CULTURAL SURVIVAL AND HUMOR IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S NOVELS: *THE ANTELOPE WIFE, TRACKS, FOUR SOULS,* AND *THE BINGO PALACE*

By

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I. INTRODUCTION

In beginning this project, I tried several approaches, each with extensive rewrites, but none of them seemed to adequately convey my thesis as I envisioned it. Finally, I realized that my thesis actually derives from my connection with Louise Erdrich and her works as a fellow American Indian. There is no way that I can present this project without injecting my personal story into my thoughts on Erdrich's works. My identity as an American Indian presents a reader response that differs radically from the many non-Indian writers who have critiqued Erdrich's writings. Instead of trying to ignore that difference, I have decided to expand upon my responses as an American Indian. I believe that although American Indian writings have themes and characters that all people can relate to because we all share a common humanity, the American Indian writer is also in the position of writing directly to other American Indians, giving voice to shared experiences and feelings. In writing about the American Indian experience, Erdrich is exceptional in maintaining an artistic honesty and veracity about her characters while also injecting comic humor and irony to soften the harsh realities of reservation life. Erdrich captures the nuances of Indian life, portraying the good, the bad, and the ugly. In other words, she tells it like it is.

I relate to Erdrich as a mixed blood, as a woman, as a mother, and as one closely associated with reservation life (Erdrich visited her relatives often on the reservation and I grew up on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation). In a nice ironic twist, Erdrich is Ojibwa and I am Lakota, two tribes who were traditional enemies. Although each tribal member feels a strong tribal identity, we also share a pan-Indianism because we finally realize there is strength in unity. This is only one of the many dichotomies that we face as

Indians as we attempt to span the Indian world and the white world. Historically, the white man was able to divide and conquer the Indian tribes and seize a continent.

Since the Ojibwa pushed the Lakota from Minnesota into the Dakotas, so our histories are closely intertwined. In fact, the word *Sioux* (the name used by the white man for the Lakota) comes from the Algonquin (Ojibwa language) word *Nadowe Su*, which means "little rattle," as in describing the sound that a snake makes before it strikes. The French trappers dropped *Nadowe* and changed the *Su* to *Sioux*. The Lakota (meaning "allies" or "the people together") have been correcting the record for years, yet still the moniker *Sioux* sticks. Also, both our family trees contain French trappers since trappers usually married American Indian women in their travels in the New World. Erdrich and I, as mixed bloods, acquire our Indian blood through our American Indian mothers.

Regretfully, we are both connected to children with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS); she had a step-child with FAS while I have a foster sister with FAS. FAS is a devastating problem on reservations. When I saw Erdrich's husband Michael Dorris's movie about his son Abel, who had FAS, I realized that my foster sister's confusing behavior actually resulted from FAS.

All of these connections draw me to Erdrich's novels, but the most important bond we share is the reservation. I was raised on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota while Erdrich, living in North Dakota, often visited her family on the Turtle Mountain Reservation and her maternal grandfather served as tribal chairman. Although all Indians, on or off the reservation, share a commonality, those raised on the reservation share a unique point of view. "Rez" life can at times seem hopeless and despairing, yet humor and laughter also abound to lift us above the harsh realities.

While much has been written about the effect of Erdrich's writings upon the perceptions of non-Indians, both good and bad, the effect of her writings upon one of her principal audiences, the Indians on the reservation, has been largely overlooked. As an American Indian, born and raised on the reservation, who later was educated in the white university system and has lived in a world dominated by the white culture for an extended period of time, I write from the reader-response perspective of an American Indian, which in some respects is quite different than that of a non-Indian. My thesis will explore the comparison of our experiences with reservation life, my personal experiences that reflect those of her characters, and Erdrich's use of humor and irony, extensively used by Indians to survive the physical and mental toll that disease, poverty, and alcohol have wrought on American Indians. Erdrich accurately portrays the American Indians' struggle to regain their culture and identity. She provides American Indians with a sense of validation and gives voice to pain and suffering that have too long been unspoken.

II. BACKGROUND: INDIAN-WHITE RELATIONS

To truly appreciate the American Indian experience described by Erdrich in her novels, a brief history of the American Indian/white encounters must be examined. Columbus's discovery of a new world was the death knell for millions of American Indians. While some Americans celebrate Columbus Day each year with parades, American Indians continue the struggle to survive as a race and culture in the wake of the devastation wrought by the coming of the Europeans to this continent. Although the pre-Columbian American population can only be estimated and is widely debated, anthropologist Henry Dobyns estimates that there were between "'ninety to 112 million people living in this hemisphere before 1491; he also estimates that in the first 130 years, 95 percent of the people in the Americas died" (qtd. in Lundquist 21). As Europeans flooded America and the United States of America was born, the policy of the annihilation of the American Indians began in earnest. Entire tribes became extinct, and tribes en masse were forced out of their traditional hunting grounds as white Americans demanded more and more land.

