

Continuity and Connection: Characters in Louise Erdrich's Fiction

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The recent publication of *Tracks* provides the background for understanding the connections and histories of many of Louise Erdrich's characters in her previously published novels, *Beet Queen* and *Love Medicine*. In addition, by creating intricate connections between her characters, Erdrich seems to be emphasizing the importance of continuity in native culture. Native American writers, Erdrich says, "must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe."¹ The catastrophe is, of course, the genocide of the Native Americans by Euro-Americans. Erdrich, part Chippewa and an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe of North Dakota, takes this task seriously. Characters in her fiction illuminate the continuing struggle of Native Americans to survive and maintain their culture. By tracing the connections of the characters in Erdrich's three fictional books, *Tracks*, *Beet Queen*, and *Love Medicine*, and two stories, "The Island" and "The Bingo Van," the reader can see the ways she connects destruction, survival, and continuity.²

In Erdrich's longer fictional works, the voices of different characters "tell the story," along with an occasional omniscient narrator. However, the veracity of narrators must always be in question. Pauline and Nanapush narrate the events in *Tracks*. Nanapush insists several times that Pauline does not always tell the truth.

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"[S]he was born a liar, and sure to die one," Nanapush declares (p. 53). Importantly, it is only in Pauline's narration that the reader learns that Fleur was raped by three men at the butcher shop in Argus.³

In another quite different sense, Marie speaks of her father, Ignatius (*Love Medicine*, p. 64). Although her biological father is Napoleon Morrissey, Marie is unaware of the circumstances of her birth and thus is unreliable in this respect. Despite possibly unreliable narrators, the task of connecting characters is one that can be achieved. In fact, within the structure of the novels and stories, the narrators' memories, true or false, form the basis of "the story." Marvin Magalaner notes, "In *Love Medicine* the Chippewa family line, as well as the lines of the Kashpaws and the Lamartines, is filtered to the reader through the memory flow of family members: a quick-running stream of remembrance here, a slow and deliberately muddy flow of recollection there."⁴

Perhaps the most obvious way to begin sorting out the connections in Erdrich's fictional world is to trace the "bloodlines," to find the biological connections of genealogy, a not uncomplicated task (see appendices). In fact, trying to lay out on paper the biological connections of Erdrich's characters puts one in mind of the song about bones: "The kneebone's connected to the thighbone, the thighbone's connected . . ." Yet Erdrich's characters are connected in both circular and linear ways. While one might argue that genealogical lines are unimportant in Chippewa culture, they do serve as one means of connection in the fictional world Erdrich creates.

There is one particular family from which many of the characters spring or into which their lives are woven: the Pillager family. The Pillagers are main characters in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* and are also intricately, although almost invisibly, interwoven into *Beet Queen*. Fleur Pillager's parents are identified as Old Pillager (her father) and Ogimaakwe (her mother) in *Tracks*. However, all of the Pillagers, except Fleur and her cousin, Moses, die in an epidemic. Fleur's life is saved by Nanapush, an "old" man who has lost his entire family. Nanapush thus becomes a sort of father figure and teacher for Fleur. Fleur's biological family, albeit deceased, remains important to her, but Nanapush becomes her new family. Fleur has two children: Lulu and a baby that dies at birth. Lulu's father might be one of several persons. He might be one of the men who raped Fleur in Argus (if Pauline's story is true). There is also talk that Lulu's father is Misshepesu, the water monster.

Or her father may be Eli Kashpaw, who is certainly the father of Fleur's second child. In fact, in the relationship between Nanapush, Fleur, Lulu, and Moses, the interplay of biological and "adopted" family is illuminated. Fleur's ancestors are crucial to her sense of identity, but her relationship with Nanapush, who shares her cultural beliefs, is also influential.

Regardless of the identity of her biological father, Lulu maintains connections with her biological family (Pillagers) and with her "adopted" grandfather, Nanapush. In *Tracks*, Nanapush utilizes the power of naming and provides Lulu's name, using his deceased daughter's nickname and his own last name. Lulu thus carries on both family lines.

Tracks is partially narrated by Nanapush, who is telling the story to Lulu in order to convince her not to marry a "no-good" Morrissey. Although Lulu later marries a Morrissey, she does consider and act on the story she hears in *Tracks*. In Erdrich's story "The Island," Lulu visits Fleur's cousin, Moses Pillager, a hermit. The result of their encounter is a son, Gerry Nanapush. Lulu, as narrator of "The Island," says, "By coming here, I had done what I needed to do" (p. 40). What she needed to do was to continue the lines of the Pillager and Nanapush families (Gerry takes the name of Nanapush).

Lulu's other children (by various fathers) include one with the Nanapush name, several who were Morrisseys but who take the Lamartine name, and the youngest ones, who are called Lamartines (Henry, Jr., Lyman, and Bonita). Henry, Jr. appears to be Lulu's and Beverly Lamartine's (Beverly is the brother of Henry, Sr.—Lulu's husband), while Lyman is Nector Kashpaw's, and Bonita is the daughter of an unnamed Mexican. The genealogy becomes even more tangled in the generation of Lulu's children.

Gerry Nanapush fathers two children in *Love Medicine*: Lipsha, whose mother is June Morrissey, is actually raised by Marie Kashpaw (Nector's wife and a Morrissey herself, although unknown to her); Gerry's second child, Shawn, is born to Dot Adare, a character who, along with the rest of her family, appears in *Beet Queen*. Three more of Lulu's grandchildren are mentioned in "The Bingo Van": Robert, Eber, and Clay Morrissey.

