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Smartberries: Interpreting Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

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Readers will remember the pitch-perfect opening of Louise Erdrich's revolutionary first novel, *Love Medicine*, when June Kashpaw wanders off to die in the barren fields outside Williston, North Dakota. The book begins with Kashpaw on her way to the bus station in Williston, intent on heading home, only to be seduced, if that's the right word, by a "mud engineer" named Andy. They drink, eat Easter eggs together at the bar, and later have a sexual fumble in his Silverado pickup truck before he passes out and she decides to walk home clear across the state of North Dakota wearing nothing but a windbreaker, slacks, and high-heel shoes.

The whole opening focuses very closely on June's body and the way she moves, "like a young girl on slim hard legs"; on the Rigger bar in which she meets her paramour; and on the weather, which is overcast (but warm) for Easter weekend—all in all, on the tactile qualities of the stage set.[1] The third-person voice, which will be abandoned for the most part in the rest of the novel in favor of revolving first-person narrators, is unhurried. The voice is patient, in control; the narrative eye wanders, but never very far past the surface. Only on page 4 does the voice veer toward the meaningful:

> "Ahhhhh," she said, surprised, almost in pain, "you got to be."
>
> "I got to be what, honeysuckle?" He tightened his arm around her slim shoulders. They were sitting in a booth with a few others, drinking Angel Wings. Her mouth, the lipstick darkly blurred now, tipped unevenly toward his.
>
> "You got to be different." (4)

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Then we learn that June feels fragile, like the eggs she's been eating, that her clothing is ripped and torn, that cruising bars for rig pigs like Andy is a sadly common fact of her adult life, that she is a walking wreck.

And after June and Andy park his truck along a back road for a quick and disappointing sexual exchange, walk is what she does. "Even when it started to snow," the novel tells us,

> she did not lose her sense of direction. Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the distance. The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course. She continued. Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and named part of her went on.
>
> The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home. (7)

Thus begins Erdrich's multigenerational tale of love and loss and survival. As the novel progresses we are introduced to a number of narrators—Marie Kashpaw, Lulu Lamartine, Nector Kashpaw, Albertine Johnson, Lipsha Morrisey—all related in one way or another, all telling their own stories, all trying to puzzle out two issues posited in the first chapter: why did June die in the snow (which is never overtly answered), and who might Lipsha's father and mother be?

Modern readers, no doubt, feel as though they are getting some sort of cultural treasure, some kind of artifact or sensibility that, if they are non-Indian, differs from their own and, if they are Indian, is a part of their tribal patrimony. Comments by critics and by the author herself tend to support this interpretation of *Love Medicine*. Speaking of the structure of *Love Medicine*, Hertha D. Sweet Wong claims that *Love Medicine*'s "multiple narrators confound conventional Western expectations of an autonomous protagonist, a dominant narrative voice, and a consistently chronological narrative." Wong goes on to point out that "Native American oral traditions have long reflected . . . polyvocality."[2] Wong immediately enlists the help of Paula Gunn Allen, who goes so far as to say that "Native American traditional literatures have the tendency to distribute value evenly among various elements" and that "one useful social function of traditional tribal literature is its tendency to distribute value evenly among various elements, providing a model for egalitarian structuring of society as well as literature."[3] One wonders exactly what "elements" she is talking about, but then she provides the answer to our confusion by mournfully concluding that "egalitarian structures in either literature or society are not easily 'read' by hierarchically inclined westerners."[4] Ironically, Allen's claim for equality among parts is certainly true of the Homeric epics, and it is a sentiment on her part that echoes Auerbach's description of *The Odyssey*'s machinery.[5] Allan Chavkin makes the most strident claims for the inherent "culturalism" of Erdrich's writing. He suggests that the inclusion of both the "real" and the "unreal" or "supernatural" along with her "polyvocality" that "is ascribed to the magical realism of the postmodernists probably has its origins in Erdrich's Chippewa

heritage."[6] It is alarming that in a book dedicated to exploring the manifestation of cultural sensibilities in Native American literature, Chavkin feels compelled to include the modifier *probably*. And if it does nothing else, the tentative link, the modest use of *probably*, signifies that the relationship between prose and culture is "probably" a bit more difficult to identify and "probably" a bit more problematic than his claims suggest. Chavkin goes on to quote Erdrich herself to support his claim that *Love Medicine* reflects "Chippewa storytelling techniques."[7]

These are the claims, anyway, made for the ways and means with which Native American literature constructs itself. And if they are not wholly wrong, they are at least missing what is most active and fascinating and brilliant about Erdrich's masterpiece and, by extension, much of what Native American literature truly has to offer. For the moment we will put aside what Wong and Chavkin and Allen and others say about *Love Medicine*, and we will let Erdrich's prose itself guide us; we will look at how the book *creates* itself and *how* it creates itself.

