

NATIVE SPACES OF CONTINUATION, PRESERVATION, AND BELONGING: LOUISE  
ERDRICH'S CONCEPTS OF HOME

by

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ABSTRACT

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In light of continual Native migration, relocation, and hybridization, it is my intention to examine the evolution and diversification of home in a spectrum of Louise Erdrich's writing. My examination of the texts focuses on the notion that "home" for all Native Americans (mixed and full bloods) has and is evolving and that this re-definition has made the location of language, culture, family, and community a "Home" that cannot be defined by traditional Native or Western boundaries or definitions. Instead, home depends on the inter-relation of such attributes, but it is not specific to any inclusion or omission. Home is not anything or everything but a definite correlation of those elements that correspond to belonging to a space or place. My contentions rely on the fact that the traditional sense of space and place is no longer readily available to a majority of full-bloods and mixed bloods.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: NOTIONS OF HOME

*The land. The people.*

*They are in relation to each other.*

*We are in a family with each other.*

---Simon Ortiz, *Woven Stone*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “home” as a specific, fixed residence or dwelling-place that may or may not include family. Native American notions of home, however, encompass a much more complex conception: Home “is not only a place; it is a past, a set of values and parents, an ‘ancien regime’” (Bevis 581). “Home” is the singular yet webbed intricacies of people, land, memory, identity, space, language, and community.

In light of continual Native migration, relocation, and hybridization, it is my intention to examine the evolution and diversification of home in a spectrum of Louise Erdrich’s writing. In “Louise Erdrich’s Storied Universe,” Catherine Rainwater argues, “Erdrich’s recurrent themes concern the ties between people and geographical locations, the importance of community among all living beings, the complexities of individuals and cultural identity, and the exigencies of marginalization, dispossession, and cultural survival” (271). I claim that Erdrich’s writing addresses each of these issues to explore the variety of ways that Natives have and continue to find “reference [and] identity...to landscapes-” in the “absence of all familiar place” (Erdrich “Where” 23). My examination of the texts focuses on the notion that “home” for all Native Americans (mixed and full bloods) has and is evolving and that this re-definition has made the location of language, culture, family, and community a “home” that cannot be defined by traditional Native or Western boundaries or definitions. Instead, home depends on the inter-relation of such attributes, but it is not specific to any inclusion or omission. Home is not

anything or everything but a definite correlation of those elements that correspond to belonging to a space or place. My contentions rely on the fact that the traditional sense of space and place is no longer readily available to a majority of full-bloods and mixed bloods.

In her *New York Times* article, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," Erdrich convincingly compares the situation of Native Americans to the survivors of nuclear holocaust, which explains the exigence for the malleable structure home has been forced to take on. However, relocation and/or migration are not necessarily apocalyptic for Natives when couched in the protective halls, walls, and foundations of homes created by community, family, land, and language. The Native American living in a Fargo apartment has little context for the land of his ancestors; the un-informed Native has little knowledge of his past except for his surname or a brief historical account learned in public school textbooks; and Erdrich, herself, while fortunate enough to remain in contact with her Ojibwe relatives, is a mixed-blood, who lived on the edge of the reservation for an extended period of time. Erdrich's writing reflects these types of contemporary circumstances for Native Americans, but her writing also suggests that neither Native Americans nor Native American identity is extinct or vanishing. Instead, Erdrich asserts that Natives are very much alive, coping with the post-colonial world in various fashions.

I hope that this study of "home" will add to the broad spectrum of Native literatures already dedicated to the significance of "home" to indigenous peoples. To do so, I wish to focus on emerging hybrid "homes." There, I believe, is the opportunity for Natives to view and utilize various non-traditional and traditional spaces and places to sustain their cultures, customs, and identity. Thus, the real significance of this project is that my contentions are not new at all. Whether voluntary or involuntary, for over 500 years, Native Americans have redefined "home" in a world of extermination, relocation, termination, and assimilation. This re-definition began in oral tales, but it has moved to the modern language of the oppressor in fiction, poetry, and non-fiction writing by Native authors. Thus, as a base for my own survey of Erdrich's treatment of



home and to demonstrate the importance of the topic, I offer a brief overview of significant works in Native American literature and criticism that address space or place as essential to Native identity and belonging.

Contemporary texts of the last fifty to sixty years address the “homing motif” at length. Pulitzer Prize winning author, intellectual, critic, and tribal spokesman N. Scott Momaday’s (Kiowa) *House Made of Dawn*, *The Names*, *Way to Rainy Mountain*, and especially “Man Made of Words” speak to the formation or recreation of identity and place in relation to stories and language. Leslie Marmon Silko’s critically acclaimed *Ceremony* recounts the importance of place to affirming Native identity, culture, and life. Gerald Vizenor’s *Dead Voices* relates the origins of the earth and Native peoples to the spoken word. And most pointedly, Simon Ortiz’s *Woven Stone* addresses the difficulty of Native preservation and continuation in an ever changing world-that is consumed by Western ideologies.

In *Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday states, “In the beginning was the word, and it was spoken” (*WTRM* ix). Here the “beginning” and “origin” are tied together with the land (the original “home” of Native peoples). In reference to his own memory of Kiowa stories, Momaday notes, “They seem to proceed from a place of origin as old as the Earth” (*WTRM* ix). While this seems to give rather large leeway to what home is or is not (the entire Earth), Momaday is careful to trace the migratory patterns of the Kiowa people and how and why they formulated and/or adapted new versions of “home,” both in the physical and psychological sense: “They [Kiowa] began a long migration from the headwaters of the Yellowstone River eastward to the Black Hills and south to the Wichita Mountains. Along the way they acquired horses, the religion of the Plains, a love and possession of the open land” (*WTRM* 4). This glorified interpretation of migration is, however, fleeting. Being true to historical events, Momaday later relates the catastrophic effect the United States occupation of tribal lands and Natives’ forced relocation had on his people.

Yet, Momaday does not leave his tribe or audience with a depressed outlook for the future. He expertly concludes the introduction of *Way to Rainy Mountain* with a new beginning, instead of an end. Recounting the elements that made his grandmother's house a "home," Momaday describes more than four walls and a roof; he speaks of "excitement," "feasting," "reunions," "weather," "visitors," "memory," "laughter," "prayers," and especially "talk." Words cannot be separated from what is "home." Fittingly, even after abandoned, the rooms of the house resonate with "the endless wake of some final word" (*WTRM* 12). What is "home" is not disintegrated; it lives on through words, revitalization, and redefinition, as it has from the Kiowa's first migration.

Momaday's *The Names* (1976) also speaks to and about the connection between home and what that term encompasses. Noting his own existence and location, Momaday states, "I know the voices of my parents, of my grandmother, of others. Their voices, their words, English and Kiowa—and the silences that lie about them—are already the element of my mind's life" (*Names* 8). Momaday's admittedly "autobiographical account" of his life in *The Names* reiterates the struggle of living and surviving (culturally and physically) in a world that demands the negotiation between Western and Native values. As Momaday's protagonist in *House Made of Dawn*, Abel, finds out, even though he lives in the modern world, he must return not only to his grandfather's house but also to the land that bore him. In the same fashion that his grandmother's house stood with a vibrating "silence of the word" in *Way to Rainy Mountain*, Abel acknowledges his own connection to land and language: "He was running and there was no reason to run but the running itself and the land and dawn appearing... He was running, and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went on running on the rise of the song" (*House Made of Dawn* 185). Home, land, and language become a single narration that creates or fills a specific space.

This stance seems to concurrently reiterate the sentiments of "Man Made of Words." Lamenting the decline of the Kiowa people through Western contact, Momaday explains how

“The whole piece [land, history, and language] becomes more deeply invested with meaning” (57). “It becomes a story” (Momaday 57). They (the people) and their culture survive by using the unity of these themes to redefine “home” the only way afforded to them: “They appropriated it, re-created it, fashioned it into an image of themselves—imagined it” (Momaday 57). As Momaday concludes, “...it was all they had, but it was enough to sustain them” (57).

Vizenor’s *Dead Voices* takes this claim a step further. For him, “re-creation” and “imagination” are not required; the entire earth is already ripe with the potential for becoming a “home” to indigenous peoples. Vizenor’s chapter, “Stones,” in *Dead Voices*, explains the birth of the first tricksters in the world. While the tricksters are presented in traditional fashion—both wise and foolish—the significance of their creation is their importance to place and identity. Stone, the third trickster born, “feel[s] at home on the earth for the first time” (Vizenor 25). However, wishing to murder Stone, Naanabozho, Stone’s brother, asks Stone’s advice on how to kill him. Stone wisely explains that Naanabozho needs to heat him with fire, then pour cold water on him. While this action does split Stone apart, it doesn’t have Naanabozho’s desired effect. “Naanabozho believed that he had killed Stone...but Stone had outwitted his brother...” (Vizenor 27).

Stone had broken into several families and covered the earth in the four directions. Stone families lived everywhere, in the mountains, on the rivers, in the meadows, in the desert. No matter where the trickster traveled he would not be far from his brother and the families of the stone. One break of the stone became a bear in the cities. Stone is in a medicine pouch. Stone is the in the mirror. (Vizenor 28)

Stone’s scattered fragments create the possibility of all places becoming “homes.”

Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* addresses similar issues and consequences of maintaining Native culture, customs, and land in the Western world. Silko’s protagonist, Tayo (mixed-blood), is repeatedly torn between his loyalty to Native customs and heritage and the

outside world, which has tempted and fooled those closest to him. Rocky, Tayo's full blood "brother," is sold on Western ideals from his early childhood. Rocky believes in Western science, education, serving his country, and most disastrously, leaving home to "better himself." Unable to resist Rocky's influence, Tayo agrees to enlist in the Army with Rocky. The outcome: Rocky is killed in action, and Tayo is struck with the mental and physical effects of combat fatigue and losing his "brother." However, their homeland suffers the most. Tayo returns to find a homeland barren, thirsty for rain, his uncle Josiah dead, and his family's cattle scattered to the wind. Only in returning home can Tayo mend himself, his family, and his community. Tayo's journey is painful and, at times, uncertain, but by acknowledging that he can never go back, only forward, Tayo realizes that the "ceremony" to make him, the land, and his family well again is a never-ending battle against encroaching Western ideals. The conception of home is not only desirous; it is necessary.

The most significant points of my claims seem to correlate and culminate with Simon Ortiz's (Acoma) powerful collection of poetry, *Woven Stone*. Ortiz aptly names his final section "Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land." With this obvious message in an obvious title, Ortiz not only challenges his audience to "fight"; he also declares war with his words. Recounting only a segment of his people's struggle to survive and preserve their culture, land, heritage, and language, Ortiz remembers:

My father spoke  
Above the years  
Between 1914-1920  
Dark years,  
Boyhood years.  
The people sick,  
Sunken with hunger,  
loss, and grief.

Terrified  
of being totally alone,  
orphaned.  
His voice would drift  
away.  
... (*Woven Stone* 348)

Although Ortiz's verse is sorrowful, Kenneth Roemer states, "in some of the bleakest depictions, the absences of traditional place/community implies the desperate need for combinations of old and new senses of place" (18). Ortiz challenges his audience to do just this, stating, "Only when the people of this nation, not just Indian people, fight for what is just and good for all life, will we know life and its continuance. And when we fight, and fight back those who are bent on destruction of land and people, we will win. We will win" (*Woven Stone* 363). Here "A New Story" begins, one of resistance in the most ordinary way: the refusal to participate in a "Frontier Day Parade" that celebrates colonialism and further degrades his people by making a stereotypical mockery of them, the land they lost, and himself as a "real Indian" (*Woven Stone* 364-67). His words, his text, his land, his imagination, his memory, and his challenge become spaces or locations of resistance, "life," "continuance," and home to an "orphaned" people. These brief examples from primary works by Momaday, Silko, Vizenor, and Ortiz merely hint at the prevalence and importance of concepts of home in Native American Literature(s).

From a critical point of view, the 'homing motif' has become a staple of interpretation for Native literature(s). Larry Evers' classic 1977 article, "Words and Place: A Reading of *House Made of Dawn*," foregrounds the concept of interrelatedness between words, imagination, and place. Evers states, "...for cultural landscapes are created by the imaginative interaction of societies of men and particular geographies" (212). However, geography itself is not paramount to the existence of a communal home; "indeed it is only through shared words or ritual that symbolic landscapes are able to exist. So it is that the Tewa singer, the Navajo chanter, and the

Kiowa 'man made of words' preserve their communities through their story and song. Without them there would be no community" (213). Without a community and without these songs and stories, there is no home, figuratively or literally, which to return.

In a similar argument, Paula Gunn Allen's (Laguna/Sioux) "The Feminine Landscape of *Ceremony*" comments on the undeniable link between land, language, and native peoples. While her article focuses on a feminist reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Allen's argument that the earth (in its entirety) is a living place or location of identity and home for Native peoples is undeniable (119). Identity and place are unified, creating a space, as Erdrich puts it, "where I ought to be" for Natives. In reference to *Ceremony*, Allen concludes, "The healing of Tayo and land results from the reunification of land and person" (120). However, the story is what makes or allows this "healing" to take place. Tayo's "wholeness" comes from "knowing that he belongs exactly where he is, that he is and always has been home" (Allen 125).

William Bevis' "Native American Novels: Homing In"—perhaps the most referenced critical article that addresses the homing motif—examines how "coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call 'regressing' to a place, a past where one has been before, is not only the primary story, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good" (582). Most recently Jill Jepson and John Gamber's' articles in *American Indian Culture and Research* and *PMLA* use Bevis' article as a point of reference for their own work about home's relation to community, tribalism, space, and time—home. However, even before Bevis' article appeared, home was a focal point of analysis for Indian American culture, place, thought, and writing by Erdrich.

Two years earlier, in a 1985 *New York Times* essay, Erdrich comments that "In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history. [...]. People and place are inseparable" ("Where" 1). While Bevis' position is similar to this stance, Erdrich also addresses how the

writer's role is significant to understanding and maintaining a physical and literary home. To support her view, Erdrich quotes critic Leonard Lutwack, who states, "An increased sensitivity to place seems to be required,' he says, 'a sensitivity inspired by aesthetic as well as ecological values, imaginative as well as functional needs...Literature must now be seen in terms of contemporary concern for survival" (qtd. in "Where" 23). Accepting this challenge, Erdrich argues that "Contemporary Native American writers have, therefore, a task quite different from that of other writers...In light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of catastrophe" ("Where" 23).

Places, or spaces, encompass more than location, family, time, etc; as Momaday stresses, they include the stories that must be told to ensure, defend, or even create a "home." Jace Weaver's term "communitism" suggests that Native texts aid in creating places or spaces of activism, resistance, and community—a "home" in both Erdrich's sense of the word and her understand of responsibility as a Native writer. As Weaver rightly states, "Ultimately, no Native scholarship can be produced in isolation" (xiv). "Home": the weaved and layered fabric of land, people, place, space, language, stories, culture, memory, is an ongoing conversation without an end.

Still, the question of redefining space or location is not one that can be easily classified as solely beneficial to peoples who have nothing but stories to rely on for identity or home. In *Other Destines: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992), Louise Owens' warns that "the Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people" (4). He concludes, "It is at this disjuncture between myth and reality that American Indian novelists most often take aim, and out of which the material of their art most often arises" (4). While Owens' overall contentions lean towards a post-modernist view of the world in relation to Native identity, his argument acknowledges that stories, either "myth or reality," hold the power to

create identity and, in turn, types of homes for Native Americans. This sentiment is reiterated in “Family as Character in Erdrich’s Novels” by Gay Barton, who claims that Erdrich’s novels imply that Natives are not “doomed” as “mainstream stereotypes might suggest,” but that Natives “have the power to rewrite inherited stories” (77). Gay contends that Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, and *Bingo Palace* reflect this type of “rewriting” because they defy “the dominant culture’s stereotypes,” while still grounding the novels in the “ethos of tribal life” (81).

In “Relocations Upon Relocations: Home, Language, and Native American Women’s Writing,” Ines Hernandez-Avila claims, “... the power of the creative (writing) process itself, [is] the inscription of our lives and our communities’ lives, the relocating of our languages in the homes of our words, and our homes in the words of our languages” (493). While her contentions focus on Native women writers, Hernandez is careful to explain that “... the concern with ‘home’ involves a concern with ‘homeland’. Even when Native women activists no longer reside on their ancestral land bases ...” (492) While this space is definitely confined to the abstract, the concrete of what the text signifies is important—family, land, language, community identity: home.

Addressing the issue of ‘home’ more recently, John Gamber’s “Outcasts and Dreamers in the Cities’: Urbanity and Pollution in *Dead Voices*” examines “home” as a “mobile” or “transformative” term that not only should but must include new locations such as cities. As “dreamers” those who have been removed (for various reasons) from their homelands can (re)discover a neo pan-Indian space within urban locations in which to call “home.” Gamber’s claims seem to make perfect sense, as the “Native American literary canon abounds with urban novels, poetry, and short stories from its most celebrated authors” (179). But while Gamber contends that Vizenor’s *Dead Voices* “illustrates a way that Native people can come to feel at home in the city,” the text becomes more than just a manual to recreate “home” in cities. In Erdrich’s case, her texts suggest that home can be (re)defined and/or (re) constructed, regardless of actual location.



Gamber addresses this point by explaining that “For Vizenor, the healing that comes from shared stories happens in the flux, in the spaces that are in between” (184). This “in between” could not only be the interweaving of indigenous culture, tradition, and concerns in response to relocation, but anywhere Natives need to reassert their identity and its relation to landscape, community, and language (184). Words give birth to a new “landscape” that cannot be easily defined. However, this is not so much a problem; it is a benefit to rising Native communities in various reservation and non-reservation spaces that are further complicated by racial and cultural hybridization. Gamber states, “Survival is Vizenor’s ultimate goal...” (190). Acknowledging that these “traditions and places” can be located in more than a traditional, tangible form, Gamber concludes, “All places can serve as home and homeland” (186).

Recently appearing in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Jill Jepson’s “Dimensions of Homing and Displacement in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*” explores *Tracks* from the community, landscape, and body’s distinct relation to home (27). Contending that Bevis’ 1987 article overlooks the complexity of “home” in Erdrich’s *Tracks*, Jepson’s argument centers on the notion that “Home refers both to a physical place and a network of belonging and history” (26). As Jepson makes clear, in *Tracks*, the greater good of community, land, and body hinge on returning “home” in both senses of the physical and communal. Focusing on the characters of Nanapush, Pauline/Sister Leopolda, and Fleur, Jepson believes that “loss of identity” results from the “loss of social context, disconnection from the past, and displacement from the land” (26). Jepson concludes that these alienating forces are the “intricate, interwoven forces that operate for and against Anishinaabe homing” (38). Thus, “home” is not an easy subject to define in either literary or literal terms. It is for this reason home issues warrant continued address through any appropriate and/or available avenues.

My frame of reference for this project relies on primary and secondary readings, history, and as addressed here, a degree of Western theory. Although numerous Native American critics and authors have shunned or, at least, viewed Western theory’s application to native

texts as suspect, to disregard the vantage point of any theory (Western or Native) would create an incomplete study of the subject matter. In his influential book, *That the People Might Live*, Jace Weaver summarily concludes that the flat rejection of either method of examination is not reasonable. It then seems appropriate that 'cultural studies' satisfies the need for a suitable literary analysis within the field of Native American literatures because its eclectic nature allows for a fuller interrogation of the text from perspectives of both traditional "western" theory and what Gwen Griffin and P. Jane Hafen deem an "indigenous approach" (96).

While traditionally and rightly associated with critiques of "Otherness" and colonization in the "Orient," I also employ Homi Bhabha's post-colonial concept of the "hybrid" as a tool for analyzing Erdrich's writing, for I claim that Erdrich and her characters, like Bhabha's hybrid, can never truly escape one culture or the other because, despite the complacent image their surface may reflect, they cannot reconcile the two cultures. As Bhabha states, hybridity

is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or the two scenes of the book, in dialectical play of 'recognition'. The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonially specularly, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid. (162)

Erdrich's characters must maintain this "split screen" in order to maintain or create a home that includes both Western and Native elements. As I argue throughout this dissertation, to reject either Native or Western culture or beliefs leaves the characters metaphorically homeless. Hybridity, even as a state of "crisis," is the only choice Erdrich's characters have to maintain or re-create a space of belonging. Thus, Bhabha's focus on the position of the hybrid can be transferred to the American Indian context. I believe that this application of Western theory to indigenous writers and texts is therefore appropriate.

Edward Said's interpretation of Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* also serves as a useful post-colonial concepts for further comprehending American Indian literature(s)' emphasis on "home." While Bachelard and Said do not speak directly about Native Americans, their claims correlate nicely with Native American notions of home, which include much more than simple construction materials and location. As Said succinctly puts it, "The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel [...]" (55). For Natives, "home"—all that it describes, all that it recounts, all that it brings to life, all that it struggles against—becomes a space where American Indians survive, thrive, and resist post-colonial oppression. Moreover, Said's "authorial responsibility" to represent, protect, and celebrate oppressed peoples is similar to Erdrich's stance in "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place."

Despite the usefulness of cultural studies and post-colonial interpretive orientations in the discussion of Native concepts of home, this dissertation makes no claims to being a theoretical study. Following theorist Terry Eagleton suggestion in *Theory: An Introduction*, I only use Bhabha and Said's concepts when appropriate for a given text, rather than forcing a theoretical interpretation.

An awareness of the importance of the concept of home as expressed in works by influential American Indian authors and familiarity with criticism specifically focused on relevant concepts from the topic as well as cultural studies and post-colonial criticism helps us to understand the complexities of Erdrich's concepts of home. Acknowledge of Ojibwe history and culture also offers crucial insights. Erdrich's characters and places reflect tribal concerns and issues that stem from a history of racial, cultural, and geographical relocation and hybridization. As Connie Jacobs recounts in "History of the Turtle Mountain Band," the Ojibwe were a removed people even before Columbus (24). To exacerbate this initial relocation, the Ojibwe people became, ironically, defined as people of "assorted backgrounds [who emerge as] a

distinctive people complete with their own language and culture” (24). The evolution of home for the Ojibwe is then larger than loss of land; it is the reevaluation of culture, heritage, and the people in it. Jacobs claims, this “cultural blending forever transformed the identity of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa,” and “it is out of these traditions and tribal history that Erdrich builds her stories” (27, 24).

Defending a similar claim, Catherine Rainwater believes:

In *Love Medicine* and its sequels, for example, readers learn, usually for the first time from an Ojibwen perspective, the regional history of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe of North Dakota, a people many times betrayed in their reluctant, but forced, dealings with Euro-Americans. Their collective and individual identities have been affected dramatically in this process. (278)

My focus on “home’s” significance in Louise Erdrich’s literature is then only possible when viewed on the larger historical stage in which ‘home’ has been forced to be re-conceptualized.

As Rainwater contends:

Like so many Native American writers, Erdrich moves beyond the need merely to address familiar injustices; her work call on us to develop a new historical consciousness....Furthermore, Erdrich implies, a more inclusive vision [of history] might help humanity to heal some historical wounds and to avoid repeating mistakes in the future. (Rainwater 277-78)

Native American stories, including Erdrich’s writing, are not isolated pieces of text or speech but, in Jace Weaver terms, an interweaving of hopeful human “transformation” that springs from the social ideologies in which they are born and come into contact with. The outcome is how “a people view themselves and their place in the universe” (qtd. in Weaver x). This view is complicated for Natives who are physically or psychologically removed from ancestral land bases and who have interbred with those they have come “in contact with” (x). Hence, another important context for the discussion of Erdrich’s “homes” is an awareness of

relevant general historical trends. Addressing this “contact zone,” James Axtell’s *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America* (2001), Colin Calloway’s *First Peoples* (2004), Peter Iverson’s *We Are Still Here* (1998), Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior’s (Osage) *Like A Hurricane* (1996), and most recently and focused on literature, Kenneth Roemer’s “Introduction” and “Timeline: literary, historical, and cultural conjunctions” and Joy Porter’s “Historical and Cultural Contexts to Native American Literature” in the *Cambridge Companion to Native Literature* (2005) examines history in association with the creation of Native identity and its relation to the alteration of historically Native homelands and the emergence of newly evolving and difficult to categorize diasporic communities.

Still, Roemer reminds his readers that “one of the hallmarks of the best American Indian writing is an unflinching awareness of the impact of tragic losses and persistent articulation, even celebration, of the good stories of survival, including a strong will to defend tribal and cultural sovereignty”(12). Living up to this assessment, Louise Erdrich’s writings represent a hopeful and impressive body of work that further combines and redefines Native perspectives of “home” for “people of this nation, not just Indian people” (*Woven Stone* 348). Non-Natives are not relegated to obscure backdrops to Erdrich’s plots or simply used as foils to her Native characters and locations; Native “notions of home” are viewed as encompassing and beneficial to full-bloods, mixed-bloods, and Westerners. “In other words, Erdrich seems deliberately to cultivate a general readership by crafting multiple points of entry into her texts, then proceeding to educate the audience more specifically in particulars of American Indian history, culture, cosmology, and epistemology” (*Rainwater* 273). Her perspective—while not unique in subject matter—at present offers the most multilayered, multi-ethnic, and widely diverse representation of “home” by a single American Indian author. Her work includes full-blood, mixed-blood, and non-Native characters in physical locations that can only be (re)conceptualized according to the interconnectedness of people, community, land, memory, language, and what Erdrich believes all those terms signify together.

The re-conception of “home” is not consigned to traditional Western notions of the hybrid. Instead, hybridization also becomes a multi-layered, multi-dimensional term that includes racial and cultural adaptation, assimilation, appropriation, subversion, resistance, and relocation for both Natives and non-Natives. The contact zones between all peoples is widening and collapsing, making a study such as this crucial to helping people understand that “home” is and always will be evolving.

For Natives this migration or relocation is not the exception, but the rule. As noted earlier, in Momaday’s *Way to Rainy Mountain*, indigenous people have been moved voluntary and involuntarily for centuries, but as the notion of the “west” or what is “Indian land” has steadily and rapidly decreased, Natives have been forced to re-evaluate what “home” is and where that location actually resides. Whether that place or space is Erdrich’s fictional North Dakota reservation, the near by town of Argus, or New Hampshire, “home” still remains grounded in the tenets of family, community, language, culture, and land.

By acknowledging a breadth of primary and critical works dedicated to the subject matter and relating how Erdrich’s works enter into this discourse, this project is, therefore, valuable to the continued examination of “home” in Native American literature. As Catherine Rainwater rightly argues, “the publication in 1984 of *Love Medicine* marks the beginning of what some call the ‘second wave’ of a Native American literary renaissance that commenced in the late 1960s with works by N.Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko” and that “even Erdrich’s detractors admit that her works, together with those of the growing numbers of Native American and other minority writers, have expanded the definition of American literature” (272, 277). Erdrich’s treatment of home differs from both traditional Western and Native perceptions by redefining in great variety what elements create or define home for Natives from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries.

My choice of Erdrich texts and their organization are guided by “approaches to home” rather than traditional chronological order. Chapter one focuses on *Tracks* and *Four Souls*.

*Tracks* is lauded as Erdrich's most "Indian" novel in respect to both historical and contemporary tribal issues and its emphasis on Native characters and community. Furthermore, this novel emphasizes Erdrich's most traditional concepts of home. Here the Pillager and Kashpaw families fight to retain their homelands in the face of insurmountable government taxes. The tribe is split between those who see no choice but to sell the land to corporate lumber interests before government foreclosures occur and Native traditionalists who believe the land is more valuable than money and worth fighting for. Also introduced in the text is Pauline (later Sister Leopolda), whose life epitomizes the mistake of severing all ties to her Native culture and people. Originally included in the manuscript of *Tracks*, *Fouls Souls* narrates the aftermath of *Tracks*: Pillager land has been lost to Western "progress," and Fleur Pillager's motive of revenge and desire to reclaim her land—become both a salvation and threat to herself and community. Chapter two explores *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. The text offers the broadest historical sweep of Erdrich's novels, addressing nineteenth—through early twenty-first century concepts of home. *Last Report* focused on the life and times of Father Damien/Agnes, a non-native, but it clearly suggests through thematic undercurrents that Native and Western ideologies of home are not only misunderstood by each other but that in some instances they actually compliment or supplement each other.

Chapter three focuses on two similar, seemingly non-Native Erdrich novels that emphasize home in the context of a small town, Argus, near the reservation: *Beet Queen* and *Master Butchers Singing Club*. *Beet Queen* was received by many Native American authors with a bit of dissatisfaction (or in the case of Leslie Marmon Silko, rabid dislike). However, the fact that most of the novels' primary characters are Westerners makes their inclusion crucial because they express how Erdrich's notions of home adapt and evolve in an overly Western context. Chapter four redefines Native perceptions of "home" in the reality of contemporary social, economic, and cultural forces. Finding the solution for survival and preservation of culture and land increasingly difficult, the characters in *Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love*

suggest how “home” must be revised, not only to include Western concepts of the world (in this case, capitalism), but also to embrace them in order to negotiate the large world. Chapter five focuses on *Blue Jay’s Dance* and *Painted Drum*. While a majority of *Blue Jay’s Dance’s* action occurs far removed from traditional Native lands and *Painted Drum’s* plot is book-ended by the New England landscape, the characters cannot define or create home in the places they reside without connection to people, community, and especially past. Each location is endowed with the residue of the other. Chapter six focuses on Louise Erdrich’s first and nationally acclaimed novel, *Love Medicine*. *Love Medicine* is paramount to my project because the text simultaneously serves as the seminal text of the entire North Dakota saga and depicts the most variety of reconstructed and/or redefined homes.

Erdrich’s poetry, children’s literature, and short stories (many which have grown into chapters of her novels), and other novels are not included in this study for the sake of focus. I concentrate on what many critics have deemed the North Dakota saga—*Love Medicine* through *Painted Drum*, and *Blue Jay’s Dance* and *Master Butchers Singing Club*, which I believe are necessary compliments to this focus because they address the home-away-from-home challenge (New Hampshire) and the articulation of concepts of home for non-Indian immigrants to Erdrich’s North Dakota home. *Blue Jay’s Dance* is a non-fiction autobiography, but the persona presented rests squarely in the overarching theme of the North Dakota saga: the battle to define one’s self in connection to place in order to (re) create or re (define) home. Thus, *Blue Jay’s Dance’s* inclusion further emphasizes Erdrich’s personal preoccupation with issues of defining home that preoccupies the lives of her characters in the North Dakota saga. To address the entirety of Erdrich’s writing would be obviously beneficial, but that would be a feat requiring volumes of work. A more tightly unified project would only address the North Dakota saga, but the omission of *Blue Jay’s Dance* and *Master Butchers Singing Club* would mean excluding significant concepts of home beyond the Ojibwe reservation, and thus undermine the



examination of Erdrich's primary contribution to defining Native concepts of home—the rich variety of homeland concepts she explores.

CHAPTER 2  
TRACKS AND FOUR SOULS

2.1 Home Sweet Home: Following the *Tracks* of a Lost People

*It is art of the highest order to create a world and its people with such fidelity and power that they become part of the common memory. This is the gift of this remarkable novel of Louise Erdrich.*

—Detroit Free Press

*Tracks* portrays “home” in its most traditionally Native sense: the plot centers around the seemingly hopeless fight to keep Pillager and Kashpaw homelands. This struggle is worsened by in-clan fighting and the eventual split of mixed-blood “progressives” (Morrisseys and Lazarres) who wish to sell their lands. *Four Souls* continues the story of *Tracks*, relating the consequences of Fleur Pillager’s selfish quest for revenge on the man who stole her land, John James Mauser. In order to enter Mauser’s residence to kill him, Fleur changes her appearance to that of a maid in need of work. She is successful in this initial task, but her desire to make Mauser suffer all the more, ironically, ends with her accepting Mauser’s plea for life and offer to take her as his new wife. As *Four Souls* unfolds, her decisions are distinctly disadvantages to her, her family, and community. Fleur’s sojourn leaves her an alcoholic, daughterless, and the mother of Mauser’s mixed-blood, mentally deficient son. Only in “coming home” does Fleur survive the ordeal, but even then, some pieces of her life (namely her close-knit relationship with her daughter, Lulu) never return. Jill Jepson argues in “Dimensions of Homing and Displacement in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*” that “although notions of leaving and homing are central to *Tracks*, they operate in ways far more complex than Bevis’s view suggests” (25). For

Bevis coming home is the “primary good,” but what Bevis does not explore in detail is that leaving home is primarily damaging (582). Thus, while *Tracks* and *Four Souls* argue that the space between the Native and Western worlds demands re-conception of home, both novels also suggest a type of warning to Natives who lose their connections to land, family, culture, language—home. “Home” is not just a cure; its power should not be transgressed, or the price may be too dear.

In his 1977 reading of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, Larry Evers argues that “...landscape plays a crucial role, for cultural landscapes are created by the imaginative interaction of societies of men and particular geographies” (“Words” 212). Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* can be understood in the same vein. *Tracks* is a novel that emphasizes the undeniable link between place, culture, people, heritage, time, and imagination. Evers continues, “By imagining who and what they are in relation to particular landscapes, cultures and individual members of cultures form a close relation with those landscapes” (“Words” 212).

Thirty years later, Jace Weaver adds, “Culture embodies those moral, ethical, and aesthetic values...through which a people come to view themselves and their place in the universe... All this is carried in language” (x). *Tracks* adheres to both Evers and Weaver’s claims by presenting its audience with a story of struggle and death but, at the same time, of continuation, survival, and most importantly the notion that “home” will always exist as long as the story goes on. Weaver believes, “language forces meaning into existence. All barriers yield to language: distance, oceans, darkness, even time and death itself are easily transcended by language” (3). Reiterating Edward Said and Erdrich’s versions of authorial responsibility to protect and celebrate the oppressed, Weaver suggests that “American Indian writers help Native readers imagine and re-imagine themselves” (5). This is not unlike N. Scott Momaday’s own comments about the Kiowa. He states, “when the imagination is superimposed upon the historical event? It becomes a story” (“Man” 57). The story becomes the medium, and in turn, the medium becomes part of the story itself. The story then has the power to create home or re-create home(s).

While Weaver, Louise Owens, and most recently John Gamber have done much to argue similar points, it is also beneficial to view Erdrich's *Tracks* in light of Edward Said's understanding of *Poetics of Space*. Said contends, "The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel [...]" (55). Erdrich's *Tracks* is the creation of "a world and its people with such fidelity and power that they become part of the common memory" (*DFP*). Imagination, place, community, people, and belonging create "home" in *Tracks*.

Appropriately, *Tracks* begins with an explanation of how the above elements converge. Speaking to his "daughter," Lulu, Nanapush relates:

I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (*Tracks* 2)

On the surface, these comments seem to denote a loss of home that will never be returned. Still, the story Nanapush tells is one of continuation, rather than defeat. In his words, "there is a story to it the way there is a story to all, never visible while it is happening. Only after, when an old man sits dreaming and talking in his chair, the design springs clear" (*Tracks* 34).

As *Tracks*' "design springs clear," even the dead cannot be removed without leaving the residue of their existence. When the "spotted sickness" eradicates a large number of the tribe, the ancient Pillager abode remains, despite the death of its inhabitants, an official quarantine to contain the disease, and the attempt to burn the house to the ground. Charged with the last task, a tribal police officer "threw kerosene repeatedly against the logs and even started a blaze with birchbark and chips of wood, [but] the flames narrowed and shrank, [and] went out in puffs of smoke" (*Tracks* 3). This occurrence reflects the power of the Pillager's "medicine," but reading the passage in Gaston Bachelard's terms, it also reflects the notion that the world of the

Indian cannot be easily extinguished by Western methods. In relation to location, Bachelard argues, "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (4). The special interconnectedness of the space in question "augments the value of [our] reality" (Bachelard 1). Thus, "home refers both to a physical place and a network of belonging and history" (Jepson 26). A house is nothing but wood, scrap, and earth, but it is also everything that exists within it and it stands for, in the past, present, and future.

