THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN IS A REAWAKENED INDIAN: INDIGENOUS FEMINISM, TRADITIONALISM, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S LOVE MEDICINE

A Report of a Senior Study

by

Hallie Jackson

Major: English Literature

Maryville College

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Date approved______________, by ____________________________

Faculty Supervisor

Date approved______________, by ____________________________

Division Chair
Abstract

American Indian literature has long remained a mystery to non-native readers. However, some American Indian authors are widely read despite their largely misunderstood cultural background and worldview. Often, these authors work within traditions and modes that are culturally and tribally specific. However, current authors are also often highly educated in European forms like the novel, and American Indian writers utilize both their knowledge of European form and their unique cultural norms and traditional storytelling to create literature that is richly complex. This study is an examination of the Anishinabe author Louise Erdrich’s use of American Indian themes and narrative style in her bestselling novel Love Medicine. To illustrate the impact of Erdrich’s tribal influence and highlight the cultural significance of her work, I analyze three distinctly Indian elements in Erdrich’s fiction: maternal concepts of familial identity and tradition, American Indian narrative structure as patterned after oral storytelling techniques, and the use of traditional Anishinabe characters and plotlines in contemporary American Indian writing. These three elements illustrate the existing American Indian influence on contemporary American Indian writing and lend specific cultural access to a novel that is otherwise heavily coded with American Indian stories.
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American Indian storytelling is a practice that began thousands of years ago. Before the American Indians were colonized and systematically killed or severely oppressed, they existed as a rich, complex people with various traditions and customs. These customs were passed on through the act of storytelling, and everyone in pre-colonial American Indian society would have highly valued the story itself and the art of telling it. As cultural eradication became a more prominent policy toward the American Indians, many tribal members forgot their language and were forced to stop telling their stories and taking part in essential rituals that provided cultural continuity. Today, modern American Indian writers are utilizing their rich cultural heritage to embed American Indian themes and cultural issues within contemporary literature. Authors such as Pulitzer Prize winning author N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Sherman Alexie have revived the art of storytelling by crafting works of literature that are both traditionally native and Euro American, creating a hybrid genre that is a quickly growing subset of post colonial literature. Critical studies of American Indian literature must look with a double eye on contemporary American Indian literature in order to uncover essential elements of thriving American Indian culture to general audiences and native readers alike.

One author who continues to elevate and advance American Indian literature is Louise Erdrich, author of books such as *Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, Tracks, The Painted Drum, Jacklight*, and most recently, *The Round House*, which won the National
Book Award. In this paper, I will focus exclusively on *Love Medicine*. Using a combination of Indigenous Feminist, reader response, narrative theory, and American Indian Studies approaches, I will illustrate the connection between specific cultural norms and traditions and contemporary literature. Using *Love Medicine* as a microcosm, I will explore how just one author situates herself in the traditions of her tribal heritage and use Erdrich as a model to show how this critical approach can be useful for other readings of contemporary forms that engage with traditional forms. Isolating Erdrich’s specific tribal background, I will concentrate on Anishinabe culture and storytelling traditions to the extent that is feasible for the scope of this study in order to maintain cultural legitimacy and analytic accuracy.

In chapter one, I begin by examining the basis of American Indian cultural and social life: the family unit, specifically matrilineal and matrilocal themes and family structures. In order to understand the much different social structure and culture of American Indians as a whole, a basic discussion concerning the absence of patriarchy in traditional American Indian society is necessary. In order to do this, I explain basic concepts of matrilineal and matrilocal descent in traditional tribal communities. Once the difference between American Indian and Euro American concepts of familial decent is established, a working cultural understanding can proceed in order to understand how traditional familial structure continues to play a role in colonized and post-colonial American Indian culture. In order to understand these differences, I assert that women continue to hold more domestic and social power in American Indian society than they do in Euro American society. In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich creates two powerful and dynamic
female characters who embody traditional American Indian mother figures who control the power dynamic of the family as well as the community. The novel reflects larger societal implications of differing modes of female autonomy that are present in contemporary American Indian society.

Specifically, I use a close reading of *Love Medicine* to explore these matrilineral concepts to illustrate the way that post-colonial American Indian women function within the family. Examining the two main characters, Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Nanapush, I explore the power dynamic that these women represent on a familial and societal level. Marie and Lulu are each powerful women in their own right and exercise a considerable amount of both direct power and indirect influence over their families and the community at large. No character in the novel exists without being touched, in some way, by one of these women. Reflecting traditional American Indian social structure, Marie and Lulu function as the center of the family. They work as the gatekeepers of tradition by establishing moral and communal truth. Both women use the power of motherhood to establish traditions that are accessible only through one’s maternal descent. Using an Indigenous Feminist approach, I argue that the text ultimately endorses a model of female authority by showcasing these two strong women and creating comparatively weak or uncertain male characters. By creating two different models for appropriate female behavior in Marie and Lulu, Erdrich shows the complexity of endorsed American Indian models of female authority and allows for more freedom and power than Euro American patriarchy.
The discussion of the importance of women in American Indian tradition and society in chapter one leads to questions of traditionalism in *Love Medicine* as a whole in the second and third chapters. Since much of the power that the female characters hold in the novel rests in their knowledge of cultural transmission through personal stories and knowledge of tradition, it makes sense to further examine elements of traditional storytelling that are present in *Love Medicine*. In order to proceed into a deeper understanding of how traditional storytelling impacts this contemporary novel, it is first important to understand the essentials of such a tradition. For this chapter, isolating specific tribal traditions is critical for developing an accurate understanding of how tradition operated in pre-colonial communities as well as how it continues to operate in contemporary literature. Since Louise Erdrich is a member of the Anishinabe tribe, commonly known as Ojibwa or Chippewa, Chapter Two focuses specifically on Anishinabe oral tradition. I argue that in order to fully access the text, one must understand key differences between native and non-native narrative structure, namely, a nonlinear concept of time and the use of multiple narration. A close reading of *Love Medicine* shows Erdrich’s use of both native and non-native narrative structure within the novel and illustrates how contemporary American Indian literature draws both from traditional narrative structure as well as dominant, European literary forms. Using a reader response lens, I assert that American Indian texts in general invite the reader into the narrative and require reader participation to create a full and complete story.

Once an American Indian structural perspective is applied to the narrative, it is important to look beyond structure into both plot and characterization. For Chapter Three,
a close examination of traditional Anishinabe stories and story cycles illuminates the characters Nector, Marie, and Lulu. Each main character is a modern adaptation of an existing and well known, archetypal character in Anishinabe myth. A comparative analysis of traditional story and select passages in *Love Medicine* shows the character similarities between mythic characters and those in the novel. Focusing specifically on Marie and Lulu’s relationship as competing and complementary characters and Nector as a standalone character, I situate all three main characters into specific traditional story cycles. Readings of the original stories as they exist in translation today stand alongside an analysis of the primary text to illustrate the patterning utilized by Erdrich to create depth and traditional continuity in a very modern, mainstream novel. In order for American Indian literature to be taken seriously as a genre in the larger framework of canonized literature and for alternative models of female behavior and power to be given validity in a modern context, it is important that both native and non-native readers are able to access the text via specific, cultural details and recognize the complexity of traditions that are otherwise often invalidated as primitive or irrelevant to contemporary people.

Although there are many ways to bring American Indian literature into the scholarly conversation, the scope of this paper allows for only the most fundamental exploration of Anishinabe concepts. Using a culturally sensitive approach, I attempt to see the literature for what it truly is: a rich fusion of two differing traditions that often work in opposition to one another. Integrating my discussion of one novel into critical approaches that are not traditionally native, I attempt to display an author’s ability to
transcend cultural boundaries while maintaining tribal specificity and dignity. *Love Medicine* lends itself to many readings, but by utilizing Indigenous Feminist, reader response, and American Indian Studies approaches, I believe an enriching understanding of the novel is possible.
CHAPTER 1

AMERICAN INDIAN MODELS OF THE TRANSMISSION OF MATERNAL
AND FAMILIAL IDENTITY

I. Introduction

American Indian culture is in a constant state of flux. Both American Indian communities and individuals are constantly attempting to make and remake a culture that is perceived by the outside world as static or even dead. Deanna Paniataaq Kingston says that, “Too often, in order to be seen as ‘real’ or ‘traditional’ Native Americans, the popular and even some scholarly literature tends to present Native American lives as the polar opposite of whites or stuck in the past” (Kingston 363). Real people are dealing with this conflict in their everyday lives, and this perception is evidenced in the recent literature produced by American Indian writers, reflecting their lived experiences. Among these writers are celebrated names such as N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich. As each of these authors reconstructs their culture through the depiction of real, lived experiences, their ideology concerning the nature of American Indian culture and identity becomes fleshed out in their literary work. Louise Erdrich, the youngest of these names, works closely with themes of culture, tradition, and identity with depth and complexity in her novel Love Medicine. Using both traditional
Anishinabe narrative methods and Euro American form, Erdrich produces a text that is rich in its commentary on the state of the American Indian cultural revolution that began in the 1970s.  

Specifically, Erdrich’s novel displays a large amount of concern for identity passed down through tradition, mainly by way of maternal transmission. Using characters such as Marie Lazarre Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine, Erdrich discusses concepts of motherhood and familial ties to traditional ways of life.

Among many American Indian tribes, child rearing and familial ties are incredibly important. Although it is impossible to generalize all American Indian experiences concerning family, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, one can study a particular tribal member’s traditional family setting in order to understand more current models that constitute or threaten familial relations and continuity. Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain band of the Anishinabe tribe, utilizes many of her novels as a space for dialogue concerning the American Indian family of the past and present. In their essay “There is No End to Relationship Among the Indians,” Laura Peers and Jennifer H. S. Brown say that traditionally, Anishinabe Indians considered themselves not only members of their immediate family, but also held expansive ties to members outside of their clan (530). Peers and Brown explain the importance of family:

In the Ojibwa kin universe, the immediate extended family was a fundamental nexus of relationships, a foundation for socialization,

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2 “They are the same people known as the [Ojibwe] and the Chippewa, names applied to them in the last few centuries and used widely today by Anishinabe people themselves” (Bruchac and Caduto 247).
enculturation, and daily existence. It was the center of an individual’s life experiences and identity formation, and was also the basic unit of economic production. (531)

It is thus not difficult to see that establishing strong relationships with one’s family not only ensured immediate survival but the survival of culture and traditions as well.

Although Anishinabe society was traditionally matrilocal, meaning that married couples customarily lived among the wife’s family instead of the husband’s, their society was characterized as largely patrifocal and patrilineal, with male authority largely dominant, although less so than Euro American models of patriarchy (Peers and Brown 540).

These familial features were fairly common, with some variation of course, among at least the plains Indians. There were, however, some distinct characteristics displayed in Anishinabe kinship systems that are not common knowledge. Firstly, although the woman’s first marriage often occurred as an arranged marriage around 15 years old, women were free to divorce their husbands, and divorce was a common feature of Anishinabe society (Peers and Brown 536), with any children commonly being assimilated into the wife’s larger family (539). Secondly, Peers and Brown state that it was not uncommon for women to raise children other than their own, saying “Adoption and fostering have always been common among the [Anishinabeg]; children raised in such situations are generally told who their parents are, and feel secure within their extended family,” conventions that continue to exist in current Anishinabe culture (536).

II. Maternal Transmission of Identity in Love Medicine
Louise Erdrich situates her novels in the center of discussions concerning the modern Anishinabe family. Erdrich focuses a great deal on ideas about maternal transmission of identity and women as central to cultural or family stability. The novel *Love Medicine* explores ideas of communal identity through family and diversity within the familial structure through various models of productive and destructive marriages, often presenting the woman as a savior figure, the ultimate symbol of maternity and continuity. Tarrell Awe Agahe Portman and Roger D. Herring say that, “Generally, Native American Indian women value being mothers and rearing healthy families; spiritually, they are considered to be extensions of the Spirit Mother and continuators of their people; socially, they serve as transmitters of cultural knowledge and caretakers of children and relatives” (185). This novel hesitates to categorize mothers as either strictly traditional or exceedingly contemporary, but rather a mix of both, operating in the world of American Indians and contemporary Eurocentric America simultaneously.

In order to achieve this sense of balance within disorder, Erdrich creates characters who work in opposition to one another’s familial ideals such as Marie Lazarre and Lulu Lamartine, showing the strengths and weaknesses of both systems, and inserting Albertine Johnson and Lipsha Morrissey to function as liminal characters, both with troubled maternal relations. The reader experiences the happy marriage of Gerry and Dot Nanapush while also being exposed to King and Lynette Kashpaw’s troubled relationship. The text puts forth several savior figures, both male and female, such as Marie Kashpaw and Lyman Lamartine, who attempt to mend or recreate dismantled family structure and the culture that lies within it.
Communal identity takes center stage from the start of the novel. After the death of June Kashpaw, a hodgepodge group of people who loved June and loosely identify as family come together in her memory. Albertine Johnson, the first narrator in the novel, discusses her mother, Zelda Kashpaw, writing to her about the death of her Aunt June. “She always used the royal we, to multiply the censure of what she said by invisible others,” (Erdrich 8) implying that there is a constant communal voice functioning within the modern Anishinabe community. Although this small grouping of people contains no less than four separate surnames, they are connected by ties of marriage or adoption that bind them together in times of grief and, later, happiness. The Lazarres, Lamartines, Kashpaws, and Johnsons constitute a tribe in their own right, operating both inside and outside of tradition and bringing both diversity and unity to one another and to their culture.