In the first chapter of *Love Medicine*, "The World's Greatest Fishermen," months after June wanders off into the snow, her niece, Albertine, receives a letter from her mother telling her about June's death. After thinking over the news of June's death, Albertine finally leaves Fargo and makes the trek back to the reservation. This unfolds over five pages. Three pages are dedicated to Albertine's thoughts about her father, mother, grandmother, uncles, and great uncles. One page is given over to her drive north and west toward the reservation, during which the narrative focus first takes in the entire landscape and gradually focuses on the reservation landscape itself. And finally she arrives, in the middle of a conversation between her mother, Zelda, and her aunt Aurelia as they make potato salad and bake some pies.

All of it—the swirl of conversation, the quickly pulsing focus ever narrowing in on pies or hand gestures only to pan back out to include government Indian policy and family history—leaves the reader deliciously confused, weary, and, like Albertine, ready to land someplace and to know what that place is. Erdrich doesn't create trust with the reader; she craftily makes us depend on her guidance. King, June's son, arrives with his white girlfriend, Lynette; their son, King Junior; and Grandma and Grandpa Kashpaw—that is, Marie and Nector—and the vortex of backstory increases in speed and intensity. When Albertine thinks about her grandfather's mind and its rapidly disintegrating outlines, she could very well be describing how the book feels: "Elusive, pregnant with history, his thoughts finned off and vanished, the same color as water. Grandpa shook his head, remembering dates with no events to go with them, names without faces, things that happened out of place and time. Or at least, it seemed that way" (19).

Toward evening, Gordie, June's on-and-off husband, and Eli, Nector's brother, show up. We are now twenty-seven pages into the novel. And then something seemingly minor happens. King, in a fit of drunken generosity, gives Eli his new baseball cap, which fuels the growing flames of anger between King and Lynette into a full-blown fire. Just when the argument between King and Lynette becomes physical, even violent, Gordie begins telling a joke. Gordie's

joke is of the usual variety: There was an Indian, a Frenchman, and a Norwegian. They were all in the French Revolution. . . . Just after Gordie delivers the introduction to his joke while seated inside the house, Lynette, sensitive to jokes about Norwegians, heads outside. Then we cut to King and Lynette, and taken all together the text reads as follows:

> "There were these three. An Indian. A Frenchman. A Norwegian. They were all in the French Revolution. And they were all set for the guillotine, right? But when they put the Indian in there the blade just came halfway down and got stuck."
>
> "Fuckin' bitch! Gimme the keys!" King screamed just outside the door. Gordie paused a moment. There was silence. He continued the joke.
>
> "So they said it was the judgement of God. You can go, they said to the Indian. So the Indian got up and went. Then it was the Frenchman's turn. They put his neck in the vise and were all set to execute him! But it happened the same. The blade got stuck."
>
> "Fuckin' bitch! Fuckin' bitch!" King shrieked again. (34)

This device, known as intercutting, works beautifully. It interrupts the swirl, the almost timeless flow of history and emotion, the seeming eternity of family dysfunction (where did it start? when will it end? what is the most important part of it to notice?) and gives it temporal and spatial rigidity. We finally have palpable conflict on which to rest our attention, a conflict that, when intercut with Gordie's joke, is frozen in time. The most famous use of intercutting occurs in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* during the agricultural fair (though there are more modern and cinematic variations on it, such as Trinity crouching in mid-air in *The Matrix*), when we move between three levels of action—the masses at the fair, the speech-making officials on a raised platform, and above them Rodolphe and Emma, who watch everything as they prepare to make love for the first time. All of it is timed so that Emma and Rodolphe articulate their desire just when the officials announce the manure exhibit. The effect is comic and wry and was a way for Flaubert to use structure as commentary—to make a necessity of form, to let his world work for him and, in doing so, preserve its naturalistic unity. Erdrich's deployment of this device is nowhere as conscious or purposeful as Flaubert's. Nor was it done for the same reasons. However, it does create a different kind of unity, freezing the novel in time, which makes it possible for both the characters inside the novel and the readers outside of it to analyze and inspect the situation. And, contrary to Paula Gunn Allen's claims, Erdrich's use of intercutting creates a delicious, heightened, and, indeed, foregrounded, sense of the action.

If intercutting provides us with a framework—a way of focusing our attention on specific actions and specific consequences—while preserving the feeling of flow and shift, then we still need something else. We need a vehicle for meaning, and Erdrich provides us with one, amply. Pies. When Albertine arrives back home near the beginning of the chapter, she smells the

"rich and browning piecrusts" (12). Or, rather, the pies move back in time because on the next page, after the pies have been browning beautifully, they are being patted and crimped by Zelda. "They were beautiful pies," observed Albertine, "rhubarb, wild June berry, apple, and gooseberry, all fruits preserved by Grandma Kashpaw or my mother or Aurelia" (13). Two pages later Zelda "began to poke wheels of fork marks in the tops of the pies" (15). The pies continue baking while the story swoops back into family history, and then forward into the present tense, until Albertine takes the last pie from the oven on page 22. The family sits down to eat. They argue. People get up from the table. Some propose a visit to June's grave. The novel is not hurried at all, and neither are the pies.

