

**"REPOSITORIES FOR THE SOULS":
DRIVING THROUGH THE FICTION OF LOUISE ERDRICH**

by
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The novels by Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1984; revised and expanded, 1993), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996) constitute a quintet with interrelated characters and themes. In their content, themes, and characters, *Tracks*, *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* are overtly and contemporarily Chippewa, like Erdrich herself. *The Beet Queen* and *Tales of Burning Love* reflect Erdrich's American/German background as well as incorporate Chippewa elements and characters.

Erdrich's novels depict the complex development of family groups from North Dakota. All the novels use the technique of multiple narrators, evidence of tribal community, and the heritage of storytelling. All represent place as an ontological source. Time is mythic, often non-linear. Characters reflect a rhetoric of oral tradition. A trickster figure appears in all five novels. Each novel presents indications of the multiple cultural backgrounds of Erdrich. All of the novels demonstrate a resilient spirit of survival of native peoples, a survival that occurs, in part, because cultures change and adapt through mediation.¹ Erdrich uses both images of Chippewa traditions and images of popular mainstream culture, including cars, to represent contemporary American Indian identities.

Numerous cars careen through Louise Erdrich's novels *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace*, and *Tales of Burning Love*. In a twist on the historic warrior pony, the automobile, sign of so-called "advanced" technology, becomes a mode of transportation and mediation. Rather than a simple symbol of encroaching mechanism into traditional historical

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and natural worlds, the car is an adaptive mode, conveying, translating and modulating the lives of the characters as they establish Chippewa identity in contemporary America. The cars become emblems of ritualized mourning and storytelling, ultimately representing survival.

I make a distinction between cars as representing what critic Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Chippewa) calls "terminal creed" imagery and cars as reappropriative emblems.² In the first case, cars represent tragedy, the inevitable end of native culture, a way of life and life itself. In general American society, vehicles named for Native leader Pontiac, with the model Firebird, play on romantic imagery and relegate American Indians to an absolute and adventurous romantic past. Louise Erdrich reappropriates the Firebird and embodies in it the soul of June Morrissey. Erdrich reclaims the Native symbol that has been marketed and turned into a commodity representing American well-being, and utilizes this symbol for her own story of Chippewa endurance.

Love Medicine begins with a now familiar scene. June Morrissey, alienated and disenfranchised, picks up an oil worker in a bar. In his Silverado pickup, they attempt a sexual encounter that seems to have more intimacy with the hot air and rhythms of the truck's heater than between the individuals. "Like being born," June emerges from the truck only to wander off into the North Dakota plains and freeze to death in the Easter snow.³ Although the beginning of *Love Medicine* contains elements of tragedy as June falls into prostitution, alcohol, and death, her resurrective spirit inhabits the remainder of the novel.

In a breathtaking narrative strategy, Erdrich revisits *Love Medicine*'s opening scene in the first chapter of *Tales of Burning Love*. Identical events are seen from the point of view of the previously unknown oil rigger, now identified as Jack Mauser. He believes that the sexual encounter will make him "safe" and "whole," and "he would exist," but the "stammer[ing]" and "dry hoarse air" of the pickup's heater parallel his impotence.⁴ Humiliated, Jack drives away, failing to realize that he has abandoned June to her frozen death. As in *Love Medicine*, June's spirit inhabits the pages *Tales of Burning Love*. Jack reveals that he considers June one of his wives. Through her son, Lipsha, and his father, Gerry Nanapush, June will affiliate with the community of Jack's other four

wives in another snowbound vehicle.

Like the prominent frozen snow and water images, the car images of *Love Medicine* are conspicuous. While many of these images are associated with death, they also signify transition and often have accompanying images of birth and new life. Car imagery additionally plays between popular iconography and contemporary Chippewas.