Moving back in time to *Tracks*, the Kashpaw line may be traced further.⁵ Margaret (Rushes Bear in *Love Medicine*) has eighteen children by the original Kashpaw. Apparently, the oldest sixteen children filed for land allotments and received tracts in Montana. Thus Eli and Nector, Margaret's two youngest, are the only ones

to remain on the reservation in North Dakota with their mother. In *Tracks*, Eli is the oldest brother (p. 39), but, in *Love Medicine*, they are portrayed as twins (p. 17), an interesting difference. Eli, having become Fleur's lover in *Tracks* and also connected with her in *Beet Queen*, apparently remains involved with her, although she is not a presence in *Love Medicine*.

Nector Kashpaw marries Marie Lazarre, and they raise numerous children, although their first two children die. Gordon (Gordie) is their oldest surviving child. They also have Zelda, Aurelia, Eugene, and Patsy. Zelda marries Swede Johnson, and she bears a daughter, Albertine. Marie and Nector also "adopt" two children who are raised as part of their family: June Morrissey and, later, her son Lipsha Morrissey. June, an ephemeral character, present even in *Beet Queen*, dies in the opening chapter of *Love Medicine*.⁶ She is the daughter of Marie's sister Lucille. After Lucille's death, June lives for a while with Marie and Nector but soon chooses to live with Eli instead. Indeed, in *Beet Queen*, we have "proof" of her residency with Eli in the form of a photograph and a picture drawn by her and posted on his refrigerator. June, as mentioned earlier, has a child by Gerry Nanapush. This child, Lipsha (Lulu's grandson), raised by Marie and Nector, is born sometime after June's divorce from Gordie. Gordie and June have one son, King, born while they were married. King marries Lynette, and they have a son named Howard King Kashpaw (King, Jr.).

Like the Kashpaws', the Morrisseys' genealogy is interconnected with the Pillager family. In fact, Lucille is not biologically Marie's sister, yet they are somehow related. The Morrisseys' story begins in *Tracks*, when Pauline Puyat travels to the town of Argus (identified in *Beet Queen*) to live with her Aunt Regina, whose maiden name is Puyat. Regina has several children, including Isabel and Russell Kashpaw. These two, like Eli and Nector, are children of the original Kashpaw. Thus Isabel and Russell are half-sister and half-brother to Eli and Nector. Russell's early childhood days are told in *Tracks*, and his later years appear in *Beet Queen*. Isabel is important in the earlier stories, because after Regina Kashpaw and her second husband, Dutch James, die, Isabel raises Russell and Celestine, a child of Regina's and Dutch's. Celestine has a child by Karl Adare, a character in *Beet Queen*, and that child, Dot Adare, later becomes involved with Gerry Nanapush in *Love Medicine*. Together, they have a child named Shawn.

Pauline spends a summer with Regina and Dutch and their family (while Regina is pregnant with Celestine). (This is also the

summer that she claims to see Fleur raped by the men who play cards at the butcher shop.) However, Pauline is dissatisfied with her life in Argus, so she asks Bernadette Morrissey, a distant relative, if she may live with her. Bernadette resides on the reservation with her brother Napoleon and her two daughters, Sophie and Philomena. Bernadette agrees to let Pauline live with them, and she teaches Pauline the skills required to lay out and dress the dead. As one of the many plot twists, Pauline becomes pregnant by Napoleon Morrissey. Her child is Marie (called Marie Lazarre). Pauline rejects the child at birth and joins a convent. As Sister Leopolda, she subsequently has a role in both *Beet Queen* and *Love Medicine*. Marie is raised initially by Bernadette and later by Sophie Morrissey, who marries a Lazarre. That is presumably how Marie gets the Lazarre name. Because the adjustment to Sophie as mother comes early, Marie believes, more or less, that the children she is raised with are, in actuality, her siblings. Thus there is a hint of incest as Marie's son Gordie marries June Morrissey. Gordie's grandfather is June's great great-uncle.

Finally we come to the somewhat less complicated Adare family traced in *Beet Queen*. Adelaide Adare has three children by Mr. Ober, her married "benefactor." Karl is the oldest, followed by Mary. Adelaide is pregnant with a third child when Mr. Ober dies. Because Adelaide is merely his mistress and he already has a family, she and the children lose their means of support at his death. Their destitution is compounded by the depression of the 1930s. After bearing her third child, a son, Adelaide leaves the children and flies off with the Great Omar, never to return. Karl and Mary are left at the carnival, in shock, and with the responsibility for their newborn brother. A young man "takes charge" of the infant, but, in reality, he takes the baby boy home to his wife. They "adopt" the baby and name him Jude. In desperation, Karl and Mary hop a freight train to Adelaide's sister's home in Argus, North Dakota. Pete and Fritzie (Adelaide's sister) operate the butcher shop in Argus. At the end of a long story in which we learn that Karl is bisexual and Mary is in some ways sexless, Karl hooks up in Argus for several months with Mary's friend Celestine James. The result of that union is Dot Adare, the future "Beet Queen" in a contest rigged by her "adopted" uncle and father's lover, Wallace Pfef. In *Love Medicine*, Dot and Gerry Nanapush have a daughter named Shawn, and that brings the story full circle—almost.

Actually, the above genealogy is only the beginning of the

characters' intricate connections. Still, the genealogy helps sort out some of the myriad twists and turns. Finally, one sees that Lulu, Marie, Mary, Karl, Sita, and Celestine are roughly contemporaries. However, it is in the more subtle connections that the continuities of Erdrich's fiction shine through. As we explore the different facets of the characters, it may help also to look at the chronology, bearing in mind that there are discrepancies in some dates and that, at any rate, all dates are estimated from sometimes minute clues in the texts (see appendices).

The oldest character in the stories seems to be Nanapush, both by his own admission and by his age. He is one of two narrators in *Tracks* and maintains that he is the most honest. Born in approximately 1862 (p. 2), Nanapush received a Jesuit education (p. 32). Thus he is able to read and write important legal documents. He is responsible for saving Fleur's life after the epidemic kills the rest of her immediate family. Partially because of this, he considers Fleur his daughter (p. 55) and Lulu his granddaughter.