After King and Lynette fight, Albertine connects with Lipsha and they lie down in a field and talk. Albertine falls asleep on the field's edge and is awakened by the sound of a new round of violence. She rushes up the hill to the house and finds King trying to drown Lynette in the sink. Albertine tries to help her but is beaten down by King. She stands, and then she sees what he has done:

> All the pies were smashed. Torn open. Black juice bleeding through the crusts. Bits of jagged shells were stuck to the wall and some were turned completely upside down. Chunks of rhubarb were scraped across the floor. Meringue dripped from the towels.
>
> "The pies," I shrieked. "You goddamn sonofabitch, you broke the pies!" (41)

After King notices the damage he has done, he quickly leaves. Lynette follows. They end up making love in the car parked in the driveway. But Albertine cannot leave the pies alone. "Sometime that hour I got up," she tells us in the closing lines of the chapter, "leaving the baby, and went into the kitchen. I spooned the fillings back into the crusts, married slabs of dough, smoothed over edges of crusts with a wetted finger, fit crimps to crimps and even fluff to fluff on top of berries or pudding. I worked carefully for over an hour. But once they smash there is no way to put them right" (42).

It is really quite elegant. After all the people in the house—Zelda, Aurelia, Eli, Nector, Gordie, King, Lynette, King Junior, and Lipsha—have been introduced and then have exited the stage, leaving a twist of half-understood passions and grudges in their wake, Albertine (arguably the sanest narrator and therefore the most reliable spokesperson for the whole) is left alone with the damaged pies. The pies, alone, spotlighted by the narrative focus they have now, through much hard work, received, carry the burden of meaning that all the human characters have left behind and represent and symbolize those relationships. There is no egalitarianism here, either among pies or among people.

As the novel progresses, we collect a number of symbols both large and small—physical and literary—that when taken together carry the weight of meaning for the book. For example, King's car becomes, literally, the vehicle through which Lipsha learns the secret of his mother's

identity. When Dot knits the jumper for her soon-to-be-born baby, that little yarn outfit stands in for the weight of knowledge and the sometimes heavy bonds of family. And in the most interesting case, when Lipsha tries to unite Lulu and Nector by making "medicine" out of two turkey hearts, those hearts, like the pies in the beginning of the book, stand in for the complex of relations, not only between people but also between a past (cast as a cultural landscape) and the present (colored by the dominant society). When viewed closely, the weight of meaning is unequally distributed, and this is how the novel creates its own sense—out of the tools provided by centuries of invention in Western literature. The literary activity in *Love Medicine*, the core of the book's power, does not derive from old-time traditional techniques. Rather, it treats Native subjects with strikingly modern techniques. And to interpret the novel fruitfully it is necessary to keep this in mind.

THE FIGURATIVE I: THE MYTH OF POLYVOCALITY

In addition to these symbolic objects, the figurative language of the multiple narrators rests on the creation and manipulation of symbolic speech. For example, immediately after the close of the first chapter we get a chapter from the perspective of Marie Kashpaw (nee Lazarre) concerning events that took place fifty-seven years before the opening chapter, in 1934:

> So when I went there, I knew the dark fish must rise. Plumes of radiance had soldered on me. No reservation girl had ever prayed so hard. There was no use in trying to ignore me any longer. I was going up there on the hill with the black robe women. They were not any lighter than me. I was going up there to pray as good as they could. Because I don't have that much Indian blood. And they never thought they'd have a girl from this reservation as a saint they'd have to kneel to. But they'd have me. And I'd be carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toenails would be little pink ocean shells, which they would have to stoop down off their high horse to kiss. (43)

In the span of thirteen sentences we are greeted with seven different instances of metaphoric language. We get "dark fish must rise" and "plumes of radiance" and "soldered" in the first two sentences. The next eight sentences are not only devoid of literary devices, but they suggest an "uneducated" and "girlish" voice that demonstrates little grasp of grammar or syntax. And in the last three sentences of the paragraph we are once again bombarded by metaphoric images such as "I'd be carved in pure gold" and "ruby lips" and toenails that were "little pink ocean shells" and "high horse."

Erdrich's use of metaphor (mostly) and simile (somewhat), along with the larger symbolic strokes of the novel, is always perfectly done. But what is interesting is not their presence but their placement. The novel opens with a virtual absence of figurative language:

> The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of the oil boomtown of Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. She was a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved. Probably it was the way she moved, easy as a young girl on slim hard legs, that caught the eye of the man who rapped at her from inside the window of the Rigger Bar. He looked familiar to her. She had seen so many come and go. He hooked his arm, inviting her to enter, and she did so without hesitation, thinking only that she might tip down one or two with him and then get her bags to meet the bus. She wanted, at least, to see if she actually knew him. Even through the watery glass she could see that he wasn't all that old and that his chest was thickly padded in dark red nylon and expensive down. (1)

All we have here is "killing time" (a construction so formulaic as to have lost status as metaphor) and "easy as a young girl," which is simply a comparison of the usual variety, though apt in the case of June. Instead of the figurative first-person language we have a "naturalistic" or "realist" impulse guiding us through the opening sequence. It is hard-edged, natural, real, without affectation. As if a gritty life, a gritty reality, deserves gritty language. Like Walter Scott, Erdrich creates a pleasurable parallel between her characters and their environment—but unlike those early romantics, and more like Raymond Carver, she adds an ironic flavor to her formula that saves her from empty or obvious allegory.