"Drunk . . . asleep or passed out," Henry Lamartine, Sr. stalls his car in front of a train to end his life (107). The chapter that describes his death, "Lulu's Boys," is about Henry Sr.'s brother, his relationship with Lulu and the subsequent birth of Henry, Jr. Henry's car wreck on the rails of the Northern Pacific, the closed casket and emotional funeral become generative acts that bring together his brother and wife to create new life.

As an adult, Henry, Jr. and his brother, Lyman Lamartine, create a community of labor as they purchase a "large as life," red Olds convertible. The brothers use the car to share a road trip and a girl. When Henry returns from Vietnam, spiritually wounded and inarticulate, Lyman takes a hammer to the vehicle. This destructive act leads to healing and inspires Henry to "[string] together more than six words at once" (188). Henry restores the car, but cannot save his own soul. Lyman watches helplessly as Henry drowns himself in the Red River. Lyman eases the car into the river, too. The title of the chapter is "The Red Convertible," alluding to the conversion and transforming rite of passage in Lyman's life as he overcomes his brother's death.

Marvin Magalaner, a Joycean scholar, suggests in his essay "Louise Erdrich: Of Cars, Time and the River," that the convertible is a "shiny, metallic new god" and a "tribute to the [Chippewa] river god."⁵ While this reading may be valid, it emphasizes ritual and sacrificial tragedy. Magalaner also overlooks the closing words of the chapter: "And then there is only the water, and the sound of it going and running and going and running and running" (193). The gerunds emphasize continuity of the river and, implicitly, Lyman's continuity. Erdrich does not pull back from Henry's anguish and death, but offers hope for the survivors, especially Lyman.

Additionally, repetition of the word "running" recalls the survival

and ritual reconciliation of main character, Abel, in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. In that novel, army veteran Abel (Jemez Pueblo), like Henry, Jr., suffers from what appears to be post-traumatic stress syndrome. However, both men are also fragmented from their respective tribal communities. Henry cannot recover and takes his own life. Abel heals through Jemez ritual and he joins the tribal Dawn Runners. Both the "Prologue" and the closing paragraph of *House Made of Dawn* emphasize running; "He was alone and running on."⁶ Abel heals through physical gesture while Lyman is baptismally immersed in the sound of the water, "going and running and going and running and running" (193).

In additional mediational car imagery in *Love Medicine*, the blue Firebird, bought with June's death benefit, becomes the space for the battleground and reconciliation of the mixed race marriage between June's oldest son, King, and his wife, Lynette. She seeks refuge in the automobile that her husband, King, violently attacks.

Lynette was locked in the Firebird, crouched on the passenger's side. King screamed at her and threw his whole body against the car, thudded on the hood with hollow booms, banged his way across the roof, ripped at antennac and sideview mirror with his fists, kicked into the broken sockets of headlight. Finally he ripped a mirror of the driver's side and began to beat the car rhythmically, gasping. (35)

The eroticism of the moment is repeated when King and Lynette reconcile as "The horn blared softly. . . they knocked against it in passion" (42). The car represents the extremes of King and Lynette's marriage from violence to passionate reconciliation.

Lulu Nanapush Lamartine seduces Nector Kashpaw in a car, but Marie Lazarre, whom he marries, entices him in the wilderness. As with June's death in the frozen field, Erdrich creates a dichotomy between the natural world and the mechanical vehicles, but she does not seem to privilege either. Nector's devotions remain primarily with Marie, while he always maintains a tenderness for Lulu.

June's husband, Gordie Kashpaw, comes to terms with her death in

a chapter called "Crown of Thorns." Gordie starts to drink, again, caressing the bottle, trying to purge his hands of the intimate memory of June, of both his love for her and of his violence toward her. In drunken desperation, he takes off in his car. He hits a deer. Consumed with guilt, he stops and puts the deer in the back seat of his car. He continues his drunken journey only to be shocked by the gaze of the no longer stunned deer in his rearview mirror. Gordie strikes the deer with a crow bar, believing he kills her yet again. In his intoxicated miscomprehension, aided by ambiguities in the narrative voice, he envisions the deer as June.