If time and space are then undeniably linked together through the imaginative value of place, the location and its inhabitants are endowed with a power that transcends both. "People and place are [truly] inseparable" (Erdrich "Where" 1). Even death cannot divide Fleur's ancestors from the land. They circumvent the seemingly concrete condition of death, "living" through their story's relation to location. This is possible in two different ways: first, Nanapush finds that the Pillagers are as "stubborn" as his own clan; their ghosts follow him home (*Tracks* 6). This makes them impossible to forget. Second, the story that Nanapush relates to Lulu secures an heir to Pillager power. Lulu is after all Fleur Pillager's daughter. In this context, the land, the people, and the story come full circle in the diegesis of the narrative. The Pillager "stubbornness" to survive is the power of the past. Nanapush's tale is the power of the present. And Lulu's position as the audience is the story's power for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Yet to accept the circle of *Tracks*' story as complete would be a mistake. The narrative acts as spiral with no end or beginning and the distinct ability to double back on itself. Erdrich does not delay focusing on core issues of community, family, and especially land. Early in the text, Nanapush comes to terms with the reality that "The land will go...The land will be sold and measured," but he also notes that "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And government promises, the wind in steadier" (*Tracks* 8, 33). This creates a problem that solidly locates the exigence of land issues in the present, but Erdrich

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<sup>1</sup> Erdrich's *Bingo Palace* makes this last contention clear, as Lulu becomes a tribal spokeswoman against Native land development.

then switches to a second narrator, Pauline/Sister Leopolda, to express how the same story is viewed from the context of a mixed-blood that has lost faith in Native land, spirituality, justice, and most of all community. This deviation from Nanapush's traditional pre-occupation with tribal concerns and lands makes Pauline's version of events not only questionable, but it questions the reader's ability to define the truth when dealing with the context of their given situations. "Both Nanapush and Pauline are tricksters and victims, liars and truth-tellers, critics, and visionaries, seeking ways to deal with colonization" (Hughes 99). Therefore, even though Pauline's story is almost void of any sense of Native belonging, leaving her to search, to her detriment and others, for a space or place to call home, her tale could be as "truthful" as Nanapush's account. As Sheila Hughes points out, "neither one [Nanapush and Pauline] is a traditionally reliable or omniscient narrator, but each does operate as a potential prophet, speaking words of other-worldly vision and social critique" (88).

The point, however, is that Pauline loses all connection to her native roots and home by choosing to join a space of Western ideological saturation: a convent. She is warned, "'You'll fade out there', ...'You won't be an Indian once you return'" (*Tracks* 14). Pauline later attempts to justify her decision, stating, "I was an orphan and my parents had not died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white" (*Tracks* 137). On the surface of Pauline's persona, this eventually does come true, but Pauline is still incapable of escaping the need to define "home" somewhere. She is always doomed to be an "orphan." As Jill Jepson makes clear, "Pauline is even less at home among whites than she is living with the Anishinaabe" (29). Pauline admits this fact, stating, "I knew that God had no foothold or sway in this land, or no mercy for the just, or that perhaps, for all my suffering and faith, I was still insignificant" (*Tracks* 192). Erdrich then convincingly uses the juxtaposition of Nanapush and Pauline's stories to emphasize traditional concerns for land, community, and family and how the loss of concern for such elements concludes in the alienation of those who deny their culture, heritage, land, and community.

For Pauline's belief "...that to hang back [in the Indian ways] was to perish" leaves her with what becomes a progressive movement towards nothingness. Pauline becomes a nun, but never a saint, which she desires the most.<sup>2</sup> She again becomes simply lost in the shuffle, rather than the distinct entity she craves throughout her life. At the age of fifteen, Pauline poignantly states, "I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop. Until they needed me, I blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny big nosed girl with staring eyes" (*Tracks* 16). Unfortunately, with the exception of an increased cruelty and sense of self-loathing, not much changes throughout Pauline's life, even after she effectively "kills the Indian and saves the [wo]man" (Pratt). Becoming Sister Leopolda simply becomes a justification for her own absurd and horrific actions towards penance and others she deems outside of the Church. Erdrich, however, does not use Pauline as a foil against Nanapush's loyalty to Indian concerns and issues.

If anything, the juxtaposition of the characters acts as the climate that gives rise to Fleur's own struggle to preserve her heritage, culture, and land in a world that demands a certain level of assimilation. For all of Fleur's glorified actions and adherence to Indian issues of land and people, she makes the same mistake that Pauline makes: Fleur "abandons her home and community for a time to take a job in the nearby white town of Argus," where "Fleur's intentional departure from home" "culminates in a beating and rape by a group of white men" (Jepson 31, 38).

Russell, a full-blood child, is the only one that attempts to rescue Fleur in her time of need; Pauline, of course, "fails to act when she is needed," closing her eyes and ears in hopes of blocking out Fleur's screams of anguish (Jepson 30). While Pauline's inaction to aid her Native brethren sets the tone for the remainder of her life, blame cannot be solely placed upon Pauline. Fleur made the choice to leave home, work in Argus, and incorporate herself in a white man's card game, which draws equal amounts of admiration and hatred. Still, to place blame on

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<sup>2</sup> As *Last Report* makes clear, Pauline's candidacy for sainthood is effectively denied, and her most atrocious secrets, including murder, are revealed to church officials. Reference chapter 3

any certain character(s) is not my intention in discussing either Pauline or Fleur. The situation occurs because of conflicting Native/Western values placed upon land, community, and people. To elucidate, without the introduction of Western culture, especially capitalism and the concept of individual land holding, Fleur would have no reason to relocate. The existing Native communal community would be all that she needs. Historically, this point is emphasized by the Allotment Act, which denies communal rights in favor of individual possession, creating “ownership” problems such as levies, taxes, and foreclosure.<sup>3</sup> As Nanapush reminds his audience, “our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step” (*Tracks* 4).

Blame then cannot be placed on an individual, but on economic system that defines the haves and have-nots by economic prowess, rather than communal good. As recorded history shows, the have-nots are predominately minorities that do not have the luxury of lobbyists and monies to support their causes or concerns. Thus, Pauline and Fleur only make the choices that are seemingly available to them to ensure their physical survival. Still, the repercussions of such choices are not just detrimental to those characters, but to the community and land as a whole. As Jepson states, “homing is reflected in bonds of affection and mutual support and in community cooperation and harmony. Displacement is made manifest through betrayal, discord, and destruction of community bonds” (26). While Pauline is obviously “a force operating against community,” Fleur’s desertion also acts as a form of “betrayal” and “discord” responsible for the “destruction of community bonds” (Jepson 30). When Fleur returns to her land after the rape, she concedes, “I shouldn’t have left this place” (*Tracks* 38). This lesson and acknowledgement is, however, fleeting, as the story of *Four Souls* later shows.<sup>4</sup>

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for more information.

<sup>3</sup> Allotment Act 1887 Sec. 24: 388-91 and 1891 Sec. 24: 794-96, *American Statutes at Large*.

<sup>4</sup> *Foul Souls* is the story of Fleur’s revenge on John James Mauser. Unfortunately, leaving home only estranges her from her land and family, especially her daughter, Lulu.



“Home” is then essential for survival, but remaining on indigenous lands does not guarantee its “legal” possession under Western law. Instead the characters are thrust into circumstances that force them to make choices that show the amount of damage Indian communities and lands incur under the power and influence of Western ideals. While Nanapush and Pauline epitomize the split between Native and Western notions of home, a majority of the characters are simply caught in-between. This fact (historically and literarily) creates the need to re-conceptualize the term “home.” As Nanapush realizes early on, “They formed a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new” (*Tracks* 70). Yet this type of glorified redefinition and recreation of home is only one view into the multi-dimensional problem of defining home in the context of an intruding Western world. “Community cooperation—once a cornerstone of Anishinaabe life—has disintegrated. Fueled by hunger and despair, quarrels break out on the reservation, and, as white financial interests encroach upon their land, the Anishinaabe families fight about whether the land should be sold or kept” (Jepson 27). “Progressive” mixed-bloods of *Tracks* adamantly reject Nanapush and his relations’ commitment to land, community, and family. The head of a contentious mixed-blood family, Napoleon Morrissey, warns Pauline against associating with Nanapush and others like him, stating, “Blanket Indians’, he said in an ugly voice. ‘I don’t want you going out there” (*Tracks* 91). Ironically, the irreversible erosion of tribal and familial ties still cannot separate the community, families, or lands into clear divisions. As the character of *Love Medicine’s* Lipsha Morrissey exemplifies, the tribe’s biological connections cannot be easily severed.<sup>5</sup> The reader instead continues to discover that choices made by the characters are more than spite over difference; they are crimes against family, community, and land.

The conflicting concerns of tribal loyalist and mixed-blood “progressives” spark actions that change “home” forever for all the characters. As Nanapush begins, “I don’t know how to tell this next thing that happened, an event that started baldness in the Pillager women, and added

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<sup>5</sup> Lipsha is the descendant of both the Morrissey and Pillager clans. For further reference consult Chapter 5 of this dissertation and *Love Medicine*.

new weight on each side of the feud that would divide our people down the middle, through time" (*Tracks* 109). Here tribal indecision about Native futures comes to fruition in an act of violence: Two representatives of mixed-blood families capture and shave Margaret Kashpaw's head. While the consequences of this action may seem slight, the shame and symbolism of the design is what is important. The two miscreants are Boy Lazarre and Clarence Morrissey, who only

...stuck together lately because their families had signed the new purchase agreement with the Turcot lumber company, and now spoke in its favor to anyone whom they could collar. They even came to people's houses to beg and argue that this was our one chance, our good chance, that the officials would drop the offer. But wherever Margaret was, she slapped down their words like mosquitoes. (*Tracks* 111)

For these mixed-bloods the end of Native existence has already come. They see their "one chance" at survival and constructing a new home as selling their ancestor's lands. The Lazarre and Morrissey's actions and notions towards Native concerns seems to draw a strict line between "in the blanket Indians" and Western "progressives," but this suggestion misses the mark. Those on both sides of the issues of continuation, assimilation, and preservation must concede at points that neither delights in. For example, both Nanapush and Pauline acknowledge that these choices must be made, but their choices in relation to the situation rest on opposite planes of the spectrum.

Comparing their Native peoples to the last of the buffalo, Nanapush notes the savage and indiscriminate nature of living beings that fear that they have no future:

He [Nanapush] said the animals understood what was happening, how they were dwindling. ...the beasts that survived grew strange and unusual. They lost their minds. They bucked, screamed and stamped, tossed the carcasses and grazed on flesh. They tried their best to cripple one another, to fall or die. They tried suicide. They tried to do away with their young. They knew they were

going, saw their end. He said while the whites slept through the terrible night he kept watch, that the groaning never stopped, that the plains below him was alive, a sea turned against itself, and when the thunder came, then and only then, did the madness cease (*Tracks* 139-40).

Like the buffalo, Pauline “grows strange and unusual,” “tried [her] best to cripple one another [other Natives],” and “tried to do away with [her] young” (*Tracks* 140). This is seemingly the only action afforded to Pauline, who states, “‘I have no family’...‘I am alone and have no land. Where else would I go but to the nuns?’” (*Tracks* 142). Without place, without identity, Pauline effectively has no space to call home, to protect, to call her own. Re-conception of home then comes at the cost of complete rejection of her heritage and community. While this description paints a horrific picture that reflects those such as Pauline, Nanapush and his cohorts see hope for the preservation of home after the “madness ceases.”

Still, the preservation of home for Native loyalist also comes at the price of negotiation with the Western world. In sadness and on the brink of starvation, Nanapush admits, “... in the end it was not Fleur’s dreams, my skill, Eli’s desperate searches, or Margaret’s preserves that saved us. It was the government commodities sent from Hoopdance in six wagons” (*Tracks* 171). As Nanapush finally realizes, home for all Natives is bound to change by degrees, regardless of how hard they fight against it. He states:

...I had seen too many changes. Dollar bills cause the memory to vanish, and even fear can be cushioned by the application of government cash. ...I saw this: leaves covering the place where I buried Pillagers, mosses softening the boards of their grave houses, once so gently weeded and tended by Fleur. I saw the clan markers she had oiled with the sweat of her hands, blown over by wind, curiosities now, a white child’s toys. (*Tracks* 174)

In-clan fighting is just the beginning, and the true enemy of Nanapush’s people, land, community—Home—are those that turn them against each other. Thus, Nanapush sees his people’s only choice as one of careful subversion and reliance on each other.

Unfortunately, the latter notion is disintegrated by government liens against Kashpaw and Pillager lands (*Tracks* 175). Here the decision to pay the taxes on one plot or the other falls on Margaret and Nector Kashpaw, who betray the Pillagers to ensure the possession of his family's lands. As the last straw of clan ties, community, and family seem to be undone, Fleur acknowledges that "home" will never remain the same, a conclusion reflected in her physical form and manner: "...Fleur was a different person than the young woman I [Nanapush] had known. She was hesitant in speaking, false in her gestures, anxious to cover fear" (*Tracks* 177). And as Pauline gleefully surmises, "The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened" (*Tracks* 205). All that is left for traditional Natives such as Nanapush is what seems to be extinction of culture, land, and heritage.

The story of *Tracks* does not, however, leave readers with a decisively negative ending. The conclusion is simply a beginning, a cycle in which a new cycle begins. Here readers discover that all hope is not lost for Nanapush and other traditional Indians. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, "Forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional *cultural* practices" (his emphasis, 29). Under this guise, Natives are able to navigate the world by performing approved or normal Western acts to their own advantage. In Nanapush's case, paperwork becomes both a space of oppression and insurrection. Nanapush states:

...once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a correspondence to which there is no end or reason. That's when I began to see what we were becoming, and years have borne me out: a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-place documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match. (*Tracks* 225)

However, in Bhabha's terms, the in between spaces that Nanapush's paperwork reflect, "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). Comprehending that this type of opportunity is represented, Nanapush sees no other choice but to become apart of a "tribe of file cabinets and triplicates." As Shelia Hughes states, "doubleness of such speech, like that of the prophet of the trickster, works simultaneously to undermine the power of the privileged oppressor and to appeal for his and her realignment on the side of the oppressed" (87). It is only through a combination of assimilation and subversion that Nanapush believes cultural, familial, and land preservation can be ensured. Nanapush then "seeks authorization for [his] strategies by the production of knowledges of colonizers and colonized [paperwork] which are stereotypical but antithetically evaluated" (Bhabha 101). The end of *Tracks* does not find Nanapush dejected or hopeless; instead, the reader is introduced to a Nanapush who acknowledges that times are changing, and that he must do all he can to maintain Native traditions, culture, and lands, despite the continual advance of colonial powers.

Nanapush confesses, "I am a man, but for years I had known how it was to lose a child of my blood. Now I also knew the uncertainties of facing the world without land to call home" (*Tracks* 187). To counteract what Nanapush believes to be the inevitable outcome that Pauline prophesied, he practices what Bhabha labels as "mimicry" of the dominant hegemony. As Bhabha explains, "Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (122-23). For Nanapush and his kind to save even a vestige of home, the choice is clear: "To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home" (*Tracks* 225). "He isn't surrendering when he finally adopts the bureaucratic identity he had previously shunned but searching for a way to get Lulu back from

the government school to which she has been sent....This acceptance...is a means of ensuring the survival of the tribe" (Jepson 29). Furthermore, the fact that Nanapush is speaking to his "daughter," Lulu makes this speech dually significant to home's power and construction. Lulu, Nanapush, Fleur, and the community's values "poetically endow" the landscape as "home" (Bachelard 55).

In regards to authorship, Erdrich practices a similar and equally important tactic. She, like Nanapush, uses the language and conventions of the "American novel" to deliver a message of hope and survival for American Indians. "Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha 122). Language becomes the medium the oppressed use to solidify their own power in a structure that recognizes the 'subject's' indigenous modes of communication as inferior through 'difference'.<sup>6</sup> In relation, to "home" as both an institution and/or place, Erdrich's *Tracks* suggests that new spaces (homes) can be found or created where Native stories survive.

It works to keep alive actual people and their practices in order to self-perpetuate and continue the process of living transmission. Textualizing...is not meant primarily to capture a dying 'authentic' tradition but to sustain it by attracting other resources and drawing new voices into an old conversation. It is meant to feed new texts and inspire new speech acts. (Hughes 99)

In this context, Jace Weaver's position that the "people might live" within the telling and retelling of given stories makes the reader a participant in both the proliferation of American Indian stories and lives.

The space, even though abstract, is as effective as the oral tradition which preserved Native tribal customs, heritage, and culture throughout active Western forces of assimilation and annihilation. "What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to

be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable” (Bhabha 125). “Facing the world without land to call home,” indigenous homes are literally written into a text that acts as “a mode of representation” that “mocks” the “power” of the “model” that wishes to disrupt and disintegrate its very existence (*Tracks* 187). The fact that “the modern colonizing imagination conceives of its dependencies as a *territory*, never as a *people*,” is repudiated through a text that re-writes the history of the land with a definite people, community, and culture that is inexplicably tied to place (Bhabha 138). In the terms of “mimesis,” art does not only represent the human condition, but as Erdrich’s careful writing suggests, the human condition can be created in art. “Home” is not simply a fixed location, but a malleable and shifting entity that only relies on the value that one’s inhabitants or readers bestow upon it.

#### 2.2 Fear and Loathing in the Search to Reclaim Home in Louise Erdrich’s *Four Souls*

*But you, heartless one, won't even call Fleur mother or take off your pointy shoes, walk through the tough bush, and visit her. Maybe once I tell you the reason she had to send you away, you will start acting like a daughter should. She saved you from worse, as you'll see. Perhaps when you finally understand, you'll borrow my boots and go out there, forgive her though it's you that needs forgiveness, and you that will need a mother once the Morrissey fills you with child and whines in your ear and vanishes.*

---Nanapush. (*Tracks* 210)

Originally included in the manuscript of *Tracks*, *Four Souls* begins where *Tracks* leaves off. Fleur Pillager has lost her land and has sworn vengeance, at all costs. Deciding to murder the man who stole her land, John James Mauser, Fleur painstakingly re-creates herself in the images of her mother’s secret name, Four Souls, to give her power and as a simple maid to enter Mauser’s household. The latter position eventually seems to allow Fleur to prolong Mauser’s suffering when she becomes his wife, but the story of *Four Souls* is more complex than a simple tale of revenge or a revenge gone wrong. As Jill Jepson explains, “In a culture

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida’s argument in “Differance” elaborates on the hierarchies that binary oppositions instill.

based on interdependence, she [Fleur] insists on acting independently. She neither relies on the community nor obeys its mores" (31). Thus, the crux of the situation is that Fleur leaves her culture, community, and family—three major building blocks of home's construction—for her "independently" selfish desire for revenge. Location then does not solely designate "home." In fact, observing the story from an indigenous perspective, especially in relation to the "homing motif," Fleur does and does not leave her ancestral lands.

The location of Mauser's residence stands on land once firmly governed and loved by Fleur's tribe. Erdrich states, "During a bright thaw in the moon of little spirit, an Ojibwe woman gave birth on the same ground where, much later, the house of John James Mauser was raised" (*FS* 4). Furthermore, the very wood that grew strong and wild on Fleur's land is "processed right at the edge of the city to specifications of the architect" to build the framework of Mauser's residence. In essence, Fleur follows her land to its new location, never being truly disenfranchised from it, but as Erdrich's descriptions of Mauser's monstrous and unholy abode shows, from the landscape, to the framework, to the finished product, the house is a corruption of the former pristine land and indigenous people. "In fact, there is no question that a number of people of all ages lost their lives on account of this house" (*FS* 8). Fleur's losses are of no exception, as she finds that even the power of Four Souls cannot save her from the detrimental decision to leave home.

What seems to be an ironic reason for Fleur's employment at Mauser's residence—"this Indian woman had no family connections"—becomes a truth that Fleur cannot wholly remedy because she leaves her family and culture. Thus, what is lauded by Mauser's sister-in-law, Polly Elizabeth, as "their [Indian] talents—for duplicity" is detrimental, rather than advantageous to Fleur. This is a marked difference from Bhabha's positive sense of the hybrid. In Bhabha's terms, "hybridity reverses the formal process of disavowal so that the violent dislocation of the act of colonization becomes the conditionality of colonial discourse" (163). At once, and at the same time, "the presence of colonial authority is no longer immediately visible; its discriminatory identifications no longer have their authoritative reference to this culture's cannibalism or that



people's perfidy" (Bhabha 163). Noting Fleur's situation, Bhabha's contentions seem to make sense, as she not only becomes indispensable to the Mauser household, but she becomes Mauser's beloved and feared wife. While these adaptations seem to negotiate conflicting worlds by knowingly stifling portions of her culture and heritage to achieve what Bhabha terms "sly civility," her concessions are far beyond necessary for Fleur's initial purpose of revenge. Her choices begin to work in the opposite direction, robbing Fleur of her Native identity and place.

Therefore, upon closer scrutiny, Bhabha seems to romanticize the position of the "hybrid." In its overlooked negative sense, the hybrid has the most to lose. In Shelia Hughes' terms, "having one's tongue tied to another's is as 'desperate' and costly as it is delicious" (100). The hybrid is both a position of power and disempowerment. As the story of *Four Souls* shows, the results of Fleur's choice to leave her land, family, and culture ends ambiguously, giving no clear notion of victory or defeat. As Nanapush so ardently states, "I shared with Fleur the mysterious self-contempt of the survivor. There were times we hated who we were, and who we had to become, in order not to follow those who we loved into the next world" (*FS* 21). What Polly Elizabeth labels the "hoax" of Fleur's existence as Mauser's servant and wife becomes the reality which Fleur must emancipate herself from in order to return home (*FS* 19) .

In a similar manner, but adhering to contrasting values, John James Mauser practices a type of "sly civility" by taking Native wives. Upon his arrival in "Indian country," Mauser:

took advantage of one loophole and then another.... In his earliest days, handsome and clever, he had married young Ojibwe girls straight out of boarding school, applied for their permits to log off the allotment lands they had inherited. Once their trees were gone he had abandoned his young wives, one after the next. (*FS* 23)

While definitely not a case of adaptive hybridity in Bhabha's reasoning, the conditions of his marriages imply a certain degree of acceptance by the Native community. Mauser conquers by using every skill, talent, and unethical masquerade afforded to him. But "from the point of view of the colonizer, passionate for unbound, unpeopled possession, the problem of truth turns into

the troubled political and psychic question of boundary and territory” (Bhabha 142). In an attempt to rectify or circumvent this “political and psychic” conundrum, Mauser simply objectifies the woman he marries as much as the lands he destroys.

Dangerously, the subject’s game of cultural resistance and preservation is easily converted to a tactic of the new dominant’s oppression. Land, community, and family are subsequently disintegrated one after the other, as Mauser steals the land of his young brides and breeds out their indigenous blood: “The young girls he [Mauser] had left went on to marry other men, but he took the sweetness of their youth just as he stripped off the ancient pine from their lands. Stumps and big bellies was all he left behind” (*FS* 24). While Mauser’s economic enterprises eventually fail, forcing him to abscond out of his creditors’ reach, Fleur leaves Mauser’s house in not much better condition: She is an alcoholic; she has a son “strange in the head” (*FS* 200); and she never exterminates Mauser. Looking to seize the opportunity, Fleur “cleaned her knife,” and “tested its edge” (*FS* 43). “She’d grown tired of the long wait, and wanted to go home” (*FS* 43). But her desire for a drawn out revenge is too strong.

Fleur enters Mauser’s house to eradicate him, but she is vengefully over-come with the possibility of making him suffer for a prolonged period. After she discovers that Mauser suffers from a clinically diagnosed case of repressed sexual climax due to his loveless marriage, the stage is set. Fleur only need seduce Mauser to make him, as he willing submits, her dog. Thus, even at the literal edge of her knife, Fleur cannot bear to allow Mauser to die so quickly. Mauser pleads for his life, promising to give all to her: “My spirit is meant to be the slave of your spirit. I will make you my wife and give you everything I own. And more than that, I will love you no matter what you do to me, as a dog does” (*FS* 46). For all of Fleur’s sense and power, she listens and weighs Mauser’s pleas, deciding to allow him to live, to make him suffer at greater length. This choice is not for the benefit of her land, community, or family; it is one of pure selfishness. As Nanapush relates, this decision “would slam her to the earth and raise her up, it would divide her, it would make her an idiot and nearly kill her, and it would heal her once it had

finished humbling her” (*FS* 47). Home becomes the power to which Fleur must bow, and leaving home demands a fierce price to pay.

From the beginning of her marriage contract with Mauser, Fleur is doomed. Fleur promptly finds herself with child, a traditionally joyous occasion. However, Fleur has “trouble carrying the child and there was concern she’d lose it” (*FS* 63). This difficulty is compounded by the fact that she is carrying a mixed-blooded child, effectively becoming yet another Indian girl whose indigenous ancestral blood is thinned by the ever fertile John James Mauser. As the pregnancy comes to fruition, Fleur’s troubles multiply by legions. Mauser’s Western doctor prescribes whiskey to relieve the complications of both Fleur’s time of pregnancy and labor. Consequently, the child is born “screaming and would not be soothed until I [Polly Elizabeth] thought to dip my finger into the whiskey cup and lay it on his kitten’s tongue” (*FS* 68). In Western terms, the child is a victim of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. This is a circumstance that Fleur would have never faced if she had not turned her back on her community and family. As Nanapush unhappily concludes, “... the second time Fleur Pillager went off the reservation, she toppled Minneapolis society and made a son. But her power got to be too much for her. She got careless. Too bold. She should have known that it is wrong to bear a child for any reason but to surrender your body to life” (*FS* 72). The demureness that Polly Elizabeth initially believes to be Fleur’s skill as “a talented mimic” creates a person who is concurrently unrecognizable to her Native roots and alien to her new Western existence. In this time of crisis, she aligns herself with the only location afforded to her, the residence of her now husband, John James Mauser.

Fleur is, thus, taken in by the very existence that she initially detested for its lack of value for her “home.” “She [Fleur] had come to kill and humiliate and take back her land...then Mauser made himself her dog anyway and wanted her in such an absence of self that she put aside her knife” (*FS* 73). In doing so, Fleur allows Mauser’s tentacles to search farther and deeper into her; she loses her chance to return home in minute but solid steps. “The problem was, the closer she got to the man she’d come to destroy, the muddier grew her intentions” (*FS* 74). Still, despite the ample distractions Mauser places in front of Fleur, it is the combination of

the mentally deficient infant she births into the world and the whiskey that fills her body that clouds her judgment and scatters her mission to the wind. Nanapush later comments, “She was the last of the Pillagers, and to see her as a common drunk would take something out of every one of us” (*FS* 194).

Nanapush laments this very existence, stating, “Smallpox ravaged us quick, tuberculosis killed us slow, [and] liquor made us stupid” (*FS* 76). Nanapush’s crisis is, however, very different from Fleur’s. Nanapush realizes, “For as I see it now, *she* [Fleur] was not happy. She was more trapped than in control, even with the position she had gained as Mauser’s wife” (*FS* 126). They are both bombarded by Western ideals, influences, and temptations, but Nanapush invests himself in these modes, codes, and practices, unlike Fleur, for the benefit of the tribe, culture, community, and family—Home. Moreover, what is specific to Nanapush’s post as bureaucrat is that he stays home, never leaving his ancestral geographical locus and the people he loves.

My claims here re-focus on Nanapush for two different reasons: first, Nanapush represents one of Erdrich’s strongest, yet humorous, traditionalists. Second, it would be irresponsible to imply that all characters that “stay home” in fact work towards the welfare of cultural, communal, or even familial solidarity. As various Erdrich novels show, some of the most horrific crimes against humanity are “red-on-red” and come from characters that exist, at times, comfortably within the confines of the reservation. However, my point is that Nanapush retains a simultaneous and equivocal allegiance to land, culture, community, and family. Thus, Jill Jepson’s claim that “Nanapush promotes connections between tribal members and aids them when they are trying to forge bonds” throughout *Tracks* also seems to be true in *Four Souls* (Jepson 28). Sadly, as the text shows, a majority of Erdrich’s characters either make unfavorable compromises or outright commitments to Western ideology or values. Even an old traditionalist such as Margaret is swayed enough by greed to sell her own son’s land for a bit of shiny linoleum. Shocked Nanapush states, “Margaret was always for the land, if nothing else. Nothing stopped her in this quest, until that linoleum. Because of it, she betrayed herself, and

worse, she betrayed her son" (*FS* 82). While Margaret does not suffer to same degree as Fleur for her transgressions against home, neither does Margaret abandon her home or children.

Even in Margaret's son, Nector's, case, although he is "educated" in a Western boarding school, he dutifully returns home for the good of his people. "He was smart, and for sure, he'd grow up to arrange the features of this mother and father in the best possible combination" (*FS* 132-33). Furthermore, the circumstances of his removal from the reservation lie in protection, rather than the choice of revenge. Nector is a young boy with no choice but to follow the orders of his elders and relatives who are forever under pressure from the United States government. If anything, Nector really is a "talented mimic" such as Nanapush. He understands that truth is what is perceived, instead of what actually occurs. The preservation of home is simply a charge that Nector takes upon himself as he reproduces tribal documents at his digression. Under the unguided and unchecked direction of Bernadette Morrissey, Nector thrives in the bureaucratic setting, eventually writing and re-writing tribal history to his specification in Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. For Nector, "the words of the master become the site of hybridity – the warlike, subaltern sign of the native – then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain" (Bhabha 172). This option is not possible for Fleur.

Far from her lands and people, Fleur is eventually both cast aside and freed from Mauser's hold by his fiscal ruin. "Fleur had taken the automobile, her clothing, and the boy," but analogous to the lands and people he encounters, John James Mauser only leaves "ruined accounts and the bled carcasses of his books and the plucked spars of the solid edifice that once had been his moneyed life" (*FS* 159,160). Fleur must return to the only land, community, and family she really belongs with. The problem with her return is that she comes back a different woman. No longer is Fleur seen as the master of her own destiny. Instead, the community questions, "whether the slim woman in the white car, and the whiter suit fitted to the lean contours of her body, was the ghost of the girl we knew or Fleur herself" (*FS* 182). Even those closest to Fleur cannot at first comprehend the change, contemplating that "perhaps the

Pillager stuff was all used up in Fleur” (*FS* 183). Still, to underestimate Fleur and the power of home would be a grave mistake.

Fleur’s mentally deficient son epitomizes the hybrid at a whole new level. The boy is decidedly white on the surface, even described as “too soft, too baby fine, too chubby, too white, to be any son of Fleur Pillager’s” (*FS* 183). But, like the hybrid’s tactics of “mimicry” and “sly civility,” the boy is not what he seems. Trained by Fleur in the art of card playing, her son is a formidable force at the table; he regains his mother’s lands in ten solid hands from the former Indian agent who holds the deed. Admiringly, Nanapush looks on as “the life of him showed. Fleur’s part of him, the Pillager” (*FS* 197). Only then does the boy’s competition, Tatro Jewett, realize that the “foolish mask the boy wore was in fact both his real face and unreadable” (*FS* 197).<sup>7</sup> In its most classic sense of the hybrid, the subjected becomes the dominant by appearing as the dominant hegemony’s perception of that subject. The stereotype is turned upon itself to create what Jace Weaver terms “hyper-realities” that both subscribe and negate the subject as one and neither. As a result, Fleur regains her land. The re-acquirement of her homeland is an arduous, complex, and lengthy process, but Fleur’s homecoming is no-less painful or complicated.

Similar to Silko’s Tayo, Fleur must complete a “ceremony” to scrape a way the influence and presence of Western ideology in order to re-affirm her position in the location and with the people who create her home. Singing songs of her Native tongue, Margaret physically scours Fleur in a wash tub, allowing Fleur to “finish washing herself with her own tears” (*FS* 203). Making sure that Fleur cannot forget and cannot be easily forgiven, Margaret chastises Fleur for her transgression against all home represents: “‘You put the heart of an owl under your tongue,’ I said. ‘You braved all the old wisdom. You scorned us. You did not listen. And yet we loved you, n’dawnis” (*FS* 104). While the last line of Margaret’s speech seems to imply forgiveness, Fleur cannot realign with her home’s land and people that easily or quickly. As Margaret states,

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<sup>7</sup> Jewett’s ancestors play an important role in *Painted Drum*. Also he is former Indian Agent and barkeep on Native land.

“there wasn’t enough human pity in the world to help Fleur Pillager. She needed more, from another source. She needed help from her neglected spirits, and would find it only by fasting on the dark rock eight days and eight nights with all of her memories and her ghosts” (*FS* 205). Here Fleur must suffer to rid her body and soul of all that is corrupt: her need for alcohol, her want of material goods. Margaret describes the torture Fleur will endure, but Margaret also aids Fleur by allowing her to wear a sacred medicine dress: “the sun will bake and burn you and destroy your ability to see, but this dress will save your vision so that you’ll be forced to look within. It will get worse. Stinging flies will torture your skin and the zagimeg will suck your blood....but this dress will not let you die” (*FS* 205). Thus, Fleur must again count on her family, culture, and beliefs in order to survive a seemingly impossible exile.

To humbly acknowledge home’s power and beg its forgiveness, Margaret commands Fleur to remember how “all the power you were given and all the luck that drove you to the Cities, all the cruelty that lay in your heart toward those who wronged you, all the devotion to the land and to your stubborn idea comes to nothing before one truth—your first child does not love you and your second child doesn’t know how” (*FS* 206). Fleur must, again, comprehend that the community, family, and place—Home—should be the sole beneficiary of her actions. This is a difficult realization in the context of colliding Western/Native worlds, but speaking to this type of forced liminal existence, Margaret concludes, “now is the time for you to walk the middle way” (*FS* 206). Assimilation through choice or force is unavoidable, but what is important is to never lose sight of home’s power to destroy or heal. Fleur, like Nanapush, must learn to plot a course in life that redefines home in the avenues afforded to the project and its meaning to those involved. In these terms, home is delicately transformative. For Erdrich’s characters, to lean too hard towards either traditionally Native or Western definitions of home only spells disaster and displacement. Pauline and Fleur make the same but opposite mistake. Pauline sees no future for Natives or their concerns, and Fleur cannot contemplate a future without the exact land of her birth. Nanapush, however, wisely epitomizes the middle ground of both positions. He continues to make home paramount through the conventions and values of Western ideals.

Thus even as an admonishment, *Tracks* and *Four Souls* stand together as hope for the future of indigenous populations. The repercussion of rejecting or forgetting home's tenets and power is clear, but home is also depicted as resilient and forgiving. Fleur undergoes and survives the harsh re-baptism into the home she at the outset rejects for revenge, and Nanapush sadly makes concessions to exist within the modern world. In the end, they find hope in people, community, family, and location that allow them back home.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE

#### 3.1 Reading 'Home' as the Catalytic Converter in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

*Hearing sins was work that required all of the tactful knowledge developed during the years spent among these people. His people. He was proud to say he had been adopted into a certain family, the Nanapush family, whose long dead elder had been his first friend on the reservation.*

---Father Damien Modeste/Agnes (LR 5)

Unlike its predecessors *Tracks* and *Foul Souls*, Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* does not chronicle Natives' fight and plight to retain indigenous lands, customs, and culture, but the novel's major characters also desire to belong to a specific place or people. Furthermore, the fact that novel's protagonist is a non-Native is an advantage to my overall contention that Erdrich tackles home concepts from a variety of view points, including the lens of a liminal existence, never purely Native or Western. Tribal concepts of home are then not relegated to Native Americans or defined by a specific number of Western or Native elements; home is formed or characterized by the contact of these elements with each other at preciously the right moments. In *Last Report's* case, the Native American backdrop (the reservation and Native community) serves as the fertile ground from which Erdrich's protagonist, Damien/Agnes's, home grows and flourishes. Thus, Erdrich's tenets of home never change for either Natives or non-Natives: family and community and their relation to location are still keys; it is only the connections between those particular elements and location that differ.