Such an opening, which suggests more Steinbeck than Faulkner, creates a reality in which the story will unfold, a reality filled with hard-luck women, dingy bars, and men in pickup trucks. Nothing onstage is extreme or fantastic, just quietly desperate. During the next six pages Erdrich uses only eight metaphors and similes, just one more than in the first paragraph of the second chapter. And these only occur when Erdrich is giving us a portrait of June's feelings and thoughts. Some of the first-person chapters begin with "straight" or colloquially inflected language in which the compound similes and metaphors are largely absent, while others function similarly to Marie's first chapter. Interestingly, the three chapters that are the most imagistically loaded are, after "The World's Greatest Fishermen," the next three chapters, narrated in turn by Marie, Nector, and Lulu. What is interesting is that these three chapters are the most remote in time, and all deal with sexual and religious transformation. The function of symbol and symbolic language in *Love Medicine* is, like the use of symbol in early-twentieth-century French poetry and fiction, to bridge the physical and metaphysical—ultimately Erdrich uses symbol to create a novel that is fundamentally a novel about conversion both sexual and cultural. And while, of course, Erdrich manages to create characters who seem to speak and think differently (and, in certain ways, they do), they are all guided by the same consciousness. All these chapters—whether they begin with a feverishly symbolic pitch like Marie's or end up there like Nector's—use a mixture of fact and fancy, a mixture of the figure and the

figurative to create their tensions and to resolve them. As such, *Love Medicine* is much more a book about language than it is about or of culture.

What does this suggest about how the novel is put together and how it functions? Clearly Erdrich is working in two modes, the naturalist and the symbolic. Erdrich begins her novel in the realist tradition and thereby reinforces what the reader might think of as both plausible and relevant. The language is easy, unself-conscious. It—like the original German realist poets of the nineteenth century, and the "poetischer realismus" movement of 1848–70—creates a matter-of-fact mood that is resigned and quietly discontented. That is, she recreates in language, at the sentence level, an easily recognizable Indian world: dismal and all too real and desperate.

Erdrich's naturalist prose descriptions provide a beautiful and necessary counterpoint to the intensity of the figurative language she reserves for her characters and their emotions and that, like the cloven oaks and thunderstorms in Chateaubriand's *Atala*, signal and facilitate the transformations that take place in them. And this becomes the guiding tension throughout the novel—a tension between resignation, the glum reality of reservation and Indian life, and the fantastic and colorful emotional landscapes that somehow manage to bloom there.

The result of this tension is an amazingly inventive and new kind of literary irony. Every one of the characters, including the silly Lipsha and even the serious Marie, engages in the classically Greek form of ironic self-deprecation. More than that, the vast difference between the mean physical circumstances in which the characters find themselves and the rich symbolic speech in which they confess and the parade of objects (cars, pies, hand-knitted sweaters, and geese) to which they give symbolic significance creates, to use Cleanth Brooks's definition of irony, a "principle of structure." This irony reconciles, or at least contains, the cross-purposes, paradoxical aspects, ambiguous significance, and multiple agendas at work inside the novel. There is a wonderful irony here created between the language of thought and the language of event—the convening and pleaching of two different literary modes.

The use of figurative and symbolic speech and thought by the first-person narrators creates a mirage of sound. It gives the appearance of polyvocality, when, in fact, all the characters share the same consciousness. If, for the moment, we ignore that each chapter is narrated by characters with different identities, and instead focus on the language they use, we see that all the first-person chapters use the same devices and same miniature structures. They all combine wild "emotional" language with sober "natural" description and in doing so mobilize key symbols that are then collected together and built upon in subsequent chapters—whether they begin or end with it they all reach for the Longinian sublime and the place carved out by language for self-expression and self-discovery. There is no sense in any of the chapters that there are contested truths or contested versions of reality. All of our narrators (all of whom possess information we need) tell the different parts of the story. There is no overlap. Nor is there a sense, as there is in *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*, that the narrator or narrators are untrustworthy. Nor do *Love Medicine*'s multiple narrators, like those in *The Sound and the Fury*, give us different realities,

different impressions of the same reality. It is easy to see this last point in that the narrators of *The Sound and the Fury* all speak and think differently. Not so with the narrators in *Love Medicine*. Not only do they think the same way, but they speak to us the same way—each with the same reliance on metaphor and simile, the evocation of material symbol, and the lilting close of each of their chapters—but on different registers. The mirage effect is created by the use of symbol, not by differences in voice.