In *Tracks*, Nanapush is a trickster figure. Even his name reflects his trickster nature, "[b]ecause it's got to do with trickery and living in the bush" (p. 33). Nanapush's name is also very close to Nanabozho, the Chippewa trickster. A trickster figure is usually the firstborn. Symbolizing both good and evil, Trickster breaks the rules, messes with the rituals, and is divisive about everything. Trickster is interested in scatology and has huge appetites for sex and food. Paul Radin notes that "[I]aughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does."⁷

Nanapush, the firstborn in the sense that he is the oldest character, is also firstborn in that he is the first narrator. He evokes a personality that includes humor, sometimes gentle and sometimes lewd. For example, when Pauline/Leopolda has limited herself to urinating only twice a day, Nanapush tells a ribald story, fills her with tea, and tricks her into using the outhouse before she is "supposed" to. In a gentler, self-deprecating vein, after he invites an unresponsive Eli to share a meal with him, Nanapush thinks, "I suppose he could see for himself that the meat in the pot was only one poor gopher that should have hibernated while it could" (*Tracks*, p. 96).

Other trickster figures in Erdrich's fiction include Gerry, Lulu, and Lipsha. Gerry is the most obvious trickster in *Love Medicine*. Trickster figures are, in a sense, legends, as is Gerry, "the embodiment of Chippewa life."⁸ William Gleason calls Gerry the "paradigmatic Trickster figure."⁹ Gerry personifies the trickster in two

important ways. First, he is able to change forms, to escape despite his enormous size, thus acting out the trickster's escape and recapture cycle. Lipsha says of Gerry, "I knew my dad would get away. He could fly. He could strip and flee and change into shapes of swift release. Owls and bees, two-toned Ramblers, buzzards, cottontails, and motes of dust" (*Love Medicine*, p. 266).

Gerry is also able to make Dot Adare pregnant, even though he is in jail. "Dot had straddled Gerry's lap in a corner the closed-circuit TV did not quite scan. Through a hole ripped in her pantyhose and a hole ripped in Gerry's jeans they somehow managed to join and, miraculously, to conceive" (p. 160). James McKenzie calls this a "magical impregnation."¹⁰ Of course, Gerry, the child of Lulu and Moses Pillager, is a continuation of an important family line.¹¹

Gerry's mother, Lulu, also has some trickster-like qualities. When Beverly (her deceased husband's brother) visits her, she prepares a meal: "She seemed to fill pots with food by pointing at them and take things from the oven that she'd never put in. The table jumped to set itself" (*Love Medicine*, p. 86). She, too, is a Pillager, of course, and determined, as readers find in "The Island," to continue the Pillager family.

In *Love Medicine*, another important figure is Lipsha. In fact, one could argue that Lipsha exhibits trickster-like qualities along with the beginnings of a medicine man's powers. For example, Lipsha concocts a sort of love medicine in an effort to revitalize Nector's love for Marie. He does, we are told, have "the touch" (p. 190) and is able to help people with such problems as arthritis. He sets out to kill two geese (geese being creatures that mate for life) so that he can extract the hearts, which he intends to feed to Nector. Despite his apparently perfect shots, he misses the geese and instead purchases two frozen turkey hearts at the local Red Owl grocery. Nector chokes to death while eating this "love medicine." In a way, Lipsha has broken the rules. (For both Lipsha and the trickster in round seven of the Winnebago Trickster cycle, the result is a person's death.¹²)

Gerald Vizenor writes that the trickster is comic and survives in the natural world: "He represents a spiritual balance in a comic drama rather than the romantic elimination of human contradictions and evil."¹³ Lipsha serves this purpose in *Love Medicine*. He is the bearer of good and bad medicine; he has "the touch," and he is the one who finds his balance by the end of the novel.¹⁴

Nanapush, already identified as a trickster, is also in some ways

a medicine man. Although not as strong as Moses Pillager's medicine, Nanapush has the power to heal Lulu's frozen feet, even though the white doctor says they must be amputated. Moses Pillager's medicine powers begin in *Tracks* and, by the time of *Love Medicine*, have become legendary. Lipsha hesitates to consult Moses about the love medicine for Nector, because that would make it serious business, "and I have always thought it best to steer clear of that whenever I could" (*Love Medicine*, p. 199). Lipsha's "medicine power" works for Albertine, who says, "Lipsha's voice was a steady bridge over a deep black space of sickness I was crossing" (p. 35). Lipsha is the medicine man for his generation.

Pauline serves as a counter to traditional ways. She is a foil for the trickster figure, especially Nanapush. When Nanapush, after consulting with Moses, sets up a ceremony to cure Fleur of her overprotectiveness of Lulu, Pauline disrupts it. Further, when Pauline tells the nuns she has no Indian blood, she not only tricks them but takes a role in the destruction of native culture. She misuses some love medicine created after consulting with Moses. She uses the love medicine on Eli so that he will be sexually unfaithful to Fleur with Sophie. Ironically, administering the love medicine, Pauline's touch is destructive and eventually becomes focused on herself. Before the end of *Tracks*, she also uses her "power" on Bernadette's brother Napoleon. Her earlier sexual encounters with Napoleon resulted in the birth of Marie, but, at some point, Pauline has a vision, meets Napoleon in the woods, thinks he is the devil, and strangles him with her rosary beads. She then tosses the beads into the bushes. It is shortly after this incident that she goes into the convent. Pauline receives her new name, Leopolda, and a post at Saint Catherine's school in Argus to teach arithmetic. Thus Pauline makes the transition to *Beet Queen*. During this posting, she is called upon to photograph a miracle, "The Manifestation at Argus." Later, she is found at the site of the miracle, using her powers against herself, scourging her arms with dried thistles. After this episode, she is sent to Sacred Heart Convent, where "problem" nuns end up (and thus makes the transition to *Love Medicine*).