*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* traces the investigation of Sister Leopolda/Pauline's candidacy for sainthood; however, the story that transpires finds that Father Damien is not only more fitting for the honor, but that Damien's existence within the reservation hinges on incorporation and integration into the Native American community. Damien/Agnes is, in Simon Ortiz's terms, an "orphaned people"; thus, the "home" that she discovers on the reservation is paramount to her survival. Damien's direct involvement with the community also warrants the acknowledgement that she is instrumental in Native survival, both culturally and literally. Damien is not merely given a "home"; she becomes a crucial part of the community. Deirdre Keenan acknowledges in "Unrestricted Territory: Gender, Two Spirits, and Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*," "This assertion immediately raises the question: How can a white Catholic missionary represent Native American tradition?" (4). As Keenan subsequently argues, "the representation substantially depends on the ways the Anishinaabeg at Little No Horse perceive him [Damien] and recognize his Two Spirit status" (4). The fact that Damien is a Western character is exactly the point. The backdrop, influence, and acceptance of the Indian community specifically re-defines and/or re-creates "home" for Damien. "Home" is then re-conceptualized to give a person with no place a space to survive and thrive.

Written partly in epistolary form and partly as a reconfiguration of the oral tradition, *Last Report* begins with an end. It tells the most private and most protected secret of Father Damien Modeste: he is a woman. While profound, Damien's secret is less important than his journey and struggle to keep the secret. Mimicking Native American's own voluntary and involuntary migration, assimilation, and eventual re-conception of "home," Damien (the persona) emerges without a fixed location to call "home," but she later becomes firmly and admirably established in the fold of the Native community.

Searching for a place to belong, the former Agnes DeWitt is usurped by the identity Sister Cecilia. This identity is, however, short-lived. Finding love for music at the convent and finding the love of companionship with Berndt Vogel, Agnes attempts to create two very distinct

identities that enjoy the above merits, yet neither of those identities is permanent. Instead, they end in certain tragedy. However, these lives are only the first steps on the road to going “home,” to be “adopted” into “family” (LR 5).

After losing part of her memory from a gun shot wound to the head and surviving a flood of biblical portions, Agnes relates, “I now believe in that river I drowned in spirit, but revived. I lost an old life and gained a new” (LR 41).<sup>8</sup> This is the start of a new beginning. At this point in the novel, the notion of “home” is not only refocused, but the Native community—despite the horrific impact of initial western contact—comes to need Damien as much as he needs them. Every individual in a Native community is crucial to its existence. Therefore, to salvage any “home,” Agnes slips into the role of a drowned priest (the first Father Damien) and begins “...to walk north, into the land of the Ojibwe, to the place on the reservation where he had told her he was bound” (LR 45). While the transformation is difficult, in “The Complicated Life of Louise Erdrich,” Karen Olson states, “*Last Report*...is about someone who, rather than being overwhelmed by loss, survives it. Agnes [Damien], in spite of her deprivations, achieves a fantastically full life” (34). Damien begins to construct a home, one where she is necessary, accepted, and at “home.” In Damien’s own words, she “had arrived here. The true Modeste who was suppose to arrive—none other. No one else” (65).

The physical location of Little No Horse, however, is itself only as important as the people and community. As Damien is quick to point out, comparing himself to Mary Kashpaw, his history is undeniably tied to the Native citizens of the community: “‘The story of her [Mary Kashpaw] existence is also my story here,’ said father Damien. ‘Her story and mine are twined up from the roots of the place. There is no telling my story without hers!’” (55). As Erdrich concludes in an interview with Mark Rolo, “I think there is a more pointed, political, Native identity in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. But now it’s more about identity in a sense that includes family, gender, sexual identity—every kind of way that we label ourselves or attempt to root

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<sup>8</sup> Agnes is shot by a bank robber who subsequently takes her hostage. In attempt to rescue her, Berndt Vogel is murdered by the assailant, leaving Agnes, again, alone in the world.

ourselves" (38). Damien and the Natives' combined concerns and struggles become the "roots" that unify to create a singular story of survival, assimilation, and communal identity.

The location of the reservation and the space of the characters' actions are neither fixed nor solid. "The reservation at the time was a place still fluid of definition, appearing solid only on a map...It was a place of shifting allegiances, new feuds and old animosities, a place of clan teasing, jealousy, comfort, love" (*LR* 75). It is a "home" in all aspects, but with "boundaries [that] came and went, drawn to accommodate local ventures—sawmills, farms, feed stores, and the traplines of various families" (*LR* 75). This is the place where Father Damien Modeste arrives and attempts to make sense of Native conditions and her own existence within the community.

Nanapush and Fleur (at first reluctantly) become the immediate family that Damien never had. As their relationship develops, "Nanapush becomes a veritable instructor of traditional ways by taking Father Damien (Agnes) under his tutelage" (Wittmier 241). Damien's own views of Catholicism are not only revised to include Ojibwe customs and beliefs, but she becomes the father (at least in name) of Fleur's soon to become estranged daughter, Lulu. "Home" is, therefore, redefined to include Lulu, Nanapush, and Fleur as "adopted" family members that, for Damien, seamlessly weave their way into his heart and religion. In a letter to the Vatican, Damien declares, "I have discovered an unlikely truth that may interest Your Holiness. The ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ" (*LR* 49). This statement sets up the notion that "home" is more than the Ojibwe or Catholic world for Damien. "Rather, Father Damien's mediation reveals the limits of Christian orthodoxy, the recuperative potential of Ojibwe spirituality, and the possibility of a spirituality that arises from two traditions" (Keenan 6). In fact, by Damien's own admission, she, herself, lives a hybrid existence that cannot be pigeon-holed into one clear definition of spirituality or gender.

"In this context, Erdrich's novel provides a theory and practice of gender identity formations that challenges mainstream concepts and the intolerance that rises from those

concepts” (Keenan 1). While Damien comes to realize that her arrival on the reservation is a new beginning, what memories remain of her former selves are not truly extinguished. She has to confront her evolving identity in order to attempt to define who or what she is. As Damien questions, “Between these two [female and male identities], where was the real self? It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing?” (*LR* 76). In application to race construction, Louis Owens supports this notion, claiming that American Indian identity is also “manufactured” from the dominant hegemony’s stereotypes (4).

Therefore the issue Nanapush and Fleur face is what colonization has forced them to become and what their memories tell them they still are. As Damien states, “They were shells made of loss, made of transparent flint, made of the whispers in the oak leaves, voices of the dead” (*LR* 80). Yet, these “dead” still have voices, voices that carry on through Damien’s memory and re-telling of the story. Home evolves in all of these fashions by utilizing what, in Momaday’s terms, “sustains” them all: the word. It is here the story of creating place becomes paramount to creating or re-creating a literal place of communal identity for Damien, Nanapush, Fleur, and the Native community. Therefore, Damien “saves” Nanapush and Fleur and other members of the community as they save him.

In fact, the reciprocal nature of Damien’s relationship with the Natives of the reservation replicates Erdrich’s own liminal status, noted by Peter Beidler, who claims that Erdrich’s talent to create a story lies in her position as both an insider and outsider (*DLB* 175). Damien’s priestly role exudes fear and spite. As Fleur recollects, “The priests had brought the sickness long ago in the hems of their black gowns, in their sleeves, in the water they flung on people to make them holy but which might as well have burned holes in their skin” (*LR* 81). However, as many in the community come to realize, Westerners and their religion are not going to simply disappear. This leads to varying levels of hate, assimilation, and tolerance for Catholicism. For

instance, the office of a priest obtains Damien a degree of respect and usefulness. Thus, no matter the response to the Church's presence, its effect is felt.

This fact is introduced early in Damien's journey to the reservation by old Kashpaw and serves as the foreground to a worsened situation where home is placed precariously in flux. Kashpaw's personal solution is both activism and surrender. He acknowledges that the world is changing, but he desires the option to "go back to the old ways" (LR 63). Unfortunately, Kashpaw's initial reaction to colonization is relegated only to blood quantum:

Leave us full-bloods alone, let us be with our Nanabozho, our sweats and shake tents, our grand medicines and bundles. We don't hurt nobody. Your wiisaakodewiniwag, half-burnt wood, they can use your God as backup for these things. Our world is already whipped apart by the white man. Why do you black gowns care if we pray to your god. (LR 63)

Choosing the term "whipped" rather than "ripped" implies that the world and "home" Kashpaw had known is not gone but is in need of reintegration, one that includes the tenets of Western culture that have been "whipped" apart from Native culture, practices, and life. Noting the oscillate nature of the relationship between Native and Western cultures, Damien is equally influenced by, or "whipped," into this re-conception of "home."

The challenge to save their land, lives, and souls from Western intrusion, obstruction, and oppression is, however, extremely difficult in the context of colonization. As the epitome of colonial opportunism, John James Mauser uses the land and Indian people for pure economic gain:

He went from land speculation into lumber, minerals, quarries. He now purchases areas lost to the continual census that shows a dwindling number of Indians. He buys the land tax forfeited. He buys the land by having the Ojibwe owners declared incompetent. He buys this parcel and the next and the next. He takes the trees off. He leaves the stumps.

New Legislation passes. Is reversed. Mauser prospers with every fumble. His hands are always open, ready to receive. He denudes all holdings as they come his way, though sometimes he waits for certain special parcels that produce, as do one series of prime allotments on Little No Horse, oak trees of great density, beauty, and age that will never again be seen in this region. (*LR* 106)

To combat Mauser's actions and others like him, Damien becomes one of the Natives most conscientious activists and constituents. In accord with Erdrich's definition of authorial responsibility, Damien "took up the pen" to not only recount the story of Mauser's dishonest capitalist activities, but also fight against them. Damien warns,

...John James Mauser is not government, he is a single man who wants trees, in general,...he offers what seems a vast sum of money...But then the winter drags out, children need to be fed, old people buried, and the craving satisfied that never quits. Thanks to Mauser, ishkodewaaboo, the smooth fire that takes their land money, is tidily available just across the reservation line.... (*LR* 107)

Damien's fight is not one of simple priestly virtue or goodness; these are "his people" and his home he is protecting (*LR* 5).

The sentiment of communal unity and good is later reiterated by a perishing wife of Kashpaw, Quill. "Lazarres and Pillagers should eat from the same kettle'," Quill said, 'join together for strength against the truer threat which is not each other but the damn chimooks [Whites]...Stay together, you families, don't let the land and money divide you" (*LR* 114). While this statement is an obvious appeal to preserve traditional versions of a communal home, in both senses of location and cultural identity, Erdrich's choice to specify the Lazarres and Pillager clans is paramount to understanding that totally reverting to the "old ways" is impossible. The families and their perspective names have already been diluted by French interbreeding and influence. Colonization is unavoidable and irreversible. In Erdrich's terms, her

characters are only left with “protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of [this] catastrophe” (“Where” 23).

As Damien gathers up a shovel to aid Kashpaw’s daughter, Mary’s, mechanical and relentlessly digging into the ground of her Native home, he does not chastise her for her seemingly abnormal actions; he joins her as an equal. Recollecting old Kashpaw’s vision of impending death for his people, “shuddering fear ran through him [Damien]...Was [Kashpaw’s] daughter digging those two hundred Anishinaabeg graves? The holes were the shape not only of graves, but worse, of many interconnected and searching graves” (*LR* 115). Reflecting his own placement with the Native community, Damien’s actions literally make him the digger of graves but also solidly position Damien as member of the Native community “that the tall spirit wearing the black hat” “will return for” (*LR* 112). The interweaving of Native and Western culture, then, transcends typical location, culture, and heritage; it becomes a composite of the religious basis for both worlds that must be reconfigured and re-recognized as such, even within their individual religious contexts. A primarily Western or Native interpretation cannot be relied upon in a world of colliding or contrasting social and cultural values.

This becomes amply clear when Damien and young Father Jude disagree on the seriousness of “irregular [sexual] behavior” within the convent and Damien’s parishioners (*LR* 134). Jude argues that Damien’s tolerant view is “somewhat appalling” (*LR* 134), but Damien does not rebuke his colleague; instead, his response negotiates the rigid Catholic world of “Black is black and white is white” (*LR* 135). As Damien puts it, “The mixture is gray....I have never seen the truth...without crossing my eyes. Life is crazy” (*LR* 135). Who better to utter this remark than one who is a blend of the traditional dichotomy of man/woman. Damien is both practice and principle of an evolving identity. Without comprehending what he first sees, Jude recognizes that there is “inhabiting the same cassock as the priest, an old woman. She was a sly, pleasant, contradictory-looking female of stark intelligence” (*LR* 139). She is not inferior, but one person telling and living and (re)telling and (re)living the story. “Home” is not something



that is defined, but something that can only be redefined through the understanding that it is and can never be fixed into definite terms.

As Damien understands it "...each name you hear on this reservation is an unfinished history. A destiny that opens like a cone pouring out a person's life" (*LR* 145). The story of Pauline Puyat/Sister Leopolda is no different. From her conception, she is born into a family of mixed-bloods who are searching for a "home." While it is easy to condemn Pauline/Leopolda's actions throughout Erdrich's North Dakota saga, it would be unfair to discount the circumstance that created her. As Damien explains, the consensus on the reservation is "that the Puyats were subject, as any family on the reservation, to the same great press of forces, and that their clan managed to survive at all was certainly commendable and strange" (*LR* 148). The loss of clan, tribe, and home afflicted Pauline's people long before many other Natives of the same region; therefore, her story and life is destabilized by a significant degree more than even the Pillager's, Nanapush's, Lazarres', and Morrisseys'.

This makes her integration in the competing Native/Western worlds markedly more complex. Instead of redefining "home" in a fashion that treads the line between both worlds, she gives herself completely to what she prizes as the core of Western power, conversion, and colonization: the Church. While many readers and critics are quick to claim that Pauline's actions reflect the detrimental decision to deny the indigenous roots of her culture, place, and heritage, that is only partially true. Pauline's re-conception of home begins with a loathing for her own self, people, and family that spans generations of mothers and daughters. In Father Damien's recollection, "This killing hatred between mother and daughter was passed down and did not die when the last Pauline became a nun. As Sister Leopolda she was known for her harsh and fearsome ways" (*LR* 157). Under the duress of her abusive mother and hers before her, Pauline is formed into one that sees no clear future for Natives, only the bleak existence of

staving off the Church, disease, and starvation. Pauline then chooses to embrace Western ideals to secure her place in the new world.<sup>9</sup>

Denouncing her Native heritage, Pauline enters the convent for one purpose only: to become a saint. It is not a coincidence that sainthood is the most powerful position one could obtain within the church. Saints transcend all Church authority, as they are likened to Jesus himself. Unfortunately, even the Church cannot negate what Chadwick Allan deems “blood memory.” As Damien questions, “What unknown capacities, what secret Old World cruelties, were thereby tangled into her simmering blood?” (*LR* 157). Pauline cannot escape her fate because she does not have any sustaining notion of home. Instead, she searches constantly for that “familiar place” to ground herself within the world of colonization (“Where” 23).

Pauline was, of course, the warped result of all that twisted her mother. She was what came next, beyond the end of things. She was the residue of what occurred when some of our grief-mad people trampled their children. Yes, Leopolda was the hope and she was the poison. And the history of the Puyats is the history of the end of things. It is bound up in despair and the red beasts’ lust for self-slaughter, an act the chimookomanag [whites] call suicide, which our people rarely practiced until now. (*LR* 158)

Seeing nothing but continued despair for herself and other Natives, Pauline’s choices are not without reason. As other Natives also lament, she believes the indigenous world no longer has anything to offer. “Their gods had not, in recent times, served the Ojibwe well” (*LR* 238). Her misguided appropriation of a position within the Church and its tenets is merely the struggle to find or define “home” within the halls and walls of the church convent. Within this context, Pauline/Sister Leopolda is not simply, as the reader learns, a sadistic torturer and killer, but an individual who exemplifies the dire need for place in a degenerating world of Native culture and heritage. Her choices are detrimental, but they are not simple. As Bernadette, Pauline’s

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<sup>9</sup> In accordance with her lineage’s propensity for mother/daughter loathing, Pauline attempts to abort her child, Marie; abandons her; and as Sister Leopolda, physically and mentally abuses a

surrogate mother, concludes, "... it was useless to do anything but go forward, live forward, take the money in their hands, and find a new place to put their hearts and their feet" (LR 168). Comparing Natives to the last of the Buffalo, Nanapush sadly recollects, "The buffalo went crazy with grief to see the end of things. Like us, they saw the end of things and like many of us, many today, they did not care to live" (LR 158). Figuratively, Pauline commits suicide and is then reborn as Sister Leopolda. However, as the tale of *Last Report* unfolds, Damien's actions and words balance and/or combat Leopolda's adherence to her perverted forms of Western ideology.

Damien works tirelessly to champion the physical and religious needs of the Native population. In doing so, he comes to redefine what is truly important for him, what he considers elements of his home: "He described the piteous effects of the most recent illness. The ravages of hunger. The moral effect of land loss and the deep thirst he had already experienced among the people—a thirst for the spiritual drink, curiosity, a hunger for the food of the heart" (LR 180). Subsequently, this thirst is solidly tied to the "...[Native's] vital relationship to the dirt and grass under feet" (LR 171). As Damien resides in the same physical location, this reality becomes true for him too.

He finds that his desires, needs, and loves all exist within the Native family and community he calls "home." Drawn immediately to Fleur's infant, Lulu, Father Damien becomes both a father and unbreakable part of a Native family. "It was perhaps the imprint of the tiny body against his own, the connection that still lingered, a dreaminess, that caused him when he signed the certificate to add his own name, twice, *mistakenly* along with Nanapush, as both priest and father" (LR 184). This "mistake" is dually important because it recognizes Damien as a family member, but it also acknowledges that Nanapush is a "priest" of sorts. Erdrich's sentence crosses both lines of family and religion to create a distinct relationship that firmly adheres to notions of "home." Irresistibly, "slowly and inevitably, she [Father Damien] fell in love with each person in the family, only she didn't know what to call it. She simply found herself

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grown Marie at the convent, where she also applies to become a novice.

related,” and in turn, “their love for him, in return, pained and soothed him. He was thrilled and touched with sadness, he was hungry, and he was practical. He was lonely; he was a priest” (LR 184, 185). Always an outsider and always an insider, Damien acts as activist and family member for Nanapush and Fleur, who are in danger of losing their lands to John Mauser.

Damien, again, picks up the pen to preserve a vestige of his “family’s” land:

Father Damien’s letters flowed everywhere. He wrote to the governor of North Dakota, to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to John James Mauser, to the Grand Forks, Fargo and Bismarck newspapers. He wrote the President of the United States and to county officials on every level. He wrote to Bernadette Morrissey and to the sick former land agent, Jewett Parker Tatro. He wrote to the state senators and representatives and to an organization called Friends of the Indians. He was determined to restore that land, but once it was gone, it was gone forever from Anishinaabeg hands. (186)

While the outcome of losing Nanapush and Pillager lands is the story of *Four Souls*, Damien’s struggle to aid the Natives is equally as important as Fleur’s later decision to leave “home” to exact her revenge on John James Mauser. As *Four Souls* pointedly shows, Fleur’s decision is detrimental to her, even though she does win back her land. As her daughter, Lulu puts it, “*She chose revenge. I chose to hate her for it*” (LR 242). On the other hand, Father Damien’s resolution to stay put in order to serve the tribal community solidifies her position within the Native world, ironically making her actions more “Indian” than many of the native community consider Fleur’s life with John James Mauser.

This fact is further reiterated by Damien’s agreement with the “devil.” Damien becomes Lulu’s surrogate mother and protector upon Fleur’s relocation to the cities in order to commit her revenge on John Mauser. Damien readily gives all that he has for Lulu, entering into an agreement for the exchange of souls. Damien demands, “I will trade places with the child, with Lulu Nanapush,” she declared, “but you must not take me until I am good and ready” (191). As a “mother” figure, Erdrich shifts Damien’s speech to the female pronoun, “she.” Damien at once

becomes the legal father, surrogate mother, and protector of her family of the only “home” she knows she is apart of, “the true Modeste who was suppose to arrive—none other. No one else” (65).

However, Damien discovers this identity and “home” is not one that comes without a price. Giving herself up for the good of the community is unfavorable to her in various ways. She continually struggles with who she has been, who she is, and who she must become. “This love of Christ, this love that chose Agnes and forced her to give up her nature as a woman, forced Father Damien to appear to sacrifice the pleasures of manhood, was impossible to define in Ojibwe” (*LR* 99). Damien crosses both the boundaries of manhood and womanhood, which comes to a complicated and decisively destructive climax when Damien is sent an assistant: Damien’s faith and allegiance to both place and community are shaken by the arrival and closeness of Father Gregory Wekkle.

Having no other place to stay, Wekkle promptly moves into Damien’s small abode. Fearing that her secret will be found out, Damien constructs a wall of books between them. As their attraction to each other increases, this wall becomes symbolic of what seems to be the words that they cannot say to each other. Reverting to her old identity, Erdrich shifts Damien into the female Agnes. Here, Agnes admits, “A mistake. Close, she smelled the wood heat of his skin, the washed soapy scent of his neck, the scorched wool upon which he must have used a too hot iron, and sweat. A faint, low, clean, and intensely sexual workman’s sweat. Agnes felt herself leaning into the air around him” (196). Similarly, Father Wekkle is “disturbed at his own physical reaction to the proximity of Father Damien” (196). Fittingly, their need for each other comes to fulfillment by the accidental destruction of the book wall between them. As Wekkle enters Agnes’ bed for the first of many times, they find the words they could not speak, “they spoke now, their whispers incoherent” (200). Still, this relationship is one Agnes knows that she cannot keep.

Wekkle attempts to convince Agnes “to leave together,” “be a couple married legally and happily,” “have children, a life” (205-06). Unfortunately for Wekkle and Agnes, Damien

already has a home, one with happiness, children, and life. This life is as priest of Little No Horse. In an interview with Karen Olson, Erdrich explains, “Agnes really has to live through the fact that she has an amazing drive to follow what her spirit dictates. She does follow it, and it is immensely difficult” (qtd. in Olson 34). Reiterating this point, Nanapush concludes, “Your [Damien’s] spirits must be powerful to require such a sacrifice” (*LR* 232). True to this evaluation, Damien again gives up all that she carnally desires to ensure that her Native “home” does not suffer the consequences of her actions with Father Wekkle. Addressing the Vatican, Damien begs,

Many of the Indians (they call themselves the Anishinaabeg, the Spontaneous or Original People) have come to depend upon me. There is really no one else I feel can take my place, no one committed to their well-being or engrossed in their faith—I am becoming one with them so as to better lead them into the great Corpus Christi. And the closer I draw, the more of their pain do I feel.  
(209)

Yet, Damien’s love for her Native home does not make her choice to stay and give up Father Wekkle any easier.

After recommending that Father Wekkle be given a new post, Damien mimics “the buffalo [that] went crazy with grief to see the end of things. ... [Damien] ... saw the end of things and like many of us, many today, they did not care to live” (*LR* 158). However, before Damien can end his own life, a powerful sickness afflicts him. At this juncture, Damien’s role as activist, father, mother, and friend to the Native community is drastically reversed; Damien becomes the one his “family” must care for. As Damien enters an unconscious state of hallucination caused by his illness, he still cannot flee his liminal status, “wandering mightily through heaven and earth. He was exploring worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic” (*LR* 211). This journey is equivalently as damaging as Damien’s actual position between the Ojibwe and Catholic worlds. “And had Mary Kashpaw not kept that beacon [a lighted lantern] going, he might, in his long and rambling journey, have become confused or even got lost. For the countries of the

spirit, to which he was now admitted, were accessible only via many dim and tangled trails" (*LR* 211). Only Damien's Native counterparts can save him from the destruction caused by the "absence of all familiar place" (Erdrich, "Where" 23).

While emancipated from the "tangled trials" of the spirit world by her attendant, Mary, Damien's recovery only finds her still resolved to suicide. Here other members of her Native home retrieve her from another point of certain extermination. Damien's friend and confidant, "Nanapush provides the traditions that can reconcile the priest's divided self" (Keenan 5). This is in stark contrast to "the way Damien understood it, he was to help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg. Not the other way around" (*LR* 214). Yet, as "he [Damien] entered the familiar yard [of Nanapush's home] that afternoon, heart full, the pleasure and kindness in Nanapush's face somewhat eased his certainty [of killing himself]" (*LR* 214). It is this "familiar place" that "reference, identity ... pull to landscape that mirror our most intense feelings" that Damien needs in order to rescue her, to again be whole, to again have place—a home ("Where" 23). Damien realizes that, like his Indian brethren, only the combination of the Native and Western worlds can save him. "Here surrounded by Ojibwe men, Damien finds peace" (Keenan 5-6). As Melanie Wittmier concludes, "Damien, who comes to the reservation to instruct the Ojibwe people in the beliefs and ethics of the Christian faith, finds himself learning from those he intended to instruct" (241). In a Native sweat lodge, chanting Catholic prayers, Damien discovers that he is indeed "comforted," as he first believed he was to comfort the Natives (*LR* 215).

Erdrich's next chapter, "The Audience," further disintegrates the hierarchal binary of Western/Native religious beliefs. In a mix of Euro-American and Ojibwe religious practices and attitudes, Damien literally fills the church with serpents, who are attracted to his piano playing. This allows Natives such as Mary Kashpaw to enter the church to worship among the snakes unmolested, "as though with her kind" (*LR* 220). Biblically serpents are considered synonymous with evil, but in a tribal view, as Nanapush explains, the occurrence "was a sign of great positive concern among the old people, for the snake was a deeply intelligent secretive being, and knew

all the cold and blessed spirits who lived under stone and deep in the earth” (LR 220). Acknowledging the power of the animals and of this occurrence, the Native population “consults [Damien] more often and trusted [him] with [more] intimate knowledge” (LR 220). Damien’s incorporation into a Native family evolves into a larger home of the tribal community. This entrance into Native society hinges on Damien’s own hybrid beliefs and actions that negotiate the two seemingly contradictory worlds. The navigation of these worlds is not a lesson relegated to Native Americans; for, the greater good of the entire community (mixed-blood, full-blood, and non-native), the world must be seen in its “grey” reality (LR 135). Fittingly, a statue of the Madonna arrives at Little No Horse with a “too realistic” serpent that “did not look at all crushed down by her weight,” symbolically reflecting Damien/Agnes’ own Catholic beliefs and understanding of Native religion (LR 226).

As the Vatican investigator, Father Jude Miller, concludes later, Damien’s role and actions within the community and convent make him a deserving applicant for sainthood. This realization emerges after learning about Sister Leopolda’s sadistic and masochistic nature and the truth about the “miracles” attributed to her. Therefore, “home” becomes a term that drives Leopolda into the arms of the western Church, and at the same time, “home” becomes a place that consists of the people, land, and community that Damien needs. Set at opposite ends of the spectrum, Erdrich masterfully leads the characters into direct confrontation. After spying on Damien, Leopolda threatens to inform Church officials of Damien’s gender. True to her selfless nature, Damien only laments what she believes could be lost: “Married couples Father Damien had joined would be sundered. Babies unbaptized and exposed to dark powers. Deaths unblest and sins again weighing on the poor sinners,” and “there would surely be no one who would listen to the sins of the Anishinaabeg and forgive them...” (LR 276).

However, Leopolda’s threat does not come to fruition. A compromise is struck for both of their benefits. Damien keeps the secret of her gender, and Leopolda continues as a lauded member of the convent. Here the novel’s text becomes crucial to creating or defining “home.” The story of *Last Report* is a testimony in which Leopolda’s candidacy for sainthood is



essentially re-written in order to include the tyranny, manipulation, underhandedness, and murderous actions of which she is guilty. This “re-vision” takes that necessary attribute of belonging to a people and place away from Leopolda, positioning her forever in a setting that tolerates her, but can never be the “home” she desires—she will never achieve sainthood. Father Jude’s “last report” and Damien’s letters to the Vatican make sure of this fact. Without both, Leopolda would be glorified as dedicated to the holy Church, its works, and its people—she would be saintly.

Damien’s own life is placed in much the same context. Without the oral history he gives Father Jude, Damien would have been simply remembered as a priest who had done his duty—converting and hearing confessions by the ignorant horde of Natives where he is posted. Instead, as Father Jude concludes, Damien’s lives “*The life of sacrifice, the life of ordinary acts of daily kindness, the life of devotion, humility, and purpose....includ[ing] miracles and direct shows of God’s love, gifts of the spirit, humorous incidents as well as tragic encounters and examples of heroic virtue...[are] Saintly...*” (LR 341). And in an added bit of irony, the text of Lulu’s birth certificate convinces Father Jude that Damien is none other than Lulu’s biological father (LR 333). In both cases, Father Jude’s “report” and Lulu’s birth certificate, Damien is given more than what could be achieved by merely a woman posing as a priest. The texts make Damien a real priest, a real father, one that is respected and loved within the community where she creates a home. In Jace Weaver’s terms, the lives of Leopolda and Damien both continue to live on because of the stories told.

Louise Owens’ contentions support this notion on a different level. In Owens’ view, many contemporary Native writers attempt to address stereotypical versions of “Indianess” in literature. Aptly created, Damien and Leopolda simply do not fit the bill of any Western or Native stereotype. Although she enjoys no quantum of indigenous blood, Damien’s character is far more, and rightly, classified as Indian in both her actions and words than Leopolda’s character. Leopolda, on the other hand, fully rejects her Native heritage to become the anti-thesis of concern for tribal issues and peoples. Pitting these characters against each other, Erdrich nicely

deconstructs the notion that Westerners and Natives can be easily categorized as one type of person or the other and that their “home” is or can be defined in either a purely Western or Native sense. As Keenan further explains, “In each of her mediations between mainstream and Ojibwe culture—in matters of spirituality, faith, conversion, language, culture, and morality—Father Damien provides not merely opposing opinions on mainstream issues but new meaning” (7).

The final sequence of *Last Report* reiterates this sentiment. While Damien does not wholly refuse the Church’s trappings, “Damien personally rejects Christian dogma, including its concept of evil and redemption, choosing, in the end, to enter the Ojibwe heaven” (Keenan 6). To escape the Catholic version of the Devil, Damien absconds to a location that embodies what Edward Said calls, “The objective space of a house...what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel” (55). Spirit Island is a sacred Ojibwe place feared and revered for its power throughout the North Dakota saga. Living in between the Western and Native worlds, Damien “values” the island as much as he does the Church. Since he already struck a deal with Christianity’s devil (represented as a large black dog) to trade his life for Lulu’s when the time comes, Damien hopes the island’s power will allow “her soul [to] slip past the cur’s slimy teeth and sneak by the hell gates and pearly gates into that sweeter pasture, the heaven of the Ojibwe” (*LR* 346).<sup>10</sup>

This death scene vitally contrasts with Sister Leopolda’s melodramatic demise in *Tales of Burning Love*. Damien finds his way into the “sweeter pasture” of the Ojibwe heaven through the actions of Mary Kashpaw. Finding Damien’s body on the island shore, Mary guarantees that Damien’s gender will not be discovered and that he receives a proper burial by submerging his body in the lake. Thus, Damien becomes an actual part of the land he so loved. On the other hand, during Leopolda’s life, her fanatically violent and painful penances draw rebuke from her

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<sup>10</sup> The Christian version of the devil visits Damian in the form of a large black dog. At this visit the dog makes clear that he wants Lulu’s soul. To “save” her, Damien promises to trade places with her when the time comes. It should also be noted that the dog does not find Lulu on his first

mother superior, and by the end of her existence, Leopolda's temperament and actions socially ostracize her from the ranks of the convent, positioning her again as an outsider in a space she wishes to belong. The implications of her death are then less shocking or surreal than the actual event: Leopolda has a heart-attack when Jack Mauser, who is at the time disguised as a statue of the Virgin Mary, hands her a bouquet of sweet honey suckle.<sup>11</sup> Leopolda's body, however, is not given last rites or buried in consecrated ground. Her body is vaporized by lightning in *Tales of Burning Love*. Thus, she seems doomed to an afterlife undefined by either Western or Native beliefs. Therefore, Leopolda's choices and actions alienate herself from both her Native culture and the Church, while Damien embraces his hybrid position to become one with both the Native community and church.<sup>12</sup> The outcome of Damien and Leopolda's deaths is then earned or deserved through their contrasting works within the Native community and Church.

However, Damien's death scene's emphasis on positive hybridity is anything but final. *Last Report* moves to conventional and unconventional end notes, where Louise Erdrich gives acknowledgments and thanks to people and places instrumental in aiding in her creation of *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Here she also mentions that "the reservation depicted in this and in all of my novels is an imagined place consisting of landscapes and features similar to many Ojibwe reservations" (*LR* 357). Yet, the word "imagined" should not be read as synonymous with false. Instead the "imagined" is, as Ines Hernandez-Avila claims, "... the power of the creative (writing) process itself, the inscription of our lives and our communities' lives, the relocating of our languages in the homes of our words, and our homes in the words of our languages" (493). Consistent with this assessment, Erdrich ends *Last Report* by blending language, fiction, and reality into a place (a home) which does not distinguish each space as an individual location.

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visit to Damien because Fleur sent her to a government school. Ironically, the estrangement between Fleur and Lulu that ensues also "saves" Lulu in a way.

<sup>11</sup> Jack enters the convent in search of Eleanor who is researching the life of Sister Leopolda and escaping her own personal demons. Believing that he might be discovered by the convent's nuns, he positions himself in the space of a statue of the Madonna that has not yet arrived.

<sup>12</sup> See *Tale of Burning Love* and *Love Medicine*.

As always, Nanapush gets the last word. He ends the narrative of *Last Report* by acknowledging the power words have to create and define a home's place for all peoples. He states:

If we call ourselves and all we see around us by the original names, will we not continue to be Anishinaabeg? Instead of reconstituted white men, instead of Indian ghosts? So the rocks here know us, do the trees, do the waters of the lakes? Not unless they are addressed by the names they themselves told us to call them in our dreams" (*LR* 360-61).

While this statement supports Chadwick Allen's argument for "blood memory," the lines are also imperative to understanding that "home" can exist in "dreams." This argument is akin to John Gamber's contentions in "Dreamers in the Cities," but for my objective, it is more important to realize that, despite actual location, language, the land, people, community, and culture are interdependent on one another for definition. As Nanapush makes clear, "unless the earth is called by the names it gave us humans, won't it cease to love us? And isn't it true that if the earth stops loving us, everyone, not just the Anishinaabeg, will cease to exist" (*LR* 361). The word "human" (not Native or Westerner) includes all people, such as characters like Father Damien and Sister Leopolda. Only the remembering, the telling, the re-telling of the stories is responsible for the continuation of all people. "That is why we must speak our language, nindinawemagonidok, and call everything we see by the name of its spirit. Even the chimookamanag, who are trying to destroy us, are depending upon us to remember" (*LR* 361).