Her look was black and endless and melting pure. She looked through him. She saw into the troubled thrashing woods of him, a rattling thicket of bones. She saw how he'd woven his own crown of thorns. (221)

He drives to the Catholic mission to confess his crime, the murder of his wife, to an insomniac, clarinet-playing nun.

This episode, like others in *Love Medicine*, heals through humor, through transformation with the car as medium. Gordie's pain and shock about the deer lead to ritualized mourning over June's real death. Magalaner's atavistic analysis of Gordie's "crying like a drowned person, howling in the open fields" (229) attempts to connect Indians with nature. However, Gordie's primal scream also indicates the duality of water imagery: a *pharmakos* that represents both drowning and baptismal rebirth.

The blue Firebird, purchased by King with June's insurance death benefit, becomes the mediating emblem of reconciliation for her son, Lipsha and his father, Gerry Nanapush. Lipsha and Gerry, working as tricksters, cheat at cards and win the car from Lipsha's half-brother, King. Gerry miraculously escapes from the police, hiding in the trunk of the Firebird. Later, in the conversation within the car as they speed toward the freedom of the Canadian border, they acknowledge their common bond through June, the mother and the lover. The pronoun of the last sentence of *Love Medicine* is vague, referring to either the car or June's

spirit. Although June has perished, Lipsha and Gerry survive: "A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home" (367).

June continues to influence her son, Lipsha, in *The Bingo Palace*. In a chapter entitled "The Bingo Van," Lipsha is obsessed with winning the bingo grand prize, a converted van, a representation of the American dream. His dream shatters as his ideal material object disintegrates into a "rez rod," an indication that he cannot escape the reservation. Yet, this image along with the car images from *Love Medicine* become signifiers of survival and mediators in rites of passage, not only for the individual characters but for the Chippewa as well, as they negotiate historic traditions with modern realities. Lipsha describes the lush vehicle:

It has every option you can believe—blue plush on the steering wheel, diamond side windows, and complete carpeting interior. The seats are easy chairs, with little built-in headphones, and it is wired all through the walls. . . . The paint is cream, except for the design picked out in blue, which is a Sioux Drum border. In the back there is a small refrigerator and a padded platform for sleeping. It is a starter home, a portable den with front-wheel drive . . . A four wheeled version of North Dakota.⁷

The geographic ascription of the van to North Dakota suggests an inextricable connection, even with a modernistic mechanical device, of object to landscape. As the van becomes an extension of Lipsha's ego, it is also tied to his ontological sense of place.

In his ritualized quest for the van, Lipsha plays bingo nightly. Though he finally wins the van using the supernatural suggestions of his mother, June, his triumph is short-lived. He has an encounter with some Montana rednecks he previously insulted. He describes the result:

My bingo van is dented on the sides, kicked and scratched, and the insides are scattered. Ripped pieces of carpet, stereo wires, glass, are spread here and there . . . I force open a door that is bent inward. I wedge myself behind the wheel, tipped over at

a crazy angle, and I look out. The windshield is shattered in a sunlight burst, a web through which the world is more complicated than I thought, and more peaceful. (83)

One reason Lipsha is in the wrong place at the wrong time is that he abandons his tribal and communal responsibilities by refusing to help Shawnee Ray and her sick baby. The wrecked van is a reminder of this failure, an emblem of his wrecked relationships with the tribal whole. Erdrich uses the automobile imagery to demonstrate the power and desire of mobility and economic good fortune. At the same time, the cars become spaces where characters encounter self-revelations and mediating tools for reconciliation.