Although Pauline/Leopolda makes the transition through the three novels, other characters appear in only one or two of the books. However, characters may be connected in other ways to stories in which they do not appear. Several characters are connected by their abilities in fortunetelling, gambling, and card playing. Of the Native American and mixed-blood characters,

three are especially adept at gambling and playing cards. Early in *Tracks*, Fleur tricks three men into believing she will win only one dollar per night. On the last night they play cards together, Fleur lures them into placing all of their money on their bets, and she wins that hand. The men are upset, and, in retaliation (at least in Pauline's story), they rape Fleur. She walks away from Argus, returning to the reservation, but manages to keep the money.

Fleur's daughter Lulu is also a good card player. In addition, she plays bingo. Finally, Lipsha Morrissey, Lulu's grandson and Fleur's great grandson, is a successful card player. Lipsha deals himself not just cards but "a perfect family," a royal family, to beat his half-brother King at cards. Thus he wins the car, a Firebird, purchased by King with his (and Lipsha's) mother's life insurance money. In "The Bingo Van," Lipsha, after coming to a better understanding of his healing powers, wins a bingo game, the prize of which is the title of the story.

There is one final card player in Erdrich's fiction: Mary Adare. It is here that one begins to see some of the intricate connections between the Native American characters (mostly in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*) and the predominantly Euro-American characters (mostly in *Beet Queen*). Mary's odd nature defies her ordinary appearance. She was "so short and ordinary that it was obvious she would be this way all her life. Her name was square and practical as the rest of her" (*Beet Queen*, p. 1). But Mary aspires to be a fortuneteller and likes to wear tasseled turbans. She plays cards with Celestine and usually wins. Mary probably learned to play cards at the butcher shop, where Fleur played cards with the men and won their money. Mary, as a character who lives on the edge of Argus society, thus connects particularly with Fleur, who also lived on the fringes of her (native) society. Mary also uses cards to tell fortunes, sometimes with a regular deck and sometimes with a tarot deck. She reads the lines in people's palms and throws yarrow sticks to foretell the future. Further, "[a] customer had shown her a certain way to crack an egg into a jar of water and read the yolk . . . Standing on her clean linoleum, thinking forward, she willed a sign to come" (p. 142). In fact, Mary dreams of Dot before her birth. Moreover, Mary is one of two characters who read the magazine of fortunetelling, *Fate*. Lulu is the other.

Lulu and Mary share other connections as well, because Mary exhibits trickster qualities. Early in her life, she manages to acquire her uncle's special talisman, a cow's lens, after he has refused to give it to his own daughter Sita, who asked for it. Mary also

“steals” Sita’s best friend, Celestine. In addition, Mary is the cause of a miracle in Argus. On an icy winter day, when the children are told to stay off the slide, Mary whooshes down it face first, and, in smashing her face into the ice at the bottom, leaves the imprint of Christ’s face. This “manifestation,” which melts away as soon as the weather changes, pushes Sister Leopolda (Pauline, Marie’s mother) over the edge psychologically, and she is sent away.

Further, Mary is blamed for Sita’s mental illness, as though she has special powers that could make a person ill. She does use the power of naming when she provides a nickname (Dot) for Wallacette Darlene, whose given name Mary detests. Mary makes certain that everyone calls the child Dot, not Wallacette. Here, Mary parallels Nanapush, who provides Lulu’s name and who previously (re)named Moses in an effort to hide him from the epidemic.

Finally, in another trickster-like, humorous action, Mary inadvertently joins the Beet Queen parade. When she and Celestine arrive to pick up Sita on their way to the parade, they find her dead and rather stiff. Everyone from the local mortuary is at the parade, so Mary and Celestine load Sita into the front seat of Mary’s delivery van. Coming into Argus, they take a wrong turn and end up in the parade, where they cruise slowly along, waving at the onlookers, with Sita propped in the front seat.

One effect of the interconnection of characters is to blur the lines of conventional fiction. When one story or character overlaps with others, the reader becomes further enmeshed in their lives. These are not just characters. They are like people you know, whom you might happen to run into at any moment. Erdrich’s fiction contains its own inner chronology, and the characters move in and out of the reader’s consciousness. Who would have thought, for example, that June, a dim figure of a girl living with Russell’s half-brother, would become a central presence in *Love Medicine*? Moreover, many characters are connected to each other in a circular fashion. One circle begins with the trickster Nanapush: Nanapush saves Fleur’s life (*Tracks*). Fleur saves Karl Adare,¹⁵ who later saves Wallace (*Beet Queen*). Wallace starts the sugar beet farming business that eventually brings a Mexican lover to Lulu, who then has a child, Bonita. Wallace also serves as the head of the Chamber of Commerce about the same time that Nector serves as tribal chair, a position Nanapush had held at one time.

In some ways, Erdrich’s connections almost deconstruct the novel form in which the stories appear. This may simply be due to

the appearance of the chapters as individual stories. On the other hand, the fiction is rather like a collection of folklore, stories, anecdotes, and jokes.¹⁶ Robert Silberman notes that Erdrich brings a sense of immediacy to her fiction that is like oral storytelling. "The characters themselves almost at once demonstrate the effects of storytelling, for it is storytelling that animates the women in the kitchen after June's death [in *Love Medicine*]."¹⁷ *Tracks* is also Nanapush's story about the past, directed as a lesson for his granddaughter, Lulu.

The characters' memories are shaped by their relationships to their culture. Further, the ways in which the characters interconnect, even between white and Indian worlds, become clearer as one examines the motif of homecoming, which runs throughout Erdrich's fiction. William Bevis points out that a "homing" plot is typical of Native American novels: "In Native American novels, 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."¹⁸ In Erdrich's fiction, the characters face both sides of the question—not just a chance to "go home" but also a chance to leave.