The confrontation of Damien and Leopolda is then not anti-climatic; it grounds *Last Report* in the notion that language participates in crafting "home" for Erdrich's characters. Home is defined or constructed by the words responsible for its creation. In "reality," Damien is a woman pretending to be a priest, but the "home" she comes to know, love, and belong is defined by what is perceived, what is dreamed, what is written, what is spoken by Damien, Jude, Nanapush, and Leopolda.

## CHAPTER 4

### BEET QUEEN AND MASTER BUTCHERS SINGING CLUB

#### 4.1 'Blood Memory' in Action: Pull Towards 'Home' in Louise Erdrich's *Beet Queen*

While a majority of Erdrich's writing is dedicated to Native American plots and characters, she has also written several pieces that focus on Western themes and characters. Erdrich's second novel, *Beet Queen*, examines the mix-and-matched family of Mary Adare and, most notably, traces how Mary's home is constructed in response to motherly abandonment; migration to Argus, North Dakota; a life long relationship with her best friend, Celestine (mixed-blood Native); the birth of her daughter, Dot; and estranged relationship with remaining biological ties—her cousin, Sita, and her brother, Karl. *The Master Butches Singing Club*, likewise, centers on predominately non-Native characters. The novel traces the immigration of German Nationals, Fidelis Waldvogel and his wife, Eva, who relocate to Argus, North Dakota after World War I. Fidelis' first employment in *Master Butchers Singing Club* is for Mary Adare's uncle, Pete Kozka. While Fidelis and Kozka become sworn enemies after Fidelis opens his own butcher shop, they reconcile by participation in Fidelis' "singing club." This connection is, however, only one of many sub-plots that originate from Fidelis' place of business. Far more important to my examination of home places or spaces is, after Eva's prolonged illness and death, Fidelis' entrance into a relationship with Delphine Watzka, a returning local of Argus. It is through this liaison that Fidelis creates a home bound by location.

Thus, while the books are connected by more than resemblance in theme and direct link between characters, my most significant claim to including *Master Butchers Singing Club* is that the protagonist's journey and eventual incorporation into Argus society mimics the voluntary or involuntary migration of many American Indian tribes throughout contact with European

nations. Their relocations demand the need for re-definition and re-creation in what, at times, is a hostile, unforgiving, and initially alien world. It is only by firm connection to surrounding elements that home is established. Thus, the argument that Fidelis recreates or redefines home before the intrusion of Delphine in his life has merit on the surface, but upon closer exploration, return to his initial homeland, Germany, pervades his thoughts throughout the text until their marriage. Fidelis finds a space to exist, but Delphine gives him a sense of belonging.

It is for these reasons and comparison that both novels are important to exploring Erdrich's "notions of home." Erdrich, like many of her characters, finds it impossible to write, act, or address any concerns independent of either her Euro-American or Native heritage. Even when Erdrich seemingly focuses on non-Native characters, Native ideas and themes abound. Her writing cannot be neatly dichotomized. It would be equally imprudent to assume that Erdrich's "Indian" novels are constructed purely of her Native identity. Furthermore, it is here—in these 'non-Indian' writings—that I believe Erdrich most lucidly expresses her preoccupation with contemporary Native notions of home. Thus, I include these two novels in this survey of Erdrich's "notions of home" to draw attention to Native undertones in what many critics and audiences misguidedly label as her "non-Indian" writing.

For example, Leslie Marmon Silko's article, "Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf," appearing first in *Impact/Albuquerque Journal Magazine* (1986), condemns *Beet Queen* for its seemingly Western focus. Silko claims that *Beet Queen's* "self-referential writing has an ethereal clarity and shimmering beauty because no history or politics intrudes to muddy the well of pure necessity contained within language itself" (10). Here Silko seems to have missed *Beet Queen's* mark by a vast margin. As Silko, herself, confesses later in her article, "Dot doesn't fit in. Dot is as incongruous as the Beet Queen as Mary, Celestine and Wallace, a white homosexual, are as citizens in this small North Dakota town" (11). This is exactly the point. The characters don't fit. As Catherine Rainwater comments, "Erdrich's novels feature Native Americans, mixed bloods, and other culturally and socially displaced characters whose marginal status is simultaneously an advantage and disadvantage, a source of power and

powerlessness” (405). Although Erdrich penned the novel in her New England residence, *Beet Queen’s* setting does not emulate the happy, tolerant, “magical” New Hampshire place Silko depicts; it is rife with “history and politics” that alienate its characters, forcing them to rely on each other for identity, place, and comfort—home.

Dot, Karl, Mary, Celestine, and Wallace are given no more stability in life than Erdrich’s full-bloods and mixed-bloods in *Love Medicine* or *Tracks*. For Silko to simply align *Beet Queen* with “Grimm’s Fairy-Tales” and criticize *Beet Queen’s* off the reservation location denies the possibility for mixed-bloods to redefine ‘home’ in places they have been voluntarily or involuntarily relocated. In the context of John Gamber’s “Dreamers” article, Vizenor’s *Dead Voices*, and Inez Hernandez-Avila’s “Relocations Upon Relocations,” this criticism is without much merit. A majority of Native Americans today (including Silko) do not live on reservations. Does this make them any less Indian? No.

A closer reading of *Beet Queen* shows that the plot does not give up or reject Native notions of home. Native tenets of home are the undercurrent of *Beet Queen* that gives space and identity to displaced whites and mixed-bloods. The text conforms to both Chadwick Allen’s argument for “blood memory” and Anthony Rolo’s reiteration that, for Native novels, returning home is a greater good than “embarking on a journey, finding adventure beyond one’s beginnings” (36). The characters’ interdependent relations mimic how “the Native American ‘family’ allows for various ties of kinship—including spiritual kinship and clan membership—joining the individuals living together in one house” (Rainwater 418). Furthermore, Catherine Rainwater adds that “The reader must consider a possibility forcefully posited in all of Erdrich’s works (as well as in those of other contemporary Native Americans): the world takes on the shape of the stories we tell” (422). The stories of *Beet Queen* create homes, despite numerous external and internal obstacles in their lives.

Erdrich begins the novel with an Anglo family facing the cross cultural issues of abandonment, fatherlessness, displacement, economic hardship, and relocation. As Mary Adare and her siblings soon come to realize, they must redefine home in order to locate a

space where they truly belong. Like most of Erdrich's works, home transcends the usual groupings of nuclear family, biological ties, and fixed location. As *Beet Queen* makes quite clear from the start, in a world broken apart by the reality of socio-economic difficulty and lack of familial support, home must be re-conceptualized.

As her mother literally "flies off into the sunset" with a carnival stunt pilot, Mary's family dynamic and notion of home forever change. Searching for the only concrete family link she knows, Mary and her young brother embark on a journey to her aunt's butcher shop. Yet, this action is not one of simple relocation. Left with her infant brother in her arms, Mary begins to sever biological ties even before her outreach to family. Although at first unwilling, Mary allows her newborn brother to go "home" with a man whose wife has just lost a baby. Here Mary's brother, Jude (the future Father Jude of *Last Report*), is firmly incorporated into a family and place, which gives him a loving home. Mary and her other brother Karl are, at first glance, not as lucky. Both are forced to create a "home" from nothing but the need to maintain their existence. Of the two characters, Karl's journey to discover place and identity is the more difficult to map and categorize, but his eventual place within a "home" is dependent on Mary's foundational move to the town of Argus. Here Mary becomes the focal point of family and home. This is a radical transformation from the orphaned child who arrives at her aunt's door-step to beg a place to live.

On a larger but similar degree, the difference of *Beet Queen's* introduction and conclusion shows how home's elements evolve in light of relocation and alienation of the characters. Erdrich's preface, "The Branch," foreshadows the displacement the characters are doomed to confront. Karl rips a branch from a tree; this act not only spells the end of the beginning for him, but for the "family" tree from which he removes himself: "It was such a large branch, from such a small tree, that blight would attack the scar where it was pulled off. The leaves would fall away later on that summer and the sap would sink into the roots" (*BQ* 2). This action seemingly sets the tone for the novel, as all the characters embody the elements of torn



branches, “attacking where [they are] pulled off.” Still, as Robert Allen Warrior suggests in *Like A Hurricane*, Native stories and lives are ones of perseverance, not defeat.

Instead, where Mary’s scar begins to form, she grows new branches that become her family and home. As Peter Beidler states, biological family is not as important to clan concepts as integration and acceptance into the community and family (*DLB* 87). His notion fits well when considering that after Mary’s paternal abandonment and separation from her siblings, she is still considered an outsider and outcast by her cousin, Sita, who is about the same age as Mary. Biologically, Mary’s only saving grace is her aunt and uncle, who eventually relocate, leaving her the butcher shop. Still, this relationship is not built on trust, love, or family ties. Instead, Mary plans “to be essential to them all, so depended upon that they could never send me off....because I soon found out that I had nothing else to offer” (*BQ* 19). Mary, therefore, becomes part of a home by, as Bevis argues, “staying put,” while her cousin Sita’s puppet like existence and eventual destruction stems from leaving the place she is from.

Leslie Marmon Silko’s assertion that “Erdrich swallows white sexist standards of beauty rather than challenging them” is dead wrong (“Here” 11). Erdrich does present Sita as “Slender and blond,” a “beauty,” and “Erdrich trots out the old cliché in which the dark, ugly girls are nicer, smarter and work harder,” but *Beet Queen’s* conclusion makes it clear that beauty is ephemeral (“Here’s” 11). In comparison to Karl’s emblematic removal from family and place, Mary states, “I became more essential than any ring of necklace, while Sita flowered into the same frail kind of beauty that could be broken off a tree by any passing boy and discarded, cast away when the fragrance died” (*BQ* 21). Cliché, yes, but the statement is Mary’s cliché, not Erdrich’s. Furthermore, Sita’s own “dreams” suffer from, if not more cliché, at the least more pathetic notions of marriage and employment fit for women. Sita confesses,

...[she] wanted only to move down to Fargo and live by herself in a modern apartment, and model clothes for DeLendrecies. She imagined that she would also work behind the men’s hat counter. There she would meet a young rising professional. They would marry. He would buy her a house near the county

courthouse, on a street of railroad mansions not far from Island Park. Every winter she would walk down the hill to skate. She would wear powder blue tights and a short dress with puffs of rabbit fur at the sleeves, collar, and all around a flared hem that would lift as she twirled. (*BQ* 76)

In contrast, Sita ends up marrying twice; she is “kidnapped” by her first husband’s brother, who leaves her in an “Indian” bar in full wedding regalia; and she spends her last days alone and dislocated in the cellar of her house, addicted to anti-depressants. Ironically, the traditional location of home (her residence and the cellar below) is merely a space of interment before Sita dies. She has no kinship with family or community, therefore, no place to belong, no home. In the end, Sita dies in the image of a painted puppet, hanging, tangled in the branches of a yew tree in her garden. Fittingly, after her demise, other sub-characters of *Beet Queen* cannot tell if she is dead or alive. In a bit of humor and sadness, an old admirer, a city policeman initiates a conversation with Sita’s dead body. Absurdly, the conversation comes to an end without the officer ever realizing Sita has expired. While Sita’s absolute plasticity and hollowness is predictable throughout *Beet Queen*, the vacancy of any real personality or connection to others is exacerbated when she “moves” away from her home and family, becoming “pickled in her own juice” (*BQ* 76, 113). Furthermore, Mary may be the cliché “hardworking,” “ugly” girl Silko chastises Erdrich for creating, but the novel doesn’t exactly portray Mary as “nicer” than anyone else (Silko, “Here” 11). Mary is mostly cantankerous, unpleasant, and unyielding. Still, those facts are only secondary to my argument. Mary doesn’t succeed in life because she is any of the above. She succeeds because she never leaves the only true home and family she has ever had.

Home is formed by characters who only have each other. As Peter Beidler puts it, “blood quantum is not nearly as important as love quantum” (*DLB* 89). The mixed-blood Celestine, the eccentric Mary, the cold-hearted Karl, the closet homosexual Wallace, and the misunderstood, one quarter Indian, Dot are a family. While an unorthodox family, the elements that bring them together are location and love for Dot. Ironically a place of death by virtue of its

objective, Mary's butcher shop becomes the center of outward growth for Argus and more pointedly the locus of family connections for the novel's main characters. As Jill Jepson argues, "... home engages the individuals association with a network involving family relations, larger communities, geographic space, and 'cosmic networks'. Home refers both to physical place and a network of belonging and history" (26). Not comfortable in any other place or with any other persons, Erdrich's characters find that "geographical space," "family relation," and "cosmic relation" with each other.

As Argus grows like a tree from the roots of the butcher shop, Erdrich's other characters, like Sita, often discover that any attempt to leave "home" is disastrous. After Karl leaves Mary's protection, he finds himself in yet another state of depression, this time from the rejection of a train-traveling homosexual. Again disillusioned with his life, he jumps from the train, breaking both legs. He is subsequently cared for by Fleur Pillager.<sup>13</sup> While Fleur only plays a small role in *Beet Queen*, her actions speak louder than words. It is of no coincidence that Fleur uses "the only branch within a mile of the railroad track, the apple branch, torn from an Argus tree, that she found lying next to me" to manufacture a cast for Karl's damaged legs (*BQ* 49). In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen argues that Silko's Tayo can only be healed by connection to the land which he belongs (120, 125). In a similar fashion, Karl is aided by an object, ironically tossed away earlier, that comes from nature in Argus. The fact that Mary and Karl aren't originally from Argus is irrelevant. It is the only place they have family, community—home. Even Adelaide, Mary and Karl's abandoning biological mother, is eventually brought back into contact with Argus. Adelaide and the stunt pilot, the Great Omar, are injured in a plane accident at a county fair. Although Adelaide only incurs a few light wounds, the incident makes her reflect on her past. Awakening in a hospital bed, for the first time in years, Adelaide mentions Mary and promises to send her a sewing machine. Disturbed and jealous of her thoughts and speech, Omar waits until Adelaide again falls asleep to prop a post card sent by

Mary, *Aerial View of Argus, North Dakota*, in front of Adelaide's sleeping body. Mary's inscription reads: "All three of your children starved to death" (BQ 60). Thus, home's power comes full circle: even those that flee from Argus find that they cannot escape the powerful combination of interwoven people and place. Still, home creation is not consigned to only space or community.

In Mary's case, the development of home also includes time and space. Mary dreams of "no place I had ever lived in, but one I knew. Inside, there were many small empty rooms, some hidden deep in the interior. I wandered through the whole place, never lost but never quite certain of where I was until I came to the room I recognized, the room where I would wait for him" (BQ 79). While the true context of Mary's dream and the "him" in question is not fully explained, the reader can deduce from only two pages prior that Mary is either speaking of Russell, Celestine's Native American brother, or an apparition that represents all that Mary feels for him. The place Mary has never "lived," but that she "knows" is home: Argus, her "family," and Russell. The place that Mary is "never lost but never quite certain of" is more complex than location; Mary belongs to Argus in ways that weave the fabric of people, community, family, and space together in an overlapping narrative that breaks the boundaries of both time and space. In relation to Paula Gunn Allen's assessment of Silko's *Tayo*, Mary finds that she has "always been home" (Allen 125). While this is a comforting thought, Erdrich doesn't merely paint a pretty picture of Argus as home for any of her displaced characters, especially one like "rural New Hampshire" (Silko10). Instead the reader finds Mary, Celestine, Dot, Karl, Russell, and Wallace ostracized for different reasons and at varying degrees.

A full-blood, Russell's plight is not comparable to any of the other characters. His home is not Argus, for he cannot make a home in a space so far from his traditional culture, people, and land. Even his best but misguided efforts simply place him in harm's way as a United States' soldier. As Mary states, "I think it's stupid, that this getting shot apart is what he's lived

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<sup>13</sup> See *Tracks*, *Four Souls*, and chapter one of this dissertation: Fleur is lauded as Erdrich's most feared and powerful female character of the North Dakota saga. However, as *Four Souls*

for all his life" (*BQ* 111). Instead of lauding Russell's service, he is continually objectified throughout *Beet Queen* as a prop or museum piece. Celestine sarcastically comments, Russell's

two dress uniforms were asked for by the county museum. They now hang off a tailor's dummy in a display case along with a list of Russell's medals and a photograph. That picture shows him as he was when he came back from Germany, before Korea, when his scars were more attractive than now. (*BQ* 117)

Silko's argument that Erdrich does not address American Indian concerns or themes is therefore unfounded. If anything, Erdrich's treatment of Russell mimics her portrayal of Sita. This is a seemingly odd comparison on the surface, but the conclusion of *Beet Queen* finds both characters equally manipulated by Western ideologies that have given them false promises of belonging by leaving home. Like Sita, Russell becomes a shell of his former self. As *Beet Queen* and later *Bingo Palace* shows, "Russell looks like a statue...the kind you see for sale as you drive along the highway," "a broke-down God" (*BP* 65, 81). Russell does return to his homeland, but it is just too late for him to truly live. Russell and Sita are "dead" long before their bodies physically succumb to death. They die the moment they leave their homes. Sita hopelessly acknowledges, "It's too late to change the way I am," and appropriately, "a plain white cross [is] planted at his [Russell's] feet," (the grave marker of unknown soldiers) even before he physically expires (*BQ* 299, 289). As Russell later correctly surmises, "I'm dead now" (*BQ* 300). While Erdrich provides this depressing occasion with a type of comic relief, the seriousness of her message about home is not lost. Russell literally laughs himself back to life at the thought of the "American Legion ...solemnly saluting a dead Indian" during his appearance in Argus' town parade, but bringing Sita's body back home or returning to the reservation, for Russell, simply leaves the characters with a similar conclusion that *Love*

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and *Tracks* sets up, even Fleur cannot transgress home's strength.

*Medicine's* June and *Four Souls'* Fleur face: Home has the power to give life and destroy it at varying degrees (BQ 300).

For *Beet Queen's* other characters, home is comparably powerful and equally complex, but they benefit from Sita and Russell's dismal outcomes. Sita's death and Russell's debilitated existence serve as admonishments for characters who do not seem to realize what they have with each other. Again using a Native American marker, Erdrich confronts Wallace with what can only be construed as the core of the Native American trickster, coyote. Traditionally both wise and foolish, the "grumpy stray with tattered white hair and tail kinked and thin" leads Wallace to both his homosexual lover, Karl, and the only version of a "wife" he ever has, Celestine, Dot's mother (BQ 165). It is Wallace (in the traditional role of father) who delivers the infant Dot into the world during a snowstorm that strands him and the laboring Celestine together in his home. Through this interaction, Celestine and Wallace create a familial bond solidified by naming her child, Wallacette (Dot). This is an odd family unit, but they are still a family whose interaction, love, and proximity create a home. As Celestine finally understands, the interrelation and interdependence of all involved "was a delicate thing, close to transparent, with long sheer legs. It moved so quickly that it seemed to vibrate, throwing out invisible strings and catching them, weaving its own tensile strand. Celestine watched as it began to happen. A web was forming, a complicated house, that Celestine could not bring herself to destroy" (BQ 176). Like all webs, this web comes from one single point of origin.

Dot is literally that dot to which all other characters are connected and whose relationships overlap to create a home. Fathered by Karl, mothered by Celestine, the niece of Mary, delivered by Wallace, and loved by all of the above, Dot is the glue that holds "home" together. "For Dot was like a wolf ready to descend on the fold. There would be no resisting her," and "more than anything we had in common, Dot's spite drove Celestine, Mary, and me [Wallace] together" (BQ 182, 301). Even Karl, for all his self-centered faults, admits, "I wanted everything I'd left behind" (BQ 317). "They loved Dot too much, and for that sin she made them miserable...it was as if all of her family's worst qualities were crowded into her—Mary's

stubborn, abrupt ways, Sita's vanity, Celestine's occasional cruelties, Karl's lack of responsibility"; still, as Wallace concedes, Dot "always drew me back" (BQ 233). Without her existence, there is no story; there is no family; there is no home. While Dot's final decision about place and belonging don't appear until the publication of Erdrich's novel, *Tales of Burning Love* (the title of which appears in *Beet Queen*), the conclusion of *Beet Queen* is important. All the characters either stay put or come back home. Even after reviewing all the negatives that Argus represents to Karl, he concludes, "I was coming back" (BQ 319).

Still no other return home is more dramatic than Dot's. Following Adelaide's example, Dot vaults into and takes off in a plane awaiting the announcement of the Beet Queen of Argus, North Dakota. Dot rationalizes, "There is a thread beginning with my grandmother Adelaide and traveling through my father and arriving at me. That thread is flight" (BQ 335). True to her word, Dot does fly off, but she cannot abandon her family by flying off into the sunset like Adelaide. She must be grounded. Dot finally realizes that it is not that she cannot escape; it is that she does not want to. She states, "I am so happy to touch the ground that I don't care, and I don't care either that the air is dense, humid, and I'm smothered in my own dress again. The cloth is damp with sweat, scratchy, clinging like a burr-filled sheet. But I could run down third baseline. Home" (BQ 337). Fittingly, her mother, Celestine, awaits Dot's landing. They do not abandon each other because Argus, the butcher shop, and their "family" create the place and spaces they belong. They are the things—the people, the places, "a past, a set of values and parents, an 'ancien regime'" that William Bevis argues are "home" (581).

Silko argues that "you'd think that as the novel unfolded, who's who would become clear. After all, in 1932 in a small North Dakota town near an Indian reservation, whether one was white, Indian or part Indian mattered a hell of a lot. The fact is, it still matters" (Silko 11). I whole-heartedly agree with this assessment. Still, to read *Beet Queen* as anything but a novel about the human condition, suggests stereotypes that Erdrich has done her best to undermine. While a focused reading of the text does clear up the ethnicity of the characters, perhaps that clarity is not one that Erdrich feels is necessary. For Erdrich, it is much more important to show

how all the characters (no matter their race) come together to form a home. If any assessment of the novel should be made from an indigenous point of view, it is that all of *Beet Queen's* displaced and discriminated against characters (white included) benefit from American Indian notions of home. As Erdrich puts it, "In a tribal view of the world...the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history... People and place are inseparable" ("Where" 1). In regards to *Beet Queen*, Erdrich's words are true for Natives and non-Natives: the characters never leave and/or are always coming home.

#### 4.2 The Office of Carnage as the Location of 'Home' in Louise Erdrich's *Master Butchers Singing Club*

*HERE'S AN ODD and paradoxical truth: a man's experience of happiness can later kill him.*

(MB 64).

*Who are you and what makes you think you belong anywhere near this house, this shop, and especially my brother, Fidelis, who is the master of all he does.*

(MB 86)

Returning from World War I with a hardened, detached spirit, Erdrich's protagonist, Fidelis, enters the lens of *Master Butchers Singing Club* (similar to many of Erdrich's main characters) coming home: "Fidelis walked home from the great war in twelve days and slept thirty-eight hours once he crawled into his childhood bed" (MB 1). Unfortunately for Fidelis, he awakes to find Germany, his birthplace, a defeated country, in the throes of attempting to stave off a crippling depression. Hoping to combat the impending struggle to survive economically, Fidelis takes his dead war comrade's pregnant fiancée, Eva, as his own wife and sets out to discover a new place of opportunity. As with millions of immigrants, Fidelis migrates to America.

Fidelis finds America hospitable, but *Master Butchers Singing Club* is not a simple story of immigration. Similar to a majority of Erdrich's non-Native and Native characters in her North Dakota saga, Fidelis' version of home is constructed outside of traditional Western or Native definitions. In Fidelis case, home is defined by his second wife, Delphine, and the site of his



butcher shop, negating traditional Western tenets of home such as nuclear family and birthplace. Thus, while John Carlos Rowe rightly contends that *Master Butchers Singing Club* follows the pattern of *Tales of Burning Love* and *Beet Queen* by focusing “primarily on the European immigrant communities,” Rowe fails to point out that Fidelis’ struggle to re-define or re-construct home replicates the difficulties faced by both Erdrich’s Native and non-Native characters in her North Dakota saga (197). Like them, Fidelis is physically and emotionally displaced at the beginning of the novel. This makes his re-conception of home difficult and at times seemingly hopeless, but as with most of Erdrich’s protagonists, this is to be expected.

While initially intending to settle in the city of Seattle, Fidelis runs short of money and finds himself in Argus, North Dakota. “He didn’t know that he would never leave” (*MB* 13). This location becomes the site of his butcher shop and birth place of three of his four sons. But Fidelis continues to dream of returning to Germany. It is only transplanting his new wife, Eva, and the birth of his sons that temporarily solidifies their place in Argus. Eva realizes from her arrival in Argus that “although there was not a damn thing of interest or value in sight, there would be. And she, Eva Waldvogel, would see to it” (*MB* 31). On its most rudimentary surface, home seems to lie directly with Eva, endowing her with the responsibility of approval, creation, and/or reproduction. Eva does not shrink, but rather rises to this occasion to construct a home bound by kith and kin, but she also unflinchingly adheres to past German values. “She had a knack for saving money and making a good effect out of nothing” (*MB* 36). Yet, Eva’s sentiment, even in a country so far from her own, extols the virtue of “The Finest. Old World Quality,” which is pronounced in unabashed letters on the side of butcher shop’s delivery car. Thus, as long as Eva lives, the past is not simply an influence on the future; to her, Fidelis, and in hope for their children, the “home country” of Germany is essentially a land of nostalgia: luxury and wealth, a virtual heaven on earth. Historically, post World War I Germany was far from this beautiful picture, but the fantasy is what obstructs Fidelis’ family from completely redefining and reconstructing a home in America. Even the introduction of Delphine into Eva’s home merely serves both women as a sisterly or motherly/daughterly connection.

Delphine is a woman literally born into the human waste of her biological parents. Instead of aborting Delphine, her biological mother unceremoniously drops Delphine from her womb into an outhouse vat of excrement in the dead of winter. It is only through sheer luck and happenstance that she is rescued by an American Indian drifter, Step-and-a-Half. "And it was always, she [Step-and-a-Half] thought, watching Delphine grow up, exactly the margin by which the girl escaped one dirty fate after the next" (*MB* 382). This is an apt initial assessment. Delphine is raised by an alcoholic, Roy; falls in love with a homosexual, Cyprian; watches her only existing friend, Eva, die a painfully slow death; becomes the wife of Fidelis, who passes before they can procreate; and becomes the step-mother of boys that die, physically or mentally, in World War II or simply leave to find their own place in the world. Thus, lonely and alone, Delphine's home is defined by the pain associated with those who leave the place from which she originates and defines herself.

While they never established a true father/daughter relationship, upon her return to Argus, Delphine becomes her father's caretaker. Although a seriously alcoholic and emotionally unavailable, Delphine finds that she still loves him and wants to understand him. "Who was he, sober, anyway? Her father was a stranger, a man of whom she had no knowledge and did not exactly know how to approach" (*MB* 169). However, the realization that her investigation into her father's character is a difficult and lengthy process does not dissuade Delphine from her intent. In fact, up until her father passes away, Delphine religiously questions him about his life and her origins. While Roy never divulges his most guarded secrets, the banter between them and Delphine's close care during Roy's drunken spats and delirium tremens deepens their regard for each other. Thus, true to the schema of her life, Roy leaves her alone and clueless of her inception into the hard world that forms Delphine and her version of home. The relationship with her father foreshadows Delphine's greatest assets and weaknesses throughout the novel: for all of her straight forward bluster, independently savage ways, and rough induction into the world, Delphine cares too much for those around her, especially men. As she pictures in her mind's eye:

She became the human table. Only...instead of chairs one by one men came out and balanced on her flint hard stomach. A stack of boys and men. Cyprian and Fidelis. [Fidelis's sons] The twins, Emil and Erich. Then Franz, and Markus, at last her father. All were precariously balanced on her phenomenally tough midsection...What could she say? One word and they all might topple. One word could throw them off. So she didn't say anything, but her arms and legs started to shake. (MB 255)

Roy dies saturated by the only thing that makes him feel whole: alcohol. Cyprian detaches himself, first emotionally then physically, from Delphine because of his homosexuality.

Cyprian Lazarre, from the famed Lazarre clan of Erdrich's North Dakota saga, is a class act circus performer, mixed-blood Native American, World War I veteran, and homosexual, who is hopelessly in love with Delphine. Oxymoronic, yes, but impossible, no. Cyprian truly loves Delphine, but in a sisterly fashion, rather than as a love interest. In almost every attempt to consummate their love, he falls miserably short, to his and Delphine's dissatisfaction. Thus, while Cyprian's sexual preference dooms any chance of a real marriage relationship between them, Delphine pities and loves Cyprian. Delphine's emotional attachment manifests itself mostly clearly by making Cyprian essential to her initial return home and to her home's re-creation. Upon discovering Delphine's childhood abode over run with filth and debris, Cyprian wastes no time, becoming an essential helpmate in its clean-up and architect in the residence's recreation. As Delphine notes admiringly, "He was proving remarkably handy...in ways odd and wonderful" (MB 75). Cyprian eventually leaves not because Delphine refuses his offer to marry, but because he knows that he is not capable of loving her in the fashion she and he so crave. In what is the end of their relationship, Cyprian absconds from Argus in the dead of night, after an implied sexual rendezvous with Clarisse, Delphine's childhood friend, an undertaker and murderer. While Clarisse plays an opening part in Delphine's decision to once again make Argus her home, their relationship has changed over time. This fact is not necessarily negative,

but it does leave Delphine void of any close knit female contact, which is especially damaging to one that craves a mother figure so ardently.

Eva Waldvogel steps neatly into this motherly role, giving Delphine a place to belong—home. “Upon walking into Eva’s, something profound happened to Delphine. She experienced a fabulous expansion of being. Light-headed, she felt a swooping sensation and then a quiet, as though she’d settled like a bird” (*MB* 70). Here Delphine comes to roost, as her relationship with Eva blossoms once again into a situation where Delphine gives all her love to another who is tragically destined to leave her. While Eva’s sickness raves throughout page after painful page of the last half of the novel, Delphine’s loyalty does not waver. As she explains, “Eva was a person of rare qualities, and she loved her all the more,” even to the detriment of herself (*MB* 97). Eva’s passing, however, does not close the door on Delphine’s journey to reconstruct or redefine home. If anything, Eva’s demise supplies Delphine with the opportunity to secure her place in Fidelis and his sons’ hearts and Argus society.

True to Delphine’s own words, “The dead have more power than we know” (*MB* 141). Delphine becomes Fidelis’ wife and the boys’ stepmother. This is not an act of betrayal against Eva’s memory; Eva’s last request directs Delphine “on when to marry Fidelis and how to care for the boys” (*MB* 138). Eva’s death is Delphine’s transition to becoming a wife and mother. While this inclination towards Fidelis’ sons is evident even before Eva dies, afterwards, Delphine holds the boys well-being with jealous and guarded affection. And “when they were healthy and breathing hard in boys’ sleep, she stood in the doorway and worried. They had done this to her. Activated some primitive switch in her brain. She couldn’t turn it off” (*MB* 166-67). Still, no amount of love or concern saves Delphine from her inevitable loss of all those she brings close to her heart. The oldest, Franz, is killed in a freak accident by a loose guideline at the end of the war; Markus leaves Argus to make his way in the world; and after immigrating to Germany at the bequest of their aunt and other Germany family members before the beginning of World War II, Fidelis’ twin sons are recruited as soldiers in the Nazi army.

For the first twin, Emil, “war was very short” (MB 347). He steps “on a mine planted in a sheep pasture early on” (MB 347). Yet, it is the second twin, Erich’s, disenfranchisement from his family that changes the landscape and elements of home for Delphine and Fidelis most negatively. After quick movement from the Adolph Hitler Schule to the Waffen SS ranks, Erich is thoroughly culturally saturated into Nazi notions of loyalty to Germany. Even after it is discovered that Erich is held at a prisoner of war camp north of North Dakota, Fidelis and Delphine find it impossible to bring Erich back home. For Erich, “in a fierce crush of training and in the years of his formation, he had become in his deepest person thoroughly German. Or what he thought of as German. That is, he’d replaced his childhood with a new wash of purity. Belief, death loyalty, hatred of the weak. He lived simply, by one great consuming oath” (MB 352). From these new roots, there is no place for family outside what Erich believes is unadulterated devotion to Hitler’s ideology. He forsakes his family, choosing to stay in the war camp, rather than return to his childhood home. “Erich’s new father was a boundary on a map, a feeling for a certain song, a scrap of forest, a street. It was a romance as enduring as the spilled blood of his brother or the longing of Fidelis or the pains of this war. It was an idea that kept him walking through the prison gates” (MB 364). Once again, Delphine’s “family” disintegrates.

Cyprian, her father, Erich and Emil, Franz, and Markus are gone, but she remains with the one who now defines home, Fidelis. From their first meeting, Delphine stands in awe of Fidelis. While this feeling develops into a type of fearful worship, Delphine is not scared of Fidelis in a physical or mental sense. She is frightened of her evolving sentiment towards him. Even after Eva’s death request to marry Fidelis and her later marriage, Delphine finds it hard to accept that she has finally acquired a place to call home because of the removal of many intricate people, who originally make the location so attractive. However, her reciprocal relationship with Fidelis makes home’s construction possible. As much as Delphine is locked to her location through Fidelis, he is just as much, if not more, invested in their union. Argus is Delphine’s birth place and familiar community. Fidelis, on the other hand, is encouraged at almost every point in his interment at Argus to return to the Rhineland, especially after Eva’s

death and his twins' re-immigration to Germany. Yet, Fidelis refuses to erect a home without Delphine. This loyalty to place and people is epitomized in their visit to Germany after World War II.

Fidelis' relatives treat them with every imaginable comfort and congeniality, but even those actions and attitudes cannot sway them from returning to Argus. Delphine acknowledges that "some of the relatives would, it seemed, do anything for them," but as Delphine makes clear, Argus (home) pervades her every thought (*MB* 374). "We are too well fed...I can't wait to get home for good," Delphine states in a letter to Markus (*MB* 376). It is only there (Argus) that she and Fidelis fit and fit together. As Delphine describes, her and Fidelis' relationship is analogous to "a great collision" of "two glaciers...smashed together, at last, and buckled" (*MB* 306). That encounter engenders a place of belonging for both. Fidelis is incomplete without Delphine, and she has no one except him.

This fact is not lamented; Delphine embraces everything that Fidelis and the institution of marriage bestows upon her. Delphine's realization that she finally belongs somewhere springs from the seemingly unimportant ringing of Fidelis' butcher shop bell: "It was all there. She breathed the peace of the order she'd achieved. A powerful wave of pleasure filled her. And then the customer bell rang out front, and she walked swiftly forward to take *her place* behind the counter" (my emphasis, *MB* 335). This sentiment is reiterated once Delphine takes stock of her position as the "butcher's wife." She is no longer alien to "this house, this shop, and... Fidelis, who is the master of all he does" (*MB* 86). "To her bewilderment, by simply marrying, following a daily schedule, attending to details and minding her own business, she became one of the town's most stable and respected women. Her advice was asked. Her solutions quoted. Her sagacity with cheap cuts of meat and her saving ways with money were admired" (*MB* 343). She creates a home. This level of happiness in hearth and kin are, however, short-lived. Delphine is pre-ordained to narrowly escape "one dirty fate after the next," as destiny takes those closest to her (*MB* 382).