Randall Hill discusses American Indian literary diversity and says of native writers that “theirs is a literature of polarities—Indian versus white, [and] tradition versus change, primitive versus civilization…” (132). Although Hill is specifically discussing literary patterns in American Indian literature in general, it is also a useful definition of the state of Indian culture and value systems represented in Love Medicine. There is a constant opposition from within the reservation community in which the novel is primarily set, as well as influences from more mainstream cultural value systems that create diversity within the lives of Erdrich’s characters. Although no character in the novel is described as being one hundred percent Indian, some embrace traditional modes of existence more than others and some fall into a space of enhanced hybridity that
bridges the internal Indian and the external Euro American worlds. *Love Medicine* conforms to Hill’s ideas about hybridity and tension in American Indian literature as a whole.

Marie Kashpaw represents the most purposefully Eurocentric character in the novel. Marie was born into the Lazarre family, widely known in the reservation community to be the stereotypical lazy and dirty Indian. Marie describes her mother as “the old drunk woman who I didn’t claim as my mother anymore” (85) and makes her whole family stand outside in the yard because she “would not ask them onto [her] washed floor” (86). Marie's contempt for her family reaches a high point when she becomes too disgusted with their ignorance and poor manners that she says:

> Those Lazarres just stood there, yawning and picking their gray teeth, with the girl [June] between them most likely drunk too. No older than nine years. She could hardly stand upright. I looked at her. What I saw was starved bones, a shank of black strings, a piece of rag on her I wouldn’t have used to wipe a pig. (86)

It is clear from the beginning of the text that Marie as a character will exist in opposition to the kind of extreme traditionalism that, at least in her eyes, leads to erosion of personal integrity and, ultimately, the destruction of beneficial family ties.

Marie as a mother, however, embodies the traditional characteristic of the woman who raises many children, several of them not her own. In the passage above, Marie makes the decision to take in her sister’s daughter June after her sister passes away in the wilderness. The desire for Marie to care for someone who is helpless is not the most
important factor for Marie in motherhood, but instead it is the shaping of her children into people who she deems fit for consideration based on the concepts of Euro American personhood that Marie identifies with. It is only after Marie realizes that June does not possess the negative characteristics that she associates with the Lazarres that Marie chooses to love her. She says:

I scrubbed the pitiful scraps of her and wiped ointment over the sores, I saw nothing, no feature that belonged to either one, Lazarre or Morrissey, and I was glad. It was as if she really was the child of what the old people called Manitous, invisible ones who lived in the woods. I could tell, even as I washed, that the Devil had no business with June. There was no mark on her. When the sores healed she would be perfect. (87)

The concept of maternal transmission that Erdrich presents in the relationship between Marie and her beloved June represents a clash of traditional values concerning raising the children of the community and the desire to promote herself through her offspring. Initially unwilling to become June’s mother, Marie is ardent in her task of promoting a more Eurocentric model of identity. By literally cleansing June of the filth of the woods, Marie attempts to wash away what she believes is the representation of an impure and immoral version of humanity manifested in the Indian condition. Marie emphasizes the importance of the self and standards of moral purity that she evaluates through a lens of public and private modes of performativity. Marie’s ritualistic washing of June embodies her performance as a mother, acting as both an intimate performance between caregiver and child and a public performance about Marie’s superficial concepts of purity.
Hill states that, in American Indian literature and culture, “Performance...recognizes the ongoing remaking of culture and allows [people] to examine the synchronic moment of a performance and the diachronic moments of culture rehearsal through which a past is recounted in order to shape a future” (3). Based on this mirror-like model of the maternal transmission of identity, the mother figure transcribes a rigid set of expectations upon her children in order to prompt the advancement of the self and of the familial line, being modern in the sense that the individual, or the mother, has something to gain through parenting and also traditional in the sense that the continuation of family perpetuates standards of culture that a particular set of people deem worthy and proper. Here, past and present concepts of familial identity and cultural continuity are together simultaneously as the mother figure provides a set of core cultural values to which her children must adhere while promoting, not a stagnation of culture through these ideals, but a progression and continuance rooted in tradition.

Erdrich presents two women who both promote cultural continuity and create a space for communal growth. Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine are two distinctly different women in Love Medicine. Marie, the uptight Indian from a bad background is constantly attempting to change herself and those around her, a “bewildering mixture of toughness and compassion, of tenderness and astringent candor” (Castillo 15). Lulu is, from a young age, not planning much of anything. Where Marie is analytic and at times calculating, Lulu is passionate and free spirited. Fighting for the love of one man, Nector Kashpaw, Marie and Lulu are diametrically opposed to one another. It does not seem, however, that the text endorses either one of these women. Each of them experience
tragic events. They lose children, lose the love of their life, and at times lose themselves. American Indian culture values diversity and endorses multiple gender performances. The concept of the nature of woman as an autonomous being complicates notions of binary gender performance. Lulu and Marie are not in fact two different people, but are fragments of the complete self personified to illustrate the dangers of strict binaries applied to gender and identity concepts.³

Marie Lazarre, later Marie Kashpaw, functions as the moral and practical anchor of the novel. Coming from a poor family with a bad reputation, Marie is constantly striving to remake herself into a person that she deems worthy. Constant and careful planning provides structure for Marie in a life that lacks rigidity. Erdrich introduces Marie as the grandmother of Albertine Johnson, mother of Zelda and June, and wife of Nector Kashpaw. There is an immediate sense of structure in the presence of Marie through the network of family relationships. Albertine’s narrative describes elderly Marie as a solid figure, something that has remained relatively stable throughout her life:

   When I was very young, she always seemed the same size to me as the rock carins commemorating Indian defeats around here. But every time I saw her now I realized that she wasn’t so large, it was just that her figure was weathered and massive as a statue roughed out in rock. She never changed much, at least not as much as Grandpa. (16)

³ See Karin Van Marle’s book Sex, Gender, Becoming: Post-Apartheid Reflections for Jacque Derrida’s concept of difference and gender performativity through non-binary, varying degrees of expression through a post-colonial lens. Also see Gender Trouble by Judith Butler for a feminist theory concerning the gender binary and female gender performativity.
Marie, or Grandma Kashpaw, has not been eroded by life in the same way that her husband has been. She continually withstands the troubles of life. Although she is weathered, she is intact.

Her stability is not the result of success, however, but in her ability to survive failure. From the time Marie is introduced through her own voice, as an adolescent girl, she is planning and plotting, trying always to push her life in the direction she wants it to go. Her plans do not often work out. Her first marked failure is a spiritual one. Marie wishes to go and live with the nuns at a small convent just outside of the reservation. Her desire to distinguish herself from other Indians in her local community is obvious. She says of herself, “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” (43). Marie chooses to identify more with the white nuns than she does her own people. In crossing the boundaries of the reservation, Marie condemns her own culture, but is ultimately unable to divorce herself from her Indian identity.

At this point in the story, Marie is not yet a Kashpaw but a Lazarre, the epitome of the stereotypical lazy Indian, despised by everyone they come into contact with. Marie makes a conscious decision to distance herself from her family name. Taking to the hills, Marie literally seeks to transform herself from a typical reservation girl to someone of higher status, someone holy in seeking out the nuns. The reader gets the immediate sense that Marie is distancing herself from her traditional background. She justifies going to the nuns by saying not that she is relatively pale for her American Indian ancestry, but that
the holy women are as dark as she is. In her attempt to set herself apart from those similar to her, Marie is unable to completely exclude. She is inclusionary even as a young girl, which becomes more important in her adult life.

Marie’s actions, although admirable, are always tinted by darker tones. Her desire to become deeply religious is not simply one of personal gratification or spiritual investigation, but a public announcement that she, Marie Lazarre, is better than those around her. Her desire for the love that she deems worth having is plagued by a perpetual sense of the inadequate self. Marie says, “I was that girl who thought the black hem of [the nun’s] garment would help me rise. Veils of love which was only hate petrified by longing—that was me” (45). Marie is deeply influenced by Eurocentric ideas of purity. The desire to escape her past and carve her own identity manifests itself in a longing for baptism. The water that has eroded Marie’s culture is for her a chance for rebirth.

It is her connection to American Indian life that acts as a barrier to her salvation. Sister Leopolda, the nun who takes Marie on as a student, tells Marie that she is being chased by sin. Marie says, “[Sister Leopolda] always said the Dark One wanted me most of all, and I believed this. I stood out. Evil was a common thing I trusted” (46). Marie is not only heavily influenced by assertions made by non-Indian authority figures, but she does not question her inherent sinful nature, or that she is more sinful than anyone else. The language in this passage becomes intertwined with Marie’s identity as an American Indian and her desire to overthrow what she perceives to be a degrading culture. Marie’s voice becomes almost pre-colonial indigenous when she discusses her inner evil, saying, “Before sleep sometimes [Satan] came and whispered conversation in the old language of
the bush. I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians. I was privy to both worlds of his knowledge” (46). For Marie, being Indian is a gateway to sin.

Contemporary American Indian knowledge of both traditional Indian thought and Euro American value systems enables Marie to transcend basic sin and gain special status as someone who is deeply flawed. Hybridity for Marie is dangerous. She is terrified by the notion of failing to remake herself into a representation of what is valued by Eurocentric ideals.

Marie is described by Sister Leopolda as being almost evil. Sister Leopolda tells Marie that the darkness, or the devil, is more attracted to Marie than to other children. Although the text does not explicitly state that Marie is a threat to sister Leopolda and a perceived enemy of holiness because she is American Indian, the reader can infer that there is a sense of otherness that excludes Marie from the white Christian world that she wishes to be a part of. Marie attempts to bridge her world and Eurocentric Christian ideals of womanhood, but is ultimately unsuccessful because her personal sense of autonomy coupled with her youth makes her an enemy of Eurocentric spiritual pureness. Sister Leopolda, whose sanity has already been eroded to the point of no return, attempts to drag Marie under, but Marie’s ability to function as a go-between too strongly resists binary oppositions of any kind.

Marie’s inability to seek balance in her life leads to several upsets in her plans. Although Marie is calling for balance in her life, attempting to find her personal center, her static approach to personal evolution creates more tension than it alleviates. Unity

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4 It is revealed in a later novel, titled Tracks, that Sister Leopolda is in fact Marie’s biological mother.
within herself is impossible because she cannot formulate a sense of what it means to be an Indian who wishes for Eurocentric ideas of success and personal worth. Sister Leopolda represents what Marie wants most in life: power. Marie says, “But I wanted Sister Leopolda’s heart. And here was the thing: sometimes I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick” (49). Even her concept of love and devotion is colored by her obsessive need to get ahead.

Marie’s failure to yield to those in power does not end entirely unsuccessfully. In her attempt to kill Sister Leopolda, Marie is stabbed in the hand by a poker and received as a saint by those who believe the marks are a sign of the stigmata and who are unaware of the motivations for her action. This success is, however, short lived. Marie finds no real consolation in the end result of her efforts. She becomes a shell of the person she was meant to be, and her over planning and lack of cultural acceptance turns her to dust. Marie says, “My skin was dust. Dust my lips. Dust the dirty spoon on the ends of my feet. Rise up! I thought. Rise up and walk! There is no limit to this dust” (60). This is the defining moment for Marie as a character. She does not see that her plans have fallen through. She has been worshipped and does not care that it is on false pretenses. Her pride turns even dust into diamonds. Through this mock sacrifice, Marie believes she has gained the power and status to control her own future. This dust, although arguably misinterpreted by Marie, gives her the power to believe in her own agency. From this moment forward, Marie takes an active hand in creating the world she wishes to live in.
Unfortunately, Marie’s life does not unfold in the ways she hopes. Marie marries Nector, the most eligible bachelor in town. Marie does not marry for love, but for status. In choosing someone that everyone on the reservation knows, Marie thinks that she will be able to cling to Nector in the same way that she tried to cling to Sister Leopolda. In true form, Marie says:

> With each stroke of my dasher I progressed in thinking what to make of Nector. I had plans, and there was no use in him trying to get out of them. I’d known from the beginning I had married a man with brains. But the brains wouldn’t matter unless I kept him from the bottle. He would pour them down the drain, where his liquor went, unless I stopped the holes, wore him down, dragged him back each time he drank, and tied him to the bed with strong ropes. (89)

Marie, in her desire to gain control, no longer attempts in her childhood ignorance to use and then abandon those she needs to reach success. She draws people into her life, writes them into her plans. This is not all negative, however. Marie functions as an anchor for many people in the novel, such as her husband and children, who are lost or losing themselves. In her attempts to reconstruct her own identity, Marie helps others piece themselves together as well.