As Europeans landed in America, they encountered the Eastern and Southeastern tribes, such as the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Iroquois. These tribes shared their land and knowledge of the land with the Europeans while integrating many of the European values and material items into their cultures. They were farmers, so the agricultural Europeans easily related to these American Indians; the two races worked together and even intermarried. These tribes realized too late that their generosity in sharing with the white man would not be reciprocated; in fact, quite the opposite occurred as European Americans took up the banner of Manifest Destiny. As

Europeans flocked to America in greater numbers, more land was necessary to sustain them. Although many tribes attempted to live in peace beside the white man on smaller and smaller portion of land, the whites would settle for nothing less than all the land.

Thus the Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed into law by President Andrew Jackson, became another method to gain Indian land. A strong advocate of Indian removal from the southern states, Jackson had an economic interest in acquiring Indian land for himself, family, and political cronies (Wallace 6). In the midst of the Industrial Revolution, Great Britain demanded large quantities of American raw cotton for the manufacture of cotton goods. Cotton plantation owners had an opportunity to reap enormous profits; for example, a 500-acre cotton plantation could make a profit of around $6,000 a year, which was a large sum of money in 1830 (Wallace 7). Jackson himself amassed a large estate with his mansion at "The Hermitage, two plantations, 161 slaves, a valuable stable of fifty horses, and hundreds of head of livestock" (Wallace 6). So to appease the greed of the white man, Southern Indian tribes and to a lesser degree Northeastern Indians, were removed to Indian Territory, which is today Oklahoma. The forced removal in 1838 of the Cherokee was especially brutal. In the summer of 1838, they were forced out of their homes at gunpoint with only the clothes on their backs and placed in improvised stockades (today they would be called concentration camps). Finally, they were placed in wagons to be transported to Oklahoma from October 1838 to March 1839 in the dead of winter. It is estimated that 3,000 died in the camps from dysentery and disease while as many as 1,000 died on the journey (Wallace 94). Between 20 and 25 percent of the Eastern Cherokees died on what came to be known as the "trail

of tears," one of the worst episodes of United States aggression towards the American Indians (Wallace 94).

Cherokee Chief John Ross strongly fought against removal and refused to sign any treaties agreeing to removal; he had such supporters as John Howard Payne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Sam Houston (Wallace 92). John Ross used all legal and government channels available to him without success, and the Cherokee were finally militarily removed. The Seminole fought militarily to avoid removal, and because of huge losses on the United States' side, the Seminole were left alone in the southern swamps of Florida.

Each tribe used various strategies in resisting the European invasion. Many people are aware of the many Indian uprisings, such as King Phillip's War in 1675, an alliance of New England tribes against the colonists; Chief Pontiac's Rebellion, an alliance of Great Lakes tribes against the British; and the Sioux defeat of Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. Less emphasis has been placed on Indian leaders who attempted to find solutions to the "white" problem, such as John Ross, probably because these approaches failed. But it is important to note that American Indians were learning the white man's language, religion, and laws from the beginning of the invasion; this resistance would finally bear fruit in the 1960s when the United States Government would no longer be able to flaunt their own laws to deny American Indians their rights. Indian tribes would reassert their sovereignty and use legal litigation to rectify broken treaties.

Another Indian leader whose message would resonate in the 1960s was Handsome Lake, a Seneca prophet. He had a vision in 1799 that warned the Seneca to return to traditional values and reject the vices of the white man. In a vision he had, Handsome Lake met Jesus, and Jesus's message was "Now tell your people that they will become lost when they follow the ways of the white man" (Morrison 100). Ironically, Handsome Lake employed the white man's God to relay the message that the Seneca must not adopt the white man's ways. He preached against using the white man's whiskey. Husbands and wives should rear their children with love, and tribal members should love and help one another. Handsome Lake preached a proactive message that the Seneca must act to become whole once again. The idea of tribes taking positive action to return to traditional values, which sheltered and nurtured the people in the past, returned in the 1960s when tribes reasserted their tribal sovereignty and autonomy. Tribes reinstituted traditional tribal values while incorporating the white man's technology and knowledge into their lives; they also learned to challenge Government violations of treaties through litigation.

Some resistant leaders were more proficient with words than with guns. Using the white man's words for the Indian's benefit, William Apess (1798-1839) gained the return of Indian sovereignty to the Maspee in Massachusetts. He was a Pequot Indian who was the son of parents of mixed blood, raised by alcoholic grandparents, and who served as an indentured servant until he joined the military (Apess 120-121, 130) . He was one of the first American Indian radicals writing against the injustices perpetuated by the white man. Apess was drawn to the Methodist religion because the New England form of Methodism with its antiestablishment message at this time appealed to

disenfranchised groups (O'Connell xxxii). He became a Methodist minister who made his living by riding a circuit, staying with members, and preaching to various congregations in the New England area. He wrote extensively during this period, including sermons, speeches, and five books, one of which was his autobiography *A Son of the Forest.* He led what came to be known as the Mashpee Revolt, an appeal for equal rights for Indians under the Constitution.