Suffering a physical and emotionally broken heart from his own familial loss, Fidelis succumbs to an illness that takes his life not long after his marriage to Delphine. While a tragic incident in both their lives, Fidelis' passing does not have the same effect on Delphine as the prior losses in her life. This is not to claim that Fidelis' death is not equal in importance to her other relationships, but to argue quite the contrary: Roy, Cyprian, Eva, and the boys were instrumental in creating a home for Delphine, but their agency never transcends more than human connection. Even the return to her childhood residence cannot tie Delphine to place. It is through Fidelis and his butcher shop that this is accomplished. As Delphine admits from the beginning, the butcher shop has something magnetic about it.

This mesmeric quality is the location, people, and Fidelis—home. Thus, even after Fidelis' death, her activity and participation with the space ensures a place of belonging within the larger community. Fidelis' demise cannot rob her of the history she creates with him, his family, and those others who enter or re-enter her life only to cause her pain and anguish. Instead, Delphine's elevated position within Argus allows her and her younger sister, Mazarine, to successfully renovate a flower shop business after Fidelis dies (*MB* 387). While their biological relation is unknown to either of them, Mazarine by happenstance marries and bears children to Franz, Fidelis' oldest son. Ironically and fittingly, the family that Delphine and Fidelis need to redefine and recreate home lies in both biological and emotional ties that, in cyclical form, return to a space or place of growth and beauty: the flower shop. Thus, home continues to take on new attributes and spaces to secure its longevity.

*Beet Queen* and *Master Butchers Singing Club* end with the notion that home is derived from sources that can only be classified by the characters' inter-relatedness to the people, community, and landscape. If Silko can't figure out "who's who" in *Beet Queen*, it is because Erdrich challenges the validity of the question itself. Each one of the characters is, in Simon Ortiz's terms, "Sunken with ... / loss, and grief. / Terrified / of being totally alone, / orphaned (*Woven Stone* 348). *Master Butchers'* characters crave to discover a place to belong—a home. To criticize either text because a majority of the characters are Anglo or that Anglo concerns or

issue are addressed is as misguided as reading Erdrich's "Indian" texts as purely informed by her Native American heritage because indigenous themes and motifs pervade the texts. If Ortiz is right at the end of *Woven Stone*, it is going to take "all of us, Indian and non-Indian" to cure the world of all its ills. Defining and defending home as a subject, place, and space in *Beet Queen* and *Master Butchers Singing Club* is a beginning step towards doing so because in these fictional worlds home creates a sense of belonging despite race, gender, biology, and sexual preference.



## CHAPTER 5

### TALES OF BURNING LOVE AND BINGO PALACE

#### 5.1 Old Wives, the Same Man, and a Baby: Location and Family as the Foundation of 'Home' in Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*

*Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love* suggest that “home” must be revised to include, negotiate, and, at times, embrace tenets of Western ideology in order to find or secure one’s home. In *Tales of Burning Love*, a rather clueless Jack Mauser knows about his indigenous heritage, but he has firmly embraced the Western world of big business construction. Starting over at the end of the novel, Jack has not completely lost his Western ambition, but his re-conception of place within the world now differs to include his son, the land, and understanding with and about the numerous women he marries and hurts throughout the novel. In a similar fashion, *Bingo Palace*’s Lipsha Morrissey and Lyman Lamartine redefine Native perceptions of “home” in the reality of contemporary social, economic, and cultural forces that oscillate and collide in the spaces between indigenous communalism and modern capitalism. They subsequently discover that their existences can never be fixed to one or the other.

In “Outcasts and Dreamers in the Cities’: Urbanity and Pollution in *Dead Voices*” (2007), John Gamber examines “home” as a “mobile” or “transformative” term that not only should but must include new locations such as cities. Noting Bevis’ “homing motif,” Gamber argues that “...Indian narratives...find hope for the survival of Indian people and narratives, challenging the widespread assertion that they cannot thrive in the cities, that their only refuge is on the reservation” (180, 179). I agree with Gamber’s assessment, but my claims elaborate on how “home” is defined or created by people, community, space, and language, regardless of

urban or rural setting. It is the connection between those elements that work in tandem and complimentary manners to construct home.

In Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*, home is something that is layered through Jack Mauser's multiple marriages, the re-telling of "tales of burning love" by his ex-wives, the birth of his only son, and his eventual return to the land of his birth.<sup>14</sup> While a majority of the novel is set within the confines of a snow-bound Ford Explore and revolves around Jack's relationship with each woman and his subsequent false death, the conclusion of *Tales* finds the characters not only firmly positioned in one central location, but also making up a network of familial connections. In essence, home is created for and by the characters through their connection to Jack as much as by the stories they share with each other and place they come to define as home. In "Ceremonial Healing and the Multiple Narrative Tradition in Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*," Roberta Rosenberg explains the significance of this type of "healing" storytelling, but she also adds that Erdrich charges her stories with Native themes and tropes: "Erdrich makes use of the healing power and magic of pre-Enlightenment Western and Native American storytelling while reinscribing and revitalizing it within an Indian context" (119). Thus, while many of the characters are non-Native and Jack and Dot only contain a small vestige of Native blood, Native American concepts of home abound throughout the novel.

The opening chapter of *Tales* simultaneously sets up Native overtones towards home and Jack's inability to commit to anyone person for long enough to create a true home (in any sense of the word). Erdrich begins *Tales* with June Kashpaw, struggling to go home.<sup>15</sup> Waiting for her bus back to the reservation, June meets Jack for the first and last time. As June quickly discovers and many other women and wives later find out, Jack is not that "different" man they all wish him to be (*Tales* 7). After a drunken, hasty, and questionable "marriage" to June, Jack drives June to the outskirts of Argus, where he fails to consummate the "marriage" and, most

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Mauser is the great-grandson of John James Mauser, who effectively stole Fleur Pillager's lands in *Tracks* and who married Fleur Pillager in *Four Souls*. See *Tracks* and *Four Souls* for reference.

importantly, allows her to leave the safety of his truck during a blizzard. As a result, June resumes her journey home on foot, only to freeze to death in the process. While Jack's action or inaction plagues him throughout the course of his life, at the time Jack, drunkenly and ferociously, claims that "He was not the one," not the one that had "to be different" for June (*Tales* 10, 7). Ironically, by the end of the novel, Jack is the "one" who pulls his wives, son, and self firmly to the landscape by creating "family" connections with each other.

Like so many of Erdrich's characters, Jack's search for family and place begins with abandonment. The "fatherless and motherless" Jack is unable to commit to any of his wives because he believes it better to leave them before they leave him (*Tales* 13, 40). Jack's search for place or space is only transformed into his final reverence for a home that includes the earth, birth, motherhood, and physical and emotional love by acknowledging that the people and places he discarded or disregarded are necessary to creating or defining home. The fact that Jack finds these elements of home with and in multiple wives reflects one of the many Native under-currents in *Tale of Burning Love*.

In *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Old Kashpaw is saddened by the thought of losing even one of his wives because of their individual attributes and contributions to his home. Jack is no different. He has "always relied on women" (*Tales* 158). Jack needs women in order to invent the home he never had, just as much as he needs to return to the location of his birth. "For Jack had come full circle, at last. His latest and final wife had also grown up in Argus" (*Tales* 14). Fittingly, Jack latest wife, Dot, is also a mixed-blood whose sphere is only completed by "coming back here" and the inability "to shake this town" (*Tales* 17). Still, Erdrich does not invoke the notion that these two mixed-blood characters are destined to meet, marry, and define each other in any Native or Western sense of the terms. Instead, Erdrich presents a picture of two characters who not only confess that they know almost nothing about their Native ancestry, but who are on the surface defined by Western cultural and

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<sup>15</sup> This is the same beginning of *Love Medicine* but from Jack Mauser's point of view. See *Love Medicine* for clarity.

economic systems. Dot's "family" centers around the heart of Argus, her aunt's butcher shop, and Jack is the head of his own construction company.<sup>16</sup> "For Jack did not see the land in the old-time Ojibwa sense, as belonging to nobody and nothing but itself. Land was something to use, space for sale. It did not occur to him that the ground he put his house on was alive...Land seemed dead to Jack" (*Tales* 153). But in order for Jack to realize the error of his ways, his Western home and identity must first be destroyed.

As a land developer looking to get rich quick, Jack is hastily and cheaply building "model homes" in a subdivision on the outskirts of Argus. Similar to his relationships with women, Jack does not take the time and care he needs to in order to create a solid foundation or competent structure. Upon his own scrutiny, even the home he resides in is hardly anything more than a contemptible illusion of a modern abode. The painters did a "slapdash job," the showers do not work, and most importantly, "the smoke alarm [is] faulty" (*Tales* 103, 109). As Jack warms himself from the flames of his own fireplace, he realizes that the fire is not contained, but has already burned a small basket of pinecones adjacent to the fireplace's opening. At first, a now drunken Jack is hardly concerned, rationalizing that the fire will extinguish itself on its own; then it dawns on him: "he was insured. He had paid the premiums, in spite of how tight things were, paid them in advanced even, just to save the paperwork" (*Tales* 110). Here Jack decides that "God had smiled a big hot smile on him," and in order to take advantage, Jack allows the fire to burn down his home and hopes "maybe...the whole damn cul-de-sac," freeing him from both the responsibility of his construction project and resulting financial debt (*Tales* 110). Making sure to leave behind his "porcelain bridgework," a belt buckle, and all of his clothes to suggest his own demise in the fire, Jack jumps from a window of his home into the harsh reality of freezing snow.

Reborn from the cleansing flames of arson, Jack emerges, literally, naked into a world where he must redefine himself as father, husband, lover, friend, and family member within a

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<sup>16</sup> See *Beet Queen*: Dot's "family" comprises of Natives, Westerns, bisexuals, homosexuals, and defies most connections of actual biological relation.

home space that offers him a new chance and outlook on life. But as with all births, Jack's is painful: "He was crushed of importance, pathetic in his fetal ball, naked, gray, same color as the pale gray snow, stuffed with unspent anger, almost dead" (*Tales* 160). Presumed dead after the fire, Jack holes up in "the smallest of his four twice-mortgaged properties, the one with an office and a coffee pot. No night watchman, no access" (*Tales* 161). Here, in dream like disorient and pain, Jack begins his journey home. Starting with vivid memories of his mother's "secret, wild, despairing love that mothers bear their boy children," Jack commits himself to resurrection as a new man, the "one" (*Tales* 184). While Jack maybe unaware of the direction he is embarking on, in a vision of light and color, Jack knows that his course begins by seeing his son, Jack Jr.:

Jack looked away from the desk and fresh clipping, and out the office window to the vaulted windows of the concrete garage, where pale lavenders and golds of a noon sun trembled through the industrial-glass ripples and floated, cold splendor in octagons of chicken wire. Now sweeter, redder fires flared into the sky, and shafts of cathedral intensity, bold and strange, held for long seconds in Jack's vision a fractured emblem.

*My son!* (*Tales* 258).

This realization is Jack's first step towards creating a true home. But as Jack shortly finds out, growing into the home he eventually helps construct is equally as agonizing and confusing as his rebirth. Jack enters the residence of Candy and Marlis (the mother of his son) to discover that "his two former wives slept together as lovers" (*Tales* 261). Initially, Jack is overwhelmed by this fact; however, Candy and Marlis' relationship is also an instrumental building block to the ultimate construction of home out of the chaos of old wives, the same man, and a baby, which Jack decides—with the best of intentions—to abduct. This choice makes Jack responsible for his son's later, accidental kidnapping, but even this deed cannot circumvent the power of home that Jack has set into motion. The unwitting kidnapers are none other than Dot's first husband, Gerry Nanapush, and his son, Lipsha Morrissey. This coincidence is seemingly spectacular, but as noted by Allan Chavkin, Erdrich's "individualistic prose style includes the juxtaposition of the

mundane and the fantastic, gritty realism and dreamlike hallucinations, the conversational and the lyrical, and existential bleakness and slapstick exuberance” (Chavkin 2). Thus, by employing this very approach, Erdrich brings *Tale’s* story full circle by the most un-believable circumstances that oddly enough seem to fit the plot: Jack chases Gerry, Lipsha, and his son straight to the home of his birth—the reservation.

In the meantime, Jack’s former wives become stranded together in a blizzard. Karah Stokes contends that Dot and Eleanor, wives number five and two, enjoy an early “sister” like connection that is also facilitated by the confines of a vehicle—a ride home where Eleanor and Dot bond, leaving Jack alien to their newfound relationship. In a similar circumstance and manner, the forced proximity of Jack’s Ford Explorer becomes the germinal ground of both understanding and family for Jack’s four remaining wives. As Rosenberg argues, this forum for the wives’ stories is imperative because “the truth about Jack and love remains within a ‘web’ of seemingly contradictory and paradoxical stories” (125). Thus, while *Tales of Burning Love* does live up to its title—Jack’s ex-wives share the secrets of their relationships with Jack—, Stokes adds that

in addition to formal features...Erdrich’s work also draws on characters, plot patterns and relationships from traditional Anishinaabe culture and mythology. Specifically, stories about Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis, a polar pair of sisters in a cycle of stories commonly told by Anishinaabe woman, gives the reader a new perspective on the relationships between women that are central to Erdrich’s novels. (Stokes 89)

In this case, the stories that Jack’s ex-wives share act as a therapeutic common ground between them, despite their divergent relationships to Jack. Rosenberg claims this type of curing dialog is foreground in *Tales of Burning Love’s* opening conversation between Jack and first wife, June Kashpaw. In Rosenberg’s view, this dialog “provides a paradigm for cross-cultural sharing and intertextualities of all kinds, including the universal storytelling process which is unconcerned with ownership but asks only that each speaker/listener benefit from

gained wisdom and pass it on” (Rosenberg 113). It does not matter that Jack’s wives are Westerners or, in Dot’s case, only contain a small amount of indigenous blood, Erdrich “uses the storytelling frame and multiple narrators to heal and reconnect the fragmented world in *Tales of Burning Love*” (Rosenberg 116).

While Rosenberg’s overarching claims center around the syncretic weaving of Native and Western traditions together to form a unique structure of its own, her perspective on language’s ability to “heal” and “reconnect” compliments the idea that language is instrumental to creating or re-creating a space or place for the characters of *Tales of Burning Love* (Rosenberg 114). Jack’s ex-wives solidify their connection to each other through their stories, but the stories, themselves, also play a necessary part in the scheme of Erdrich’s plot: Doomed to freeze to death if their voices fail, the telling of the stories keeps the women from falling asleep. It isn’t by accident that Jack’s first wife, June Kashpaw, could not be rescued from that same dismal fate because no words could sustain her. Far from her traditional home, June is without “family” network to protect and guide her, and Jack cannot recall his new “wife’s” name to call her back into his truck. “Her [June’s] aborted journey is a cautionary tale to everyone about the dangers of alienation from community” (Rosenberg 123). June dies cold and alone, only looking towards home, never reaching it. Annette Van Dyke adds to this analysis by noting that June is denied the ability to feel safety or belonging even early in her life: “June’s childhood is so horrendous—being raped by her mother’s boyfriend—that she never comes fully into her own power” (Van Dyke 139). Jack’s four other wives, on the other hand, have a chance to reach, define, or create home for two reasons: first, they have each other to count on for protection and connection. Second, Jack’s rebirth/resurrection has made him the “one” June Kashpaw wished he had been. He now realizes that the people he loves all reside within the confines of a specified area of North Dakota.

However, it would be a mistake to accept Jack’s emotional and mental transformation as the catalyst of the novel. From Jack’s absentee mother to his fifth wife, Dot Adare, women profoundly affect Jack’s social and self identity. In *Of Vision Quests and Spirit Guardians:*

*Female Power in the Novels of Louise Erdrich*, Annette Van Dyke argues that traditional Euro-American concepts of Indian women are “defined by their relationship to men and are not seen as powerful in their own right” (130). *Tales of Burning Love* confronts this viewpoint by presenting “independent and feisty woman characters” and the novel’s male protagonist, Jack Mauser, as notoriously romantic and co-dependent (Van Dyke 130). In Erdrich’s own words, “there is a kind of wild energy behind ... many women that is transformational energy, and not only transforming to them but to other people” (qtd. in Van Dyke 130). Home, for Jack, is not wealth or his poorly build house; Jack’s hopes and dreams lie in belonging to the place and people he has previously shunned, especially his wives and son. While attempting to rescue his son, Jack finally comprehends that he has everything he wants right in front of him in the first place, but “now he was out in the middle of a blizzard. Heading north. Trying to save a baby he’d been too stubborn and blind to claim when that could have made a big difference in all of their lives” (*Tales* 379).

Here Erdrich, again, brings the novel to a circular intersection: Jack recalls June giving him the doorknob from her purse. This is a seemingly empty and odd gesture on the surface, but the significance of the gift is that it opens the door to a home Jack refuses: the love of woman who just wanted “someone different.”<sup>17</sup> Jack cannot make the same mistake twice. In the cleansing waves of the blizzard, Jack comes to terms with Candy and Marlis’ relationship; he remembers the “protective arms” and “wild and fascinated” face of his mother; and he, most importantly, follows the ghost of June into the blinding snow. While the outset of this path does not seem promising, Jack understands that “it was all right...She [June] was bringing him home” (*Tales* 385). The connotation here implies more than a simple location; Jack is brought back to his Native heritage, the wives he wronged, and the son he subsequently dismissed. Fittingly, Jack later recites Shakespeare’s line, “All the world’s stage” (qtd. in *Tales* 405).

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<sup>17</sup> Consult *Love Medicine*’s version of June and Jack’s first meeting. Also refer to chapter 6 of this dissertation.



Erdrich's first four-hundred pages set this stage, but the characters take their places at the conclusion. Jack's ex-wives, including June, fix themselves to the space or place that defines their homes. June's ghost finally makes it back to the reservation. Dot decides to remain in Argus, going into business with her aunt and mother (*Tales* 419). Candice and Marlis purchase a home in Jack's sub-division (*Tales* 421). And after accepting Lyman Lamartine's proposal to write a book about the reportedly deceased Sister Leopolda, Eleanor takes up residence in "an old farmstead at the edge of the reservation, where she could interview an ancient priest, Father Damien, who'd known Leopolda in her youth" (*Tales* 446).

Home for Jack, his wives, and son is more than a specific location; home is the interrelation of all that is "poetically endowed" to land and family. As Jack gazes out the window of Marlis and Candice's new residence, he is "gripped for a moment, mesmerized by the silence of the sky, the field, the peace of the scene" (*Tales* 421). A powerful and profound scene, Jack's moments of levity and clarity pronounce home's affect on the characters that now define themselves within the context of both location and family.

His actions and thoughts are a far cry from the money hungry, land destroying, womanizer of the novel's opening chapters. Instead, the reader is given a Jack Mauser "hit by feeling" for the land and how his Native mother "loved the place" (*Tales* 401). Still, Jack is not transformed into a tribal spokesman or an "in the blanket Indian" at the end of the novel. Despite his journey, Jack, and other Natives, cannot escape the reality of an ever encroaching Western world that adheres to capitalistic notions of progress and productivity. As Jack states, "It had not been easy for her, for June, when she froze to death, no. But it was also hard to bear the pain of coming back to life" (*Tales* 452). Jack may have found a place and purpose in the world, but he still has to survive. And his Indian "cousin" Lyman Lamartine has just the plan.

In attempt to capitalize on Jack's Indian heritage and ruined financial situation, Lyman proposed that Jack become "head of operations" for Lyman's plans to erect a casino on Native land. Jack knows he is pawn, but "there was no way he could turn this [offer] down or back out" (*Tales* 408). "He was a hostage of his past and his life of temporary fixes" (*Tales* 408). Like

other Natives, Jack has to make choices that guarantee his survival. However, the location of Jack's future opportunity is only equal in magnitude to the fact that it is also a return to his past: "He had the sense of a swift undertow, pulling...tugging. *Home*. An old anxiety formed. He had thought he might come back here if he failed. But never that he'd come here needing to save his skin" (my emphasis, *Tales* 408). Therefore, even in the context of "developing" indigenous lands for monetary gain, home (place and people) remains a force of remedy and rescue. While Jack excitedly begins to think about "beams, boards, steel, stone, and below him the earth of his same childhood dirt—rising around his ankles" (*Tales* 408), the underlying current of his inner thoughts suggests that Natives can and will continue to re-locate or negotiate home in any viable space afforded to them or forced upon them. As John Purdy contends, "[Erdrich's] novels suggest that loss need not be irrevocable; colonialism can be countered" (9). Finally realizing that his fate is not sealed and that opportunities are possible, Jack concludes, "There was no golden life out there. Only the uncertain ripening of fields" (*Tales* 421).

True to these words, Erdrich ends the novel with Jack and Eleanor again reuniting, but this time their relationship is different. They still need and love each other, but they both understand that they cannot achieve that "golden life" together. Still, that fact does not suggest that their relationship is over or even stagnant. Their relationship evolves through an "uncertain ripening of fields" that maintains a comfortable but loving distance between them. "Fearing no complication they simply leaned into each other with all their weight" (*Tales* 448). This type of balance is epitomized in the final scene's bout of love making. Parallel to the composition of their new relationship, Jack and Eleanor sexually unite in what seems to be half tenderness and half pain. They balance precariously on both the banister and steps of a staircase, chancing splinters and scratching shoulders, but the act is well worth it. As Eleanor theorizes, "What happens in between is an uncontrollable dance and what we ask for in love is no more than a momentary chance to get the steps right, to move in harmony until the music stops" (*Tales* 452).

Thus, they both attain a type of home by adapting to the conditions which are most beneficial to maintaining their relationship. Location definitely matters, but its importance is only

equal to the character's connection to that place. For Jack, Eleanor, his other wives, and his son, Argus and the reservation (the site of the forthcoming Bingo Palace) is the space they are drawn to and bound. Jack is partially Native American and harbors fond memories of his mother and the land, but that fact pales in comparison to Eleanor, his other wives, and his son's power to hold him to a fixed location. Only through his past and present can he foresee a future.

### 5.2 Finding a Winner in Louise Erdrich's *Bingo Palace*

*We never ask for all this heat and silence in the first place, it's true. This package deal. It's like a million-dollar worthless letter in the mail. You're chosen from the meaningless nothingness, but you don't know for what. You open the confusing ad and you think, Shall I send it in or should I just let the possibilities ripen? You don't know shit! You are left on your own doorstep! You are set there in a basket, and one day you hear the knock and open the door and reach down and there is your life.*

---Lipsha Morrissey

*Bingo Palace's* opening chapter "The Message" sets the stage for the plot of the novel by ceremoniously introducing a host of complexly inter-related characters who face the consequences of attempting to reconcile Native American culture, beliefs, and customs with a post-colonial world. Lulu Lamartine is a promiscuous woman with a sorted past, whose sons reflect various clans of the tribe. Shawnee Ray Toose is considered both lovely and the future of the tribe for her ability to create Native clothing and dance to Native songs. However, it is Lulu's grandson, Lipsha Morrissey, and her youngest son, Lyman Lamartine, whose search for belonging (home) that dominates the novel. Lipsha is simultaneously regarded as a gifted traditional healer but also a waste of talent.<sup>18</sup> Lyman, on the other hand,

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<sup>18</sup> See *Love Medicine* and chapter 6 of this dissertation. Lipsha's biological and "adoptive" family is both sorted and conflicting. If anyone, his character not only represents factionalism in the clans, but he is biologically equal parts of two clans that hate each other. While Lipsha's struggle for identity is also tackled in chapter 6 of this dissertation, the characters is addressed here because he is also caught between competing Native and Western economic systems that negate each other at points, adding more confusion to his life.

was a man everybody knew and yet did not know, a dark-minded schemer, a bitter and yet shaman-pleasant entrepreneur who skipped money from behind the ears of Uncle Sam, who joked to pull the wool down, who carved up this reservation the way his blood father Nector Kashpaw did, who had his own interests so mingled with his people's that he couldn't tell his personal ambition from the pride of the Kashpaws. (*Bingo* 5)

While Shawnee Ray and Lulu play instrumental roles in the *Bingo Palace*, Lyman and Lipsha's developing business and social relationship is the focus of 'home's' significance in a contemporary world overshadowed by capitalist interests that force and/or tempt Natives to sacrifice their culture, heritage, and land to acquire material, monetary, and social prowess.

As John Purdy puts it in "Against All Odds," "together, Lipsha and Lyman dramatize the attractions, and ill effects, of engaging in games of chance with the wrong attitude, or without proper 'luck'" (23). Lipsha and Lyman do not seemingly fit in either the Native or Western world. But both Lipsha and Lyman see the "potential for the generation of large sums of capital carries [and] with it the potential for self-sufficiency and therefore self-determination" (Purdy 9). However, "change can cut many ways, in any direction, as Erdrich's characters often learn" (Purdy 8). And "with this potential also comes the threat of reprisal and loss" (Purdy 9). Therefore, only in being able to negotiate the Western and Native worlds can Lipsha and Lyman truly realize who they are in the context of community, family, and land—home. While this home space is never solidly defined or are clear alternatives for identity and belonging presented to either Lipsha or Lyman, *Bingo Palace* offers a dialog where the characters at least come to terms with the reality that indigenous peoples can never define or create home outside of Native or Western influences or demands. "Without suggesting that there is any one right answer to...questions of" "what does it mean to be 'Indian' in at the end of the twentieth century" or "what does it mean to be 'traditional' in a postmodern consumer culture," Nancy Peterson claims that "Erdrich's novel [*Bingo Palace*] does take a firm stance on one thing: collective discussion of these issues is vitally necessary" (177). In other words, the position of Natives in

an alien capitalistic world is difficult to decipher. They must adapt, but they must not lose connection with their culture and customs. It is in the attempt to answer the question of placement of Natives—although extremely difficult to pin down and ripe for opportunities to make the wrong choices—that Lyman and Lipsha hope to create or define home.

This state of being influx is further exacerbated by the community, which initially perceives Lyman's Western enterprises as, at best, suspect and Lipsha as obviously disjointed from tradition, culture, and location. Upon Lipsha's return to the reservation, Lipsha is again written off as "a waste, a load, one of those sad reservation statistics" (*Bingo 7*). The community indicates this very judgment, coming to a consensus that

going back and forth to the city weakened and confused him and now he flails in a circle with his own tail in his teeth. He shoots across the road like a coyote, dodging between the wheels, and then you see him on the playground, swinging in a swing, and again he has made himself stupid with his dope pipe. He tires us. We try to stand by him, to bring him back, give him advice. We tell him that he should ground himself, sit on the earth and bury his hands in the dirt and beg Manitous. We have done so much for him and even so, the truth is, he has done nothing yet of wide importance. (*Bingo 7*)

As Lipsha enters his former high school gymnasium during the winter powwow, the community's assessment seems to be true: "He slid through the crowd during the middle of an Intertribal song. We [the community] saw him edge against the wall to watch the whirling bright dancers, and immediately we had to notice that there was no place this boy could fit" (*Bingo 9*). In agreement with this evaluation, Lipsha states, "I stop as if to ask directions to a place I've always known" (*Bingo 11*). Still, the community's opinion and Lipsha's feelings of alienation cannot deprive him of the fact that he is nevertheless "only Lipsha, come home" (*Bingo 10*). Here, mid-way through a "Intertribal song," never truly in one world or the other, Lipsha Morrissey falls hopelessly in love with Shawnee Ray Toose, who "is the best or our [Native] past, our present, [and] our hope of a future" (*Bingo 13*). In the "hard radiance of Shawnee Ray

Toose,” consciously or unconsciously, Lipsha chooses a love that is more than superficial beauty; she is the all that he has forgot, has never known, and what will be come of his people (*Bingo* 12). But even though he is captivated by Shawnee Ray, Lipsha is quick to remind himself that “coming home is never simple” (*Bingo* 13).

Fortunately, some members of the community continue to hold on to the hope that Lipsha will become more than a “reservation statistic” (*Bingo* 7). His “mother,” Marie Kashpaw, originally took Lipsha in as an orphan “because of the way he was found in the slough, half drowned.” She believed “he needed more than other children. She [Marie] had tried to save his mother, June<sup>19</sup>, but it had been too late to really save her. June had worn out the world with her hurt, headlong chase” (*Bingo* 27-8). Marie and other community members hope to save Lipsha from this “headlong chase,” which they believe will undoubtedly forever take him from his Native culture, land, and customs—home. In an attempt to impress her belief in him, Marie presents Lipsha with his stepfather, Nector’s, pipe. In Purdy’s view, “Nector had been its holder, and now Lipsha has been chosen to assume that duty” (23).

Sadly, Lipsha doesn’t carry out this charge well or at the outset make clear that Marie’s confidence in him is justifiable; instead, Lipsha comes off as tongue-tied, unsure, and, at last, willing to trade the sanctity of the pipe to impress the object of his obsession, Shawnee Ray. “As he held it [the pipe] in his open palms he seemed about to speak. Once or twice he cleared his throat, shook his head, but he didn’t find the words” (*Bingo* 29). Lipsha’s inability to find the right “words” is replicated only pages later, when he takes Shawnee Ray on a fateful date where Nector’s pipe is confiscated by police, who desecrate its holy purpose by connecting the stem of the pipe and allowing the feathers on its body to touch the ground. Lipsha can only whisper, “Please, don’t,” without either force or authority (*Bingo* 35). While the overtones of this occurrence denote Lipsha’s blind ambition to win Shawnee Ray’s heart, even at the cost of

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<sup>19</sup> The circumstances of June’s death are told from differing view points in *Love Medicine* and *Tale of Burning Love*. June also appears in other novels in Erdrich’s North Dakota saga, but the significant of her character is that while she never reaches home in life, she continually leads

placing his (and his people's) heritage in danger, Lipsha's actions or in action, in this case, is the turning point of his incorporation into a capitalist system through which he believes he can acquire Shawnee Ray and, as a corollary, place, identity, community—home. Thus, Lyman's subsequent offer to employ Lipsha at the Bingo Palace is not only a very attractive opportunity for someone who admits, "I'm kind of between places," but the proposition seems to come at just the right time (*Bingo* 39). For Lipsha earnestly hopes that he too can achieve Lyman-type financial success.

As Lipsha notes, "from day one, we're [Natives] loaded down. History, personal politics, tangled bloodlines. We're too preoccupied with setting right around us to get rich. Except for Lyman, who does a whole lot of both" (*Bingo* 17). But Lyman is not only a thriving businessman, of which Lipsha is envious, but Lipsha and Lyman's "relationship is complicated by some factors over which we have no control. His [Lyman's] real father was my stepfather. His mother is my grandmother. [And] I [Lipsha] have an instant crush upon his girl [Shawnee Ray Toose]" (*Bingo* 16). Therefore, "the *Bingo Palace* foregrounds a classical comic plot—the romance plot—as it follows Lipsha Morrissey's uncontrollable passion for Shawnee Ray Toose, who has had a baby and an affair with his uncle Lyman Lamartine, a successful entrepreneur and respected tribal member" (Peterson 161). Overcome by jealousy and feelings of inadequacy, Lipsha resigns himself to becoming and obtaining everything he believes Shawnee Ray wants—what Lyman has. While Lipsha's desire seems to transfer his objectives firmly into Western ideology, he acknowledges

That no matter what I do with my life, no matter how far away I go, or change, or grow or gain, I will never get away from here. I will always be the subject of a plan greater than myself, an order that works mechanically, so that no matter what I do it will come down to this. (*Bingo* 21)

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other characters back to the land (home) of their birth and belonging after her death, either retrospectively or as a ghost.

Lipsha is forever caught between his traditionally Native self-identity and what Western encroachment influences him to become. Yet, even with this realization, Lipsha places all his energies “toward spaces I have never seen and no place I can name” in order to replicate Lyman’s monetary and social success (*Bingo* 22).

Lipsha readily takes his post in Lyman’s casino only to realize that the Bingo Palace is nothing more than a “Disney set up, like a circus show, a spaceship, a constellation that’s collapsed.” “But you can’t see dents in the walls or rips or litter once darkness falls” (*Bingo* 41). He knows that Lyman’s monstrous “Palace” creates “a kind of magic food that leaves a man emptier and hungrier after one whiff” (*Bingo* 42). He knows that “the bingo palace drives itself through wet nights according to these hungers” (*Bingo* 42). The tragedy: Lipsha doesn’t understand that he too is caught in the web the Bingo Palace represents. He slaves for meager wages to supplement his stated purpose: “to be the man who can impress Shawnee Ray” (*Bingo* 62).

Motherless, fatherless, and with no place to fit, Lipsha doesn’t understand that he is doomed to become another victim of Western ideology, one that he laments took his mother, June. In a drunken stupor, Lipsha sees June “the way she should have if she stayed and kept the good ways and became old and graceful” (*Bingo* 53). But he doesn’t see himself. He must “stay” and “keep the good ways” to “support the bigger task it was to be an Indian” at home in the land and community of his people (*Bingo* 53, 47). But like most Erdrich novels, her characters only learn lessons the hard way and through seemingly harmless beginnings. June’s ghost poses the question: “Do you play bingo?” (*Bingo* 55). Lipsha’s answer doesn’t matter; he will. The endeavor is both Lipsha’s downfall and the beginning of his eventual acknowledgement that he, too, cannot escape the power and pull of each world.

Lipsha plays bingo with June’s “lucky” cards in “pursuit of a material object,” a van, which Lipsha mistakenly believes is “a starter home, a portable den with front-wheel drive, a place where I can shack with Shawnee Ray and her little boy, if she will consent” (*Bingo* 63). Thus, like his grandmother, Fleur’s, choice to exact revenge on John James Mauser in *Four*



*Souls*, Lipsha's decision is one of selfishness: "He wants to win money and the bingo van, not to end impoverishment on the reservation, but to impress Shawnee Ray" (Peterson 167). However, this realization comes in retrospect, where Lipsha subsequently comprehends, "because of the van, I'll have to get stupid first, then wise" (*Bingo* 62). Lipsha has no choice; he must make the long and difficult journey back to the place he is already at—home.

The first effect of the van's ownership is the loss of Lipsha's special healing power, a power inherited from his Pillager bloodline.<sup>20</sup> Although he attempts to continue to treat his patients, Lipsha fails, "for each time, in the center of the cloud that comes down into my brain, in perfect focus, the van is now parked" (*Bingo* 64). The image of the material object and the possibilities he believes it represents is far too much for him. He can't concentrate; therefore, he can't help people. As he confusingly and despondently states, "My hands are shocked out, useless. I am again no more than a simple nothing that I always was before" (*Bingo* 66). Lipsha's social and capital ambitions do not place him any position better than before; in fact, he is far worse. The little importance he felt to the community is now also gone. He has nothing but the hope for a mobile 'home' and that Shawnee Ray will love him.

While the next few pages of the novel seem to imply that Shawnee Ray does care for Lipsha—she agrees to visit a local hotel with him—the circumstances of their decision suggests that an empty sexual rendezvous carries no more weight than worry over sexual protection and anxiety over a cheap room where they do not know what to do. The hotel is just a

modest kind of place, a clean place. You can smell the faint chemical of bug spray the moment you step in side it. You can look at the television hung on the wall, or examine the picture of golden trees and waterfall. You can take a shower for a long time in a cement shower stall, standing on your personal shower mat for safety. There is a little tin desk. You can sit down there and

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<sup>20</sup> The Pillager healing power and bloodline is outlined and utilized in *Tracks* and *Four Souls*, but it is also presented in other Erdrich novels such as *Beet Queen*, where Fleur Pillager nurses Karl Adare back to health after he jumps from a moving train car.

write a letter on a sheet of plain paper. You can read in the Good Book someone has placed in the drawer. (*Bingo* 71-72)

This is not the romantic tryst or place Lipsha thought it would be. It is awkward and uncomfortable. As he finally concedes, "I don't know why we're here" (*Bingo* 72). Still, the motel scene serves a distinct purpose in Lipsha's first attempt to return to his Native people, places, and beliefs.