Not a particularly harsh person, Marie does say, “I didn’t like to remind these old cows of their own bad lives. But I had to protect my plans” (93). In attempts to shake off the communal nature of her traditional culture, Marie had ironically become weighed down with the problems of others. If she were able to embrace her hybridity, or allow her
life to “include risk, transformation, householding, and medicine, as well as an integration of past and present,” (Barry and Prescott 127), her ventures at saving herself and others would perhaps be more successful. In the end, Marie loses June to a death caused by a loss of traditional knowledge. Marie’s inability to transmit cultural knowledge to June leads to June passing away in a snowstorm that she should have recognized as dangerous. Additionally, Nector leaves Marie for the wonders of the ever spiritual Lulu. Bound up by guilt and fear of inadequacy, Marie fails to become a complete person. She is forever tied to those who embody the traditional spirit of her ancestors.

Tradition enters Marie’s life in waves. It seems as though Marie only calls upon traditional American Indian knowledge or spirituality when she has no other choice, when all other options have failed her. In the chapter that shares the title of the novel near the end, Lipsha Morrissey is enlisted by Marie, his adopted grandmother, to enact a ceremony ensuring Nector’s love for Marie will persist despite growing complications due to Alzheimer’s disease. Marie is forced to seek the help of her grandson because she is completely disconnected from her heritage, just as June is at the opening of the novel. Although Lipsha is also inadequately versed in the traditional ways of his people, he has the sacred touch and is essentially guilt tripped by Marie into attempting the powerful love medicine ceremony. The ceremony fails because Lipsha is unable to complete the task via the strict ceremonial directions he is given. His fear of failure coupled with disappointing Marie lead to improvisation which, in the world of sacred tradition, does
not bode well. Nector’s death is a direct result of Lipsha’s inability to properly access the cultural code that would, supposedly, give him success.

Lulu Lamartine is an entirely different person than Marie Kashpaw. Erdrich uses Lulu to represent the more stereotypical or traditional American Indian woman. A deeply spiritual person, Lulu embraces her cultural heritage and strives to incorporate passion into everything that she does. A woman without any plans, Lulu enters into relationships with people and becomes their spiritual and cultural gatekeeper. While Marie is attempting to refine herself in a convent, Lulu is living a quiet traditional life with her uncle Nanapush and his feisty wife Rushes Bear.

Lulu’s introduction states straight off that she is a person who is constantly in a cycle of birth and rebirth, always going back to the source of her identity but never staying there. Lulu says, “I never grew from the curve of my mother’s arm. I still wanted to anchor myself against her… I slept in a room of echoing creaks. I made and tore down and remade all the dormitory beds. I lived by bells, flat voices, rough English. I missed the old language in my mother’s mouth” (68). Lulu is fluid from childhood. She is as much striving to find a sense of self as Marie, but her approach is more organic and in some ways feels more desperate, more destructive, and more dangerous. Lulu is a woman unafraid to take the risks that Marie would plan for but never take.

Lulu’s identity is wrapped up in her mother, a woman who does not appear in this novel. She says, “I needed my mother the more I became like her” (71) suggesting that, by Lulu’s model, girls become the essence of their mothers. The spiritual side of identity through female transmission is a central element of what makes Lulu a person. It
is interesting, then, that there is no female authority present in Lulu’s life. Her Uncle Nanapush, who Lulu lives with, is married to Rushes Bear but she despises Lulu for her close relationship to her husband. It seems that Lulu is not a girl’s girl. Everything she learns about the world, aside from certain spiritual elements of life that Lulu does not learn in particular but seems to have been born with, she learns from Nanapush.

The single most important line that encompasses the whole of Lulu’s essential character comes in a piece of advice from Nanapush, one that Lulu follows for the rest of her life. He says, “The greatest wisdom doesn’t know itself. The richest plan is not to have one” (76). After hearing this advice, and undertaking what Marie might say is a reckless plan, Lulu goes to visit with old and spiritual Moses Pillager and changes the course of her life forever. She says, as if to foreshadow her own experiences, “Nothing would look the same after loving Moses Pillager. Right and wrong were shades of meaning, not sides of a coin,” (76). Love is not a smooth road for any of the characters in this novel, however, and Lulu is no exception to the rule. Her relationships are constantly held in tension with the rest of her existence as a worldly and also deeply spiritual woman. Loving the mystical Pillager early in life molded Lulu into the woman she would later become.

The relationship with Moses Pillager is Lulu’s starting point as a character and her actions with Pillager set the tone for her actions throughout the novel. Lulu is able to exercise a certain level of power over men from the beginning; she is in control from the start, or at least she believes that she is. She says, “I told Moses Pillager a lie that later turned out true,” (78) echoing Nanapush’s advice that the greatest wisdom is unaware of
itself and implying that, although Lulu is not always conscious of her own doings, no one else exercises autonomy over her. The great and terrible Pillager is not whole in the absence of Lulu, nor is anyone else in this novel. She is the fabric that knits everyone together, most evidently the men. Lulu functions under the idea that “a man has to enter and enter, repeatedly, as if in punishment for having ever left the woman’s body. She [Rushes Bear] said the woman is complete. Man must come through us to live” (82). Functioning as antithesis of Marie, Lulu offers fluidity in place of plans. Lulu “is Erdrich’s vision of a wholly transpersonal state of being. The vibrant, strongly self-aware Lulu is the best illustration that dissolving physical boundaries can strengthen identity” (Smith 18). She becomes the essence of woman through her sexual prowess and the dissolving of physical boundaries while Marie is stuck in white constructs of who she ought to be and how she ought to act. Describing herself, Lulu says, “I am a woman of detachable parts,” (115) indicating that she values her hybridity where Marie is unaware of or does not use hers.

It seems as if these two women are working in opposition to one another. Although they never interact with one another until Nector’s death, the reader assumes that they must hate each another. Since these women are so different and so driven in their own ideas of womanhood, it may be inconceivable that they are in fact part of the same whole, that together they constitute the center of the novel. However, later in the novel, Marie and Lulu are brought together by destruction. It is as if the death of their shared love cleanses them. Two women drowning in love and jealousy find power in sisterhood and become united and powerful in a way that no man ever made them.
After Nector passes away, Marie begins to lessen her hold on the charade of strength and appearances and, although she still plans, she begins to soften. It is as if Marie has been resurrected by the death of her husband. In an interesting role reversal, in terms of Rushes Bear’s description of men and women, Marie has passed through Nector and all those she cared for and lost in order to become whole. Loss is at the core of Marie, but it does not break her. She is weak not for an instant, but persistently strong in her narrow scope of life. Elderly Marie “had reached the age where her skin was soft again, smooth as rainwater in a drum. She kept herself moving though, and she was strong” (260). Rather than being pulled under in her grief, she carries the potential to be ruined within herself, much the same way that young Lulu crosses the water and into herself with Moses Pillager. Marie’s ability to mend the lives of others comes full circle in the shadow of the irony that her love medicine is responsible for killing the only person she ever loved. Marie lost Nector because she loved too hard and planned too much, just as she lost June despite her fondness for her. The inability to transgress boundaries simply delays Marie’s misfortune, but never eradicates it. In her old age, Marie becomes what she has long strived for, perhaps without noticing the marked change in herself. Doing as she always has, Marie cares for Gordie, and instead of killing him, repairs him. Although Marie is not completely transformed, she is reborn. Erdrich writes, “Nothing that had fallen was broken badly, and she restored all that was out of place,” (273) implying that Marie is able to continue on as the savior figure, an incredibly strong and enduring example of American Indian femininity.
Lulu continues to represent nature and a motherlike connection to all things in her old age. She says, “I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms. Sometimes I’d look out on my yard and the green leaves would be glowing. I’d see the oil slick on the wing of a grackle. I’d hear the wind rustling, rolling, like the far-off sound of waterfalls. Then I’d open my mouth wide, my ears wide, and I’d let everything inside” (276). She is natural in a positive way that contradicts negative Eurocentric ideas concerning the femininity of nature and Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s famous noble savage concept. However, Lulu is not complete in her connection to the natural world, nor does she fit neatly into categories of American Indian or Euro American womanhood. She says, “I was a heartless, shameless man chaser, don’t ever forget this: I loved what I saw. And yes, it is true that I’ve done all the things they say. That’s not what gets them. What aggravates them is I’ve never shed one solitary tear. I’m not sorry. That’s unnatural. As we all know, a woman is supposed to cry” (277). Lulu notes that her behavior deviates from all norms. She resides inside of no boundaries but her own.

Although Lulu’s bond with the world is based on a somewhat raw sense of passion and motherhood, Lulu is not without regrets. Living entirely without plans, her life fails to reach any kind of typical, measureable success. Reflecting back on her many experiences with love, Lulu says, “It’s a sad world, though, when you can’t get love right even after trying it as many times as I have…I never worry half as much as other people. Things pass by. I suppose Kashpaw was the one exception in my life” (278, 280). It is as if, in her one edifying moment, that Lulu is reaching beyond her sense of self and into the collective bonds that have been built upon her relationships with others. It may seem as
of comparison to Marie, Lulu is a selfish woman, concerning herself with little more than lovers. However, there is more to this character than simply being an object of desire. Lulu’s agency is impossible to ignore. She verges on otherworldly, rooted in a time not her own. After leaving Moses Pillager’s island, Lulu became a woman bound to inescapable darkness, stuffing herself too full of love medicine, never going home again.

In contrast to Marie, who one could argue is too Eurocentric, Lulu is too indigenous. Their combined hybridity is what brings an undeniable essence of female strength through shared concepts of essential motherhood and perseverance to the novel, speaking directly to current American Indian gender concepts.

The story takes an odd turn of events when Marie becomes Lulu’s caretaker in the nursing home. It happens seamlessly, as if there could never have been any other ending, as if “they have become warriors, raging against their own invisibility” (DeShazer 353). Marie and Lulu have both fallen from the strong, passionate women that they once were. Living in a nursing home, they face the possibility of becoming irrelevant in old age. However, the novel does not end this way. From Lulu’s perspective, Erdrich makes the story of these two incredibly different and linked women come full circle. Lulu says, on the morning after being visited by Nector’s ghost, “Yet, when morning had apparently come, life went on even more usual than usual. I had put in my request for an aide at the desk but they didn’t have enough aides for all who needed them. That’s why Marie volunteered to take care of me. She knocked that morning. I let her in” (296). For Lulu, the morning after Nector’s death, and the morning she becomes friends with Marie,
seems more normal than any day that has come before because she is now becoming a complete person.

Free from the bonds of romantic love and desire, Lulu and Marie are essentially free to become the woman of their choosing, perhaps for the first time. Marie goes to help Lulu regain her vision after an eye surgery, taking off the blinders of their previous relationship. In a world free of male domination, these two women become whole in their supplementary relationship to one another. Marie does not plan to care for Lulu, but is called upon because there is simply no one else to do so, and in becoming the true savior figure of the novel, Marie goes to Lulu as “the embodiment of the saintly virtues of compassion, forgiveness, and love. Even her rival Lulu is forgiven in the end” (Flavin 62). Lulu, the mother figure of the novel, is taken care of by her former arch nemesis’s daughter in law. The veil is removed from each woman’s perception as they break through the binary concept of their singularity as women and come together as friends, as sisters, and as part of a whole. “I blinked,” says Lulu, “The light was cloudy but I could already see. She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just-born child” (297). Two women who were once systematic enemies now turn to one another for aid.

Marie and Lulu become a model for female integration and promote the message of united female power that Erdrich promotes in this novel. Louise Flavin says that this text is endorsing a feminist view of women:

While the men in the novel accept inevitable doom in their lives, the women approach the same reservation world with a different
outlook…[as] two strong women who raise families in adverse situations and, in the end, bond with each other after their children are raised and the man they both loved has died. Marie and Lulu not only survive but look back on their lives with satisfaction, having endured without the support of a strong male figure or the help of God or the government. (57)

Although Marie and Lulu are incredibly different in their opinions of what constitutes acceptable cultural norms and traditions, they both represent the essential maternal figure. The longer Lulu and Marie struggle for happiness and attempt to reconstitute or invent a way of life, they increasingly “mirror one another in their role as mother, in their ability to take risks, in their way of blending past and present, and in their wielding of power in old age” (Barry and Prescott 129). Lulu represents the essential past and a certain nostalgia for traditional ways of life. Marie embodies the struggle to purify one’s culture from negative, preconceived notions of sin or stagnation. Separately, these women accomplish little more than petty victories over one another and their individual families. Together, they become the universal mother of the entire reservation and heal what has been broken for generations. Jeanne Smith says that Erdrich “stresses the tremendous comfort the sense of a universally shared pulse can bring” (17). The end of the novel, a subversion of maternal transmission of identity with Lipsha discovering his paternal connection to his heritage, suggests that even though few things have managed to be resolved in this novel, the characters and their culture are on the track to becoming healed.
I. Introduction: American Indian Literature

American Indian cultures have been assaulted from all sides since the conquest began nearly five hundred years ago. For hundreds of years, tribes fought desperately to cling to their long held cultural traditions and way of life in the face of what can be described as nothing short of cultural and literal genocide. As more and more white settlers moved westward and into Indian country, tribes were forced to reevaluate their traditions, retain those they felt they must hold on to, and let go of or radically revise others. In chapter one, I examined maternal concepts of identity as a cultural construct in *Love Medicine*. I argued that women’s inherent function in Indian culture remained traditional in many senses of the word, which led me to question what other traditional tools Louise Erdrich is using in her storytelling, and began to examine the act of traditional storytelling itself through the Anishinabe lens. One of the aspects of Indian life that has changed radically but continues to be essential to tribal cultural continuity and Indian expression of identity is storytelling.
Most North American Indian tribes were primarily orally communicated societies well into the nineteenth century, with the exception of the Cherokee who soon developed a written alphabet.\(^5\) The American picture of an Indian in the pioneer days probably looks something like a group of people huddled in a tipi around a fire, sharing stories and discussing daily events.\(^6\) While this snapshot is fairly exclusive of the Great Plains tribes like the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Blackfeet, it is the image that survives in the American consciousness. This is partly because the Plains are where most of the United States’ Indian population still thrives today and where those oral traditions of storytelling continue to play out.