The most extreme example of leaving is the death of three characters: Henry, Sr., Henry, Jr., and June. They are linked together by alienation from a Western society that they can no longer accept or understand and that does not accept their culture. Henry, Sr. parks his car in front of an oncoming train. Henry, Jr., alienated particularly by his experience in Vietnam, also commits suicide. Interestingly, although he identifies himself with the trickster-like Gerry in escape ability, Henry, Jr. ends his life by drowning, a bad death for a Chippewa. Also, when Henry, Jr. asks Albertine, shortly before his death, "Angel, where's your wings" (*Love Medicine*, p. 136), he connects himself to June's drinking Angel Wings in a bar just before her death by freezing.¹⁹

Other characters escape their past in different ways. Moses Pillager, after escaping death in the epidemic, finds himself unable to fit into society. He lives alone on an island.²⁰ Fleur sends Lulu to government school and leaves Matchimanito to become a peddler. Fleur is able to return to the reservation, but readers never learn if she and Lulu ever speak to each other again. In the beginning of *Beet Queen*, Adelaide escapes from her life by flying off with the Great Omar. Although she vaguely keeps tabs on her children, she never attempts to see them again. Her son Karl escapes several

times. First he runs away from Argus. Later he leaves the priesthood to become a salesman. Throughout *Beet Queen*, Karl is coming and going, more often leaving than not. Yet, at the end of the story, he returns to Argus and "saves" his male lover, Wallace. Sita Kozka, Mary's and Karl's cousin, escapes from Argus to Fargo, where she works as a model, but she eventually returns to the vicinity of Argus and, even in death, revisits the streets of her hometown as part of the Beet Queen parade. Moreover, Sita (*Beet Queen*) is connected with Sophie (*Tracks*). They are the only two characters who eat a lot of candy. Sita exchanges her candy for pills as her mental condition deteriorates, but Sophie gives hers away to Eli. Sita escapes into her own world and then into death. Sophie does not escape; instead, she marries a Lazarre, bears many children, and has a hard life.

On the day that Sita dies and rides in the parade, Dot Adare, the newly chosen queen (who has heard the story of Adelaide's desertion by plane) also attempts to escape, bringing *Beet Queen* full circle. Unlike Adelaide (but like her future lover, Gerry), Dot returns. In *Beet Queen*, Russell Kashpaw manages an escape from Western society that is also a homecoming to his native culture. Disgruntled over Karl's presence in Celestine's life, Russell moves out to the reservation. In fact, that seems to be his retreat whenever he needs to get away. Russell and Eli, both Native Americans, are the two fishermen in the texts. Both also understand the ways of hunting and trapping that have been passed down through their family. After his stroke, Russell moves to Eli's place permanently. For Russell, the reservation is an oasis, a place to go home to when he is alienated by a society that accepted him only in the role of a soldier.

Finally, Gerry Nanapush is a trickster/escape artist, but he escapes from jail in order to return home rather than leave. Occasionally, he is pursued by Officer Lovchik (Lovesick?), "a tall, sad, soft-shouldered man with a horror of confronting criminals" (*Beet Queen*, p. 189), who pursues Sita Kozka unsuccessfully.

Many of the characters in Erdrich's fiction are alienated from society, including Henry, Sr., Henry, Jr., June, Albertine, and King. The first three die, but Albertine and King find other ways to deal with their problems. King is alienated from his relatives and tribal life in general. However, when he moves to the city, he finds that life is no better. His failed escape from the reservation leaves him angry and frustrated. He then takes his anger out on his wife, Lynette.

Albertine escapes to Fargo for a time in an effort to come to terms with herself, and she succeeds. She apparently also lives for a time in Argus, working on a job connected with the construction of an interstate highway that the area needs because of the booming sugar beet business started by Wallace in *Beet Queen*. In Argus, she meets Dot Adare, who is pregnant with Shawn. Returning to the reservation for a reunion in 1981, Albertine seems at ease with herself. She left the reservation, but she is able to come home.

Perhaps the most significant homecoming is Lipsha's, which parallels Albertine's experience. Lipsha tries to escape from the reservation by joining the military but finds he must in fact escape that instead. In the final moments of *Love Medicine*, when Lishpa has learned the identity of his parents, he comes to an understanding of himself and is able to return home.

Although Lipsha later finds out that he would not have had to serve in the military, he is oddly connected to two of the veterans in *Love Medicine*, because they, like Lipsha, have tattoos. Of the four veterans—Russell, Beverly, Henry, Sr., and Henry, Jr.—three have tattoos. However, Russell's "tattoos" are battle scars. Beverly's and Henry, Sr.'s tattoos include lizards, a woman's name, a rose with a thorn, a skull with a knife, an eagle, and their names, ranks, and serial numbers. The serial numbers emphasize the alienation of the individual in a mass society. It is noteworthy that two of the veterans, Henry, Sr. and Henry, Jr., commit suicide. Lipsha's tattoo, a small, running horse (obtained in "The Bingo Van"), points the way to a return to more traditional ways, a movement toward peace and away from war.

While tattoos and other similarities are not indications of cultural continuity, they do serve as connections between characters in the stories. It is such similarities that create a kind of web that holds Erdrich's stories together, that binds her diverse characters together in a fictional world.

There are still other intriguing connections that provide a resonance between characters. Three females, Lulu, Dot, and Shawn, are portrayed as extraordinarily strong babies. As children, all are robust, hearty, and precocious. Mary describes Dot: Her "first clear word was MORE. She was greedy, grew fat . . . Dot growled, 'PLEEZ MORE,' her eyes hard as buttons" (*Beet Queen*, p. 181). And Dot conquers her classmates with force: "She feared nothing" (p. 233). Dot's child, Shawn, was as "restless a prisoner as its father, and grew more anxious and unruly as the time of release [birth] neared" (*Love Medicine*, p. 163). The strength of women in Erdrich's

fiction is sometimes shown in their hands. Fleur and Celestine have especially tough and worn, but competent hands.