Lipsha bestows all of his remaining bingo winnings on Shawnee Ray, and he returns "to the woods to sit and think," "on ground where Pillagers once walked" (*Bingo* 73). In this sacred place, the place of his ancestors, Lipsha's healing should begin, but instead Lipsha, again, is overwhelmed by images of the van. Resolved to once more try to win the object of his desire, Lipsha is victorious: "Of all of those who stalked that bingo can over the long months, I am now the only one who has not lost money on the hope" (*Bingo* 75). While this judgment may be true, Lipsha loses much more than money could ever buy: his, at best, vague sense of place within the world. This is not to claim that Lipsha once again laments his bifurcated, unfixed existence; in fact, quite the opposite is true: he rejects the people and places around him on a whole new level of capitalist elitism. As he states, "it's hard to say. I change. Just one late evening of riding the reservation roads, passing cars and pickups with a swish of my tires, I start smiling at the homemade hotrods, at the clunkers below, at the old-lady sedans nosing carefully up and down gravel hills" (*Bingo* 75). In hindsight, Lipsha can only regret how he "ride[s] high, ...Looking down on others, even if it's only from the seat of a van that a person never really earned, [and how it] does something to the human mentality" (*Bingo* 75).

Here Lipsha loses his entire perspective on life, his place within the community, and even his relationship with the woman he professes to love. He arrives at Shawnee Ray's home not to confess his feelings of love, but to "show-off" his van (Peterson 165). Here he finds Shawnee Ray's son, Redford, ill, but instead of offering his Pillager "touch back from wherever it had left," his "van to take Redford to the HIS," or something other than what I do, "[Lipsha] hit[s] the road for Hoopdance, looking for a better time" (*Bingo* 76). What was once the object of his

affection, his love, his sole preoccupation—Shawnee Ray—is simply and quickly replaced with steel, glass, and rubber—the Bingo van. While Lipsha is remorseful of his choice not long after, it is too late: he cannot help Shawnee Ray, Redford, or himself.

When he arrives at the party that he mistakenly believes is a “better time” than Shawnee Ray’s home and family, “several Anglos, led by a man he argued with earlier, kidnap him, humiliate him, and then dump him at Russell Kashpaw’s to get an equally humiliating tattoo to commemorate their revenge and their power over him” (Purdy 25). In a fitting bit of irony, Lipsha’s attempt to argue himself out of this altercation makes him realize that the “straight-edge shape [of the prospective tattoo of Montana] is not a Chippewa preference” and that “only human-made things tend toward cubes and squares—the van, for instance” (*Bingo* 80). It is only at this point that Lipsha seems to comprehend that he misguidedly placed value into an unnatural entity, one that has further disassociated him from Native culture, land, community, and family. Release from the van’s hold over him only comes from finding that the group of non-natives “totaled” the vehicle over the course of the night (*Bingo* 83). After crawling into the van’s battered shell to relax in one of the now broken and un-stuffed seats, Lipsha at last becomes conscious that he is free from the burden of the van and its influence on his value system. Lipsha states, “It makes no sense, but at this moment I feel rich. Sinking away, it seems like everything worth having is within my grasp. All I have to do is reach my hand into the emptiness” (*Bingo* 83). While Lipsha seems to have finally embarked on a journey that at least will help him negotiate traditional Western and Native worlds, Lyman is not so lucky.

Erdrich’s chapter, “Lyman’s Luck,” opens with Lyman’s desire to obtain his father, Nector’s, pipe from Lipsha. However, Lyman’s aspiration is only motivated by jealousy, greed, and pride, not familial relations or love of home, “for when he [Lyman] imagined himself drawing the sacred object solemnly from his bag and also presenting it to friends, to officials, always with the implication that it had, somehow, been passed down to him by right” (*Bingo* 85). Lyman’s “desire had [only] something to do with his natural father,” but it has everything to do with the “prestige of owing that pipe” (*Bingo* 85). In a clear act of cultural corruption, Lyman wants to put

the pipe “in a glass case...right at the casino entrance,” making it a fixed object, rather than a ceremonial tool of Native culture and custom. Lipsha at first refuses Lyman's offer to purchase the pipe, but then Lipsha again slips: “‘I'll trade you [Lyman] the pipe!’ he suddenly cried out. ‘For what?’ ‘Shawnee Ray. Here's the deal: I give you the pipe, and you lay low, step aside’” (*Bingo* 88). “Home” for Lyman and Lipsha at this juncture becomes unrecognizable as they readily make these exchanges to further their own love interests and social and capitalistic endeavors. Instead of Lyman or Lipsha caring about their home or the people that make it home, they agree to trade cultural artifacts and people as commodities. Sadly, Lyman and Lipsha perpetuate the chattel system in which their ancestors were enslaved or died. Lyman's “luck” further emphasizes this point, as he compounds his mistakes, pawning the pipe during a gambling binge in Reno. As Purdy puts it, “Lyman's losses in Reno are molded by a Western model; he plays for self, and thus only the house can win” (26). “He is of course unsuccessful, in part because he is not at home, where as the manager of ‘the house’ he has the power” (Purdy 26). Thus, Shawnee Ray, who “is the best of our [Native] past, our present, our hope of a future,” is bartered for an object, now only valued for bragging rights and, at last, its monetary value in an “all-night pawnshop” (*Bingo* 93).

Lyman and Lipsha are not only guilty of objectifying a person who they both declare they love, but they are guilty of continually selling out their traditional home for money that Lipsha describes as “dead stuff, but I like it” (*Bingo* 101). So regardless of their competition to acquire Shawnee Ray, Lipsha and Lyman become business partners. Instead of realizing that placing stock in “dead stuff” is unnatural, Lipsha begs Lyman to “tell me everything you know” about money. “How it reproduces if you pile it up high enough and put it in the right circumstances” (*Bingo* 101). In an odd moment of clarity and honesty, Lyman confesses, “Success wrecks as many people as failure...especially Indians. We're not programmed for it” (*Bingo* 102). Yet, Lipsha does not heed Lyman's warning; he only reviews the past travesties of trading home for capital by lauding the success of the Bingo Palace: “the bingo palace that he [Lyman] so recently maneuvered to open is doing bigger business and contributing to the

overall economic profile of our reservation" (*Bingo* 103). As Nancy Peterson succinctly explains the situation:

Proponents argue that bingo and casino games are making it possible to end the terrible impoverishment that has afflicted most reservations; critics argue that this economic boon comes with hidden price tags, and they contend that native involvement with gambling is detrimental to tribal traditions and values.

(166)

This fact is exactly the problem: Natives must survive in the contemporary Western world. To return to the time and land of their ancestors is impossible. As Lyman admits, "It's a mixed bag of trouble....There's lots of ways to make money, and gambling is not the nicest, not the best, not the prettiest. It's just the way available right now" (*Bingo* 103). In short, it is a necessary evil. The trick Lyman and Lipsha must learn is that they cannot fully invest themselves into the past or the necessity of the future; they must navigate the tortuous road ahead of them in order to keep from derailing in the present.

And Lipsha is on a dangerous ride. Instead of looking towards the good of the community and Shawnee Ray, he desires most to astonish his love with material goods. As Lipsha states, "I want to buy her a new house, a pet, a car red as the fresh blood she is bleeding from my heart" (*Bingo* 105). Unfortunately, what Lipsha does not understand is that Shawnee Ray's literal "home" is already solidly build upon his peoples' traditions and culture, an "original old log house from the way back when, a place tucked together by Resounding sky, added to over years gone by with layer on layer of sheetrock and plaster, which is why the walls, so thick, keep in the warmed air in winter, and the cool of night all summer" (*Bingo* 105). This is not to claim Shawnee Ray and Zelda's abode represents their allegiance to traditional Native American sense of self or home. The house is what is important. It represents a solid Native foundation that is forced to take on elements of the Western world such as "sheetrock and plaster," while simultaneously serving the "way back when" purpose of protection, place, and belonging: it is home.

This fact seems to miss its point with Lipsha. Again, he rushes headlong to explain to Shawnee Ray how he and Lyman are now business partners “on a big investment scheme” (*Bingo* 109). Lipsha’s conscience, however, makes him reluctant to divulge the location of “this big resort area that sits on an undeveloped lake” (*Bingo* 109). The space in question is none other than his great-grandmother, Fleur Pillager’s, land. This is the same land that Fleur was forced off, swore revenge for, and ruined her relationship with her daughter, Lulu. This is the land Lipsha hopes to develop. As Shawnee Ray rightly assesses, “you got the medicine, Lipsha. But you don’t got the love” (*Bingo* 112). Lipsha’s “wish [that] I was that little boy, I wish I that I was Redford” only further emphasizes his inability to love Shawnee Ray correctly (*Bingo* 165). While these feelings are not difficult to comprehend since Lipsha was effectively abandoned by his own mother, June, as a child, the fact that Shawnee Ray represents the past, present, and future of her people implies that Lipsha not only does not know how to love her, but he does not know how to love his home’s land, family, and community.

But Shawnee Ray is not blameless or incorruptible either. If she, indeed, signifies the future of her people, by unavoidable circumstance, she has a foot firmly placed in Western culture and society. Shawnee Ray knows how to keep and cultivate the old customs, but she still desires to better herself both financially and socially in accordance with Western standards. In an argument that proceeds her leaving the safety and comfort of Zelda’s home, Shawnee Ray is quick to defend Albertine, Zelda’s daughter’s, choice to move to the cities to study Western medicine.<sup>21</sup> Although Shawnee Ray’s speech does weaken when Zelda reminds her that she does not call Albertine’s visits “coming home” because Albertine “never stays,” Shawnee Ray continues with her plans to leave Zelda and pursue a cash prize at the yearly traditional dance contest (*Bingo* 18).

While it is an easy indictment to claim that Shawnee Ray is just as willing as Lyman and Lipsha to trade culture—the Native dance and dress—for economic gain, the crux of the

situation lies not only in the growing influence of Western ideologies, but the monetary ability to leave home is set in motion by none other than Lipsha, who gives his remaining bingo money to Shawnee Ray (*Bingo* 152). “It was her freedom, her train ticket, her camping money, and Zelda didn’t know about it” (*Bingo* 120). Lipsha, a man without a home, enables another one of his people to break away from a place that defines them. It would, however, be irresponsible to suggest that Shawnee Ray’s existence with Zelda is anything but overbearing and prescribed. The point is that Lipsha cannot locate his own place in world, much less advise or aid Shawnee Ray, who is touted as even “the best of our [Native] past” (*Bingo* 13). It is Lipsha who, try as he might, cannot come to terms with either the Native or Western worlds at large. In his own terms, he acknowledges:

I am waiting for a band card, trying out to boredom to prove who I am—the useless son of a criminal father and mother who died with her hands full of snow—but trying to prove myself to the authorities....I don’t have my enrollment and entitlement stabilized, not yet, nor do I have my future figured exactly out.  
(*Bingo* 128)

Lipsha’s only hope is that he seeks out the consult of both his grandmother, Lulu, and great-grandmother, Fleur.

While Lipsha’s intentions still rigidly adhere to devising a way to convince Shawnee Ray to love him, at his subsequent meeting with Lulu, the most interesting information revealed to the reader is that Lulu “is out to reclaim the original reservation” (*Bingo* 129). Thus, Lipsha’s decision to invest himself in the Western world of capitalism is more destructive than simply selling-out his community; his choice strikes at the very people and family who “poetically endow” that space or place with value greater than monetary gain: Lipsha’s intentions negate his grandmother, Lulu’s, mission to restore the reservation to its former size, and the only goal

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<sup>21</sup> See *Love Medicine*: Like many of Erdrich’s characters, Albertine is the victim of a liminal existence, literally living under a white woman’s home in a basement. This choice bars her from being accepted on the reservation also, never allowing her to fit into either world comfortably.

for his seemingly impending fortune is to buy material objects for Shawnee Ray, who he has already successfully helped emancipate from the Native community.

The dire and corrupt circumstances of these details only multiply in significance when Fleur allows Lipsha to follow her to the land of her home. In a surreal journey to the Pillager homestead, Lipsha painstakingly struggles to keep pace with what seems to be an ancient yet supernaturally nimble and strong Fleur. Fearing he is lost and possibly in emanate danger, Lipsha debates on turning back, but as he helplessly confesses, “She has me. She is drawing me forward on a magic string coughed up from her insides” (*Bingo* 134). There destination is, without coincidence, “the far end of Matchimanito Lake, which is right where Lyman Lamartine intends [using Lipsha’s money] to erect his gambler’s paradise” (*Bingo* 133). “Once more Fleur will be displaced: not by white lumber interests this time, as happens in *Tracks*, but by her own grandson” (Peterson 168). But even a moral and ethical rousing such as a visit to the Pillager homeland is not enough to change Lipsha’s plans for elevated economic and social status.

Ironically, it is Lyman who second guesses his own capitalist objectives. In a dream about playing the slot machines, Lyman encounters a very sad truth: he can picture Shawnee Ray and Redford. Sometimes he can see the faces of Zelda and Lipsha. “Sometimes [he can see] the face of the old Pillager woman [Fleur] leapt glaring from nowhere,” but “his own face did not appear in the magic line along with theirs” (*Bingo* 147). Lyman has no one and nowhere to turn because he doesn’t have an identity that fits within the lives of those he even deems closest too him. “His own reflection was lodged at the bottom of the river where his brother Henry have jumped in and drowned” (*Bingo* 148).<sup>22</sup> While this lack of relation to place and community squarely pegs Lyman into a Lipsha like existence, Lyman’s dream is more obviously prophetic than Lipsha’s visit from June’s ghost.

“The face of Fleur Pillager appear[s] before him [Lyman]” to state, “Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water, and for the government’s

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<sup>22</sup> See *Love Medicine* and/or the short story, “The Red Convertible”: Henry’s suicide haunts Lyman for the rest of his life.



promises, the wind is steadier....This time, don't sell out for a barrel of weevil flour and mossy pork" (*Bingo* 148). Unfortunately, Lyman—comparably obtuse to Lipsha's own misunderstanding of home's power—does not put stock in the magical, the dreamlike, or the supernatural. He awakes pledging that "whatever else happened, he would be a good father, this is, he would be himself—instead of trucks, he would play store. Teach value for value, pound for pound. Already he was sure, Redford had an investor's eye" (*Bingo* 149). Lyman and Lipsha simply cannot figure out what is important to them or "where they ought to be" (Erdrich "Where" 23). As Lipsha finally understands, "I want a place where I can belong, but I end up as part of a surprising configuration" (*Bingo* 158). And as "it turns out [Lyman is] just as confused and oppressed by love as me. Lyman's such a complicated guy there's something uncanny about him, scary, like it's a disease of the spirit, a kind of saint-hood that's out of control" (*Bingo* 169). Lyman and Lipsha are—what Erdrich aptly names chapter seventeen—"Getting Nowhere Fast." Still, as with many of Erdrich's chapter headings, the meaning is not ambiguous but ambivalent.

"Once again Lyman and Lipsha are tied; they both go on vision quests at the same place and time" (Purdy 28). Lipsha and Lyman seek the help of Xavier Toose to "feel that connection we must have lost," one "that hasn't a forward or backwards" (*Bingo* 193). Here Lipsha finds himself again "wandering alone looking for a place where I can spend as long as it takes for a vision my way" (*Bingo* 195). What Lipsha does not realize at the time is that the place of his and Lyman's exorcism is the place he belongs. It is Fleur's land, the land of his ancestors, the land of his people. Humorously, these facts are only made clear by visit from a prophetic skunk that sprays Lipsha. The animal's message, "*this ain't real estate,*" at last gives direction and meaning to Lipsha's life (*Bingo* 200). Lipsha must revere and care for the land, people, and community that comprise his home. "Here the future of all the community is central" (Purdy 28). In "A Little Vision," the supernatural skunk returns to remind Lipsha of the land's importance, presenting him with a horrific picture of the destruction which Lipsha is about to help set in motion:

the bulldozers scraping off wild growth from the land like a skin, raising mounds of dirt and twisted roots. Roads are built, trees shaved, tar laid out onto the new and winding roads. Stones and cement blocks and wood are hauled into the woods, which are no longer woods, as the building is set up and raised. (*Bingo* 219)

Acknowledging that the “damn skunk is right,” Lipsha states, “The money life has got no substance, there’s nothing left when the day is done but a pack of receipts.... Our reservation is not real estate, luck fades when sold, attraction has no staying power, no weight, not heart” (*Bingo* 221). Erdrich does not devote much text to Lyman’s vision, but the opening of the next chapter, “Lyman Dancing,” suggests that he, too, comes to a type of understanding with his position in the Native/Western worlds. “It was the first time since Henry had died that he had not danced in his bother’s clothes. It was the first time, ever, that he didn’t dance for money” (*Bingo* 203). The implications here are twofold: Lyman finds his own Native identity by dancing for himself, and as Nancy Peterson contends, Lyman’s vision “reconciles him to his brother Henry’s suicide” (162). Thus, Lyman and Lipsha take clear steps towards defining themselves within the context of their situation and location.

Still, Erdrich does not conclude *Bingo Palace* with a classic storybook ending. “Erdrich’s novel resists clear or firm resolution and strikes a kind of balance between re-birth and death that is analogous to the situation of contemporary Native Americans” (Peterson 175). As Lipsha states, “I am staring down, off the railing of a bridge, into a river that is treacherous, full of suck holes and underground streams. I have looked into that river once, and thought I’d crossed it for good on my way back to reservation home ground” (*Bingo* 238). Therefore, it is only fitting that the final pages of *Bingo Palace* find its characters’ definitions of home as equally difficult to pinpoint as the novel began. Albertine, again, returns to the cities, Shawnee Ray enrolls in a university, Lyman steals Lipsha’s joint invested money to pay off gambling debts, and Fleur passes over to the Native afterlife. On the other hand, Lipsha again rekindles his relationship with his father, the escaped convict, Gerry Nanapush; Lulu becomes the voice of the people

against tribal injustice; and Lipsha finds purpose in saving the child that he and Gerry inadvertently kidnap.<sup>23</sup> Remembering his own orphaned existence, Lipsha vows that “at least this baby never was alone. At least he always had someone, even if it was just a no-account like me, a waste, a reservation load” (*Bingo* 259).

While Lipsha’s return to the reservation does not seem to be the right choice—it is eerily reminiscent of his mother, June’s, frozen death—the problem with a full indictment of the novel’s ending lies in the fact that he, Lipsha Morrissey, “a waste, a load, one of those sad reservation statistics,” is bringing one of his own kind, Jack Mauser Jr., back home (*Bingo* 7). Lipsha is once again caught in the “mobile home” of a car he and Gerry steal, but the circumstances different from his van. Lipsha is not returning to the reservation to brag or belittle others on the road; Lipsha is selflessly traveling towards home to save the life of Jack Mauser Jr., who is protectively huddled in his jacket, where he remains safe from the cold. While the ending of the novel is ambiguous about whether or not Lipsha survives the ordeal, the reader is told that a “hostage [is] found in good condition” (*Bingo* 268). The lack of clarity seems to suggest that, once again, a balance is struck between the Native and Western worlds in order to exist within them with any success. Even if he perishes in the snow like his mother, Lipsha is no longer the selfish and arrogant owner of an object won by supernatural luck, nor is he considered an ardent Native traditionalist; but he is a hero in both the Western and Native sense: he rescues a child.

As the conclusion of *Tales of Burning Love* makes clear, the return of Mauser’s son begins a whole new chapter in Jack senior’s life, one that, like Lipsha’s existence, demands the traverse of both the Western and Native universes. The car that Lipsha and Gerry steal literally becomes the vehicle that forces Lipsha and Jack to define or construct home. Lipsha does not want to be a “waste,” and Jack does not want to be an absentee father. Jack’s journey to find himself and place is just as difficult as Lipsha’s, but that fact only seems to further the novel’s

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<sup>23</sup> See *Tales of Burning Love*: Lipsha and Gerry accidentally kidnap John James Mauser Jr. after Mauser, on the run, leaves Jack Jr. unattended in a running car.

message that it is not easy being an Indian in a time period that appears to be ruled not by borders, places, people, or allegiance to home, but by Western values and interests.

The novel's focus on Lyman and Lipsha's journey unites and exemplifies Natives' struggle to define who they are, where they belong, and, most importantly, what tenets of Western/Native culture, customs, and beliefs constitute their home. Reiterating Bhabha's sentiments about hybridity's effectiveness, Nancy Peterson states, "Erdrich's tricksters in the *Bingo Palace* are most successful when...they figure out how to set in motion traditional strategies and goals adapted to contemporary conditions" (172). Modern Native Americans are forced by circumstance to devise a way to parley the Native and Western worlds in order to (re)define what and where home is and how their very identity relates to this difficult to define and locate term. *Bingo Palace* suggests that this lesson is not one that can be learned overnight or from a single occurrence. Instead, as Lipsha and Lyman discover, events, situations, desire, and reaction to the world at large make the redefinition of home almost a moment by moment choice. What might constitute the return to the "old ways" one minute might conclude in tribal extinction the next, and what might constitute sustained survival in modern society might end in selling out the very people and places one initially aspired to protect. Only through a delicate balance of choices and actions can Erdrich's characters and Native Americans avoid falling into abyss that is offered by one or the other.

This is the tight-rope that Jack, Lipsha, and Lyman must transverse without giving up or slipping off. There are no easy choices, only easy ways of failing their culture, communities, families, and themselves. These characters must learn that the tight-rope is not there to make them fall, but essential to resisting Western encroachment. It is dangerous, yes, but without moving towards the future, Natives are destined to become the 'vanishing people' Western literature and history has made them out to be. While Jack, Lipsha, and Lyman are far from Native traditionalists or even competent businessmen at the end of *Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love*, it is through their attempts at negotiation with the Western world that "the people might live."

## CHAPTER 6

### BLUE JAYS DANCE AND PAINTED DRUM

#### 6.1 Home Away From Home: Body and Nature in Louise Erdrich's *Blue Jay's Dance*

*"I'm homesick," I keep saying*

*This is home," he keeps answering.*

*Each of us is absolutely right.*

---Louise Erdrich in argument with Michael Dorris

With the exception of *Master Butchers Singing Club*, previous chapters of this project tackle texts classified as Erdrich's famous North Dakota saga—*Love Medicine* through *Painted Drum*. However, in this chapter, I begin by exploring notions of home in *Blue Jay's Dance* and then discuss *Painted Drum*. Probably the most unexpected inclusion to my project, *Blue Jay's Dance* is a type of autobiographical memoir. While the pairing of *Blue Jay's Dance* and *Painted Drum* is seemingly difficult, for considerations of format and intention, the versions of home presented in the novels correspond nicely. *Blue Jay's Dance* and the beginning and end of *Painted Drum* offer a distinct version of home that depends on family, community, and nature far more than proximity to traditional tribal lands. Even *Beet Queen* and *Master Butchers Singing Club* are, for the most part, technically set within miles of Erdrich's imaginary reservation. Still, it would be incorrect of me to imply that traditional locations in these two texts play no part in their formation of home. As the body of *Painted Drum* and Erdrich's thoughts, emotions, and feelings about her native North Dakota in *Blue Jay's Dance* clearly indicates, these versions of home are supplemented by direct links to the past's lands, values, and peoples. Thus, the variance in intention and creation of the books

should be viewed as a testament to Erdrich's skill at continually emphasizing the importance of home in her writing.

Differing greatly from Erdrich's previous work with the North Dakota saga, *Blue Jay's Dance* does not attempt to address the threaded plot or structure of the mix-and-match relationships of Native full-blood and mixed-blood characters struggling to redefine or recreate home in the contemporary world. Nor is the book set on the reservation or in North Dakota, both staple origins of Erdrich's saga. *Blue Jay's Dance* is geographically located in New Hampshire, far from Erdrich's native roots, but by reading home as what is "poetically endowed" to a space rather than a specific location, *Blue Jay's Dance* implies that feeling, people, and especially the bond between mother, infant, and earth redefine what and how home is contemplated and shaped.

Indeed, the moral and ethical values that Erdrich espouses through her art—compassion, responsibility, respect, caution...—arise from Erdrich's apparent sense of human vulnerability in a world that is beautiful but ultimately beyond our limited comprehension, despite our paradoxical power to affect the world and one another with our words and deeds. (Rainwater 279)

As *Blue Jay's Dance* clearly communicates from the beginning, the book is about "what it is to be a parent—an experience shattering, ridiculous, earthbound, deeply warm, rich profound" (*Blue* ix). "It is a book about the vitality between mothers and infants, that passionate and artful bond into which we pour the direct expression of our being" (*Blue* 5). Thus, in regards to location, *Blue Jays Dance* offers a space defined by its difference from North Dakota, the physical realm of the womb, and nature's ability to construct home through the location's environment.

Coming home is not an act or a journey; it is the realization that home begins with connection to people and place. Home is still "earthbound," still includes those who are loved, and still presides in a space deemed sacred, but the location of the writing is not transcended but transformed by the elements that define home for Erdrich. As she claims, the "love of an

infant is of a different order. It is twinned love, all absorbing, a blur of boundaries and messages" (*Blue* 4). This "blur of boundaries" in the "wild places in the world" allows the notion of home to move fluidly between parent, child, infant, and space (*Blue* 4, 5).

Fittingly, Erdrich describes the physical location of her writing chamber in the first sentence of *Blue Jay's Dance*: "The small gray house where I work was built in the hope of feeding snowmobilers" (*Blue* 6). While the subject of the sentence is significant to the book's preoccupation with notions of home, the seemingly unimportant predicate of Erdrich's statement is equally profound because it situates the memoir's overall theme squarely in the notion that each place or space is endowed with the residue of its past. As Erdrich states, "Those who've lived in this house haunt it," and when Erdrich and her family vacate the premises, her family's thoughts of and about "her small grey house" will always contain a "reference, identity or out pull to [that] landscape" (*Blue* 7, "Where" 23). Home is not relegated to a specific time or place, but "the continuum, the span, the afters, and before" (*Blue* 8). "The baby [itself] described [in *Blue Jay's Dance*] is a combination of...three babies whom I [Erdrich] nursed and cared for in a series of writing offices" (*Blue* 3). The people who create or define home nourish the place they exist. New Hampshire is not "absence of all familiar place" for Erdrich or her deceased ex-husband, Michael Dorris; it is the setting of creation—of life, of place, of home ("Where" 23).

As with all homes, a secure framework must exist. For Erdrich and, as she contends, all women, this foundation is the "rounded vases of skin and bones and blood that seem impossibly engineered for birth" (*Blue* 9). The body is the protection, the love, and center of sustenance for the unborn child. As a result, the very act of eating becomes a sacred ritual, for every "bite is destined for the heart, the muscles, hair, the bones forming like the stalks of flowers, or the lovely eyes" (*Blue* 13). The womb becomes the cosmic galaxy where the impending child exists. It is the first and most important home they will ever know. As Erdrich puts it, "the body I inhabit is gracious, a merciful shelter" (*Blue* 189). This place of security and care are, however, short-lived. As Erdrich laments:

I have to trust this body—a thing inherently bound to betray me, an unreliable conveyance, a passion-driven cab that tries its best to let me off in bad neighborhoods, an adolescent that rebels against my better self, that eats erratically and sleeps too much, that grows another human with my grudging admiration, a sensation grabber, unpenitent, remorseless, amoral. (*Blue* 43-44)

But for now, for the term, the place of the child's habitation is secure. The child is safe within the confines of the womb. Therefore, the child becomes not only a tenet of home, but it is literally a component in the most natural home, its mother.

Although Erdrich acknowledges that the fetus/mother connection will dissipate after birth, this connection is not lost, only transformed. Thus, it would be incorrect to surmise that the body's function as home ends with the child's growing independence. The child, no matter its age, is necessary to the solid formation of home. As she describes, "we [Erdrich and Dorris] touch our baby's essential mystery. The three of us are soul to soul" (*Blue* 56). A type of Holy Trinity is created, erecting a home, a place specified by the simple relation of mother, father, and infant. She adds, "my feeling is that a baby must be weaned slowly from its other body—mine. So I keep her close, sleep with her curled tight, tie her onto me with padded contraptions" (*Blue* 64). Much like her description of the "wavelike sway," "a graciousness of the entire body" given to parents that soothes and calms their children (*Blue* 54), this is an out of "body" experience for the child that replicates the love and tenderness of the womb. Erdrich's body only relocates her fundamental role for the child in relation to new demands, circumstances, places, and times, but the connection between parent and child remains one of the essential building blocks of home. When Erdrich later speaks in reverence of a bird's nest constructed from the hair of her daughters, it is not the craftsmanship of its construction that peaks her interest; it is the fact that it is her daughters' hair that fashions the "tight woven nest," "an indigo bunting's water tight nest," a home, of all things.

It is then only appropriate that Erdrich's actual residence at one time physically rests on her, encapsulating her in a womb like cocoon. While Erdrich admits early on that "the entire



Northeast seems like the inside of a house to me,” the circumstance of her placement in the house’s womb greatly differs (*Blue* 88). In a misguided attempt to rescue a wayward and feral kitten, Erdrich inches into the recesses below her home, “only mov[ing] by shifting ...hips up and down” (*Blue* 101). “From underneath, I had heard the house all around me like a familiar body” (*Blue* 103). Here, in the dark, in fright, she is lodged between the earth and support beams of her abode. Caught in this womb like structure, Erdrich, like the fetus, is immobile and helpless, yet she can hear the indistinct sounds of her “family’s daily lives”: “Their steps trailed and traveled around me, boomed in my ears. Their voices jolted me....Water flowed...hitched and gurgled” (*Blue* 103). She becomes the “unborn,” filling the house’s womb with her life, thoughts, and family (*Blue* 103). Erdrich’s redefinition of what is home is revised not because of her first observation that the “house itself had given birth” to the kitten beneath it, but because the house, the landscape, the people who exist there have given birth to a home that cannot be deconstructed as easily as removing boards, bricks, or plaster. Still, home is a too precious an entity, too difficult a term to pin-point, in order for Erdrich to seamlessly and comfortably situate herself in the New England landscape.

As she contemplates the worth of her New Hampshire surroundings, Erdrich originally concludes, “this is a beautiful place but it is not where I belong” (*Blue* 87). “I’d rather die in the familiar landscape where the grave markers of my recent ancestors stand crooked in the deep mold of oak leaves, or where they are a part of the landscape itself, as Ojibwa once buried their dead high in the bones of trees” (*Blue* 96). However, Erdrich’s reluctance to belong in the New England setting is eventually sedated. As she states, “I literally transplant myself into this ground.” “I sink roots,” but she does not replace her North Dakota roots with New England ones; she redefines home in her new surroundings (*Blue* 92). While family seems to be the vehicle that makes this transplantation possible, Erdrich also justifies her adaptation in both history and nature.

Erdrich states, “1792...Those numbers have stuck in my head for so long I have come to measure history around them:...the Articles of Confederation were ratified. [And] All land

west of the Appalachian was still Indian territory” (*Blue* 98). In Erdrich’s speculation, even her New Hampshire location is connected to her Native ancestors: “the people whom I am descended on my mother’s side, the Ojibwa, or Anishinabe, lived lightly upon it [the land], leaving few traces of their complicated passage other than their own teeth and bone” (*Blue* 98). This place, this new home, becomes a space of heritage and old ancestors, not an alien land where she does not belong. Erdrich’s relocation is then a type of homecoming that surpasses the creation of modern nations, states, territories, and/or reservations. It is allegiance to “the continuum, the span, the afters, and before” that she adamantly believes is essential to comprehending place and space (*Blue* 8). *Blue Jay’s Dance* suggests that this type of past, present, and future reading also locates home within the context of New England’s evolving flora and fauna.

Erdrich carefully maintains the flowers seeded by those who lived in the house before, while simultaneously supplementing the landscape with her own contributions of both family and plant life. In regards to the woman she imagines embodies the house before her, “it is the foxglove I am most careful not to disturb...cardiac medication digitalis, that I keep for her and multiply with slow preservation, as if in the presence of the foxglove these ghosts are not so much laid to rest as still able to partake of the rich and rooted fullness of this life” (*Blue* 110). Erdrich’s own contribution: “a child lying on a blanket, entranced at the spectacle of light, the arching clouds, the blaze of Artic flame, a hardy subzero rose I have ordered, and will plant, and which is guaranteed to bloom in this baby’s first summer” (*Blue* 44). The link to the past is kept sacred as an active participant in the present and future, just as Erdrich’s precious baby and the Arctic flame rose are ripe to grow into beauty that can only be feed by the earth where they are “planted.” As Erdrich’s three-year old daughter succinctly puts it, truly, “God’s in the garden” (*Blue* 26).

For instance, the trees, themselves, reflect both a human physicality and connection to the past. While Erdrich is not native to New Hampshire, her connection to nature allows her to enjoy the trees as family members, and through them she is able to relate to the location’s past.

As she describes, the “sugar maple that have been used for hundreds of years now are like a complex body, the blue rubber lines the veins and arteries, the sap a clear blood, a moving tide collected in barrels and hauled off on sledges to fires that seem to beat in and out in the woods like great blasting lungs” (*Blue* 62). For Erdrich, it is clear that the land is not something to be bought, sold, or used, but a place where she is allowed to create or define home. As she states, “People and place are inseparable” (“Where” 1). Thus, kinship is created because “the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history” (“Where” 1). In this case, Erdrich plants her family history firmly in the ground of New Hampshire. As she hopes early on, “maybe if I dig and fertilize I’ll flourish, I’ll belong where I am” (*Blue* 94). The conclusion of the book answers her questions with a resounding “yes.”

When Erdrich’s maternal grandfather passes away, she returns to North Dakota. While an obviously painful and woeful event, the return makes her realize the role her grandparents play in her life: “I [Erdrich] must have been sustained by my grandparents even more than I knew, because the silence in their wake roars over me, and it seems as though something within me is pulled deeply under, into the earth, as though I still follow after them, stumbling, unable to say good-bye” (*Blue* 184). This statement seems to revert Erdrich’s definition of home back to North Dakota and the relatives that reside there, but the details of her departure from New Hampshire negate any such clear cut assessment. In her words, “Grandpa stopped recognizing me years ago, and yet, I still need to go. Michael takes care of our home and other children, but I bring our baby along....traveling in the mouth of a North Dakota blizzard to the Turtle Mountain Reservation” (*Blue* 185). Home is now New Hampshire, Michael, and her other children, and the North Dakota Turtle Mountain Reservation is a destination. However, it would be careless and most probably mistaken to claim that either location has lost its significance or status as a home of some type. Instead, both the “something within me...pulled deeply under, into the earth” and the need to “belong where I am” exist in tandem, not competition (*Blue* 94, 184). Home exists on her ancestor’s land in North Dakota and in New England because each

location exudes what home is “poetically endowed” with—family, love, nature, community, and, most of all, place within the milieu of those elements.

Aptly, *Blue Jays Dance*’s title creature is itself a bird of malleability that makes, creates, and redefines its home in the conditions of any environment into which it is plunged. “The blue jay is an opportunist, and opportunists are survivors in every sense. They are adaptive, clever, and unprincipled” (*Blue* 159).

Blue jays have little difficulty moving into the human world and they hold their own in common with raccoons, skunks, sparrows, raven, grackles, starlings. And feral cats, too.

Blue jays can live in chopped-up, murdered woods, in dump lots, fancy gardens, and city boulevards. They can live in old pines and brand-new Lombardy poplars. (*Blue* 159-60).

Similar to Erdrich, the blue jay is by all accounts a bird of fluctuating location, yet they both find place in whatever space they are afforded—home. Relocating, leaving, returning, and all of the movement in between those spaces is Erdrich’s own adaptive dance to “survive”—mentally, physically, emotionally—in the places she lives.