Ironically, Lipsha's final appearance in *The Bingo Palace* is in a stolen car, snow is falling, and he is headed for apparent disaster. In a scene that parallels the escape in *Love Medicine*, Lipsha and his fugitive father, Gerry, are on the run again. They are shocked to realize that the car they have stolen has an infant in the back seat. As they drive further into a blizzard, they share a vision of June. Lipsha says: "I suppose that I should be more amazed than I am to see that it is June's car and she is driving" (256). Gerry follows the vision of June. He drives the car off the main road, jumps out, and wanders off into the snow. Lipsha is left in the car with the baby and his reflections on his Chippewa heritage and his life. He distills mythic time with his own sense of elusive identity: "Before the nothing, we are the moment" (259).

The Bingo Palace leaves Lipsha and Gerry's fate unclear. The tragic, romantic view of the Vanishing American would find parallels with June's tragedy and relinquish Gerry, Lipsha and the baby to a frozen death. Indeed, at the time of the novel's publication, I heard many suggestions of such "terminal creed" interpretations lamenting the characters' demises and failures to see beyond the static moment. Erdrich writes about endurance, though, and her next novel, *Tales of Burning Love*, confirms that all three survive.

Like *The Beet Queen* (which also has a terrific automobile scene when Mary Adare and Celestine drive the dead Sita Kozka through the beet festival parade), *Tales of Burning Love* is less obvious than

Erdrich's other novels in its representation of American Indian issues. Nevertheless, Erdrich uses the return of a familiar trickster and ritualized storytelling in a snowbound, red Ford Explorer as creation of *communitas*, binding together the wives of mixed-blood Chippewa Jack Mauser. With a snoring hitchhiker in the cargo space of the Explorer, the wives spin stories through the frozen night like the life-preserving tales of Scheherazade, or the attempt to elude death in *The Decameron*, or like the sacred storytelling time of winter in many Native cultures. Dot Adare Nanapush Mauser, Jack's most recent wife (though not officially divorced from Gerry Nanapush), sets the rules:

No shutting up until dawn. . . . Tell a true story. . . . The story has to be about you. Something that you've never told another soul, a story that would scorch paper, heat up the air! (206)

Their stories telling of their commonality with Jack and the presence of the hitchhiker invoke the spirit of June Morrissey, as well.

In a parallel storyline, earlier in the day Jack Mauser leaves his own infant son in an idling Honda, only to have the car stolen by none other than Gerry Nanapush and Lipsha Morrissey. Jack recognizes Gerry and realizes that the Honda and its occupants are headed north for the Canadian border. Eventually, Jack pursues them in a snowplow. In an episode reminiscent of many others, Jack's drive is one of self-reflection and discovery. He recalls the stories of his Ojibwa mother. He thinks of the Easter blizzard that took June's life. Like Gerry and Lipsha in *The Bingo Palace*, he is led through the snow by a vision of June: "He followed her meekly. She was bringing him home" (385). The language similarities to the last lines of *Love Medicine* would tempt a reader enamored with tragedy to anticipate that Jack will meet the same end as June, wandering, freezing to death in the blowing snow. The reader who is aware of Native survival anticipates that Jack will find and rescue his baby and Lipsha, as he indeed does.

The hitchhiker in the snowbound Explorer is revealed to be Gerry Nanapush. Before he miraculously disappears once again, leaving behind mythic gloves like the mittens of Anishinabe hero trickster Nanabozho,

Gerry and his current wife, Dot, make frantic love in the front seat. She affirms hope in continuity and the future: "I hope you made me pregnant," she whispered" (375).

Louise Erdrich instills her Ojibwa and North Dakota characters with hope, continuity, and a sense of survival. They head home to the familiarity of the tribal community. The imagery she employs that displays her wonderfully poetic voice not only binds together the novels, but indicates her own sense of survival. As she writes:

Contemporary Native American writers have therefore a task quite different from that of other writers . . . In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of catastrophe.⁸

Unfortunately, critic Marvin Magalaner does not see that survival and suggests a perilous assimilation:

The movement of the young Chippewas from fishing and swimming to reckless driving in automobiles signals the encroachment of a mechanical and impersonal civilization upon the natural environment of the families. (107)

Magalaner's assessment privileges an unnatural preservation of historicism and traditionalism in circumstances marked by dynamism and change. Indeed, he fails to see that the automobile as "rez rod" has become Erdrich's emblem of reappropriation and vehicle for hope.