There are, within the limitations of the characters' experiences, contested facts. So if there is some kind of "polyvocality" it doesn't create a chorus so much as a round, each voice, on its own register, repeating (in structure and form) what has come before, with almost identical rhythms. Conflict, narrative tension, does not arrive from contested versions of events or from contested or variant voices but from conflicting and interwoven modes.

The friction generated between these conflicting modes—naturalist and symbolic—creates, on an entirely different plane, a new kind of symbolism. That is, if symbolism is in its most basic sense a device by which the writer makes one thing stand for another and thereby creates a relationship between those two things—by creating characters who think and speak and narrate in symbolic, figurative language—the characters are elevated and set in front of the dismal backdrop of Indian life. The characters become, in themselves, extractions, metaphors, and symbols of that experience.

The impetus for Erdrich's prose project does not differ from that of many other twentieth-century writers. She has the same desire to avoid naming a thing and seeks instead to suggest it. James Ruppert suggests that "Native Americans unify the various levels of meaning that Western non-Natives tend to separate. . . . Erdrich merges this Native sense of multiple levels of meaning for each physical act with a powerful belief in the mystery of events. What begins on a physical level may start to take on a larger significance, but Erdrich leaves the connections mysterious."[8] It is not clear what Ruppert is referring to when he says "levels of meaning" usually separated by Westerners. It is not clear because we were talking about literature, not thought, and in written literature the task is almost always to suggest connections and cross-purposes and to create multiple and overlapping ideas clustered around and in events, objects, and characters. When Ruppert backs up his claim, he does not do so by investigating Erdrich's language or style—he uses the example of Nector and Marie having sex on the trail to suggest that "what appears to be a moment of heedless lust" is really "an event that defines their lives."[9] One need not name all the physical events, purely physical events, in literature whose significance does not end up residing solely on the physical plane. Ruppert's analysis seems to be trying to suggest that symbol and ambiguity are the sole provenance of Native American thought. And as precious as that commodity is, there is nothing "Native" about it. What is maddening is the degree to which this kind of interpretation, which owes nothing to tribal language, tribal storytelling, or even to the long and brilliant life of the novel form itself and the inspiring variety of sources that came together to create modern literature, obscures the true brilliance of Erdrich's work.

Erdrich creates fiction that shares the same concerns as many other twentieth-century fictions. In her writing she struggles to suggest a thing rather than to name it. She does brilliantly, what Mallarmé said good writing does:

> *Nommer* un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poëme qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le *suggérer*, voilà le rêve. C'est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le symbole: évoquer petit à petit un objet pour montrer un état d'âme, ou, inversement, choisir un objet et en dégager un état d'âme, par une série de déchiffrements.
>
> [To *name* an object is largely to destroy poetic enjoyment, which comes from gradual divination or decrypting (unraveling of a mysterious scroll). The ideal is to *suggest* the object. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes symbol. An object must be gradually evoked in order to show a state of soul; or else, choose an object and from it elicit a state of soul by means of a series of decodings.][10]

Erdrich's approach, while it has the same goal, is very much opposite that of writers like Hemingway or Carver, with their maniacal and almost painful adherence to the language of reality, their stubborn insistence on addressing only the actual as a way to evoke the unnamable. The end result is the same, a painful distance between speech and event contained by a beautiful unifying field of language and sense.

THE SENSIBILITIES OF INTERPRETATION

It is clear that there is a large gap between the sense of the novel and the sentiments that inform the interpretation of it. What must be dealt with is not a question of fraud or even of authorial identity. It is not a question of cultural dishonesty. It is a question of culture, as a sentiment, as a wish. Since Erdrich has claimed that her "method" is a cycle of stories told from various vantage points about a single subject, and that this "method" is a Chippewa narrative device, and since we have shown that she activates her novel using "Western" literary techniques, we should look closely at Ojibwe literature, namely Ojibwe oral performances of communally held stories, to see if we can find similar devices—symbolism, metaphor, stories told from different angles or, alternately, if we can find "polyvocality" and "multiple levels of meaning" and "equally valued elements" and all the other ways in which most critics claim Natives think and spin their literature—at work.

One searches in vain—through the stacks of memory and the piles of books—for something that resembles a "Chippewa cycle of stories." There are no performances recorded in which several speakers take up the same topic and spin it out from different perspectives, adding layers of truth and meaning or, at least, layers of approach. There are some stories that, for obvious reasons, have been told and retold over the years. These stories are mostly incidental stories—meant to entertain or teach, and their subject

matter is funny and rude. Three of these Wenabozho stories stand out because they have been recorded over and over and there are versions of these stories that have been performed and captured in the late nineteenth century, mid-twentieth century, and again more recently. These are "Wenabozho and the Ducks," "Wenabozho and the Partridges," and "Wenabozho and the Smartberries."