According to Roger L. Nichols,\(^7\) when white colonizers first encountered the American Indians and learned that most had no writing system, and many had no permanent domiciles, they immediately perceived Indian cultures and value systems as a whole as primitive or lacking.\(^8\) Perhaps the greatest slight was done to Indian myth and storytelling by white settlers who assumed that anything Indian was inferior. For hundreds of years, non-Indian Americans failed to study the complexity and richness of traditional Indian stories and storytelling. The United States Government assimilation policy attempted to eradicate Indian languages and culture both on and off the

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\(^5\) For a brief history of the rise of written communication among American Indians, see *Sequoyah and the Invention of the Cherokee Alphabet* by April R. Summitt

\(^6\) See, for example, a basic history of the American Indian such as *American Indian History: A Documentary Reader* by Camilla Townsend, *American Indian History: Five Centuries of Conflict and Coexistence* by Robert Venables, or *In the Hands of the Great Spirit* by Jake Page.

\(^7\) See *American Indians in U.S. History*

\(^8\) As Suzanne J. Crawford says “This attitude is consistent with a mindset that insists on seeing native cultures as primitive” for early Euro American even when presented with multitudinous examples of complexity.
reservation. With modern Indians living more than ever in the mainstream white world, Indian traditions and stories began to change according to white values.

After the 1950s, more Indians began receiving college educations. Armed with degrees and much to say about their tumultuous lives, American Indian writers began the tour de force that has become American Indian literature. As the American Indian movement gained strength and tribes began to practice their spiritual and traditional lives more openly, a level of hybridity and freedom to speak from a place of both tradition and modernity emerged with what some call the Native American Renaissance. Power players such as N. Scott Momaday and James Welch began building on the models of D’Arcy McNickle and others to craft the influential novels *House Made of Dawn* and *Winter in the Blood*, respectively. Both of these authors unapologetically utilized both white and native methods of storytelling in a way that was never before seen. When *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969, native storytelling made its debut on the world stage in an incredibly powerful way. Indian literature could no longer be dismissed as primitive or unrefined.

As Indian culture becomes more accessible to mainstream Americans and Indians from both on and off the reservation find a voice in the increasingly diverse American narrative, contemporary American Indian literature has emerged as a powerful and influential subgenre. Authors such as Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich have become highly regarded Indian writers and have forced readers and critics to examine not only a non-native person’s relationship to American Indians living today but have also shed
light and a level of truth to traditions and people who are too often stereotyped or forgotten about.

It is impossible to say that all tribes have one unifying type of literature or one kind of tradition that makes studying American Indian literature easy or formulaic. The truth is that one gets meaning out of reading Indian literature by allowing for complexity and a clash of traditions that may not at first glance seem that they should work together but manage to do so. Here, I will focus on Anishinabe narrative structure and style in order to illuminate the complexity of just one author’s use of traditional storytelling methods. I will first describe general expectations of Anishinabe narrative structure and style and then explore how those traditions have collided with European literary forms, specifically the novel, and apply those principles to Louise Erdrich’s novel *Love Medicine*. I will use a reader response critical lens to examine the important relationship between teller and listener or, in this case, author and reader in Indian literature. Chapter Three will further discuss specific mythic and traditional tropes and archetypes used in *Love Medicine*.

II. American Indian Narrative Structure

It warrants repeating that no Indian tribe is exactly the same as another, that Indian culture and traditions have never been and will never be a monolith. Although some tribes possess regional cultural similarities, each has at least subtle variations that some non-Indians or non-tribal members fail to recognize. In order to maintain the integrity of Erdrich’s work as that of a mixed-blood Anishinabe woman, this discussion
will examine Indian narrative style with a specific focus on Anishinabe methods of storytelling. In order to fully understand Erdrich’s novel, if one can ever fully understand a work of literature, one must be able to interpret or at least recognize the use of the traditional Indian narrative.

Traditionally, the Anishinabe people as well as other Indian tribes used storytelling as an oral representation of a cultural narrative. Some of the elements of these stories are easy for a non-Indian reader to recognize. Others are more codified and, unless one possesses the cultural understanding of Indian oral tradition and worldview as translated onto the page, contemporary Indian literature can become difficult to read if not nearly impossible to decipher. Some essential Indian storytelling elements that evade non-Indian readers are a nonlinear concept of time, a perceived lack of causality or a fractured narrative, and multiple perspectives or voices that I will show together constitute one whole and complete narrative steeped in cultural forms.

Anishinabe epistemology, unlike much Euro American epistemological thought, is built upon a nonlinear concept of time and space. Although the first trajectory is linear, according to traditional Anishinabe people, one’s life is not lived on a trajectory of events that build upon one another and gather significance as one grows older. In non-Indian worldviews, one can theoretically map life out in a straight line; a person is born, they become an adult, they marry, have children, work, and then die. This stadialist view of both individual and cultural progression through time exists at odds with American Indian concepts of movement through time. The Anishinabe perspective, in contrast, does not place important events in a string as if they are items to be checked off of a to do list.
Instead, the Indian perspective values and centers on “synchronous time with an emphasis on a circular, holistic view of events which take on multiple significance” (Ruppert 214).

The lack of causality and fractured nature of Indian narrative techniques has often led to critics labeling contemporary Indian literature as postmodern because they misunderstand the cultural traditions that native authors are working with to explain the fragmented nature of Indian literature. Scholars have noted that “in a good many examples from oral tradition, you see a narrator working back and forth in time and not following a strict time frame in the storytelling” (qtd. in Larson 55). The transition of this style of storytelling from oral tradition to the page can become muddled and lead to total misunderstanding of the plot if the author does not attempt to frame the fractured, back and forth nature of Indian storytelling in some European traditions that are recognizable to non-Indian readers.

Indian authors rectify this issue using various methods, but one that Erdrich clings to is the use of multiple narrators in the same story. Traditional Indian stories often span an entire lifetime of one character and intervene into that character’s life at different points and from various perspectives. Paula Gunn Allen, native activist and author of the groundbreaking book *The Sacred Hoop* maintains that from a cultural perspective this is because “no one’s experience is idiosyncratic” (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 17) and that “if others have done it before…and have endured, so can we” (qtd. in Ruppert 209). Closely linked with a non-linear view of life, the use of multiple narratives ensures that the listener is able to utilize multiple approaches to one issue and lends authority to both
individual experience and collective knowledge. To the Indian reader and writer or storyteller and listener, the use of multiple narrators is not obtrusive or unpredictable, but rather an accurate reflection of individual narrative in the ever present framework of tribal or cultural experience.

It is important to note that contemporary American Indian writers must publish for a wide audience due to the small number of strictly native audiences. The truth is that most Indians alive today are not one hundred percent, pure blood natives. It is certainly safe to say that many Indian authors writing today did not grow up in an entirely traditional household nor does their blood quantum, or their measured percentage of Indian blood, state that they are completely Indian. Like the audience that these mixed-blood authors write for, Indian authors are well versed and indeed steeped inside of white culture equally if not more so than their tribal culture. Louise Erdrich, the author that I will focus on, is a mixed-blood member of the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa. Erdrich describes her mother as “a strong, Chippewa woman” and her father as being of German descent. That means that Erdrich is at best half Anishinabe, but it is likely due to hundreds of years of colonization that her blood quantum is somewhat lower. Therefore, Erdrich as an artist as well as a person is “informed and ordered by elements of Anishinabe as well as of German, American, Catholic, and Midwestern cultures” (Stokes 89).

“In imagining a reader who has to learn a new way of thinking in order to make sense of Erdrich’s novel, I am positing a mainstream, non-Native, Western-trained reader; a reader coming to the text from a tribal context would bring a different set of expectations and have a different relation to the text. One’s position in the social landscape cannot help but influence what one sees in a novel” (Wyatt 14).
Erdrich was influenced as a child by hearing her grandfather tell traditional Anishinabe stories in her home. Later, when Erdrich went to Dartmouth College and began pursuing her career as a writer, she blended the rich, lyrical style of her native ancestors while writing coherently and masterfully as a novelist. In order for both of these traditions to come across to a wide audience, Erdrich must write for both Indian and non-Indian readers. While one could argue that an Anishinabe reader may have deeper or more immediate access to Erdrich’s texts, the fact that *Love Medicine* has been a bestseller and that Erdrich’s stories are often anthologized suggests that contemporary Indian literature has much to offer non-native readers as well. However, in order for Indian literature to be successful “[the author] must be free to use the tools and expectations of one to achieve the goals of another as well as to satisfy the code of expectations of its white and native American audiences” (Ruppert 210).

Erdrich’s ability, or rather, her necessity, to utilize both Indian and white cultures in her writing is descriptive of all Indian authors writing today. While using the tools of one culture to tell the story of another, native writers “create devastating critiques of white society and…[express] wider and deeper concerns than social criticism or a self-congratulatory view that all the old traditions are immutable and omnipotent” (Ruppert 210). Indian writers hold traditions in tension with one another to create narratives of the modern Indian by using the narrative structure of the traditional Indian. The mixed-blood author creates a hybrid world in which “mythological [stories] will often appear…because it is an important cultural dimension in determining identity and place” (Ruppert 214).
III. Narrative Structure of *Love Medicine*

Some critics and readers perceive Erdrich’s style in *Love Medicine* as episodic, cyclical, or even broken and fragmented. It is not incredibly clear to non-native readers and critics why *Love Medicine* has multiple narrators, multiple storylines, or what seems like unresolved plotlines. This more organic and ongoing structure of storytelling is likely to seem partial or even incomplete. Critics speak negatively about the structure being “a novel-like book of fragmented but thematically interwoven stories” or Erdrich’s style as being “the secular anecdotal process of community gossip…[with] no predictable pattern of development” (qtd. in Ferguson 551). While these opinions regarding the text are not invalid, they are misplaced in their assessment of a culture that tells stories differently than their own and therefore fall short of accurately interpreting what is happening within the text itself.

Without breaks in narrative, there would be little in the novel to denote to the non-Indian reader that there have been subtle changes in character or plotline. These juxtapositions and transfers in voice or perspective “[convey] the means of the protagonists’ change” (Wyatt 13). If the measure of successful writing for Indian authors is “[speaking] to all audiences at the same time and at different levels” (Ruppert 213) then the convention of unannounced changes in narration is a stylistic result of transmitting meaning to an audience that is trained to look for a trajectory of development in plot and character identity. Although this style choice does not come across as cleanly or in as ordered a fashion as the traditional, progressive manner, it does indeed move both
plot and characterization forward in its own way. Breaks in narrative and the use of multiple voices create meaning “at the sequential level” where “an episode holds enough unity to be coherent, but it is not the complete story” (Ruppert 223). The first shift in perspective in Love Medicine occurs in the first chapter of the story, after June Kashpaw’s death. The last line of the story from June’s perspective is “The snow fell deeper than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home” (7). Immediately, the narrative shifts to the perspective of June’s niece Albertine Johnson, who says:

After that false spring, when the storm blew in covering the state, all the snow melted off and it was summer. It was almost hot by the week after Easter, when I found out, in Mama’s letter, that June was gone—not only dead but suddenly buried, vanished off the land like that sudden snow. Far from home, living in a white woman’s basement, that letter made me feel buried, too. (7)

While June’s death in itself is the ending of one story, the story of June’s physical life, Erdrich’s immediate plunge into a continued narrative through the voice of June’s surviving relations makes it clear that June’s death is just the beginning. The parallel theme of being buried and lonely color both accounts of the story and allow for a sense of unity in perspective. While June is buried under the snow in a Chinook storm, Albertine is literally living underground. While June is killed by a white blanket of natural destruction, Albertine elects to live under a white woman’s house but feels a deep sense of loss at the loss of June, which echoes her loss of culture at the hands of living in a
white world, removed from her relations. Finding out about June’s death via letter also introduces another perspective in the narrative, Albertine’s mother Zelda, which signals a constantly shared story.