Erdrich emphasizes the varied resonances of her symbol in *Love Medicine* and observes that a singular, terminal interpretation is insufficient:

The cars really become sort of repositories for the souls of the dead in this book, and they're also shelter, they're many things. We've lived with cars that are alter-egos through the years.⁹

She also seems to acknowledge the multi-layered complexity of cultural signifiers. The car may be a functional mode of transportation, regardless of cultural perspectives. However, when the Native characters interact with these automobiles, they reveal their Chippewa responses and sensibilities. The cars become mediums for rites of passage into the tribal community, as with Lyman Lamartine and Lipsha Morrissey, and tools of survival as with the red Explorer and the Honda.

I have challenged Marvin Magalaner's reading of *Love Medicine*, not because it is an easy target, but because it clearly demonstrates a common romanticizing of the perceived tragedy among Native peoples. Magalaner certainly draws our attention to some of the integrated imagery in *Love Medicine*, but, like other critics, he fails to place his criticism in a Native American perspective and see the imperative survival. In the recent publication of *Native American Perspectives in Literature and History*, editors Alan Velie and Gerald Vizenor describe such criticism:

Although most of the critics would describe themselves as "friends of the Indian," their analyses have often been narrow and imperceptive. In most cases the critics simply applied western aesthetic standards to the works they discussed; their interpretations were often inadequate or inappropriate to the material. In attempting to understand the culture of the writers and their subjects, the critics usually depended on the works of white anthropologists.¹⁰

Velie and Vizenor do not see criticism of Native American literature as essentialist or only available to American Indian critics, but plead for a contextual and tribal understanding.¹¹

Erdrich's fiction consistently recognizes Anishinabe/Chippewa/Ojibwa tribal elements, often in subtle ways. While it may be facile to extract phenomena of material culture that represent the historic Anishinabe, it is a greater challenge to understand how contemporary Chippewas negotiate and mediate with the modern world and establish tribal and intellectual sovereignty. Louise Erdrich's writing does this by bringing her characters home, by infusing them with

a unique Ojibwa world view. The automobile imagery is an example of how Erdrich has taken a mainstream signifier and reinscribed it for her own presentation of Ojibwa survival.

NOTES

1. James Ruppert discusses cultural mediation in *Mediation in Native American Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), but does not expand the argument to see it as a survival tool.
2. "Terminal creeds' ...are beliefs which seek to fix, to impose static definitions upon the world. Such attempts are destructive, suicidal, even when the definitions appear to arise out of revered tradition." Vizenor 1989, 144.
3. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine: New and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 6. All subsequent referrals to *Love Medicine* will be noted parenthetically in the text.
4. Erdrich, *Tales of Burning Love* (New York: Harper/Collins, 1996), 9. All subsequent referrals to *Tales of Burning Love* will be noted parenthetically in the text.
5. Marvin Magalaner, "Louise Erdrich: Of Cars, Time, and the River," in *American Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 103. All subsequent references to Magalaner will be noted parenthetically in the text.
6. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Perennial Library, 1989), 1, 212.
7. Erdrich, *The Bingo Palace* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 63, 80. All subsequent referrals to *The Bingo Palace* will be noted parenthetically in the text.
8. Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," *New York Times Book Review* July 28, 1985, 23.
9. Kay Bonetti, "An Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris." *The Missouri Review* 11 (1988): 90.
10. Alan Velie and Gerald Vizenor, *Native American Perspectives in Literature and History*, American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series, Vol. 19 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 2.
11. Their volume also includes Robert Allen Warrior's essay, revised as the introductory chapter of his book *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), that argues for Native American tribal and intellectual sovereignty.

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