Since much of the scholarship quoted in this article makes claims for traditional storytelling and cultural productions without either dissecting the language of the modern writing or investigating the rhetoric and sense of the original tribal stories, we should look closely, and in full, at one story. Here is "Wenaboozhoo and the Smartberries" as told by Rose Foss, an elder from Mille Lacs Reservation in north central Minnesota:

> Megwaa babaa-maazhagaamed Wenabozho, ezhi-nagishkawaad wiiji-aniishinaaben. Ezhi-gagwejimigod, "Wenabozh, gegoo giwii-kagwejimin. Aaniin danaa giin wenji-nibwaakaayan?" Wenabozho ezhi-nakwetawaad, "Aanish naa, nibwaakaaminensan apane nimiijinan."
>
> "Aaniindi dash wendinaman iniw nibwaakaaminensan? Gaye niin indaa-gii-miijinan," odigoon iniw wiiji-anishinaaben. Wenabozho ezhi-nakwetawaad, "Ambe wiijiwishin. Giga-waabanda'in wendinamaan." "Ahaaw. Giga-babaa-wiijiwin."
>
> Mii ezhi-izhaawaad imaa megwekob, Wenabozho wii-waabanda'aad ayaamagading iniw nibwaakaaminensan. Wenabozho giigido, "Mii omaa waaboozoo-miikanaang wii-mikamang iniw nibwaakaaminensan." "Oon, mii na omaa?"
>
> Wenabozho ezhi-maamiginang iniw waaboozoo-moowensan ezhi-ininamawaad owiijiwaagan. Ezhi-mamood a'aw bebaa-gikinoo'amawind, ezhi zhakamod. Mii dash ezhi-ikidod, "Ishte! Waaboozoo-mownesan onow ingwana. Gaawiin nibwaakaaminensan aawanzinoon!" Wenabozho ezhi-nakwetawaad, "Enh, mii gwayak. Gaawiin nibwaakaaminensan aawanzinoon. Mii azhigwa gaye giin nibwaakaayan."[11]

And here is my translation:

> While Wenabozho was walking along the lakeshore he met up with a fellow Indian. He asked him, "Wenabozho, I want to ask you something. How is it that you're so smart?" Wenabozho answered him, "Look here, I always eat smartberries."
>
> "Where can I find those smartberries? I want to eat some, too," said Wenabozho's fellow traveler. Wenabozho answered, "Come with me. I will show you where you can find them."
>
> "Okay. I will accompany you around."
>
> So they went over into the bush, so Wenabozho could show him where the smartberries were. Wenabozho said, "There next to the rabbit trail we'll find those smartberries."
>
> "Oh, there?"

> Wenabozho collected those rabbit turds and handed them to his companion. The one going around being taught took them and popped them in his mouth. But then he said, "Ew! Those are rabbit turds! Those aren't smartberries!" Wenabozho replied, "Yes, you're right. Those aren't smartberries. Now you are smart, too."

The story was recorded again in 1997. This time the speaker was Collins Oakgrove, a native of Ponemah (as it's known in English, but more properly called Obaashing by those who live there) on the tip of Waaboozoo-Neyaashing on Red Lake Reservation. Oakgrove's version is a little bit longer than the one translated here. But there are no significant differences, except for a lazier, more indefinite approach that makes the solidity of the punch line, the extreme difference between story and reality, more definite.

Oakgrove begins by saying, "Aabiding giiwenzh o'ow babaamaazhagaamed a'aw Nenabozho enind, ogii-waabamaan biidaasamosed wiijanishinaaben" [Once, as the story goes, Nenabozhoo, as he is known, was meandering along the lakeshore, and he saw a fellow Indian walking towards him.][12] One gets the sense that Oakgrove is aware that his audience knows the story already. He knows we have heard it before, so he can proceed more slowly. He can let the poor turd eater wander and wonder a bit longer before he pops the pellets in his mouth. But the rest of the story is the same and, in fact, uses the same exact words—*nibwaakaaminensan* (a compound noun consisting of *nibwaakaa* [to be smart], *-min* [a morpheme meaning berry or pill], and the diminutive and inanimate plural ending *ensan*), as well as the casual verbs *maazhagaamed* (to walk along shore), *nakwetawaad* (to reply to someone), and so on. The stories do not differ in structure—aimless wandering, chance meeting, innocent question, cruel trick, sudden realization, punch line—or event. All versions also begin in the same place and are quite clear about it, on the shore of a lake. The action then moves from there to *megwekob* (the bush), where the lesson is learned. The setting of the stories, uniform throughout all versions, is interesting. Why must they meet on the shores of a lake? Why do they go to "the bush" as opposed to *mashkodeng* (the prairie), or *noopiming* (in the deep woods)? You could suggest that a meeting along the lakeshore, which is open to the sky, is a place where such meetings usually take place in Ojibwe stories (as opposed to chance meetings on roads that so often occur in Greek myths and plays) and suggests an innocent place, open, friendly. And then they go to "the bush," which suggests brush, small trees, and game trails. So "the bush" is different from "the deep woods" because there is a lot of action in "the bush" yet it is not so remote, mysterious, and serious, as "the deep woods." It is interesting that Erdrich begins her novel the same way, though the prairie is substituted for the lakeshore. June Kashpaw wanders out on the prairie, and then, when the story resumes in Albertine's voice, the action moves from another section of prairie into the bush and then into the woods, where Grandma lives.