The trained reader will see that Erdrich’s narrative style is not fragmented or unpredictable but that she is bending the conventions of the novel to tell a native style narrative. It is clear from the first fifty pages of the novel that there will be more than one perspective within the storyline, even if the reader does not yet know that several characters will narrate the story as it progresses. Erdrich “sets up the principle of polyphony from the beginning from moving from one voice to another” (Wyatt 13) in order to make clear the concept of a shared narrative. While each character takes a turn and tells their specific side of the story, there is a sense that all are telling one, coherent narrative. The fact that almost all of the characters in the novel are related to one another in the always complex system of reservation kinship bonds pulls fragmented narratives together. The story of one person in the novel is the story of all people in the novel because the webs between each and every person are inextricably connected.

*Love Medicine* may seem, at first glance, to be a group of random stories tied together by the fact that some people love the same people and everyone in the novel is an Indian or of mixed-blood. While having every character connected in some way to every other character can seem like a dream solution with never ending plot possibilities, it can also lead to a lack in overall structure and confusion for the reader. Some scholarship has been done on why Erdrich includes a diagram of a family tree in later editions of the text and various editorial versus authorial decisions to make the text more
accessible to less perceptive readers, but that is not of interest in this discussion. While it
may seem to some that there is no logical structure to the way Erdrich presents the
connected characters in *Love Medicine*, the Indian knows quite well that there is, in fact,
a logical explanation to why and how everyone is interconnected. Following in oral
tradition, it takes some effort on the part of the reader to weed out the details, but once
some basic assumptions about how the text is ordered come into play, it is easy to gain
access to the overall structure of the novel.

One way to make sense of the overall structure of the novel is to examine
common Anishinabe family structures that exist in the flesh and blood world outside of
the novel. In this novel, Erdrich uses “the pattern of two sister stories [to] structure *Love
Medicine* according to family relationships: the sister dyad, the co-wives with their
husband, the bond with child of the mother and the parallel aunt, which among the
Anishinabe would be similar to the mother” (Stokes 92). Specifics about the original
mythic patterns that Erdrich is utilizing will be discussed in chapter three, but for now a
basic knowledge of the existing patterns in Anishinabe lore will do to establish a working
sense of the kinship relations in the novel that serve as structure for the story as a whole.
The co-wives in the story are the central tenants of structure, namely Marie and Lulu and
their connection to Nector. The bonds of the children and the shared mother are in
reference to both June and to her son Lipsha, who function as bookends of the novel.
June also functions as the parallel aunt for characters such as Albertine and Henry Jr.,
who both follow in June’s footsteps and seek peace off the reservation.
The complicated kinship network, although perhaps foreign to non-natives, is something that is familiar to Indians, mostly those who grow up in small reservation communities. Since colonizers began flooding into Indian country, many non-Indians have tried to understand the complicated kinship networks that exist in Indian communities, often to no avail. According to standard accounts of modern native culture such as that described in *The Marriage and Family Encyclopedia*, the immediate family as well as distant relations are essential to Indian society. The saying, “It takes a town to raise a child” is actively put into practice in Indian communities and on reservations. When on the reservation, one will often hear friends referred to as cousins, or cousins referred to as sisters or brothers. Living in a small community forces everyone to know who is related to whom in order to avoid marrying within one’s own family. Lack in housing infrastructure often encourages several generations of one family or even distant family members to live under the same roof. Children are often raised not just by their parents but also by their grandparents, specifically their grandmothers, and other elders who are valued for their wisdom and knowledge of tradition. Erdrich is very much true to the reality of Indian life in *Love Medicine*. The use of complicated kinship networks that are both confusing and anchoring appeal to both the native and non-native reader of the text. The sense that community is essential to the story allows for an interconnected narrative that spans not just a select few but all characters, in which “relationship is based on behavior…[not just] biology” (Stokes 97).

This ongoing web of a shared story allows for characters to appear and reappear within the story as if they had never left. The novel opens with June Kashpaw’s death,
but near the end of the novel, she reappears in a story about the honeymoon between Gordie and herself. It is not as if June is being discussed through Gordie’s perspective or through his memories of their honeymoon, but that June is actually there in the story, alive and in color. The use of individual episodes that connect June to the rest of the characters even though she has died is distinctly native. Karah Stokes notes that “This oral influence is demonstrated formally in the episodic form of the novels and the fact that, as in traditional stories of the Anishinabe, the same characters evolve through many works” (90). June does not appear in flashbacks but in actual offshoots of the central story.

The opening paragraphs of the novel introduce June Kashpaw, the “long-legged, Chippewa woman” and just a few pages later kills her off in a snowstorm. The non-native reader may be confused as to why a writer would introduce such an intriguing character only to lead them to their death immediately. The native reader knows that death is not the end of any person and that June is bound to make a comeback later in the narrative, as she does both alive and dead. All of the characters are tied to June in some way and are united both by her life and her death, but few are closer to her than her friend and eventual husband Gordie, who later recalls memories of June in a drunken stupor, but they are not presented in such a way that the reader doubts the validity of the tale or the reliability of the drunken half-narrator. Indeed, just because Gordie is remembering the story does not seem to denote that the story is nothing more than a memory. It lives with the vibrancy of a living couple, not a muddled remembrance.
The reader reencounters June in this new story in the chapter “Resurrection.” While the title could suggest that the story within the chapter is a resurrection of June, it is actually a tool for the resurrection of Gordie himself. The story does not feature a dead June, a half June, but the colorful girl that one can imagine she was prior to the years of hard living that brought her to her snow storm death. The story begins with time stopping as “a dark line connected and reconnected over different markers in [Gordie’s] life. The pointer stopped over the year [Gordie] married June” (266). The first lines of the story portray June as a vivid, playful young girl, full of the dense imagery of life, summer, and new beginning, of the birth of love. The opening lines say, “They were lying in the dark of the hottest night of that fierce blue summer, panting in the sodden air, when June leaned across the bed and put her fingers on Gordie’s mouth. ‘Now,’ she whispered” (266-267). The words “hottest” and “fierce” imply an immediacy of June and Gordie feeling the summer on their skin in that specific moment. The gulping of the summer air is almost palpable to the reader’s lungs and June’s playful gesture to Gordie is subtle but fiercely alive and incredibly vivid, a small moment between two people at the beginning of a story, not at the end of one. June lives as much in the middle of Love Medicine and she did in the beginning, and the Anishinabe narrative style allows Erdrich to tell the story of a dead character with the intense immediacy that is seen in this chapter.

IV. A Whole Different Level of Reader Response

What gives meaning to Indian literature beyond the sequential level is the relationship between the person telling the story and the person being told the story.
Native literature requires the listener/reader to actively participate in the narrative, not sit passively and receive a level of instantaneous satisfaction within provided meaning. Readers are required to fill in gaps in the story that belong as much to the reader as it does to the author. Indeed, from the Indian perspective, these stories belong to everyone. What happens in a story is not a result of individual causality. Rather, the listener hears a history of the people’s shared past that is guided toward what will be a shared future.

In *Love Medicine* and other Indian novels, the participation of the reader in the narrative is so intertwined with the meaning of the story that the reader’s failure to go beyond what is presented to them in the narrative renders the transmission of meaning not just difficult but impossible. Since the story being told belongs to everyone who reads it, the individual reader is responsible for simultaneously interpreting and then carrying forward in a way that aids in the creation of the story. Literary critic and multicultural literature scholar Jean Wyatt maintains that although the tale is already written, it does not come to life without an audience that is willing to immerse itself in the story, to sit next to the characters and create their own conversation. While some may say that too much reader authority delegitimizes the story as it was meant to be told or received, in Indian literature “our participation is required if meaning is to emerge” (Wyatt 20).

There are two different types of stories that readers of Indian literature must know how to traverse and work inside of in order for the stories to be first make sense and then become meaningful. The first is what the American Indian Studies scholars Paula Gunn Allen and Patricia Clark Smith call “arcane.” This type of story prepares the reader for the transformative event that will occur later. This may be compared to a rising action in
non-Indian literature, only with readers more actively immersing themselves in the action itself. In short, Allen, Smith, and Rupert contend that “the arcane story is told to aid and complete the ceremonial story” (Rupert 216). In Love Medicine the arcane story that the reader takes part in is falling in love. Nector falls in love with both Marie and Lulu, Lulu falls in love with Moses Pillager, June falls in love with Gordie, and Lipsha cannot fall in love with anyone despite having the capabilities to heal and to care for another person. Each of these relationships centered on love, or the lack thereof, requires the reader to participate almost as if they were in the relationship themselves. The use of multiple perspectives of the same relationship allows the reader to be prepared for the ceremonies adequately. Although concerning plot and theme, romantic love is not the focal point of the narrative, it is the process of entering into romantic relationships via the storytelling that is essential for the reader to actively take place in the narrative and to be fully prepared for the ceremonial element that will come later.

The three arcane stories as defined by Rupert that I will focus on here are Nector falling in love with Marie, Lulu falling in love with Moses Pillager, and Nector falling in love with Lulu. These three examples, while not the only examples of arcane story in the novel, serve to define and illuminate the characters and the reader and push them toward the ceremonial story in powerful ways. Nector falls in love with Marie in what seems like a semi-violent accident that changes the course of not only Nector and Marie’s lives but the lives of everyone that they touch, which is essentially every other character in the novel. Nector and Marie literally slam into one another when Marie is coming down from the convent on the hill. Told from Nector’s perspective, the reader learns that Marie
“burns up at [Nector] with such fierceness” (64) that he is soon consumed by her. Nector’s retelling of his falling in love with Marie shows a searing power struggle that will define their relationship throughout the novel and prepares the reader for their eventual ceremonial end:

I look into her eyes and see the hard tears have frozen in the corners. She moves her legs. I keep her down. Something happens. The bones of her hips lock to either side of my hips, and I am held in a light vise. I stiffen like I am shocked. It hits me then that I am lying full length across a woman, not a girl...And then I am caught. I give way. I cannot help myself, because, to my everlasting wonder, Marie is all tight plush acceptance, graceful movements, little jabs...somehow I am beaten at what I started on this hill...I don’t want her, but I want her, and I cannot let go. (65-67)

Nector’s account is charged with imagery of wrestling and uncertainty. Later, as a married couple, Nector will come to resent the qualities in Marie that he falls in love with when they first meet, and eventually turn to Lulu to satisfy himself for a love that is easier but perhaps more shallow. The reader must fall in love with Marie as Nector does in this arcane tale if the forthcoming ceremonial story will have any real power of transformation. The passion in this scene laced with a deep tension between the characters pulls the reader in deeper than is perhaps comfortable, but necessary to the fulfillment of the plot and the overall meaning of the relationship between Nector and Marie.
Before Lulu falls in love with Nector, she seeks love with the strange and mystical Moses Pillager. Looking for love in a traditional place in an attempt to fill the void of her absent, traditional mother, Lulu dares to visit Moses on the secluded island where he lives as a hermit. If Nector’s meeting with Marie is passionate, Lulu’s meeting with Moses borders on sinister. Nector and Marie’s power struggle is perhaps brash, but Lulu and Moses virtually battle for domination of one another. Lulu says, “He was caught. I had dusted him, chilled him in the shape of my shadow when I stood against the sun. I had loosened the air, stolen the strings from his hands and legs, bent him like a stem of grass marking my trail. The last of the sunset shook into the cave, golden as a mist of bees, and I did not take my eyes off Moses Pillager” (80). Lulu’s clear attempt to ensnare Moses is powerful to the tone of being terrifying. The reader gains a sense of Lulu’s determination to possess what she desires, that Lulu is a woman of deep longing and is steadfast. One may wonder how anyone could fall in love with a woman whose love necessitates personal destruction, but this is what makes Lulu so intoxicating. Soon enough, Moses gives in to Lulu’s ploys, and Lulu says that he does not:

flinch or move when my fingers traced the blanket of his shirt, the bone of his jaw, his straight lips. But when I cupped his face carefully in my palms, as though he were a child, he fell toward me with a deep, sad sound. He lowered his head to me and I moved my hand continually, curiously, over his shoulders and back until he could not contain himself…suddenly his breath went deep and ragged in my ear. There was
no more light from the fire, and I couldn’t feel where he ended or began.

(80-81)

Lulu’s ability to entice and consume become more important as the story moves into its ceremonial elements. The brief but powerful meeting between Lulu and Moses prepares the reader to enter into the ceremony with knowledge of what Lulu is capable of both her power to heal and to destroy.