For the women, hair loss serves as a sign of strength as well as of comradeship. Margaret's head is shaved forcibly by two young men who are on the opposite side of the land allotment question. In sympathy, Fleur shaves her own head. Later, Lulu's hair is burned off in a fire started accidentally by Nector. While Margaret's and Fleur's hair grows back, Lulu's does not. Another, rather comical, hair loss is Mary's. Her eyebrows are scraped off when she smashes her face into the ice at the bottom of the slide, and they never grow back. This permanent hair loss indirectly links her again to Lulu.

In *Love Medicine*, dandelions symbolize the loss of something important, and they appear three times. When Pauline lies ill and dying, her hair is "pure white. . . . [It] sprang out straight and thin from her skull like the floss of dandelions" (p. 116). Pauline long ago denied her Indian heritage, and she knows she will soon die. Nector, who has, in essence, lost his mind, has his dandelion fork and is "prying up them dandelions right and left" (p. 196). Finally, Lipsha digs dandelions as he tries to cope with the loss he feels over Nector's death.

Two final connections are of particular importance to the female characters. Marie, who is stabbed in her hands with a poker (wounds that resemble the stigmata), is connected with Mary, who causes the "manifestation" in Argus. The other "miracle" in the stories is witnessed by Pauline when she observes a statue of the Virgin that weeps tears, which harden into pebbles of quartz (p. 95).

Finally, one can speculate on the appearance and disappearance of the rosary beads. In *Tracks*, Pauline holds the beads like a noose and strangles Napoleon, whom she at first takes to be the devil. When Napoleon is dead, Pauline flings the beads as far as she can into the bushes. They are not visible, then, when Lulu finds the dead Napoleon in the woods and hides in a Juneberry bush, waiting for him to wake up. Later, in *Love Medicine*, June appears on Marie's step wearing rosary beads, supposedly found in the woods. The beads are slung around her neck, a portent of a rope noose in a later scene. Are these the very same beads Pauline used to kill the devil/Napoleon? June leaves the beads with Marie when she goes to live with Eli. For Marie, the beads become her secret.

While most characters hold the closest connections with others

in their own families, some clearly cross family lines. Dot seems to be a parallel to both Lulu and Fleur, and there is some indication that Dot's daughter Shawn will continue the tradition of the strong, determined woman. In some ways, Mary parallels Lulu as well, with her trickster qualities and interest in fortunetelling. Many of the characters, in fact, are linked by their trickster-like characteristics.

The most important links help the characters form a sense of identity and family and cultural continuity. This is especially evident for Fleur, Eli, Lipsha, and Nanapush. Erdrich is working on a fourth novel, a companion to these three, to be entitled *American Horse*.²¹ How will it link with and illuminate and correct conclusions about the characters in the fiction discussed here? One link may be found in "The Bingo Van," where Lipsha meets a woman named Serena American Horse. In *Love Medicine*, Lipsha began to understand his place in tribal society. In "The Bingo Van," he increased his understanding of his powers. Where will Erdrich's characters meet again? Perhaps the fourth novel will answer some of the questions that arise from the previous work. Why are Eli and Nector twins in *Love Medicine* but just brothers in *Tracks*? Why is Fleur identified as an aunt in *Beet Queen* instead of as Eli's wife/lover? Where are Fleur and Russell in *Love Medicine*? Will Lipsha really be his generation's medicine man?

The characters in Erdrich's *American Horse* will surely add to the diverse voices in her published fiction. In fact, the diversity of voices is one of the most intriguing facets of her fiction. More than merely a set of novels with common characters, Erdrich's fictional world illustrates the continuity of native culture. While both Native American and Euro-American writers from the earlier part of this century expected the ultimate destruction of native culture, Erdrich's stories counter that prediction.²² The continuity of families and the connections of characters in Erdrich's fiction work hand-in-hand to tell the stories and celebrate the culture of contemporary survivors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought To Be," *New York Times Book Review*, 28 July 1985, 23.

2. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Bantam, 1984); idem, *Beet Queen* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986); idem, *Tracks* (New York: Harper, 1988); idem, "The Bingo Van," in *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories*, ed. Craig Lesley and Katheryn Stavrakis (New York: Laurel, 1991), 82-99; idem, "The Island," *Ms.* (January/February 1991): 38-42. I should note that, due to time restrictions, I was unable to investigate Erdrich's other stories, available in a variety of publications, to see if they are also about the characters discussed here.

3. This is an important question, because Dutch James is one of the men who supposedly raped her. He is the grandfather of Dot Adare, who has a child (Shawn) by Gerry Nanapush, Fleur's grandson.

4. Marvin Magalaner, "Of Cars, Time, and the River," in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, ed. Mickey Pearlman (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), 107.

5. The name *Kashpaw* probably originates in Erdrich's own past. A distant relative of hers, Kaishpau Gourneau, was tribal chair in 1882. See Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski, "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota: Its History as Depicted in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Beet Queen*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 12:3 (1988): 35.

6. *Love Medicine* opens with June's death and closes with her son Lipsha's coming to terms with her death. Thus June is intricately bound with the structure of the novel.

7. Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, 2d ed. (New York: Schocken, 1972), x.

8. James McKenzie, "Lipsha's Good Road Home: The Revival of Chippewa Culture in *Love Medicine*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 10:3 (1986): 58.

9. William Gleason, "'Her Laugh an Ace': The Function of Humor in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 11:3 (1987): 61.

10. McKenzie, "Lipsha's Good Road Home," 58.

11. Gerry also seems to be linked with a contemporary American Indian Movement figure, Leonard Peltier, who is in prison for supposedly shooting two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

12. Radin, *The Trickster*, 3.

13. Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 4.