On another level, the blue jay also reflects the circumstances in which most Native Americans find themselves in the modern world. In “Louise Erdrich’s Storied Universe,” Catherine Rainwater explains that “a cross-cultural vision registers powerfully in Erdrich’s works ...[because it] originates directly within her personal experience” (271). Like Erdrich, what Natives have known, do know, and what will be passed down to them comes from debilitated spaces to which they have been relocated. The contemporary reservation is not a space of pristine culture, heritage, or custom, and in most cases, the land, itself, is not the tribes’ territory before Columbus landed. Contact with the Western world is unavoidable. In “Dreamers in the Cities,” John Gamber argues that Natives must redefine place in the urban setting. While rural New Hampshire is far from being classified as “cities,” the issues of psychological alienation and unfamiliarity with place are essentially the same. For Erdrich and other Natives, it does not

matter what landscape they reside in; what matters is how that landscape is perceived—what it offers and how they (people) relate to the locale. Here is where home is defined, revitalized, and created.

#### 6.2 Following the Sound of the *Painted Drum* Home; Or The Power and Sacrifice of Little Girls

*I must have been sustained by my grandparents even more than I knew,  
because the silence in their wake roars over me, and it seems as though  
something within me is pulled deeply under, into the earth, as though I still  
follow after them, stumbling, unable to say good-bye.*

---Louise Erdrich, *Blue Jay's Dance*

In “Marching to the Beat of Her Own Drum,” Claire Kirch implies that *Painted Drum* is the latest installment of Erdrich’s North Dakota saga, beginning with *Love Medicine*. While it is not my intention to dispute Kirch’s contention, it should be duly noted that *Painted Drum* stands alone as a complete work of fiction. Readers can manage without knowledge of Erdrich’s other contributions to the “overlapping tales of three generations of interconnected families, primarily Natives or mixed, living in and around Argus, a mythical reservation town...in North Dakota” (Kirch 38). *Painted Drum* only refers to the major characters of the North Dakota saga to a slight extent, even though the novel’s plot and construction are directly related to the North Dakota Turtle Mountain Reservation and the character Jewett Parker Tatro from Erdrich’s *Four Souls*.

Tatro is an Indian agent and bar owner on the Ojibwe reservation. In both capacities, Tatro is able to swindle Native cultural artifacts and land away from their rightful owners. *Four Souls* reveals that Tatro has come into possession of the very land Fleur Pillager swears to regain. In a surreal card game, Tatro loses the deed to the land in question to Fleur’s mentally deficient but clearly astute son. In *Painted Drum*, the focal point of the novel and object in question is none other than an artifact, a painted drum, Tatro acquired in a likewise dubious manner. Tatro’s unethical procurement of the drum is compounded because the drum is not only the physical manifestation of a little girl who sacrifices her self for the good of her family, but the drum is literally a home for her bones.

Kirch argues that the “central theme of *The Painted Drum* is of mothers who fail their children while they satisfy their own emotional needs, yet find redemption because of the sacrifices made by their daughters” (Kirch 39). I wish to add to Kirch’s contentions by reading *Painted Drum* from its treatment of home and home’s connection to identity for its major characters, including the Drum, itself. Thus, while Kirch believes that “mothers” find “redemption,” she seems to gloss over the fact that the “sacrifices” of “daughters” are of more primary importance to creating and/or solidifying identity in relation to landscape, effectively bringing the characters of the novel home in various manners.

*Painted Drum* begins in the New England countryside, where Faye Traver’s mixed-blood heritage and location seem to work against each other in her quest to define her identity and home. However, as Faye discovers, even a space far removed from the land of her grandmother and mother is still saturated by her Native culture and heritage. Thus, Faye’s statement—“That is why we are not really Easterners”—suggests more than a change in location. It implies a type of identification disassociated with that region (*Painted* 30). Even though admittedly pale, herself, she is not a New England “white lady” (*Painted* 35). Still, Faye does not exactly fit into her American Indian heritage either: “They [Faye and her mother] seem very different from people here [the reservation]” (*Painted* 103). As Faye concedes, “There is no right way. No true path. The more familiar the road, the easier I’m lost” (*Painted* 3). Similar to several other characters in Erdrich’s North Dakota saga and herself in *Blue Jay’s Dance*, Faye must redefine home in the framework of her location and culturally diverse background.

While Faye confesses that she is intrigued by her own Native heritage, at the inception of the novel she is rather clueless about her family’s origins. This, however, changes with the discovery of the painted drum. The drum’s power for Faye is twofold: it allows her to rediscover her American Indian roots, but most importantly, the drum forces her to confront her own identity in relation to the people and space of her New Hampshire residence. While the final pages of *Painted Drum* find Faye heavily suggesting actual relocation to the North Dakota reservation, her mother, Elsie, answers, “No, we can’t, we can’t do that” (*Painted* 262). This

answer seems to be grounded in prudence, but in reality, the fact of the matter is New Hampshire is also home for Elsie and Faye, one that defines their relationship within the context of their surroundings. As Faye states, “It was never my sister’s loss, or the loss of my father, that bound me to this place. It was my loyalty to my mother and the determination that she should not live a life of grief alone” (*Painted* 263). Moreover, Faye finally realizes that the New England landscape also defines home for her because she knows no other place. As she states, “I always came back” because the location is the “father I loved and feared, a sister I simply loved, the loss of both [father and sister], then mother and I together” (*Painted* 79). This insight is, however, impossible without the appearance of the painted drum.

Quite suitably and ironically, Faye and Elsie’s business is homes. They run an estate business that “takes [them] into an extremity of places and lives” (*Painted* 10). Unbeknownst to them, the assessment of the Jewett Tatro estate sets them upon a journey into the “extremity” of their own “places and lives” (*Painted* 10). Here a guarded and excited peek into their “specialty—Native American antiquities” becomes the catalyst of change for Faye. Through the drum’s resounding past, Faye is pulled to both “home” landscapes of New England and the North Dakota reservation.

Looking upon the drum for the first time, Faye understands that something important emanates from it, but she cannot comprehend what that significance might be or for what purpose. As Faye states, “I’m not a sentimental person and I don’t believe old things hold the life of people,” “[a]nd yet, when I step near the drum, I swear it sounds. One deep, low, resonant sound” (*Painted* 39). The sound, the feel, the touch, and the emotion of the drum pull “like a nerve, a clear conviction. It is visceral. Not a thought but a gut instinct” (*Painted* 40). Yet, Faye is decidedly upset by what she at first classifies as the wanton misdirection of Kit Tatro, a descendant of the Indian agent, Jewett Tatro, who craves relation to American Indian roots. Faye’s objection is not based on dislike of Kit; it “irritates...because at some level I [Faye] understand his longing and confusion all too well” and that “his search is about making some connection” (*Painted* 53). For Faye, only the drum makes any of these possibilities real.

As the drum beats under Faye watchful eye and listening heart, she concludes that she did not in fact steal the drum from the Jewett Tatro estate, but rather emancipated the drum in order to return it to its “rightful owner by inheritance” (*Painted* 60). While taking the drum is an act criminalized by Western society, Faye does as she promises: she returns the drum to its home—the North Dakota reservation and the ancestors of its creator. Thus, the drum discovery and investigation allows Faye to create a new and deeper connection with both her Ojibwe roots and the family and landscape of her New England location. As becomes clear later in the novel, the drum allows Faye’s deceased sister to return to Faye’s dreams. This is not a case of poltergeist, but a welcome reunion with the one person Faye seems to love the most (*Painted* 76).

As children, Faye and her sister, Nette, feared their father and were plagued by the repeated absences of their mother. To escape this situation, they “started living in the orchard—it was a fine place to be. Our trees were houses and dens...we lived for days in the branches, brought blankets to make tents, scrounged the kitchen for lunch” (*Painted* 92). Thus, the lack of familial connection to the house that later becomes a “home” for Faye and Elsie is responsible for Faye’s early redefinition of home within the apple orchard of her family’s land. What is striking is that the bond between sisters delineates this home and is solely responsible for that home’s destruction. As the novel makes clear, the thread that binds *Painted Drum* together is the power and sacrifice of little girls, “who think... of the good of the people first” (*Painted* 117).

As Faye reflects, “she was a very good sister who loved me so much that she sacrificed herself for me without hesitation and for no use, no use at all. It happened out there in the orchard” (*Painted* 74). In search of Faye and Nette, their emotionally volatile father broaches their orchard home, demanding that they return to the house. Refusing his adamant, then cajoling requests, they venture higher into the dangerous recesses of the apple trees. Faye is the first to fall, but her landing’s importance is not that Faye is injured or even hurt; her plummet to hard earth signals her father’s lack of care for her. This act is witnessed by Nette, who saw “our father let me fall” (*Painted* 93). In the only definite act of retribution given to the



circumstance, Nette decidedly “step[s] off the branch,” tumbling to the hard ground (*Painted* 93). The conclusion—Nette’s death—consigns the orchard to physical and metaphorical ruin evermore. While Faye’s reaction to Nette’s death implies that their relationship is dead, the drum changes everything.

Although Nette is deceased, through the drum, Faye is able to rekindle a connection to her: “When I touch the drum and think of her...I feel much stronger. I feel she has come back to help me” (*Painted* 77). While the reader is not privy to what Nette might help her with or to do at this point in the book, the close of the novel finds more than salvation for Elsie’s guilt over Nette’s death. The drum’s power to bring Nette back home emancipates Faye from what she believes was her own role in Nette’s demise. With this baggage lifted, Faye is finally allowed to define herself in connection to her existing geographical location and the land of her ancestry. As Faye excitedly relates, “we [Faye and Elsie] will travel back home [the reservation] to be part of what Bernard calls feasting the drum, and we will also learn the songs that belong to it” (*Painted* 269).

Yet, Faye is also keenly aware that she is at peace and in place within the New Hampshire countryside, among those she knows best. Faye’s relationship with her mother changes, but not for the worse; it only evolves into two clear identities that permit Faye and Elsie to cultivate their individuality. Consenting to this fact, Faye states, “We’ve really been one person, she and I. But now we must go deeper, and perhaps apart” (*Painted* 263). In a dissimilar but equally life-changing stroke of luck, Faye’s estranged relationship with her former artist lover, Kurt, is remedied by the most unlikely of events: the utter destruction of his studio and work. Faye confusingly concedes, “I have no idea why this particular act of vandalism frees the two of us,” but they happily resume their courtship without the social and emotional demands that previously beleaguered their relationship, “as if no time had passed, as if there had been no other accident of grief in the world, but only this one retribution from an unseen hand” (*Painted* 272, 273). Still, Faye’s tranquility in her New England home exists most

profoundly in her new found reconciliation of life and death. She no longer mourns Nette's passing. Watching the ravens play on Nette's tombstone, Faye comes to this realization:

Say they [the ravens] have eaten and are made of the insects and creatures that have lived off the dead in the raven's graveyard—then aren't they [the ravens] the spirits of the people, the children, the girls [Nette] who sacrificed themselves, buried here? And isn't their delight a form of the consciousness we share above and below the ground and in between, where I stand, right here?  
(*Painted* 276)

Ultimately, Faye only achieves this awareness because, as she correctly apprehended early in the novel, she is "part of the chain of events.... And the drum is part of it, too, and my taking of it" (*Painted* 65). After confronting Faye about the drum's appearance in their home, Elsie correctly asserts, the drum is "more alive than a set of human bones" (*Painted* 43).

The drum's history and future are by creation linked to abandoned daughters from "above and below the ground and in between," "who sacrificed themselves" (*Painted* 276). The drum resonates with a daughter who threw herself to wolves in order to save her brother, mother, and infant step-sister. As Bernard Shaawano, nephew of the brave girl, explains, "she saw the wolves were only hungry, she saw their need was only need. She knew you [her brother] were back there, alone in the snow. She saw the baby she loved would not live without a mother, and only the uncle knew the way. She saw clearly that one person on the wagon had to offer themselves, or they all would die" (*Painted* 117). Her sacrifice makes the construction or maintenance of home possible for all whom she trades her life. Her mother, Anaquot, incorporates herself into Pillager society, her lover's people; her father grows old, raising her brother; and "the baby who was saved that day grew up and lived a long life," emerging as one of the most powerful female characters in Erdrich's entire saga, Fleur Pillager (*Painted* 121). While these occurrences are all distinct effects of the girl's sacrifice, the sacrificial daughter plays an even more important role in bringing home or solidifying home for those who are physically, emotionally, or mentally lost in the "absence of all familiar place" ("Where" 23).

Arriving at her lover, Simon Jack's, abode, Anaquot "realized that she was more than tired. She is lost" (*Painted* 125). She has no one to turn to, no one to protect her, and, most grievous, no one to protect her infant child, save one: her ghost daughter. It is Anaquot's brave and deceased daughter who again flies to her rescue. She warns her mother that her lover's wife intends to take her and young Fleur's life, blaming them for Simon Jack's extra-marital affair. It is only through heeding these warnings that Anaquot is able to secure a safe place or create place in her new surrounding, the land of the Pillager's. Here Anaquot becomes sisters with Simon Jack's first wife, "sisters who might hate each other at times, but who match so well that the work almost did itself" (*Painted* 135). The "woman who did not belong where she was" comes to truly live with Simon Jack's people and family, rather than merely surviving. As the chapter closes, Anaquot and Simon Jack's wife travel together towards the only "home" they both know—the Pillager clan and land (*Painted* 145). It is only after this time that Anaquot is comfortable enough to confide in Simon Jack's wife that her dead daughter "speaks to me" (*Painted* 147). As a new, understanding, and observant sister, Simon Jack's wife replies, "she has been here all along." "I don't think she will ever leave" (*Painted* 147).

This prophecy comes true: the child ghost is immortalized through the painted drum, which originates from her ghostly instructions and demand to use her own bones in its construction. "They [her bones] are strung inside on a piece of sinew anchored to the east and west," giving "the drum its voice" (*Painted* 178-79). As Bernard explains, "The body of a drum is a container for the spirit, just as if it were flesh and bone. And although love between a man and woman can change and fail, overreaching itself, fall prey to suspicions, yet the drum lives on. The drum waits with the patience of unloving things and yet it heals with life itself" (*Painted* 172). This healing begins even before the drum is completed. Bringing him back from a fit of alcohol fueled suicidal depression, Old Shaawano, the husband Anaquot left behind, envisions "his little girl," who entrusts "him [with] a task that was meant to keep him here upon the earth": assembling the drum (*Painted* 155). His first objective, of course, encompasses his return to the land of his ancestors, "where the people had lived in the old days, starting before the agents

and missionaries, even fur traders, even rum, when life was no doubt hard and full of cruel tricks but at least the clans and families were together”—home (*Painted* 164). “That’s what the drum is about—it gathers people in and holds them” (*Painted* 179-80). It is the tread that congeals the liquid of the characters’ identities to place.

However, as with all children, the drum is subject to “rages beyond their control” (*Painted* 185). It causes the death of Simon Jack, “the man who took away her mother and caused her own life to end” (*Painted* 185). After that occurrence, the drum’s power is not only revered but feared. Bernard’s “grandfather put the drum away” because “he couldn’t be sure of that drum anymore” (*Painted* 184, 185). When Bernard’s grandfather dies suddenly, the future of the drum becomes unclear.

After being “lost” for years, the drum’s eventual resurfacing in New Hampshire is not met with surprise. Viewing the drum’s return as just another link in the chain of events, Bernard speculates that “perhaps they [the elders] knew how it would happen and they thought that the drum needed to go east, to grow up a little more before it returned” (*Painted* 186). Still the drum’s homecoming is not as simple as Faye and Elsie coming back to the home of their heritage or the reconnection to home Bernard makes with his family and community; the drum is Anaquot’s daughter—come home, and now that she/it is back, the drum has work to do.

Finding one like herself, one willing to sacrifice herself for her siblings, one that needs help, the drum again takes on its original purpose: to save lives by creating and/or redefining home. Reminiscent of June Kashpaw’s choices in *Love Medicine*, Erdrich’s character, Ira, stops in a bar instead of heading home, leaving her children to fend for themselves in the winter cold.<sup>24</sup> What is more, Ira, like June, is searching for something undefined. “‘What do you [Ira] want?’ asked the man. ‘I want something else’, said Ira. ‘I definitely want something else’” (*Painted* 198). This statement is much akin to June’s hope that the man she meets in the bar

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<sup>24</sup> See *Love Medicine* and *Tales of Burning Love*: June’s story of freezing to death in the snow on the way home is told and retold from different perspectives. The event is also the catalyst of her son, Lipsha’s Morrissey’s, journey to find out who he is in the context of his heritage and a Western/reservation world.

has “got to be different.” Fortunately for Ira and unlike June, the man in question actually is different (*Love* 4). He does not wish to sleep with her, or at least he does not seize the opportunity. Instead, he purchases food for Ira’s children and arranges for his brother to give her a ride home. On the outset, the brother, Morris, seems to be detestable as any of Erdrich’s opportunistic villains, but as the reader discovers, even Morris is redeemably “something else” (*Painted* 198). Regrettably, the two men’s concern and aid does not save Ira’s children from either cold or starvation. Only the drum’s power and the sacrifice of a little girl can make that happen.

With the cupboards bare and the heat failing, Shawnee, the oldest of Ira’s children, takes it upon herself to feed and warm her small sister, Alice, and infant brother, Apitchi—the exact same family unit of the little drum girl, with similar actions to come. Only the consequences differ. After scouring the house for any morsel to sustain them, Shawnee concludes that freezing to death is a far more imminent threat. Searching for an avenue to combat the winter weather, Shawnee’s small but strong figure decides to re-install a wood burning stove and start a fire. “The fire gave off enough warmth and they all fit underneath the bear robes,” but their comfort and warmth are short-lived (*Painted* 195). The stove sets the entire abode ablaze with the three small children inside. Here is where Shawnee becomes more than a daughter, more than a sister, and more than a child; she becomes a savior.

Dragging her siblings from the burning wreckage of their only known home, Shawnee leads and carries her sister and brother on a journey through the snow in hopes of reaching safety from both the fire and the closing cold. While obviously a critical and dangerous circumstance, the situation—the destruction of their house and their mother’s absence—demands that home be redefined and rediscovered. For Shawnee and her siblings, this is only possible through the sound of the drum. It calls her to safety; it calls her home. About to succumb to the frozen slumber of death, the drum intervenes: “The sound of drumming would not let her [Shawnee] sleep” (*Painted* 217). “The drum grew louder, showing a way out, beating her around a tree and then a rock and over solid ground, all in the dark” (*Painted* 217). They

arrive appropriately at a location of salvation, Bernard's home. Bernard is not only entrusted with preserving and caring for the drum, but his home later becomes Ira and her children's temporary home at the close of the novel. While Bernard's house is only a provisional space, the fact is that home is always a conditional space that is defined and redefined by its inclusive elements. Geographical location is only one of them. The people who form home are far more important.

As the end of the novel makes clear, Ira and her children are given a new lease on life through the power of the drum. It saves the children from fire and cold, and the conclusion suggests that the drum heals Ira's infant son from pneumonia. Nevertheless, the drum's most significant power lies in the fact that Ira and her children receive the chance to recreate a stronger home than the one they had before. As Ira repentantly promises, "She would never [again] leave her children for a minute" (*Painted* 224). Moreover, Morris falls in love with Ira, pledging to "help raise her kids" and "teach them everything I know" (*Painted* 249). The latter oath brings the novel full circle. Morris knows the songs of the drum. Therefore, the drum comes home; it creates home for characters in need; and it guarantees its own place at home by allowing Morris to "teach" Ira's children the songs that keep the drum's story and power alive.

*Painted Drum* is not the story of June Kashpaw: broken people and broken homes. As Bernard concludes, "Everything now fit" (*Painted* 251). Ira does not die cold and alone in the snow, nor does the novel end with motherless children, who have to struggle, as Lipsha Morrissey does, to discover his family and place in the world. *Painted Drum* is a story of forgiveness, but mostly it is the tale of the power and sacrifice of little girls to build and redefine home in the direst of situations.

In an interview about *Painted Drum*'s creation, Erdrich states, "I guess I wanted to write a book about the heroism of young girls" because "I wish the world was run according to the principles of 9-year-old, 10-year-old, 11-year old girls have within them. It's just an age thing—their wisdom, their kindness, their thought for other people" (qtd. in Kirch 39). *Painted Drum* implies that this "thought for other people" and "heroism of young girls" crosses the borders of

time, culture, place, and especially death. Thus, while Faye states, “I like to make peace with the dead,” the opposite also seems to be true (*Painted* 33). The dead continue to make peace with the living because they “are unable to say goodbye” to a people, place, community, and family that form home (*Blue*184).

*Blue Jay's Dance* concludes by making similar contentions. Like her character Faye, Erdrich finds place and belonging in New Hampshire by making peace with her Native ancestry's pivotal role in the formation of her identity. This serenity has as much to do with Erdrich's mindset, as it has to do with the people and nature that surround and interact with her in the New England landscape. Erdrich discovers a space of belonging because of the closeness to her children, Michael Dorris, and the environment. No one element seems more important than the others; they are all simply necessary to home's formation.

CHAPTER 7  
LOVE MEDICINE

7.1 Notions of Home in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

*The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home.*

---Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

After *Love Medicine's* publication, Louise Erdrich was rightly recognized as the heir to American Indian literature that deals with identity within the context of colonization, tribal factionalism, and evolving hybridization of distinct clans and/or peoples. *Love Medicine* is a seminal text that presents the most variety of notions of home in Erdrich's entire North Dakota saga. While the idea of *Love Medicine* as a "culminating" text defies chronological order of publication, the subsequent novels of the saga proliferated from *Love Medicine's* seeds, making the text's position as the last chapter of this work a re-tracing of home's evolution in Erdrich's other novels. In case in point, many of the characters included in the novel become focal points of Erdrich's other writings about the fictional reservation and urban locations first depicted in *Love Medicine*, allowing Erdrich's other novels to explore home concepts from an array of different perspectives that budded during this initial writing. Thus, Erdrich's *Love Medicine* traverses a multitude of characters to explore "home" in various definitions in order to address their re-conceptions of "home" in a conflicting Western/Native world.

*Love Medicine* proposes that Natives can negotiate the conflicting forces of Native and Western ideologies to ensure their cultural, social, and economic survival. As the once emotionally, physically, and culturally lost Lipsha Morrissey looks out over



a bridge that fittingly connects the reservation and western world, he finds that he does belong, he does have a home—a home with “what poetically it is endowed with,” having “an imaginative or figurative value [he] can name and feel” (Said 55). The fact that this “home” remains on the bridge between worlds is not lamented; it is simply the reality that Natives are forced to deal with. Home is, then, a conglomerate of face, names, places, and stories that weave between worlds.

Addressing this reality, Erdrich redefines notions of “home” and its importance to identity in her novel *Love Medicine*. This re-conception of “home” challenges both European and traditional Native American perceptions and definitions of “home” and is linked to Erdrich’s status as a Native American writer, who is caught in the literal and figurative borderlands of her mixed-blood heritage: “Louise Erdrich is a contemporary writer of German-American and Chippewa heritage. Like many literary works by Native Americans, her novels...reflect the ambivalence and tension marking the lives of people, much like herself, from dual cultural backgrounds (Rainwater 405). While Rainwater’s contention is epitomized through mixed-blood characters such as Lipsha and Albertine, the novel begins with June Kashpaw, Lipsha’s mother, who draws the other characters into the web of her life, death, and struggle to return home.

June Kashpaw’s ideal home is not simply defined by her desire to return to her reservation; it is encapsulated in what she needs a home to have. As June is beckoned into a bar by a man trying to pick her up, her attention is first drawn to her hunger and the man’s money.<sup>25</sup> However, she quickly begins to optimistically anticipate her new companion’s intentions: “The roll [money] helped. But she had a feeling.... And he had a good-natured slowness about him that seemed different. He could be different, she thought” (*Love* 3). In an attempt to convince herself of the possibility, June repeats “You’ve got to be different” (*Love* 4). While these lines may seem inconsequential at first, they represent her wish for a home that includes a better man than she is used to being with, a “good-natured” man who can offer safety

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<sup>25</sup> The man in question is Jack Mauser. The same story is given from his perspective in *Tales of Burning Love*.

and protection. However, June misjudges the man's potential to be "different." The scene ends with June in the restroom, where the knob to her door—the key to her literal home—spills out of her purse. She must then pick herself and the door knob up off the dirty restroom floor in order to place herself and the key to her home outside of the man's emotional reach: "Now she picked up the knob and held it by the metal shank.... She put it in the deep pocket of her jacket and, holding it, walked back to the booth through the crowd. Her room was locked. And she was ready for him now" (*Love* 5). Thus, June realizes that "[e]ven if he was no different, she would get through this again," even agreeing to ride with him out to a deserted country road (*Love* 4).

At this desolate location, the man not only fails to consummate his desire for sex, but June also elects to resume her journey back to the reservation. Unfortunately, this course of action is done in subzero temperatures, in a blizzard, on foot: "She had walked far enough to see the dull orange glow, the canopy of low, lit clouds over Williston, when she decides to walk home instead of going back there" (*Love* 6). Choosing to "walk home instead of going back there," June places herself in danger, but at this low point, her life seems inconsequential when considering that "back there" only offers her a home that is nothing more than an indigent apartment, loveless relationships, and unabated hunger. While the decision to return to the reservation does end in her horrible frozen death, her demise is, in fact, a homecoming to a place she has decided is much better than the one she has at present: "The snow fell deeper than Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home" (*Love* 7). Thus, because June believes that her ideal home is not possible to achieve, only death can give her the love, protection, and satisfaction that she needs a home to have. This opinion is reiterated later by her family members: "What did she [June] have to come home to after all" (*Love* 13). However, June's death serves as more than one concept of home; it is a center point and frame for the novel: "The semiotic in Erdrich's fiction is often connected to June Kashpaw, an absent mother whose connection to nature symbolizes and literalizes Native Americans' attempts to retain their heritage and still be a part of American culture" (Sanders 146). Thus,

home is redefined or reconstructed by the negotiation of “heritage” and “American culture,” but this re-conception is only possible through distinct and interrelated bonds of land and people.

One of the most interconnected characters, in both family and community, of Erdrich’s North Dakota saga is Marie Kashpaw. A Lazarre/Puyat by birth, Marie’s difficulty in defining home stems from her biological mother, Pauline Puyat/Sister Leopolda,<sup>26</sup> who attempts to abort Marie when she discovers she is pregnant and later rejects Marie upon birth. As *Last Report* explores in retrospect, Leopolda’s actions are only fitting to a woman whose lineage is marked by daughters and mothers who hate each other. Although Marie’s origins are unknown to her at the time, Marie enters and stays at the reservation convent in attempt to construct a home place within a space she believes exudes power in the changing world, but she remains as long as she does because she is drawn to Sister Leopolda. However, their estranged heritage is inescapable. The relationship that builds and disintegrates between them replicates the mother/daughter loathing that afflicted their ancestors.

Leopolda, who “successfully” rejects her Native heritage, culture, and customs, is considered a most pious and strict teacher of the Church’s dogma; unfortunately, her religious zeal routinely spills over into cruelty to others and atrocious acts of self-inflicted pain. In Marie, Leopolda accomplishes both sins by abusing Marie in proxy of herself. At first this abuse is quite easy for Leopolda to exact because of Marie’s ignorance of Western religion. As Marie admits, “I had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town” (*Love* 44). While this statement should not be considered pure innocence because Marie also concedes that her motives are to prove that she could “pray as good as they could” and to become a “saint they’d have to kneel to,” she is naively misguided in her reverence for Leopolda (*Love* 44). Marie states, “I was the girl who thought the black hem of her garment would help me rise” (*Love* 45). The home Marie wishes to construct is not solely dependent on her own design and perseverance, but on the idea of Leopolda’s divine ability to

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<sup>26</sup> Pauline/Sister Leopolda’s history is analyzed extensively in chapter 2 of this document. Also see, *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and *Tale of Burning Love*.

help usher her into the Church's fold. As Marie retrospectively analogizes, this thought lacks lucidity and truth: "I was like those bush Indians who stole the holy black hat of a Jesuit and swallowed scraps of it to cure their fevers. But the hat itself carried smallpox and was killing them with belief" (*Love* 45). In the same fashion, Leopolda's criteria for place and love are worse than not belonging at all.

Leopolda convinces Marie that the "Dark One wanted me most of all" (*Love* 46). To combat what Marie believes is her main obstacles in defining home at the convent, she vehemently and blindly throws her trust behind Leopolda's cruel and wicked ways of subduing the internal and external "evils" that supposedly threaten her. Marie states, "I was careful not to give him [satan] an inch. I said a rosary, two rosaries, three, underneath my breath. I said the Creed. I said every scrap of Latin I knew," but Leopolda decides that not even this alliance to her version of Church is enough to "save" Marie. It is only through pain and suffering that Leopolda believes Marie's salvation resides. "'Marie. Star of the Sea. She will shine', said Leopolda, 'When we have burned off the dark corrosion'" (*Love* 54). As a result, Leopolda pores boiling water onto Marie's naked back, "scalding as it struck" to teach her how much sacrifice it takes to be one of the Lord's followers—but more importantly what it requires to enter Leopolda's graces and, in turn, the convent's space of belonging (*Love* 52-53). While Leopolda follows this incident with apparent kindness—she "took a pot of salve from the bookcase and began to smooth it upon my [Marie's] burns"—the damage, literally and figuratively, is done.

Marie understands that she can never define home in a place of contradictory elements of fear, pain, belonging, and love. As she puts it, "here was the thing: sometimes I wanted her [Leopolda] heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick" (*Love* 49). The latter part of this revelation comes to a climax as Marie decisively kicks Leopolda head first into the open convent oven (*Love* 57). The result is not what Marie desires: Leopolda's "outstretched poker hit the back wall first, so she rebounded," and Leopolda retaliates, stabbing Marie in the palm of her open hand (*Love* 57). However, the result of this altercation not only finds Marie in a position of power (after the

intrusion of other convent nuns into the kitchen area, Leopolda falsely claims that Marie is struck by the stigmata, making Marie saint like), but Leopolda's horrific actions and willingness to lie to save herself makes Marie pity her, which has two distinct effects: it releases Marie from the illusion of Leopolda and the convent's power, and Marie's decision to keep the true nature of her injury secret also allows Leopolda to regain power. Marie's saintly act—pity—results in a loss of her (false) saintly power. For Marie, this former mystical space becomes a place of weakness, one which she has bested through her own ability to confront and control the given situation, but she also loses much of this power because of her pity for Leopolda. This realization is instrumental in forming Marie's further and more successful attempts to define and create home from what she sees as her own fortitude.

Leaving the convent immediately, she literally runs into the renowned womanizer, Nector Kashpaw. Fearing that Marie has stolen from the convent, Nector “knock[s] her over, and roll[s] on top of her and hold[s] her pinned down underneath” (*Love* 64). However, Marie is not the one in trouble. In fact, she is positioned preciously in a place where she is able to begin erecting a new home. As Nector frantically and astonishingly concedes, “I am caught. I give way. I cannot help myself...because somehow I have been beaten at what I started on this hill” (*Love* 65). Eventually, however, Nector becomes Marie's husband, allowing them to create a family and place within the larger tribal community—home. But Marie does not make the same mistake as she did with Leopolda: she does not define her home in relation to another.

Instead, throughout their lives, Marie takes charge of her home at every inter-section. She transforms Nector's personal life and plots the course of his community involvement. As Nector's former girlfriend and off-and-on extra-marital lover, Lulu Lamartine, states, “For all of the attention he later got for his looks, for all that I came to love him, eventually, Nector Kashpaw was awkward and vain in his green youth. It took Marie to grow him up” (*Love* 73). As Marie states, “I had plans, and there was no use him trying to get out of them...I had decided I was going to make him into something big on this reservation” (*Love* 89). Eventually, Marie is victorious, receiving credit for Nector's position as Tribal Chairman and being recognized on her

own as a lover and protector of children, her own and others she takes in. The latter fact is most clear when she gives the abandoned June Kashpaw a home and when she becomes a surrogate mother to Lipsha Morrissey, who is abandoned by none other than his biological mother, June Kashpaw. However, Marie's home is still far from complete at this juncture. She has a husband, child, and a defined space which she labels home, but she lacks what she desires most, yet never had: a mother.

While Leopolda biologically fits this bill, as noted Leopolda is committed to all things other than what Mary now stands for. Nector's mother, Rushes Bear, on the other hand, is comparatively a strong, independent woman who believes in family, community, and land. On the surface, Marie and Rushes Bear seem to be a perfect fit for a mother/daughter relationship. In most of Erdrich's novels, however, the reality of the situation is far from the epidermis. With no other place to go, Rushes Bear enters Marie's home as an unpleasant, judgmental nuisance. This existence is short-lived. True to her character after her disassociation with the convent, Marie orders Rushes Bear to "leave this place....[because she is] too much trouble" (*Love* 99). Rushes Bear does not actually leave Marie's home, and she retains her volatile temper. But Rushes Bear's criticism and comments are directed elsewhere, not at Marie. Instead a kinship of sorts is established between the two women. As Marie discovers, "She [Rushes Bear] seemed to have noticed the shape of my loneliness. [And] Maybe she found it was the same as hers" (*Love* 99). While this statement draws attention to the inception of their complimentary relationship, the true mother/daughter connection they both seem to crave to some extent does not come to fruition until the inept actions of Nector warrant it.

In the first grips of Marie's birthing labor of her last child, Nector has again disappeared, with the implications that his absence is due to excess drink or meeting with other women. When he finally arrives, the next day, he finds himself un-welcome by the now pain racked Marie and her only mental and physical support system, Rushes Bear. While Nector's nonattendance early in the labor is not ever directly linked to the birth's further complications, it is clear that Rushes Bear now values her relationship with Marie more than the one with her

son. Disgusted with Nector's actions, Rushes Bear states, "This [pregnancy] is the result of the only thing you ever did...That's all you're good for" (*Love* 101). She sharply orders Nector out to beg Fleur Pillager's assistance in the pregnancy, but by the time that Nector returns and the pregnancy is over, the division of mother and son and the unification of mother and daughter is complete. After the money offered to Fleur is refused from the hands of Nector by Rushes Bear, Nector awkwardly argues that "I'm your son" (*Love* 104). Rushes Bear retorts, "No more. I only have a daughter...You shame me...You never would know this birth was hard enough for her to die" (*Love* 104). Thus, ironically, to some degree, Leopolda's view on "salvation" is correct. It is only thought pain, suffering, and acceptance that home is complete for Marie. This is a lesson Marie carries with her throughout her life.

As time passes and inevitable life events and circumstances occur, Marie's abode remains for a majority of the North Dakota saga's characters a place to return, belong, and define themselves. Even after Nector's death and her relocation to a senior center, Marie retains the family's land and home. As Albertine Johnston, Marie's great-grandchild later concludes, the house, itself, becomes a common ground for all Kashpaws. Furthermore, the move to a retirement home only solidifies Marie's pride in Native language, heritage, culture, and customs—home.

Since she had lived among the other old people at the Senior Citizens, Marie had started speaking the old language, falling back through time to words that Lazarres had used among themselves, shucking off the Kashpaw pride yet holding to the old strengths Rushes Bear had taught her, having seen the new, the Catholic, the Bureau, fail her children, having known how comfortless words of English sounded in her ears. (*Love* 263)

This statement suggests traditional concepts of the term home, but we should not overlook the location of such thought. The "Senior Center" mimics the physical design and intention of both reservations and early Native boarding schools like Carlyle Indian School. Such places were deliberately built to alienate Natives from traditional lands and thought in order to assimilate

them in the Western world, but these homes also served as breeding grounds for pan-Indian concerns and issues.