Lastly, it is important to examine how Nector describes his falling in love with Lulu. Strangely, the language in this section is far more muted than it is in Nector’s account with Marie. It is as if Lulu is less direct in her persuasion of Nector, less domineering and more subtle. Nector tells a story of meeting Lulu first at boarding school as children and looking at her first as sister figure and later as a schoolboy crush. Nector says:

I let her tag with me to town. I bought her licorice. Then we grew apart from each other, I came home, and saw her dancing in the Friday night crowd. She was doing the butterfly with two other men. For the first time, on seeing her, I knew exactly what I wanted. We sparked each other. We met behind the dance house and kissed. I knew I wanted more of that sweet taste on her mouth. I got selfish. We were flowing easily toward each other’s arms. (125)

In this passage, it is as if Nector is simply floating toward Lulu on an easy current, not crashing into her like rapids as he does Marie. For a while, Nector is able to forget his enchantment with Lulu, but he can never forget her entirely. Later, Nector says, “The
truth is I had never gotten over [Lulu]. I thought back to how swiftly we had been moving toward each other’s soft embrace before everything got tangled and swept me on past. In my mind’s eye I saw her arms stretch out in longing while I shrank into the blue distance of marriage” (128). Due to the fact that Nector is reflecting back on what occurred with Marie and Lulu and how he is longing for something to have happened differently, he begins to use more ceremonial language. Nector’s use of the language of moving toward and away from a central point feels dramatically rhythmic and one can almost visualize he characters dancing ceremoniously around one another. Once the reader establishes that Nector is in love with both Marie and Lulu, albeit in different ways, one can move out of the realm of the arcane story and into the heart of the novel, the ceremonial story.

The ceremonial story is the key element to any American Indian story. Some native authors, such as Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, are obvious in their use of actual, traditional ceremony within the text to bring about changes in both the characters and the reader. However, Erdrich is more subtle. The only ceremony that is directly depicted in the novel is the failed love medicine ceremony that Lipsa attempts to execute. While this does bring about one of the arcane stories that the reader must go through, it is a false ending. In this novel, the use of the ceremony is crucial but may not be immediately clear. The ceremonial act in Love Medicine is the crossing of or going under water. The ceremony of crossing water or coming up for air suggests a strong parallel to birth and newness of identity. The ability of water to erode is essential to the text for both the reader and the characters. The ceremonial element of native storytelling
and now native literature is to bring the listener or reader “into the energy and creativity of the cosmogenic story for rebirth and renewal” (Ruppert 216).

Water is mentioned from the beginning of the novel concerning June’s death to the end of the novel with Lipsha discovering his true identity. When June dies, the text says that “June walked over [the snow] like water and came home” (7) even though June has been eroded by her experiences to the point of her death. Soon after, Albertine learns of June’s death while living off the reservation and says, “Far from home, living in a white woman’s basement, that letter made me feel buried, too” (7) implying that Albertine’s story begins with a feeling that she is somehow going under or being pushed down with guilt and sadness. The last lines of the novel mention the crossing of water in order to return to something that was lost. While Lipsha is driving June’s car home to the reservation, he muses on last minute self discovery and the history of his people’s land. Lipsha says:

I’d heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast, unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on.

So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home. (367)

Although these are not the key ceremonial mentions of water in the novel, it is worth noting that crossing water and coming home are key themes that bookend the story as a whole and also play a large part in the individual narratives throughout the text. The water imagery also corresponds with the overall narrative structure in the text. Like
water, the narrative structure in the novel is fluid, borrowing tropes from two traditions and bringing them together in a unique form. Erdrich’s ability to blend literary conventions rather than conform to one, rigid narrative structure suggests literary mutability within contemporary American Indian literature that exists in conjunction with the ceremonial aspect of water.

When Lulu goes to visit Moses Pillager with the intention of taking him as a lover, she obviously has to literally cross water in order to get to him. Moses lives on an island that is only accessible by boat. Although the reader knows this, Lulu does not mention having to cross the water in order to come to Moses. It is only after she has seduced him, after the reader has gone through the arcane story of falling in love and becoming real within that love that Lulu discusses the water. She says, “The weather shifted, colder, and we stayed inside his cave day after day, never leaving except to bathe in the lake. We plunged into the freezing water, dizzy, steam flowing down our thighs, and then on the shore we embraced again, twisting like otters” (81). Since water is indicative of a cleansing ritual and rebirth, one can argue that Pillager’s cave represents a womb that Lulu and her new love grow inside of like an embryo. The act of coming out of the cave in order to bathe in the lake literally purifies the two by cleansing them of their bodily dirt, but it also is a spiritual cleansing. In stepping out of the warm comfort of the cave and into the deep, dangerous lake outside in the cold, Lulu and Moses plunge deeper into uncertainty, and this makes them brave and new, stronger than they were before they entered each other’s lives.
Nector is one person who is deeply affected by water throughout his life. In his descriptions of falling in love with Marie and Lulu, the events that come to define his life, he uses water colored language, saying things like, “What they call a lot of water under the bridge. Maybe it was rapids, a swirl that carried me so swift that I could not look to either side but has to keep my eyes trained on what was coming” (127) and “Time was rushing around me like water around a big wet rock. The only difference is, I was not so durable as stones. Very quickly I would be smoothed away. It was happening already” (127). Nector’s memory is smoothed away like the sharp side of a rock until he does not recognize his wife and longs for the sweetness of Lulu that helped wash away his mental power in the first place. His inability to come up for air and to be reborn is his essential character flaw and it leads to the only ceremony depicted outright in the novel. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the love medicine ceremony attempts to bring Nector out of the deep ocean of memories that his mind inhabits, only to drown him inside of those memories.

V. Conclusion

The relationship of storyteller and reader in native literature is an incredibly dynamic one with stories being of the utmost cultural importance. Storytelling and actively participating in stories that are being told is “an ongoing process of identity with the self, place, and with others, often as they perceive and are perceived through storytelling” (Larson 55). The Indian relationship to these stories is embedded in the cultural ideas of what it means to be native. The story’s power to heal the native
consciousness and to mend personal and familial identity is the strongest medicine there is in native culture. Modern American Indians utilize stories to stay connected and to remind themselves of their roots while moving forward in a society that tells stories in a much different way. For Indians, stories make meaning of events that otherwise seem meaningless or too large to comprehend. Themes like love, death, and cultural assimilation all play into American Indian modes of storytelling because they factor so hugely into the lives of Indians today. Native literary critic Lisa Brooks says of the importance of storytelling in her own life that “a huge gap in the web of our family required mending that only stories can do; those strands reinforce the relations between us, remind us of our shared history, let loose the laughter that gives us the reassurance that we can, as a family, endure” (qtd. in Wyatt 24).

Louise Erdrich utilizes elements of her native heritage in order to tell a beautiful, painfully human story. Although the characters in Love Medicine are native, they could just as easily be non-native. It is the deep connection that Erdrich creates between the reader and the characters that fleshes out the story, regardless of the stylistic tropes that she uses to bring about a traditional narrative structure. However, the reader who can recognize the traditional, Anishinabe narrative style is more deeply enriched by the cultural context of the novel.

Erdrich’s success lies partly in her ability to appeal to multiple audiences and also in Love Medicine’s ability to endure. Since its publication in 1984, Love Medicine has reached a wide audience of critics and general readers alike. Both native and non-native readers have gone through the arcane and the ceremonial with Lulu, Marie, Nector, and
Lipsha, perhaps without knowing they were doing so. Those who knew what to look for perhaps gained a sense of immediacy with the text while those who did not were left with something hauntingly beautiful, with a novel that they could not escape. While Erdrich is an incredibly competent interpreter and author of her native ancestry and future as an Indian author, she also returns again and again to her European roots and reminds non-native readers that while native storytelling is unique as a form, the accomplished author is able to transcend cultural boundaries with literature. Franz Kafka says:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we’re reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief.

*Love Medicine* is one such book. It is because of Erdrich’s polished use of both European and native forms and her raw exposition of human emotion that *Love Medicine* endures and will endure, that it is born and reborn within the readers who understand the novel and those who are baffled by its power. It will continue to allow all those who read it to cross many rivers and, eventually, to come home.
I. Introduction: Anishinabe Myth and Legend

Now that I have explored the relationship between American Indian identity and culture and have examined traditional native narrative style’s influence on contemporary Indian literature, I will look closely at the Indian myths and legends that influence modern stories. Although there exists a multitude of scholarship concerning traditional American Indian folklore, there is a blind spot in applied literary scholarship using traditional stories to illuminate contemporary American Indian literature. In this chapter, I hope to establish an understanding of Anishinabe lore and also provide a working application of traditional plot elements and characters to Love Medicine. American Indian culture today, while heavily rooted in modern American culture, continues to be defined in some ways by the past. Although some cultural traditions have died out entirely or changed over time due to changing circumstances in Indian communities or Christianization, there are certain stories that every tribe remembers, in some form, from its origin in traditional mythology. Some myths such as creation stories, yellow woman

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10 For example, see texts such as The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative by Thomas King, Ojibwe Waasa Inaabidaa: We Look in All Directions by Thomas Peacock, Native American Stories by John Hakionhes Fadden, and American Indian Folklore by Wil Two Bears.
stories, and katchina stories\textsuperscript{11} can be found in one form or another amongst many tribal groups.

Despite the presence of some stories across many tribal groups, there are certain stories that are essential to tribal worldview that are distinct and complex. The Anishinabe, a tribe to which Erdrich belongs, have many colorful and rich myths that are distinct to their tribe.\textsuperscript{12} Without an understanding of these legends, one cannot begin to comprehend the Anishinabe cultural outlook. Just as these myths were the essence of the Anishinabe before colonization, they shape contemporary culture as well. Many American Indian authors today utilize these myths that they were told in childhood in their contemporary novels and poetry.

Although Erdrich did not grow up on a reservation, her Anishinabe mother and grandfather constantly told traditional myths. As Erdrich grew older and was educated as a writer, she began to borrow directly from the stories of her childhood, adding both characters and plotlines from the traditional myths to her novels and short stories. Although many subplots and subtle character parallels are detectible in nearly all of Erdrich’s characters and plotlines if one bends the myth enough, there are some incredibly striking patterns from tradition myths in both plot and character that play out.

The Anishinabe myths that Erdrich utilizes are complex and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. For now, it will do to establish a basic understanding of

\textsuperscript{11} Yellow woman stories feature a young woman stolen or removed from her home by an evil spirit in which she goes away, learns a vital lesson, and escapes to transmit the lesson back to her community. Katchina stories are similar, but focus on a supernatural force called “evil Katchina” that causes chaos in communities in various ways.

\textsuperscript{12} Note: These and other details cited in this chapter concerning elements of traditional folklore derive from the author’s personal knowledge and authority.
Anishinabe legends and mythic characters. While there are many figures in Anishinabe lore, most are not essential to the scope of this chapter and will therefore not be discussed here. Only those that are utilized in some way by Erdrich will be of interest. In traditional Anishinabe worldview, there are three basic types of beings: non-human spiritual beings, humans who become spiritual beings, and humans. Non-human spiritual beings are known as manitous and are somewhat similar to what the ancient Greeks or Romans identified as gods. Although Anishinabe supernatural power structure is quite different than a Christian concept of one supreme deity, arguably the most important figure in Anishinabe cosmology is known as Kitchi-Manitou, or the Great Mystery. Kitchi-Manitou is the central creation figure who “created the world, plants, birds, animals, fish, and the other manitous in fulfillment of a vision” (Johnston xvi). This creation figure is not identified with a gender and exists outside of Euro-American concepts of masculine and feminine powers. Rather, Kitchi-Manitou is the essence of all that is and will be.

Shortly after Kitchi-Manitou creates the earth, there is a great flood that results in mass destruction of all life forms other than fish and fowl. It is at this time the vital character Sky Woman, or Geezhigo-Quae, is impregnated by another manitou and gives birth to twins, a daughter and a son. The Anishinabe are directly descended from these two just as Christian myth states that all people are descended from Adam and Eve. It is important to note, however, that although Geezhigo-Quae is responsible for the survival of the Anishinabe people on earth and is therefore a creation figure, she is not synonymous with the symbol of fecundity that is Mother Earth. Rather, Muzzu-Kummik-Quae (literally Earth Woman) is the figure in Anishinabe cosmology that is identified as
the essence of womanhood and femininity, new life and prosperity. It is important to note that Anishinabe lore presents two distinctly different models of womanhood that are equally valid and important in traditional Anishinabe society.

The next level of the supernatural that exists in Anishinabe legend are those manitou spirits who manifest themselves in human form and, in some cases, live side by side with humans in physical form. The hybrid, half-human characters who become essential beings to the Anishinabe came to be when the spirit identified with the West, called Ae-pungishimook, had children with a human woman named Winonah. The four hybrid manitous who resulted from their sexual union were called Maudjee-kawis, Pukawis, Cheeby-aub-oozoo, and Nana’b’oozoo (Johnston xxii).

Each of the four sons has a specific quality that renders them important archetypal characters in literally hundreds of variations of several Anishinabe myths. Maudjee-kawis is identified by his ability as a great warrior who is unable to fully participate in the human world because of his short temper. Pukawis has an almost feminine fascination with the natural world and is eventually disowned by Ae-pungishimook when he cannot live up to the prowess of his older brother. Cheeby-aub-oozoo, an introverted observer of the world and the people around him, is noted for having invented instruments such as the drum and flute. Nana’b’oozoo, who will be of the most importance to this discussion, is the essential trickster figure in Anishinabe lore.