14. Indeed, it may be significant that Lipsha is the narrator of the title story in *Love Medicine*. Privileged as a narrator there and in "The Bingo Van," Lipsha may be one of the links to Erdrich's next yet-to-be-published novel.

15. Karl recovers in the Sacred Heart Convent, where Pauline/Leopolda ends up.

16. Gleason, "'Her Laugh an Ace,'" 70.

17. Robert Silberman, "Opening the Text: *Love Medicine* and the Return of the Native American Woman," in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Albuquerque: University of New

Mexico Press, 1989), 111.

18. William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 582.

19. With her frosty death, June parallels two men who freeze to death in *Tracks*. Other "drownings" include Fleur (three times but saved each time), an attempt by King to drown Lynette in dishwater, and the supposed attempt by June to drown Lipsha.

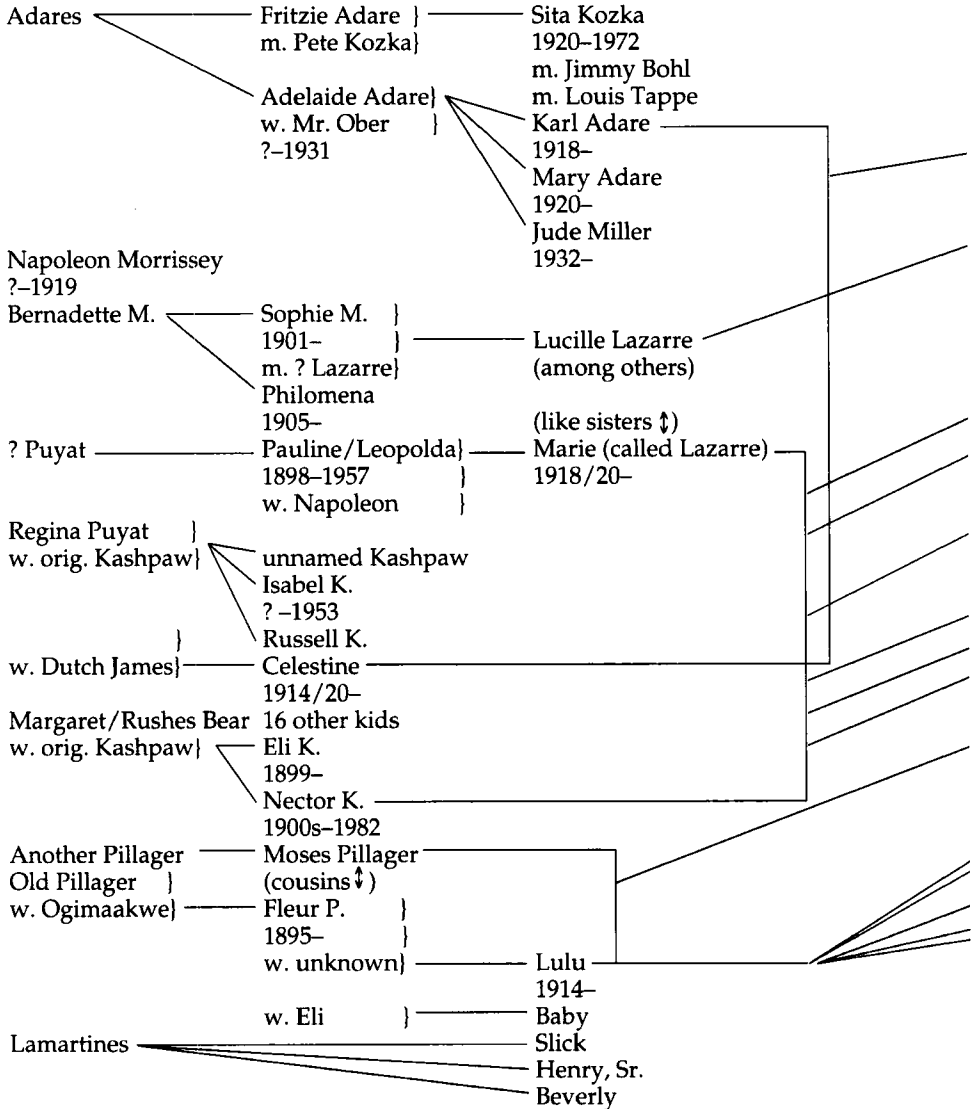
20. Eli and Moses have actually been hidden—Eli from people who want to place him in government school and Moses from the epidemic.

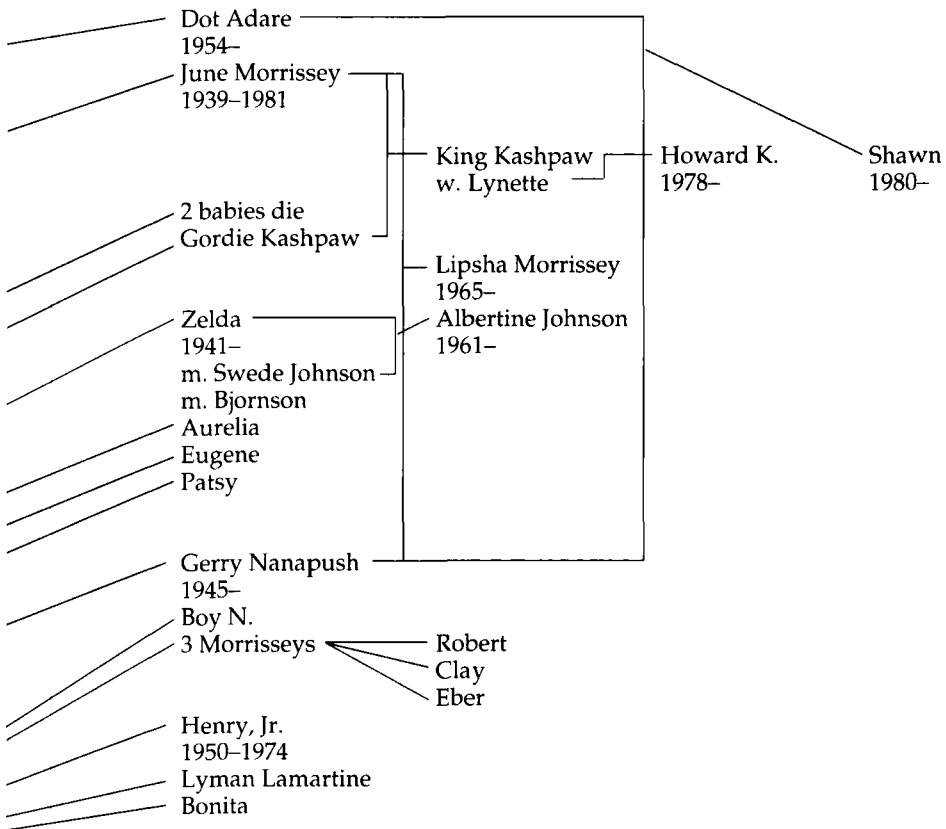
21. Maristuen-Rodakowski, "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota," 45.