But the similarities end here. One can list the things that Ojibwe stories do and don't do:

1. They are not in first person. In fact, there is not a single Wenabozho story that is narrated in the first person.

2. The issue of motivation is conspicuously absent from the story. No one wonders why Wenabozho does what he does. Such mischief is actually his job.

3. There is a complete lack of what can be seen as metaphor, simile, metonym, or implied comparison. The story is quite beautifully literal.

4. There is no sense of "subjectivity" or "competing versions."

5. It is a supremely stable narrative. What happens happens. And it happens in an orderly fashion.

6. The story exists outside of time. That is, when the story takes place is of absolutely no importance. It could have happened yesterday or three hundred years ago.

7. It exists in indefinite relation to other Wenabozho stories. It does not matter which story is told first or which story occurs first in time. In fact, there is no way to tell if Wenabozho gave his friend "smartberries" before or after any of the other stories in which Wenabozho appears, and it doesn't matter.

8. The stories never shift register. They have their own style, of course, their own unique pleasures. But there is no sense that there is tension between competing or pleached styles or modes, no war between realism and fantasy, no notion of magic realism that by its very difference comments on the reality that we inhabit.

Neither these stories nor the Ojibwe oral tradition should have anything to do with how Erdrich's novels are interpreted. This is not to say that *Love Medicine* is Indian or is not, just that it is "Indian" in a more modern sense than has been assumed by most scholars. The code of production in *Love Medicine* is not cultural. But culture, as a concept, as an idea promoted by the characters, is a very important part of *Love Medicine*. Ojibwe culture and the characters' self-conscious obsession with it, as an idea, is nowhere more apparent than in the 1993 edition of *Love Medicine*. Characters young and old—with the ease and melancholy of young, fin de siècle noblemen contemplating the wheeling of the heavens—reflect on culture in long, uninterrupted interior monologues, and such reflections are typically cast as reflections on Ojibwe language.

The first exchange, about Indianness, occurs in the first chapter of the novel:

> "Can you give me a cigarette, Eli?" King asked.
>
> "When you ask for a cigarette around here," said Gordie, "you don't say can I have a cigarette. You say ciga swa?"
>
> "Them Mitchifs ask like that," Eli said. "You got to ask a real old-time Indian like me for the right words." (32)

Gordie, who sort of knows Ojibwe, or Mitchif (the Plains combination of Cree and French), tells King how to ask. Eli, who it is suggested definitely knows Ojibwe, confirms what Gordie says. Yet "ciga swa" (or *zagaswaa* as it is typically spelled) means "he smokes." The verb, uninflected, unmodified, does not fit

the context. In no dialect does "ciga swa" mean "give me a smoke." The mistake is not a grammatical or idiomatic mistake that the characters would make unless they sat around reading dictionaries. It would seem that for all their longing, none of the characters really know what to say.

But this does not stop them from wanting to say it and from claiming the importance of "the old language" for themselves, which is the most interesting aspect of cultural longing in Erdrich's writing. It becomes especially interesting when Marie Kashpaw is in labor and Rushes Bear, a.k.a. Margaret Kashpaw, helps her through the ordeal:

> I tried to gather myself, to remember things. Each one was different. Each labor I had been through had its word, a helping word, one I could use like an instruction to get me through. I searched my mind, let it play in the language. Perhaps because of Rushes Bear or because of the thought of Fleur, the word that finally came wasn't English, but out of childhood, out of memory, an old word I had forgotten the use of, *Babaumawaebigowin*.
>
> I knew it was a word that was spoken in a boat, but I could not think how, or when, or what it meant. It took a long time to repeat, to pronounce. Between times, the round syllables bobbed on my tongue. I began to lose track of where I was, in my absorption, and sometimes I saw myself from a distance, floating calm, driven by long swells of waves. (101–2)

It's no wonder that that word *babaumawaebigowin* was so hard for Marie to get her mind around. It would make no sense to her, even if she did speak Minnesota Ojibwe, even less sense if she spoke Mitchif. Contrary to what Marie believes or wants to believe, there is no morpheme that represents boat. *Babaa-* is a reduplicative prefix that suggests aimless motion; *-ma-* is simply a connector; *-webiig* are two conjoined morphemes that suggest sound and water; while *-owin* is simply a suffix that changes a verb to a noun. Taken altogether and with the proper spelling, *babaamawebigowin* suggests the aimless movement as marked by the sound of water, a disturbed surface perhaps.