Nana’b’oozoo is a lively, tricky manitou who has an interesting relationship with the Anishinabe. Known as a figure who is constantly scheming, Nana’b’oozoo becomes the archetypal figure for all trickster characters in Anishinabe lore, and “eventually, the
[Anishinabe] applied the name ‘Nana’b’oozoo’ to anyone who committed blunders as a result of acting on impulse and instinct rather than on reason and common sense” (Johnston 94). However, like any real human being, Nana’b’oozoo is both virtuous and cowardly, with faults and qualities that both condemn him as a character and make him the most talked about figure in Anishinabe lore. He will be particularly important later in the chapter as a central mythic character in *Love Medicine*.

There are other, less friendly entities that also exist alongside these benevolent figures. The two main entities that will be of concern here are the *windigog* and the Matchi-auwishuk. These spirits are almost never presented in a positive manner and are often referred to as “man-hunting manitous that preyed upon evil-doing humans, as well as those who gave in to excesses” (Johnston xxi). These spirits exist on the boundaries of society, but are ever present in the collective and individual conscious of the tribe and individual members of society. The Anishinabe, the *windigog* and the Matchi-auwishuk encourage exemplary moral behavior. The Anishinabe, like most American Indian tribes, do not have a hierarchical judicial system like Western cultures. Some non-natives perceive this as a result of the reality that in a tribal society, selfhood is directly linked with the communal. However, this fails to understand that although the survival of the tribe is of the utmost importance, native people such as the Anishinabe encourage individuals to make their own decision and become the best version of themselves as possible. Without a healthy, thriving individual, the Anishinabe understand that there can be no tribal strength. These evil *manitous*, therefore, represent a control device in a society in which individual discretion is highly prized and respected. A healthy
relationship to both the benevolent and evil spirits residing in the liminal space between the tangible world and spirit is essential. As Basil Johnson, Anishinabe ethnologist describes:

men and women felt the presence of the manitous all around them. Human beings had to comply with the natural laws of the world, and although they were subject to no other men or women, they had to abide by everything else and could not make anything comply or conform to their wishes. They were among the least of the creatures of the Earth and were dependent on the manitous’ goodwill. (Johnston xxi)

Since the manitous and stories about them and their relationships with humans was such an important part of the Anishinabe culture and worldview, it is no surprise that their stories survive today in contemporary literature. In Love Medicine, Louise Erdrich borrows snippets from several stories and characters that influence and sometimes directly impact the novel and its characters. Some critics insist that all native literature is in the vein of the stories that were told to one’s ancestors and that “Native American written literature is traditional in [a] sense. It is comprised of stories, the authors’ telling of stories they have heard, and it is criticism, a story about those [stories]” (Larson 53). However, Erdrich utilizes traditional plotlines and characters not to copy or retell the stories of her ancestral past, but to bring Anishinabe culture into the modern world. As Erdrich borrows, she also changes and makes traditional stories relevant to the modern native reader and to the non-native reader as well. In this chapter, I will discuss Erdrich’s use of the character Nana’b’oozoo to fashion Nector’s character, how Erdrich models
Lulu and Marie’s characters after the sisters Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis, and how she borrows much of the plot from these common story cycles.

II. Traditional Anishinabe Character Parallels in *Love Medicine*

As already established, Nana’b’oozoo is a common trickster figure among Algonquian speaking tribes. Known as the compassionate trickster and somewhat of a war hero, Nana’b’oozoo:

exercises the diverse functions of many persons, and he likewise suffers their pains and needs. He is the life struggling within the many forms of want, misfortune, and death that come to the bodies and beings of nature…Nana’b’oozoo is apparently the impersonation of life, the active quickening power of life—of life manifested and embodied in the myriad forms of sentient and physical nature. He is therefore reputed to possess not only the power to live, but also the correlative power to renewing his own life and of quickening and therefore creating life in others.

(“Legendary Native American Figures”)

While this description of Nana’b’oozoo is perhaps more benevolent than what is typical of that of a trickster figure, it endows Nana’b’oozoo with a special kind of power among the Anishinabe. While Nana’b’oozoo is often foolish and makes a great deal of mistakes in his lifetime, he is also exceedingly caring of his people. Indeed, it is as if the

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13 Nana’b’oozoo is known under many different names by different tribes and even dialects within a certain language. Other common spellings or names for this figure include Nanabozho, Manabozho, Minabozho, and Nenabozho.
Anishinabe are bound to one another by both Nana’b’oozoo’s mistakes and his triumphs. Affording himself a position as the central figure in Anishinabe myth and legend, Nana’b’oozoo becomes not only widely known, but knowledge of his trials and tribulations become essential for a person to have access to Anishinabe culture.

Similarly, Nector’s character in *Love Medicine* becomes central to the plotline and to the lives of many of the characters. Since all of the characters basically stem from one of two families, the Kashpaws or the Nanpushes, the familial line that descends from the women who love Nector populates the entire novel. Nector’s love affairs with Marie and Lulu bind the various narratives into one story. It is fair to think of Nector as the common denominator of modern Chippewa reservation society in the same way that Nana’b’oozoo is the central, unifying figure for the Anishinabe. Esteemed native author and professor Gerald Vizenor says:

The stories [about Nana’b’oozoo]...have been heard and remembered by tribal people in many generations...most of the stories about the tribal trickster are not sacred, wicked, or wise; rather, the trickster is eternal motion and transformation in the stories. The trickster is boasted on cue and comes to naught; no critical closures, representations, or essential cultural conditions could hold the stories...these stories are about the comic and ironic nature of humans. (13)

Vizenor’s asserts that Nana’b’oozoo exists as a conduit of reflection for the meaning of collective and individual human nature. This opinion of Nana’b’oozoo is reflected in the way that Erdrich utilizes Nector as less of a complete person and more of a vector for the
relationships that develop and later flourish between the characters that he has relationships with.

Although it is possible that a character as various and fluid as Nana’b’oozoo could correspond to almost any character in Love Medicine, there are many undeniable similarities between Nector and Nana’b’oozoo. Nector is described as being markedly different from his more traditional brother, Eli. While Nector “came home from boarding school knowing white reading and writing,” Eli “knew the woods” and continued to hunt for his food and speak his native language (19). Nana’b’oozoo, like Nector, does not seem interested in the traditional ways of his people and “was not attentive to the winds and thunder and waves, nor did he have the same interest or respect for ceremonies and ritual, dream quests, and purification rites or regard for bears, hawks, sturgeons, and the manitous themselves,” (Johnston 51) differing from the ways of his three brothers. Late in his life, Nector falls victim to Alzheimer’s disease and his granddaughter Albertine describes him as “wary and wild” with “thoughts [that] swam between us, hidden under rocks, disappearing in weeds” (19). Similarly, Nana’b’oozoo is so consumed by his many desires and human misgivings that he “frequently had to be reminded of things, as if he couldn’t retain anything in his mind” (Johnston 58). Due to their inability to connect fully with their culture, both Nector and Nana’b’oozoo are somewhat incomplete and lack full access to not only their culture but to desires that may otherwise be accessible through proper adherence to cultural ceremonies such as faithful marriage for Nector and dream quests for Nana’b’oozoo. The nontraditional outlook of these characters, while perhaps perceived as progressive and based in what are perhaps praiseworthy assimilation efforts
to modern readers, is condemned in both traditional stories and in Erdrich’s modern adaptation.

Erdrich also draws strong parallels between Nana’b’oozoo’s relationships and Nector’s relationships. Stories about Nana’b’oozoo’s love life are fairly numerous, although they do not often feature as the dominant aspect of his life in the way that Nector’s romantic relationships do. Nana’b’oozoo is described by Native scholars as a somewhat distanced lover with few romantic interests. However, he does fall “hopelessly in love” and loves “desperately, passionately” (Johnson 82). Unfortunately for Nana’b’oozoo, he unknowingly falls in love with his sister and is forced to find another woman. Later, when Nana’b’oozoo becomes incredibly interested in all of the women around him, they begin to refer to him as “aupitchih igoh nauh w’gageebauizih” which means something to the tune of “foolish beyond words” (Johnston 84). It is when Nana’b’oozoo finally marries that he becomes similar to Nector. By marrying a woman who seems to control him, Nana’b’oozoo falls into the same matrimonial pattern that Nector does with Marie. His wife scolds him for being a liar, lacking commitment, and being “greedy,” and she chastises him by saying, “You don’t know when to stop, you don’t care for customs and have no common sense…You’re supposed to be a manitou, humph! If only they knew” (Johnston 90).

This tone of voice and the relationship between Nana’b’oozoo and his wife is utilized by Erdrich to pattern the relationship between Marie and Nector. Just as Nana’b’oozoo’s wife holds him to the standards of his social position as a demigod, Marie holds Nector together when he is at risk of falling apart. Several times, Marie
reminds the reader that she is in fact responsible for Nector’s revered position in the community as tribal chairman. She says:

I had married a man with brains. But the brains wouldn’t matter unless I kept him from the bottle. He would pour them down the drain, where his liquor went, unless I stopped the holes, wore him out, dragged him back each time he drank, and tied him to the bed with strong ropes. I had decided I was going to make him into something big on this reservation.

(89)

Later, when Nector has reached the level of success that Marie deems adequate, she again says “Now I’d let [everyone] see where my devotion had gone and where it had got me. For by now I was solid class. Nector was tribal chairman” (148). Here, Erdrich echoes Nana’b’oozoo’s wife’s sentiment that male leadership is promoted and even cultivated by the women they are married to. Although Nana’b’oozoo is born with his dignified title and Nector must earn his, each man is held to a strict standard by his wife that allows him to become more than he would be otherwise.

Although both of Nana’b’oozoo and Nector are capable of greatness and compassion or love, they share a common fault of being too human. Nana’b’oozoo is incapable of acting in a way that is representative of his demigod status, and Nector is valued more for his appearance than his ability to lead. At times, both characters seem like a sham or a half-drawn archetype. They each rely on other characters to inform them of correct behavior and they still give in to less than wholesome activities. Both characters are exceedingly prone to excess. It is said that “Nana’b’oozoo meant well, but
he did not always carry out what he intended to do. He was encumbered with all human shortcomings: sloth, gluttony, envy, lust, pride, anger, and impulsiveness, among others” (Johnston 78). One of the most telling stories that highlights Nana’b’oozoo’s shortcomings is that of his decision to harvest more from the earth than was immediately needed for his family to subsist upon. Nana’b’oozoo decided that such a tactic was “wasteful of time, energy, and talent” (Johnston 78). However, his inclination to embrace excess is punished when his extra crops are stolen from him, and he is subsequently pestered by natural beings for his wrongdoings.

Nector’s excess is also related figuratively to food indulgences, specifically to candy or sweetness. Lulu is the personification of what is sweet to Nector in the novel while Marie eventually leaves a bitter tasted in his mouth. When Nector’s mind fails in old age, Marie attributes his disease to too much indulgence from Lulu. Lulu admits that she is “the blood that pounded in his temples…the knock of his heart. I worked my way through his body and sewed him up” (282). Later, when Lulu, Marie, and Nector are all living in a nursing home, Lulu witnesses Nector attempting, and failing, to buy a pack of candy from a vending machine. She notes that “People said Nector Kashpaw had changed, but the truth was he’d just become more like himself than ever…I suppose I felt sorry for what a greedy thing he’d been all along, and how it showed now” (291).

Ultimately, Erdrich patterns Nector after Nana’b’oozoo. Although each character has shining moments of hope and goodwill, they are both so eaten up by faults that they cannot manage to evolve from the trickster to the sincere character. Just like Nector, Nana’b’oozoo:
fell back into his old habits that resulted in hardship for his wife and family. Following each lapse, [he] was contrite and made up his mind to improve for his family’s sake, and he meant it. But despite his good intentions, he soon reverted slowly to his old ways without noticing that he was falling from good habits. Stand up, fall, regain balance, and stumble again; such was the pattern of [his] life. (Johnston 90).

Although Nector’s character works as a complimentary one in *Love Medicine* just as Nana’b’oozoo does in several Anishinabe myths, the central storyline focuses on Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine. Unlike Nector, Marie and Lulu are at first glance less allegorical and more complex. Both women are strong female characters who hold up a dynamic plotline, and one might therefore think that they are not modeled after an archetypal character or storyline. However, they are indeed patterned on traditional Anishinabe characters named Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis. These characters are often featured in a set of stories that traditionally were told by and to women, and it is therefore likely that Erdrich heard the stories via her mother as a child.14 These women do not feature exclusively in one tale, but reappear again and again. Although certain stories such as *Oshkikwe’s Baby* are more famous and have been rewritten in contemporary American Indian literature, there are numerous storylines available about Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis. Erdrich draws more on basic generalizations that can be made about Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis rather than specific tales.