To a less tyrannical yet repressively similar degree, the latter consequences of those places replicate the world of Marie's Senior Center. It is here that Marie and Lulu (once sworn enemies because of Nector's infidelities) join together behind greater community causes that not only support Native American survival in the Western world, but also work to regain traditional Native custom, culture, and lands.

With Nector Kashpaw gone, the two of them were now free to concentrate their powers, and once they got together they developed strong and hotheaded followings among our local agitating group of hard-eyes, a determined bunch who grew out their hair in braids or pony-tails and dressed in ribbon shirts and calico to make their point. Traditionals. Back-to-the-buffalo types. (*Love* 303).

Yet, Marie and Lulu's powerful positions also allow them to exert their influence over the current state of their reservation. Even Lyman Lamartine, Lulu's son, who was fathered by Nector, bends to their wills, hiring an equal number of employees from different tribal clans, as they prescribe, for his "Tomahawk Factory," a place that makes for Indian artifacts for mass consumption.<sup>27</sup> While the "Tomahawk Factory" is eventually a colossal failure, Marie and Lulu's involvement in all day-to-day decisions suggests a new type of home for both, defined by their developed "sisterly" relationship with each other. Thus, Marie and Lulu's definition and construction of home becomes a dual-entity that demands allegiance to the past, but negotiates with the present to guarantee a future. However, the most distinctive aspect of Marie and Lulu's version of home is that it involves active participation of the community at large. Without the support of the people, Marie and Lulu still enjoy a very important sisterly relationship, but they wouldn't have the power to address tribal concerns on such a grand scale without the help of the community. Erdrich's Marie, thus, expresses an evolution of home concepts that begins with



her internal need for belonging, continues with her development as a familial icon of safety and love, and concludes with her role as a collaborative, behind the scenes tribal director. Still, throughout this evolution of home concepts, Marie holds true to herself, her family, her community, and her land.

While a similar argument, both in evolution and constructive elements, can be made for her enemy turned partner, Lulu Lamartine, Lulu's notions of home develop from dissimilar events and circumstance. Lulu is the daughter of the feared and revered Fleur Pillager, but her heritage is far from distinctively associated with Fleur's legendary actions and achievements. In her own right, Lulu, much like Marie, defines and constructs her version of home through experience and reliance of her individual power to contort the wills of others to her own.

At a young age, Lulu decides, with sexually exploratory intentions, to visit the home of her cousin, Moses Pillager. Upon her arrival, Lulu finds that her strange yet powerful cousin, Moses, lives among feral cats on the island. It is here, among these animals, that Lulu begins to form her adult identity and first realizes that she has the power to create home. The victim of government "education" and the seeming abandonment by her mother, Fleur, Lulu comes to find a place of belonging with Moses, the island, and his cats. As she states, "The cats made me one of them—sleek and without mercy, avid, falling hungry upon the defenseless body" (*Love* 82). While each one of these elements is significant to Lulu's creation of home, the connection between the untamed and hungry cats and Lulu becomes a comparison that reoccurs throughout Lulu's subsequent appearances in Erdrich's other novels. She is routinely described as cat like in the context of sexual or social gratification. For example, in various instances, Lulu is said to "purr" in order to get what she wants, then leave as quickly as a cat upon her satisfaction.

While Lulu's contact with men throughout the North Dakota saga clearly expresses this type of cat like quality in her sexual power over their "defenseless bodies," the offspring of her

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<sup>27</sup> Lyman Lamartine is Lulu and Nector's son, but more importantly, he believes he is destined to take over his father's desire to move Native into the future of capitalistic society. See *Bingo*

numerous sexual liaisons are the building blocks of her (and on a larger level the community's) home. "Lulu's Boys" (both a chapter and group label for Lulu's many sons) constitutes a distinct entity made up of individuals who originate from their mother and various fathers inside the community. As Erdrich describes them, "Clearly they were of one soul. Handsome, rangy, wildly various, they were bound in total loyalty, not by oath but by the simple, unquestioning belongingness of part of one organism" (*Love* 118). While many readers and critics have questioned the value of the character's promiscuity, Erdrich's Lulu is not just an excuse to include sensationalism. Her actions are necessary to constructing a home, which she, of course, controls.

Lulu is a powerful, independent woman, who, through her children, ties herself to a majority of tribal families, which, in turn, bestows to her the potency to control situations and events to her liking. Still, Lulu's sexual appetite, hunger for power, and ability to manipulate given instances does not germinate from pure selfishness. As Lulu attempts to explain, "They [the community] used to say Lulu Lamartine was like a cat, loving no one, only purring to get what she wanted. But that's not true. I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms" (*Love* 276). While both the community and Lulu's evaluations are true, to some extent, neither assessment of Lulu's motivations should be considered autonomous, but rather they should be viewed as complimentary. For example, after Nector (her lover, Marie Kashpaw's husband, and tribal Chairman) signs papers to remove Lulu's family from her ancestral lands to build a factory that manufactures "things like bangle beads and plastic war clubs. A load of foolishness, that was" (*Love* 283), Lulu refuses the tribe's decision to relocate her family and any financial restitution for her property.<sup>28</sup> She saves herself, her "boys," and land the only way she knows how: she threatens to reveal the paternity of each one of her boys. "I'll name all of them", I offered in a very soft voice, 'The fathers...I'll point them out for you right

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*Palace* and chapter 4 of this document for further elaboration.

<sup>28</sup> This project is revitalized and comes to fruition later by Nector and Lulu's son, Lyman Lamartine. Like his father Lyman is a "born" business man, who believes the future of the tribe

here...[in order to] hit the tribe with a fistful of paternity suits that would make their heads spin” (*Love* 284-85).

The overarching implication of her rejection and intimidation draws attention to historic and continual loss of culture, land, and custom. As she declares, “Indian against Indian, that’s how the government’s money offer made us act. Here was the government Indians ordering their own people off the land of their forefathers to build a modern factory. To make it worse, it was a factory that made equipment of false value” (*Love* 283). Thus, Lulu is only utilizing the strength available to her in order ensure a home place and culture for her family and community. When the “Tomahawk Factory” finally gets off the ground due to her son’s efforts, Lulu and her new partner, Marie Kashpaw, accept the business as a necessary evil, but also work in tandem to make certain the employment of all tribal clans at the factory, keeping the economic proceeds of the establishment firmly within the home space of the reservation. Thus, when Lulu finally concedes to move her family to a new location, the conditions are only acceptable to Lulu because the new land is “repurchased from a white farmer,” “with a view overlooking town,” and “from there I [Lulu] could see everything” (*Love* 288). The move allows Lulu to restore previously held Native lands back to its rightful ownership, and it enables her to keep tabs on the inner-workings of the community. Furthermore, the new home also establishes the possibility of a home for her drowned son, Henry Jr.: “By all accounts, the drowned weren’t allowed into the next life but forced to wander forever, broken shoed, cold, sore, and ragged. There was no place for the drowned in heaven or anywhere on earth...[but] I wanted him to know, if he heard, that he still had a home” (*Love* 295). This home, as Lulu repeatedly assures, is on the reservation, with his brothers, with his community. As with Marie, Lulu’s concluding definition and construction differs greatly from Ojibwe roots. She is no longer disassociated from the Native community on Moses’ island. If anything, Lulu becomes an island which others in the community must hold fast to in order create or define their own notions of home. As Moses and

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lays in a large degree of assimilation. These beliefs and actions are further augmented in Lyman’s construction of the *Bingo Palace*, in Erdrich’s novel of the same name.

the community later finds out, Lulu's abilities and talents demand careful, Native-minded negotiation with the outside world. Unfortunately for Moses, while he willingly accepts Lulu as his lover, his perception of home does not and cannot exist outside of his island.

Moses' island is adjacent to Lulu's land of birth, Fleur Pillager's home; however, Moses' abode is disjoined from the mainland by more than the weight of water. "When that first sickness came and thinned us out, Moses was still a nursing boy" (*Love* 74). His mother "didn't want to lose her son, so she decided to fool the spirits by pretending that Moses was already dead, a ghost...He lived invisible, and he survived. And yet, though the sickness spared Moses, the cure bent his mind" (*Love* 74-75). Moses is then, by existence, a figure caught in between two defined worlds. He is neither dead nor alive; he is the undead, and the undead still need a home. That home becomes the flora and fauna of the island and eventually Lulu. There Moses finds his place in the world, away from society. While this is a seemingly isolated existence, for one that does not know if he "exists" or not, it is where he belongs. Even after Moses impregnates Lulu during her stay on the island, he cannot leave it. Understanding that she has no one to help her through the labor, Lulu finally exclaims, "I can't stay here forever', 'We have to go'. It was as though I cut his wind off, raked holes in his chest. For a long moment he could not breathe" (*Love* 83). "He was not able to leave.... He was his island, he was me, he was his cats, he did not exist from the inside out but from the outside in" (*Love* 83). Moses has no choice. He is already at home. He has no need for another, and even the thought of reconstructing or defining his current perception of home is unacceptable. Moses knows that home can be no place else, with no one else, and in no other community than his cats. Thus, *Love Medicine* offers a spectrum of home that ranges from Moses' type of selected seclusion to Marie and Lulu's active participation in both the Native and Western worlds.

However, of all the other characters presented in the novel, Albertine's life especially represents the shifting middle ground. Some characters lean towards their Native American culture, while others embrace Western ideas and attitudes. Albertine "bridges"—the title of her story in a subsequent chapter—them both for specific reasons: Albertine only knows that her

absentee father is Swedish: "All I knew of him was pictures, blond, bleak, and doomed to wander, perhaps as much by [Zelda] Mama's rage at her downfall as by the uniform" (*Love* 10). This gives Albertine a mixed-blood heritage, but the location of her childhood is equally as complex: "I grew up with her [Zelda] in an aqua-and-silver trailer, set next to the old house on the land my great-grand-parents were allotted when the government decided to turn Indians into farmers" (*Love* 12). This juxtaposition of land and abode not only combines Native and Western themes, but explains the context in which it came about, lending a historical aspect to her construction of home. Therefore, Albertine's character represents a defined liminality that forces her to contort herself to the landscape, company, and, most of all, the demands of her estranged family situation.

Albertine Johnson seems to be equally divided between Western and Native society. Like June, Albertine also resides far from the reservation, at college studying nursing; still, she labels the reservation as her home; In reference to belated news of June's demise, Albertine states, "Far from home, living in a white woman's basement, that letter made me feel buried, too" (*Love* 7). This assessment of her life is symbolic because she, indeed, is "buried" by Western influences. This is caustically acknowledged in her mother's letter: "We knew you probably couldn't get away from your studies for the funeral,' [Zelda wrote], 'so we never bothered to call and disturb you'" (*Love* 7). Albertine moves between worlds to create a home that recognizes her Native roots but also firmly incorporates her into a position that will afford her Western success, nursing school. As Karla Sanders argues, "While Erdrich's fiction certainly portrays the value in cultural knowledge, *Love Medicine*...uncovers the resulting ambivalence experienced by her characters as they attempt to reconcile their Native American heritage with the expectations of the dominant white culture in the modern and post-modern United States" (129). Western influence is then inescapable for a people who have been forcibly marginalized and assimilated. This is powerfully reflected in the family unit Albertine eventually returns to. Albertine's arrival is a homecoming to family and place, but it is far from a traditional Native reception or a Western nuclear family.

As Albertine's states, "After two months were gone and my classes were done, and although I still had not forgiven my mother, I decided to go home. I wasn't crazy about the thought of seeing her, but our relationship was like a file we sharpened on, and necessary in that way" (*Love* 11). Despite this love/hate relationship, Albertine understands that this place and people are all that grounds her to Native culture. Making her way to the place she has always known, Albertine realizes "how much of the reservation was sold to whites and lost forever," yet it is still "just three miles" to "home" (*Love* 12). "Although Aurelia kept the house now, it was like communal property for the Kashpaws. There was always someone camped out or sleeping on the fold-up cots" (*Love* 29). Thus, the literal home is also a metaphorically space where, even in rupture, Albertine's family locates their identity that is "necessary in that way." As Albertine states, "Between my mother and myself the abuse was slow and tedious, requiring long periods of dormancy, living in the blood like hepatitis" (*Love* 7). This troubled identity is difficult to categorize and even harder to embrace for Albertine at a young age.

At fifteen, Albertine runs "away from home" to find her proverbial place in the world, but after arriving in the cities, her dreams are crushed, as she realizes that the cities only offer harsh lights and sounds, rather than substance and belonging: "She watched carefully as the dark covered all. The yard lights of farms, like warning beacons upon the sea of wide-flung constellations of stars, blinked on, deceptively close" (*Love* 167). No home is afforded; the wish is only confronted by the reality of un-kept promises. "All the daydreams she'd had were useless. She had not foreseen the blind crowd or the fierce activity of the lights outside the station" (*Love* 168). Here, Albertine discovers the anti-thesis of home, and any attempt to create such a place of belonging is met with the most disastrous results. Believing that she finds a kindred spirit, or at least another Native, Albertine clings to a person who turns out to be Henry Lamartine, a distant cousin.

Unfortunately, this relation and familiarity does not keep either character safe in a location far from any other identifiable attributes of home. This is not to claim that cities cannot be home for Natives. As John Gamber makes clear, most contemporary Natives are making

their homes in urban areas, but Henry and Albertine cannot construct home at this location because there are both physically and emotionally lost. Henry suffers from obvious post-Vietnam war trauma, and Albertine is but a child, attempting to redefine home as an after-thought of escaping the confines and regulations of her mother's abode. Thus, the city only offers her loneliness, disharmony, and sexual violence at the hands of her kin. Albertine agrees to return to Henry's cheap red-light district hotel room, where "He pushed her over, face down, and pinned her from behind. He spread her legs with his knees and pulled her towards him. Muffled, slogged in pillows, she gripped the head bars. He pushed into her. She made a harsh sound. Her back went hard, resistant. Then she gave a cry" (*Love* 179). While Henry's actions are deplorable, they are of secondary importance to the issue of home. The crux of the situation is that home cannot be defined or constructed without clear markers for belonging. Although Henry is a relative, this fact is only guessed at by Albertine, rather than known. No tribal community network exists to aid Albertine and Henry, and the "lights and sounds" of the city offer no familiar or redeemable value to them. Albertine's saving grace is returning to the reservation—home—until she can deal with or navigate the oppositional conditions of the Western world. Albertine eventually returns to the cities to pursue a Western vocation (nursing school), but she always defines the reservation as her true home. Upon her arrival to the reservation, she pointedly states, "I'm back" (*Love* 13). Thus, Albertine's character, both past and present, is useful to recognizing the complexity of home in Erdrich's novel, but her family homecoming at the beginning of *Love Medicine* also introduces Lipsha Morrissey and King, who suggest negative concepts of home or even troubling concepts of unhomeliness.

June's son, King, is the beneficiary of his mother's insurance policy: "So June's insurance came through, and all the money went to King because he's oldest, legal" (*Love* 21). King spends only a small portion of this money on his mother's memory, deciding instead to purchase a sports car for himself.<sup>29</sup> While this action does not seem to be decisively tied to a

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<sup>29</sup> See *Bingo Palace*: King's blue sports car mimics Lipsha's own preoccupation with what he believes to be a "mobile home," a van won using "lucky" bingo cards. Fittingly, Lipsha acquires

notion of home, its significance to homes' creation is twofold: King's ideal home is constructed of Western elements: he now has a modern American sports car, has a Caucasian wife, lives in an apartment in the city, and claims to be a war veteran. Thus, his reception, despite his heritage, is not a welcome occasion. Furthermore, the car King acquires is important because it is an object that represents his deceased mother, June: "That car reminds him [Eli] of his girl. You know how Eli raised June like his own daughter when her mother passed away and nobody else would take her" (*Love* 23). June's identity is then intertwined with her son's car. However, King is not June's only son: Lipsha is June's illegitimate child, but at this point, Lipsha does not know that fact.

Introduced as a much younger character than appears in *Bingo Palace*, Lipsha's notion of home differs from any of the other characters because he is uncomfortably displaced in both Native and Western society. As Michael Dorris explains, Lipsha's name is even a Michif word, which is a French and Cree language mix (Coltelli 43). Moreover, according to Lyman Lamartine, "Lipsha Morrissey was a combination of the two age-old factions that had torn apart our band. His mother was a Morrissey, but I [Lyman Lamartine] was his half uncle, and that gave the two of us the same descent, the Pillager background" (*Love* 312). His search to find and construct home is then further complicated because he is mongrelized even among his people. As he enters what is considered his family home, he is described as a silent loner:

That was Lipsha Morrissey.... He was more a listener than a talker, a shy one with a wide, sweet, intelligent face.... King had beaten up Lipsha so many times when we were young that Grandma wouldn't let them play on the same side of the yard. They still avoided each other. (*Love* 29)

Even at a place labeled home, he is utterly alone and apprehensive. This is further reflected when he exits the family gathering after taking offense at his half-brother's menacing stare and

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the cards from June's ghost, and King's sports car, bought from June's insurance money, represents June. In the end, King loses the car to Gerry Nanapush in a card game, and Lipsha's van is destroyed by a group of non-natives that he has an altercation with early in the text of



exaggerated comments: "He [King] was staring across the table at Lipsha, who suddenly got up from his chair and walked out the door. The screen door slammed" (*Love* 29). While the rest of the family is seemingly as un-entertained with King's antics, no one follows Lipsha or questions his exit. He becomes invisible in both his absence and presence. His definition of home then lacks any basis other than a grandmother who took him in and a family that treats him as a recluse. To form an identity and/or create an ideal home, Lipsha must embark on a journey to uncover his heritage.

This act is difficult because Lipsha has no basis from which to begin his search. He only knows fragments of his origin, which are just enough to incite his curiosity but leave him without definite closure. His initial impression of his existence is one of profound worthlessness, emphasized by the ones he cares most for: "I never really done much with my life, I suppose.... For a while she [Grandma Kashpaw] used to call me the biggest waste on the reservation and hark back to how she saved me from my own mother, who wanted to tie me in a potato sack and throw me in a slough" (*Love* 230). Lipsha's notion of home cannot be created with only the knowledge of a biological mother who attempted to murder him or the fact that his grandmother would have the audacity to lord that information over him. Either way, Lipsha remains without a family or home, where he is not perceived as unwanted or a "waste." He has no identity because he cannot find comfort in places he is supposedly from, in, or going. This is further complicated in his struggle with competing Native and Western religions. In an attempt to secure his selfhood within either religion, Lipsha becomes confused and unsuccessful: "Take Holy Mass. I used to go there just every so often, when I got frustrated mostly, because even though I know the Higher Power dwells everyplace, there's something very calming about the cool greenish inside of our mission" (*Love* 235). Lipsha later states that the mission's power is a "delusion," yet he continues to struggle between a Native or Western deity he can fully believe in (*Love* 235). He is caught in a time and place where the Christian God is deaf to his peoples'

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*Bingo Palace*. Thus, mobile homes that are overly invested in Western values are found useless and short-lived.

troubles and Native gods cannot understand their people anymore because they have lost the ability to communicate with their gods in the appropriate fashion.

As Lipsha states, "Since the Old Testament, God's been deafening up on us," and "[t]hat makes problems, because to ask [Native gods] proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewas once the Catholics gained ground" (*Love* 236). Lipsha then is, again, denied acceptance into either religious home because he cannot find his place in either. "Instead, this inclusiveness, this multiplicity, depicts the complex nature of what it means to be both a rational and a feeling being, to be both an American and a Native American, to be schooled in both Catholicism and tribal beliefs" (Sanders 130). Despite his confusion and dissatisfaction with both religions, he again turns to them for aid.

Lipsha seeks the task of creating a love medicine to solidify his grandmother and grandfather's union; however, because he lacks understanding and loyalty to either type of religious home, his love medicine grossly malfunctions. After shooting at but missing two geese needed for his love medicine, Lipsha decides to use frozen, store-bought turkeys. This substitution is admittedly wrong: "All right. So now I guess you will say, 'Slap a malpractice suit on Lipsha'" (*Love* 245). Yet, Lipsha continues with his already marred task by compounding his mistake: he not only pleads for a representative from the Catholic Church to bless the hearts of the turkeys, but he blesses them himself, using stolen holy water: "For as I walked out the [church] door I stuck my fingers in the cup of holy water that was sacred from their touches. I put my fingers in and blessed the hearts, quick, with my own hand" (*Love* 248). While his actions may seem innocuous and even comical, the result is catastrophic not only to his cross-hatched religious inclinations but also to the minute fragments of family he does have or knows about.

Lipsha plans to feed the hearts to his grandparents in order for his grandfather to cease his extramarital affair; however, his grandfather chokes on the heart, and dies: "He choked real bad.... It didn't seem like he wanted to struggle or fight. Death came and tapped his chest, so he went just like that" (*Love* 250). Thus, Lipsha's only identifiable familial home, however small,

is further eroded because he lacks the knowledge to use Native, Western, or the combination of cultures effectively. This is symbolic of the universe in which Lipsha lives in and must continue to live in because his construction of home cannot be completed; he doesn't even have a model to guide him in the building process. Fortunately, Erdrich doesn't leave Lipsha stumbling through the cobwebs of his life forever. As the novel comes to fruition, Lipsha learns the secrets that give him a past, present, future, and, most importantly, a home.

Lulu Lamartine, who is actually Lipsha's grandmother, explains to him how her son, Gerry Nanapush, and his mother, June Morrissey, met and conceived Lipsha:

My son Gerry....One day he came home and told me how he'd got his eye set on this beautiful woman [June Morrissey].... People talked, but those two went together and fell in love. Well, the inevitable happened pretty soon. That pretty lady started wearing a big wide tent dress. My boy left. Then I don't know what happened between them, because, not long after, a little baby [Lipsha] was placed in your Grandma Kashpaw's arms. (*Love* 335)

This revelation furnishes Lipsha with a basis to begin constructing a viable home. Unfortunately, Lipsha's mother is dead, and his father, Gerry Nanapush, is a "famous politicking hero, dangerous criminal, judo expert, escape artist, charismatic member of the American Indian Movement, and smoker of many pipes of kinnikinnick in the most radical groups," who is also in prison, which does not make either parent quite accessible (*Love* 341). Nevertheless, Lipsha does not despair: he begins his search with his next of kin, King.

While this visit may seem unlikely due to their volatile past, Lipsha hopes to garner information about his father and that his relationship with King may now be somehow different: "For one thing, I just had to see him knowing what I knew. Maybe things would change now that we were formally brothers. The other thing was that King had done time with Gerry Nanapush" (*Love* 341). Thus, Lipsha immediately begins to build a home with family he can identify. Furthermore, in a stroke of luck, Lipsha's father, "the escape artist," has done just that: "Federal criminal Gerry Nanapush escapes while being transferred to the North Dakota State

Penitentiary” (*Love* 351). Nanapush’s flight is important for two reasons: first, this gives Lipsha the opportunity to meet his father; second, the escaped Nanapush arrives at King’s apartment. While Nanapush’s reason for visiting King stems from the fact that King informed on Nanapush in prison (*Love* 353), the significance of Nanapush’s appearance grows from a simple game of cards.

Upon hearing that King used June’s insurance money to buy a sports car, Nanapush agrees with Lipsha’s notion that they—him, Lipsha, and King—should play poker for ownership of the vehicle (*Love* 357). “At first the Firebird is simply June’s car,...a reminder of her death, but eventually the car no longer represents June, it *is* June” (Sanders 153). Lipsha deals himself an unbeatable hand, winning the car, a mode of escape for his father, as well as retribution for King’s ill treatment throughout their lives and the opportunity to be reunited with his mother. As Lipsha states, “I dealt myself a perfect family. A royal flush” (*Love* 358). While this is not exactly the revenge Nanapush had intended exacting, the outcome of the game is a “perfect family” together at last: Nanapush, June, and Lipsha.

The fact that the game is broken up by the police in search of Nanapush simply adds to Lipsha’s new relationship with his father. Excusing himself hurriedly with the title to June’s car in hand, Lipsha starts out on the open road towards home, but before he can reach the reservation, in typical trickster fashion, Lipsha finds Nanapush in the truck space of June’s firebird, “curled up tight as a baby in its mother’s stomach, wedged so thoroughly inside it took a struggle to get him loose” (*Love* 362). Nanapush’s emancipation from the tight space not only saves him from asphyxiation, but Lipsha and Nanapush’s ensuing conversation helps Lipsha clear up additional questions about his past and directs his future. Although Nanapush relates only minor details about his and June’s time together, after Lipsha confesses that he has hastily enlisted in the Army and is currently on the run, Nanapush puts Lipsha’s worry at ease. Nanapush informs Lipsha that as a “Nanapush man,” “we all have this odd thing with our hearts,” they go “something like ti-rum-ti-ti instead of ta-dum” (*Love* 366, 365). This excuse is enough to sidestep his enlistment, but more pointedly, it provides Lipsha with a deeper

connection to his father and allows him to go back to the reservation. Unfortunately, Nanapush is not so lucky. He does enjoy a time of bonding with his son, but Nanapush is, after all, an escaped felon. It is not safe for him to return to the reservation. Confronting this fact, Lipsha drops Nanapush off near the Canadian border. Still, the interaction between Lipsha and Nanapush serves its distinct purpose in constructing home for Lipsha.

Lipsha's home is no longer incomplete; it is not a forlorn land without a heritage; it is the place Lipsha must return. As Lipsha puts it, "I believe that my home is the only place I belong and was never interested to leave it, but my circumstances forced my hand" (*Love* 364). These "circumstances" being resolved, Lipsha is free to return to where he "belongs."

As *Love Medicine* closes, Lipsha stops on a bridge that joins the outside world and the reservation. While this gap between worlds will always exist, Lipsha is now confident enough to create or embrace a home from what he comprehends of both worlds. This is in stark contrast to Lipsha's initial perception of his world: "You see how instantly the ground can shift you thought was solid" (*Love* 252). As he looks down upon the water below him, Lipsha comes to the conclusion that "[i]t was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land....So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home" (*Love* 367). Therefore, he is no longer the baby thrown in the "unreasonable waves" of the river, searching for some thing, person, religion, or location to grab a hold; he is a man with a family, community, clan, tribe, and home, which he constructs from his mixed-blood heritage and both Native and Western cultures. Thus, as Sanders argues, "the novel suggests that being an American and a Native American are not diametrically opposed identities. By concluding the novel with Lipsha returning home, *Love Medicine* demonstrates that exclusive either/or positions are not fruitful" (153).

This ending nicely returns the reader to the beginning of the story—June coming home—because she, like Lipsha, must create a home that can move between worlds. Appropriately, her spirit is an iconic American sports car that can cross "bridges" back and forth between the reservation and Western society. "Bringing her home is finally in fact resolving her

life and death in balance” (Dorris qtd. in Coltelli 44). This conclusion also gives the reader a retrospective look into all of *Love Medicine*’s notions of home.

All the character’s homes differ, yet they all have one profound similarity: they intercede, compete, backtrack, tangle, overlap, mix, and add and subtract elements that make their homes. For Erdrich, home does not conform to traditional Native or Western definitions. It is created through selected attributes of language, community, land, family, and the past and present. At times these additions, omissions, and intermingling elements are difficultly, painfully, comfortingly, and even humorously fit together, but home’s construction is always artful and always definite. As critic Shelly Reid argues, “the Native American perspectives that Erdrich explores require a kind of deconstructive logic in which each reader comes to a conclusion somewhere between the binary terminal points, and no two readers are likely to come to the *same* ‘final truth’” (81). Thus, when referring to *Love Medicine*’s notions of “home,” the term is not only multi-faceted but multi-layered. For example, the novel comes full circle because June’s absence is just as crucial as her presence. As Karla Sanders contends, “she [June] remains a presence at home because of her familial ties, but her family is greatly effected by her absence” (Sanders 146). On a larger level, the tenets of home act in a similar way. The inter-relation and connection of each person to culture, custom, family, community, and location is significant to re-creating of defining home for indigenous populations, who at times, can only count on the “absence” of these elements to define them.

CHAPTER 8  
CONCLUSION: HOME

*Where do you go for inspiration? Home.*

---Louise Erdrich in conversation with Eithne Farry

Recognized as one of the most versatile and significant contemporary Native writers, Peter Beidler argues that Louise Erdrich “raises virtually all of the issues important to an understanding of the human condition: accidents of birth and parentage, falling in love, generosity, greed, psychological damage, joy, alienation, vulnerability, differentness, parenting, aging, and, dying” (*DLB* 85). While Beidler rightly commends Erdrich’s writing for all of the above, it is no coincidence that the elements of the human condition, for better or worse, co-exist within the actual or abstract locations labeled “home.” In Erdrich’s writing these thoughts on the human condition and the place they exist come nicely to fruition. “The stories are not so much chapters in a novel as they are a complex entangling of families, histories, and themes into a richly diverse narrative” (*DLB* 87). The search for place and identity is likewise entangled at almost every step.

As many of her characters find out, ties to family, community, and land—home—must be created or recreated, defined or redefined with what is left or what is available of those entangled elements. Thus, while various characters in Erdrich’s writing actually exist in both the Western world or/and the reservation, the characters cannot escape the tentacles of either one. Whether *Love Medicine*’s mixed-blood Lipsha lives in the cities at times or if *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*’s Father Damien lives cohesively with “in the blanket Indians,” the outcome is similar: worlds collide, and the characters not only have to pick up the pieces, but also use the pieces to create a place they feel they “ought to be.” Sister Leopolda only finds identity within the Western world of the church; ironically, the man that burns his literal home,

Jack Mauser, only truly feels at home within the arms of various women and wives; and Nanapush uses Western bureaucracy to secure his place, physically and mentally, in the Native world. However, what is paramount to each of these “locations” is that they all differ, yet they all serve their major purpose: they are “home” for the characters that need them, although obviously these homes function quite differently—some constructively, some destructively.

Home becomes more than preservation of indigenous culture and location; it becomes a mosaic made from the pieces left of the Native world and new pieces garnished from the Western. In critic Jonathan Little’s terms, “Through the traditional Native American metaphor of beading, Erdrich creates a narrative of overlapping spaces between cultures while also depicting the enduring strength and resiliency of the Ojibwa heritage” (499). The best of these spaces become locations where her characters belong, yet they are not perennial by any means. Noting the nomadic history of Natives, voluntary and involuntary, Little concedes that “instead of protecting and perpetuating culture through static principles...Erdrich demonstrates how conceptions of culture, identity, meaning, and the sacred are forever evolving, perspectival, and independent” (499). Through Erdrich’s writing, these new versions of home take form and breathe life into an overlapping, interweaving, cross-cultural Native American existence. As Little sees it, “Erdrich is part of a group of Native American writers who [in Catherine Rainwater’s words] ‘dream of nothing less than revision of contemporary reality, beginning with its representation in art’” (Little 500). Little’s most important contention is, therefore, his issue with Louis Owens’ complaint that Erdrich’s novels merely depict the reservation as a place of self-destruction (501). Certainly some of the distortions of home destroy lives; never-the-less, Little believes that Erdrich’s focus “is less on fragmentation and victimization than on individual growth and weaving new patterns for individual and communal cohabitation and survival out of the chaos and pain of the past” (501). This claim links nicely to the notion that home must evolve to include more than simple location; home is people, community, past, present, future, and the “link between detail and meaning,” even though the construction of these homes may



place the inhabitants in a space awkwardly adjacent to traditional Native and Western cultures (“Where” 24).

Erdrich’s own life and writing reflect this liminal status. As Beidler notes and Erdrich substantiates in her article, “Where I Ought to be,” “although she never lived on the reservation, she has visited it often with her family. Both of her parents worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at a boarding school in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where she spent most of her youth” (*DLB* 85). Recognized as the primogenitor of the ‘second wave’ of Native literature dealing with ‘homing’ issues, Erdrich’s writing enters a dialog with other Native American authors and texts that explore the problems of trying to identify home or place while dealing with a partial Euro/Native heritage. D’Arcy McNickle’s *Surrounded*, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, to name a few, address these concerns at length, and within the last thirty or so years, numerous critics have added to “home’s” conversation. However, this subject matter continues to be significant to Native Americans because “North America continues to be such a home place for Native American peoples, [though this] is a fact that is, for many, too convenient to forget” (Evers and Zepeda vii).

Erdrich’s plots and characters are then critical to understanding and remembering how “home” consistently alters in a post-colonization world. Erdrich states:

In our worst nightmares, all of us have conceived what the [post-holocaust] world might be like afterward and have feared that even our most extreme versions of a devastated planet are not extreme enough. Consider, then, that to American Indians it is as if the unthinkable has already happened and relatively recently. (“Where” 23)

“Home” changes, physically and mentally, for Erdrich’s characters because they represent peoples, peoples who suffered from traumatic events: Natives were stripped of their indigenous lands; they were oppressed and discriminated against; they were forcibly relegated to a smaller geographical area; and they lost a sense of being, identity, and home as a result of those atrocities. However, Erdrich leaves her readers with hope:

Erdrich's representation of personal identity as a matter of subject to change and revision is the natural consequence of the relational, interwoven identity she and other Native American authors and observers have described. If one strand of the web—be it personal, tribal, or historical condition—alters its position, the others must adapt. Erdrich has found an *and* to replace the *either/or* of Euro-American conventions of identity: for her characters, continuity *and* change, historical *and* contemporary influences, individuality *and* interrelation are of equal importance. (Reid 80)

Erdrich emphasizes home as a place of adaptation. As Catherine Rainwater puts it, "Erdrich's recurrent themes concern the ties between people and geographical locations, the importance of community among all living beings, the complexities of individual and cultural identity, and the exigencies of marginalization, dispossession, and cultural survival" (271). The interconnection between these elements is vital to understanding how a people's displacement affects their notion of home. In a post-colonial world, Native Americans must create home where and however they can because failure to do so denies a liminal or hybrid people a home at all. They, like Erdrich's Lipsha, must discover a "bridge" between cultural forces to build a home on "dry land," where they can make their mark known.

Nanapush claims that "once we were a people who left no track. Now we are different.... I have left my own tracks, too. I have left behind these words" (*FS* 210). Erdrich's writing creates 'tracks' that can be followed to bridge locations. Her work shows how people, landscape, community, and family define these spaces. Her "storied world" is more than mimeses; it presents historical and contemporary tribal life, rather than perpetuating empty depictions of a people doomed to the past. Therefore, exploring the various avenues in which Erdrich's writing reconstructs or redefines home is not only important because it allows readers to view Native Americans as people, instead of the Other, these examinations also express Native Americans' difficulty in erecting home in an ever encroaching Western world. Home is not anything and everything, but it is anything and everything that Native's make it in order to

salvage their culture, customs, family, and community. In Nanapush's terms, "what is left after the events in all their juices and chaos are reduced to the essence. The story—all that time does not digest" (*FS* 71). Erdrich's writing does exactly that: her work shows that even though "home" for American Indians has and is undergoing confusing and often painful transformations, the "essence" still remains in Natives' shared stories. Jace Weaver makes similar claims about Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. In his interpretation, "The power of the almanac stories to sustain the people is attested to when the children are forced to eat pages of the notebook as food. They not only survive but thrive. Otherwise they would have starved. The pages of the book have many properties, both physical and spiritual, to feed the people and make them strong" (Weaver 134). In similar ways, Erdrich's spectrum of homes nourishes a scattered people, starving for place and identity in a world that ever infringes on their culture, heritage, people, and lands.

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