But dim as it is, the word continues to help Marie: "Now I clung on to their voices, all I had, as they spoke to me in low tones, as they told me when to hold my breath and when to let it go. I understood perfectly although they spoke only in the old language. Once, someone used my word. Babaumawaebigowin, and I understood that I was to let my body be driven by the waves, like a boat to shore, like someone swimming toward a very small light" (103). The miracle of birth. Out of nothing comes a complete understanding of a language clearly foreign to the character. And the word itself, taken from Basil Johnston's *Ojibwe Language Lexicon for Beginners*, would have been foreign to even Rushes Bear or Nanapush. Johnston and his dialect are local to Cape Croker, near Detroit, Michigan, and quite a different language it is from Mitchif. There is nothing in the word to suggest the thoughts that occurred to Marie. No sense of "body" or "boat" or "swimming" or "light." In fact, the string of similes that Marie associates with her "helping word" are all beautifully at home in English but not in Ojibwe. While it

is admirable that Erdrich is working hard to learn Ojibwe, the language of some of her ancestors, it seems only fair to point out that the Ojibwe that appears in her work contains many errors, if only so non-Ojibwe readers will know that her use of "the old language" is not necessarily the mark of Indian authenticity. And for Ojibwe readers it is important to notice that the use of the Ojibwe language signifies something other than Ojibwe identity and Ojibwe culture.

Strangely, and this is the most important point, the use of Ojibwe words—though done seldom—highlights the longing for culture, not its presence. It is longing because you don't long for something you have. You already possess it. These scattered words play a supporting role—always explained in English, always subordinate. All of the chapters are being told to us, to the reader, in the "language of the character's mind." These chapters are confessionals. And even if someone like Marie "started speaking the old language, falling back through time to the words that Lazarres had used among themselves" (263), it is not enough of a falling back to have her narrate her chapters in "the old language." Like convertibles and pies, language, and even the idea of culture, functions as a symbol. It is the English language and the devices, tricks, modes, and traditions of Western literature, after all, that creates the sense of the novel; the use of language and culture are only part of a beautiful array of symbols and metaphors that inform it.

But this is where *Love Medicine* becomes most fascinating. What we have in *Love Medicine* is a brilliant use of Western literary tactics that create, in gorgeous English prose, the simulacrum of culture. Instead of cultural desire what we have in *Love Medicine* is the desire for culture. The characters all speak to one another in English. They confess their lives (to us) in English. The very structure of the stories they tell and their contents are not only modern; they are "Western." The emotional syntax of the characters—their motivations, rationales, psychological divisions (think of childhood, adolescence, old age)—corresponds to standardized literary categories. Not only that, but, in moments of crisis such as childbirth, death, sex, and healing, the characters summon out of thin air not a culture that lives but an idea of culture that functions as a memory, not a reality. Culture is a paradigm the characters evoke but do not live by. The book ends up functioning the same way. In moments of crisis—deep feeling or dire straits—it is culture that is summoned, as an idea that exists outside of the sense the novel builds the rest of the time, and serves to signify importance or intensity.

And perhaps the problem is this. *Mii gaa-izhichigewaad ingiw wezhibi'igejig dibishkoo go ingiw mazina'iganiwi-anishinaabeg.* In other words, our scholarship seems more like an extension of the characters' concerns than a serious attempt to understand how the book actually functions. Marie reaches—beyond her own understanding, beyond what is possible for her to understand—for some cultural notion that she can use, however inaccurately, to make sense of her own experience, and so have the critics, and perhaps even Erdrich herself. They reach for a cultural understanding not present in the material to explain that material. And this is a testament to the book's power. So potent is it, so seductively does it evoke our inherited notions of Indian life, so beautifully is it wrought that, magically, the concerns and concepts of the characters—these characters who long for a life unadulterated, for a life that

is their own, of their own construction—have become our own. But to understand the book in their terms, not its terms—to ignore the ways in which it is actually constructed—is dangerous for two reasons. By doing so we might save a book, but we will destroy the literature; and if we don't look closely and carefully at what is actually in front of us, then we are fated to learn the hard way, and the price of knowledge is a lingering taste we'd rather not have.

But if you insist on believing that *Love Medicine* is a cultural document and that you can reach an understanding of its delicious magic without looking at it as a literary production in relation to other literary products, and if you really want to use notions derived from desire instead of from knowledge as a way to make sense of it, then come with me, over here next to the trail: I've got some smartberries for you to eat.

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NOTES

1. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 1. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Hertha D. Sweet Wong, *Louise Erdrich's "Love Medicine": A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88.

3. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 240–41.

4. Ibid., 241.

5. See Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3–34.

6. Allan Chavkin, introduction to *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. Allan Chavkin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 2.

7. Allan Chavkin, "Vision and Revision in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," in Chavkin, *Chippewa Landscape*, 86.

8. James Ruppert, "Celebrating Culture: *Love Medicine*," in Wong, *Louise Erdrich's "Love Medicine,"* 70.

9. Ibid., 71.

10. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 869. My thanks to Albert Sonnenfeld for translating this passage.

11. Rose Foss, "Why Wenaboozhoo Is So Smart," *Oshkaabewis Native Journal* 4, no. 1 (1997): 33–34. Transcribed by Giles Delisle and retranscribed in the double vowel orthography by Anton Treuer.

12. Quoted in Anton Treuer, *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 172.