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14 According to Karah Stokes, “stories about Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis, a polar pair of sisters in a cycle of stories [are] commonly told by Anishinabe women” (90).
Just as Marie and Lulu are polar opposites, so are Oshkikwe and Matchikewesis. The characteristics assigned to Oshkikwe are indicative of Marie’s character while Matchikewesis more closely represents Lulu. In traditional tales, Oshkikwe is “the younger [sister], [who] more often demonstrates the traditional virtues of politeness, modesty, and common sense” (Stokes 91) while Matchikewesis is “the elder, usually rude, greedy, and impulsive, especially in matters concerning sex” (Stokes 91). Although the sisters’ relationship to Nana’b’oozoo is not traditionally depicted as a romantic one, there are some stories in which all three characters appear and “in some versions they are said to be daughters of [Nana’b’oozoo]” (Stokes 91). Although Erdrich does not make note of either Marie or Lulu being older or younger, the reader can indeed assume that they are close in age because they know the same people and end up in the nursing home around the same time. Marie and Lulu are not actually sisters in Love Medicine, but they embody characteristics of their mythical counterparts to the extent that such a formality is symbolically irrelevant.

III. Traditional Anishinabe Plot Parallels in Love Medicine

In one traditional Anishinabe story called The Star Husband, Oshkikwe and Matchikewesis spend time together stargazing and musing over their mutual love lives. They are described in the story as “two semi-supernatural women” (Allen, Pocahontas 165) and are in fact noted here to be sisters. Although Marie and Lulu are not supernatural, they each have a certain force that draws people to them and the ability to

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15 There are many different versions of this story in translation. I will be using Paula Gunn Allen’s contemporary version that honors traditional themes and plot structure while using contemporary language.
manipulate their lives in ways that seem to exceed normalcy. Marie is able to control those around her to the point that she makes Nector, an otherwise and drunk and somewhat foolish man, tribal chairman. Her power stems from the spiritual power that she gleans from her stay in the convent, or at least she believes she gains new power after that experience. Marie says, “I was rippling gold. My breasts were bare and my nipples flashed and winked. Diamonds tipped them. I could walk through a pane of glass. I could walk through windows” (54). It is clear that in this scene, Marie has entered into a transformation that renders her, just like Oshkikwe, semi-supernatural. Immediately after leaving the convent, Marie is powerful in a way that no average teenage girl could be. Whether or not Marie is actually supernatural or if she and others simply believe she is is irrelevant. In telling the story, or enacting the ritual, Erdrich makes Marie’s supernatural status true.

Lulu’s supernatural power is rooted in something quite different from Marie. Lulu draws men in with her seductive nature and even has an intimate relationship with a supernatural being. After Lulu’s experience with Moses Pilager, she enacts a crushing force on those around her. Those who know Lulu reportedly see her as “a happy person” who “[greets] the world without a grudge” (281). While Marie draws her power from the depths of revenge, Lulu’s power comes from love. The mystical language that is used when Lulu and Nector see one another is dark and somewhat primitive, suggesting that Lulu is not entirely of this world. Concerning one of their encounters, Lulu says, “He came sneaking into my house with a bad smell on his hands, and I made him wash before he touched me. But when he smelled like my lilac bath soap it would be blackness, deep
blackness, and feathered insects with ruby eyes that watched us calmly in the dark” (281). The deep blackness of this passage suggests that there is no light and perhaps no electricity. Nector and Lulu sound like lovers from another time. Despite being inside a house, insects are able to watch them as if they were outside under the open sky. Lulu is given the power in this situation because she clearly decides when and where she and Nector will come together. Her mystical nature lends an interesting, traditional tone to her character.

Standing alone, Marie and Lulu embody traditional characteristics of Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis, but it is the relationship between the two women that is most interesting. In *The Star Husband*, the relationship between Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis is both similar and different to the relationship that Marie and Lulu have with one another in *Love Medicine*. There is obviously a conflicted relationship between the women in *Love Medicine*. Both Marie and Lulu are aware that they share a lover. Marie attempts to keep Nector in the straight and narrow, which at times seems harsh, and Lulu allows him all of his indulgences, which are impulsive and sometimes downright foolish. While this is quite unlike the relationship of Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis in *The Star Husband*, Marie and Lulu’s relationship becomes quite similar to the mythical sisters in older age.

At its core, of *The Star Husband* is a story about two women who desire courtship and find it with supernatural beings. Similarly, *Love Medicine* is, essentially, a story about both Marie and Lulu finding and falling in love with the same man. I have already examined initial meetings and relationships that Marie and Lulu have with Nector through Nector’s eyes. In this story, the star husband character is not specified to be the
traditional character Nana’b’oozoo that has been assigned to Nector, and that perspective is therefore irrelevant in the analysis of this traditional tale. It is now pertinent to examine the relationship through Marie and Lulu’s eyes and how each woman typifies the behaviors of their traditional counterparts.

In the traditional story, Oshkikwe is described as “the more practical one” who chooses a man that Matchikwewis finds boring (Allen *Pocahontas* 165). Despite her less romantic stance on love, Oshkikwe is the first to see the men upon waking. She is at first unsure of what she is seeing when she looks at the *manito* men “because they were leaning against a large rock and standing against the top of a hill” (Allen, *Pocahontas* 166). Similarly, in *Love Medicine*, Marie is the first person to truly hook Nector, despite his friendly fling with Lulu before he meets Marie. Their meeting closely mirrors that of Oshkikwe and her future star husband. It is noted in the traditional story that Oshkikwe is “beyond giggling girlhood, [a] full grown [woman]” (Allen 166), and in *Love Medicine* Nector remarks that he is “lying full length across a woman, not a girl” (65). The star husband and Oshkikwe meet on a hill, and Marie and Nector also meet on a hill as Marie flees from a convent. Nector specifically says “somehow I have been beaten at what I started on this hill,” (65) signaling the beginning of his relationship with Marie. Shortly after Oshkikwe and her husband meet, she has a child. Similarly, Marie has Nector’s first child at the age of fifteen, shortly after the altercation on the hill.

Oshkikwe’s movement is described several times as being “sedate” (Allen, *Pocahontas* 167) in comparison with her sister. In *Love Medicine*, Marie repeatedly displays passive behavior when it comes to Nector, in what seems like some particularly
painful scenes. In one, Nector returns to their home drunk and wants to have sex with Marie. She is not only sedate, but basically unresponsive to his actions and describes a scene that is so passive that it verges on rape. Marie says, “I went down beneath his hands and lay quiet. I rolled with his current like a stone in the lake. He fell on me like a wave. But like a wave he washed away, leaving no sign he’d been there. I was smooth as before. I slept hard, and when I woke he was gone” (95). Although Marie’s character is significantly deeper and more complex than Oshkikwe’s, there are similarities that clearly illustrate Erdrich’s use of this traditional character to pattern a modern, yet traditional woman.

Matchikwewis, on the other hand, embodies a more sexual and embellished type of woman. She detests Oshkikwe’s choice in men and interacts with the opposite sex in an incredibly different way than her sister. When the men arrive at the camp, Matchikwewis greets them immediately, “already the bolder of the two” (Allen, *Pocahontas* 166). It is noted that Matchikwewis walks more rhythmically than her sister, “swaying slightly like women do at Squaw Dance” (Allen 167). She is more graceful and puts on more of a show physically than Oshkikwe. Similarly, When Nector resumes his relationship with Lulu after many years, he is taken at first not with her personality, but with how ornate her dress is. Nector notes that her dress “is buttoned all the way down the back. The buttons are small, square, plump, like the mints they have in a fancy restaurant” (129). It is as if Lulu is dressed in intricate, traditional regalia that draws Nector in because of its complex beauty and its sexual connotations of potentially being unbuttoned. Oshkikwe’s quiet acceptance of her lover, like Marie’s complacence with
Nector’s desires, is markedly different from Matchikwewis’ and Lulu’s passionate personalities. Matchikwewis is “thrilled to hear [the manitous] deep rumbling tones” (Allen 166) when they reveal themselves to her, which is a sexualized response. Also, in a scene similar to the one that Marie experiences with Nector, Lulu is far more involved in the encounter than Marie was in her own. Although this scene comes from Nector’s perspective, it illustrates that the hyper sexualized personality of Lulu is diametrically opposed to Marie’s sexuality. Nector says, “I tell her to lay quiet. Be still” (132) but unlike Marie, Lulu does not comply. Instead she actively participates in the scene and “laughs, laying there, and touches the place I should put more [butter]. I do. Then she guides me forward into her body with her hands” (133). While Marie’s scene with Nector causes the reader to cringe at the disconnected and totally dispassionate relationship between Marie and her husband, Lulu exercises her sexual agency even when she is explicitly told to lie back and be quiet. One may wonder how two incredibly different women maintain, in the traditional sense, a sisterhood and, in the modern sense, a friendship.

In *The Star Husband*, Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis are described as having “an old conflict between them—not the kind that led to ill will, but the amiable, joking kind. Their differences yielded as much a bond between them as a point of teasing. This was probably because, like most of their people, they loved to laugh, and enjoyed poking at each other’s characteristics” (Allen, *Pocahontas* 165). The sisters exist in an easy, peaceful relationship despite sometimes making jokes at one another’s expense. This element of humor may seem in bad taste or malicious to those who misunderstand the
often self-deprecating nature of American Indian humor. While that is a rich subject in a
topic of its own, it will be sufficient here to summarize Indian humor with this statement:

The first thing most people notice about us Indians is how we’re laughing
most of the time. It doesn’t really matter whether we’re all dressed up in
the traditional finery or in bush jackets and gumboots, seems like a smile
and a big roaring guffaw is everywhere with us. Used to be that non-
Indians thought we were just simple…but the more they stick around the
more they realized that Indians have a real good sense of humor and it’s
that humor more than anything that’s allowed them to survive all the crap
history threw their way. (qtd. in Gruber 10)

This definition of humor is applicable to both the traditional story utilized by Erdrich and
in Love Medicine. If one does not understand the use of humor, which is sometimes
subtle but nearly always present, it is impossible to move forward with a discussion about
Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis and Marie and Lulu.

The humor in Love Medicine is present throughout, but between Marie and Lulu,
it does not exist until the end of the novel when the two women actually have face-to-face
interaction with one another. In contrast to Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis, before being
put into a nursing home, Marie and Lulu know of one another but never actually meet.
Their comments about one another are speculative, and the reader is unsure of what will
happen when the two women encounter one another in person, without the filter of
Nector to color their opinions of one another. Somewhat surprisingly, the relationship
between the two blossoms and they cease to be enemies. Lulu’s son Lyman comments on their relationship:

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

This passage is important for two reasons. First, it illustrates that Marie and Lulu have made the transition from enemies to true sisters and have embodied the sister story that Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis are so closely associated with. The fact that Marie and Lulu “concentrate their powers” (303) again lends to the image that these women are semi-supernatural, just like the traditional women they mirror. This passage is also humorous toward Marie and Lulu in a way that is subtle in the novel. To the non-native reader, it may seem as though Lyman is being critical of his mother and her new friend. While this is partly true, he is also operating in the traditional and enduring Indian mode of humor. His comments about community members who dress traditionally is both critical, because Lyman is not a traditional Indian, and funny because those people are instantly recognizable to any person who has lived in a reservation community. The comment about traditionalism evoking a backward glance to the time of the buffalo is a statement that almost begs to conjure up the image of the Lakota in *Dances with Wolves* teaching John Dunbar how to say *tatanka*. 
IV. Conclusion

Louise Erdrich places herself in her cultural heritage by utilizing the long told stories of her people. By delving into traditional aspects of Anishinabe folklore, Erdrich sheds light on the applicability of tribal stories in contemporary American Indian life and literature. In order to understand the present, suggests Erdrich, we must understand the past. As Lulu, Marie, and Nector are models of who has come before them, so is Erdrich and her readers. Erdrich shows that while the time for traditional, tribal living has long since faded into shadow, the continuity of culture through the values displayed in traditional stories is always relevant to the lives of contemporary American Indians.

It is likely that Erdrich drew on many traditional stories to create her characters and storylines. Indeed, there are several other traditional references that can be made in this text, and as the further exploration and collection of traditional, American Indian myth becomes more accessible to those outside of specific, tribal groups, more patterns will emerge. For now, scholars, particularly those of non-Anishinabe heritage, must make do with the materials at hand. Unfortunately, this means continuing to miss some of the complexities rooted in lesser known traditional stories. However, a continued interest in both the past and the future of American Indian literature and storytelling will aid in cross-cultural understanding and a wider application of traditional myth to contemporary American Indian literature.

While it is important to avoid suggesting that American Indian literature, based as it is today much on traditional, oral stories is in any way primitive, it does not mean that
the critical conversation ought to shy away from making just claims about the text. This will, inevitably, call for non-Indians acquiring an understanding of American Indian culture that goes far beyond the headdress and the powwow. Tribes must allow for some outsiders to respectfully explore their stories while maintaining tribal agency concerning the preservation and continuity of specific myths. Calling for a non-monolithic approach to American Indian myth will lead to enriching, applied scholarship that can only amplify the impact that past and present stories have on both native and non-native readers. There is no greater justice that can be done to histories and cultures so deeply rooted in story and storytelling. It is akin to what the great American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald says at the close of his novel *The Great Gatsby*: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180). As both native and non-native readers and writers of American Indian literature, it is imperative to both bring the conversation forward, pitching boats of criticism and conversation in perhaps unfamiliar waters, and allowing the conversation to be drawn backward into a time both much different and essentially the same as today.