22. Even John Neihardt's version of Black Elk's story implicitly looks toward a time when native culture will be completely assimilated into Western, "civilized" society.

APPENDIX 1

Genealogy Chart





APPENDIX 2

Appearance of Characters

Characters as they appear in the texts:

X = a relatively major character

O = a less obvious part

* = a narrator

Character	T	I	BQ	LM	BV
Adelaide Adare			O		
Albertine Johnson*				X	
Celestine James*			X		
Dot Adare*			X	X	
Eli Kashpaw*	X		O	O	
Fleur Pillager	X	O	O		
Gerry Nanapush		O		X	
Howard Kashpaw*				O	
June Morrissey			O	X	
Karl Adare*			X		
Henry Lamartine Jr.				X	
Lipsha Morrissey*				X	X
Lulu Lamartine*	X	X		X	O
Margaret Kashpaw / Rushes Bear	X			O	
Marie Kashpaw*	O			X	
Mary Adare*			X		
Napoleon Morrissey	O			O	
Moses Pillager	O	X		O	
Nanapush*	X			O	
Nector Kashpaw	O			X	
Pauline/Leopolda*	X		O	X	
Russell Kashpaw	O		X		
Pete & Fritzie Kozka	O		O		
Sita Kozka*			X		
Officer Lovchik			O	O	

APPENDIX 3

Chronology

Note: Most dates are estimated.

1862	Nanapush born
1895	Fleur born
1895–1909	Fleur drowns for the first time (T 10)
1898	Pauline born
1899	Eli born?? (T 40)
1910	Fleur drowns for the second time (T 11)
1912	Consumption [?] epidemic on reservation All Nanapush's family dies All Pillagers die except Fleur and Moses
1913	Fleur and Pauline go to Argus for the summer Fleur works at butcher's shop Fleur is raped [?] Tornado hits Argus
1914	Lulu born (T 31) Regina Puyat Kashpaw marries Dutch James Celestine born [?]
1917	Fleur "breaks" with Eli Attack on Nanapush and Margaret (first baldness) Fleur shaves head (second baldness)
1918	Marie born on Armistice Day [?] (T) Fleur miscarries second child Lulu's feet frozen Karl Adare born

- 1919 Pauline/Leopolda kills Napoleon, receives name
 Leopolda and posting to Saint Catherine's school in
 Argus
 Pillagers lose land; Kashpaws keep theirs
 Lumbering threatens Matchimanito
 Fleur sends Lulu away and leaves Matchimanito (T 210)
- 1920 [Marie born??] (LM)
 Sita Kozka born
 [Celestine born??]
- 1921 Mary Adare born
- 1924 Lulu returns to reservation
 Tracks ends
- 1931 Mr. Ober dies
 Adares move to Cities
- 1932 Jude Miller (Adare) born
 Adelaide flies off
 Mary arrives in Argus
 The Manifestation in Argus
 Leopolda shipped off to Sacred Heart Convent on res
- 1934 Marie goes to convent/meets with Nector
- 1939 June born
 Fritzie and Pete move to Arizona and Mary takes over
 butcher shop
 Sita moves to Fargo
- 1941 Floods in Argus? (BQ 65)
 Zelda born
- 1945 Gerry born? (LM 155)
- 1948 June goes to live with Nector and Marie
- 1950 Sita Kozka marries Jimmy Bohl (BQ 97)
 Henry, Sr. commits suicide
 Henry, Jr. born

-
- 1952 Karl sells Air Seeders, meets Wallace
Wallace starts sugar beet farming in/around Argus
Nector is tribal chairman
- 1953 Russell home for second time as a wounded veteran
Karl stays with Wallace
Karl stays with Celestine; Dot conceived
Russell has a stroke and is paralyzed (BQ 157)
- 1954 Dot born
- 1950s Mary and Celestine visit Russell at Eli's
- 1957 Beverly visits Lulu again
Lulu's house burns (third baldness)
Pauline/Leopolda dies
- 1961 Albertine born
- 1964 Butcher shop burns
Karl returns to meet Dot
- 1965 Lipsha born[?]
- 1970 Henry, Jr. stationed in Vietnam
- 1972 Sita dies
Karl rescues Wallace
Dot is Beet Queen (BQ Festival, July 8–12)
Drought ends in Argus
BQ ends
- 1973 Albertine goes to Fargo
Moses Pillager still alive
- 1974 Henry, Jr. commits suicide
- 1978 Howard (King, Jr.) Kashpaw born
- 1980 Shawn born
- 1981 June dies
"Reunion" at Aurelia's (Kashpaw land)

1982

Nector dies

After 1982

Lipsha returns home with Firebird. Later wins the bingo van.