In 1833 Apess, as a Methodist minister, went to Mashpee, the only surviving American Indian town in Massachusetts, and became the advocate for the American Indian congregation in removing the corrupt pastor appointed by Harvard under the authority of overseers assigned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (O'Connell *xxv-xxvii).* Under Apess's leadership, the members of the congregation sent a petition, "the Indian Declaration of Independence," to the governor of Massachusetts stating, "we, as a tribe, will rule ourselves, and have the right to do so; for all men are born free and equal, says the Constitution of the country" (qtd. in O'Connell xxxvi). The governor threatened to send out troops to put down the Indian insurrection; military force was the standard government reaction to American Indian appeals to regain their independence and authority over their own land and people.

The document also stated that whites could no longer take lumber off Indian land. When several local whites tested the Indians, Apess and several Mashpees confronted a group who came to take wood; Apess and his group went so far as to remove the wood from the wagons (O'Connell xxxvii). Apess was charged with "riot, assault, and trespass," jailed and fined (O'Connell xxxvii). Next, Apess published "An Indian's Appeal to the white Men of Massachusetts" in several newspapers. Shortly after, the

Mashpees petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to abolish the overseership, incorporate the town, and repeal all existing laws affecting the Mashpees "with the exception of the law preventing their selling their land" (qtd. in O'Connell xxxvii).

Several of Erdrich's books, *Four Souls, Love Medicine, Tracks,* and *The Bingo Palace,* stress the sacredness of the land to the American Indian. The Mashpees inclusion of the clause preventing the selling of Indian land shows their awareness of the whites' greed in wanting all Indian land. The State acquiesced to the Mashpees' demands, and no troops were sent in. In 1834 the state legislature granted the citizens of Mashpee the same rights of self-governance enjoyed by other citizens of the state. Apess demonstrated that American Indians could and should speak out by appropriating the white man's laws and legal system to rectify injustices. Although these non-violent "rebellions" did not always succeed, they would continue even up to the present as the Lakota refuse the monetary reparations for the Black Hills, which the tribe won in a Supreme Court case. Asa Bashonooda, Navajo, explains: "The earth was placed here for us . . . and we consider her our Mother. How much would you ask for if your Mother had been harmed? No amount of money can repay. Money cannot give birth to anything" (*Through Indian Eyes* 360). The Lakota continue to hold out for the return of the sacred *Paha Sapa* (Lakota for *Black Hills*) to the tribe.

Apess had the genius to employ the language of American democracy in capturing the attention of the government to the demands of American Indians in order to rectify wrongs, as defined by the white man's own Constitution and Christian morals. Apess was a master in using the incongruity between what the white man said and what

he did to highlight the plight of the disempowered American Indian in a country which he once ruled and which was now ruled by a people claiming to have God on their side:

> Now let me ask you, white man, if it is a disgrace for to eat [sic], drink, and sleep with the image of God, or sit, or walk and talk with them. Or have you the folly to think that the white man, being one in fifteen or sixteen, are the only beloved images of God? Assemble all nations together in your imagination, and then let the whites be seated among them . . . Now suppose these skins were put together, and each skin had its national crime written upon it—which skin do you think would have the greatest? I will ask one question more. Can you charge the Indians with robbing a nation almost of their whole continent, and murdering their women and children, and then depriving the remainder of their lawful rights, that nature and God require them to have? And to cap the climax, rob another nation to till their grounds and welter out their days under the lash with hunger and fatigue . . . I should look at all the skins, and I know that when I cast my eye upon that white skin, and if I saw those crimes written upon it, I should enter my protest against it immediately and cleave to that which is more honorable. (Apess 157)

Apess brilliantly argued the case, in Christian terms, against the plunder and rape by Euro-Americans of a continent already inhabited by a people. Although Erdrich as a novelist is more subtle in her irony and message, she also uses this type of irony to illustrate the issues of today's American Indian in grappling with the continuing issues of displacement, subjugation, and racism.

I must add one more example of Apess's biting wit and incisive logic to illustrate the type of sardonic humor that Erdrich also employs in her novels. In his *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836), he writes:

> I appeal to the lovers of liberty. But those few remaining descendants who now remain as the monument of the cruelty of those who came to improve our race and correct our errors—and as the immortal Washington lives endeared and engraven on the hearts of every white in America, never to be forgotten in time—even such is the immortal Philip honored, as held in memory by the degraded and yet grateful descendants who appreciate his character; so will every patriot, especially in this enlightened age, respect the rude yet all-accomplished son of the forest, that died a martyr to his cause, though unsuccessful, yet as glorious as the American Revolution. Where, then, shall we place the hero of the wilderness? (Apess "Eulogy" 277)

Apess's words play on the many poems and tributes written to George Washington, called the "father of our country." Phyllis Wheatley's poem "To His Excellency General Washington" comes to mind as an example of the laudatory praise heaped on Washington. Apess juxtapositions Washington to King Phillip, who led an alliance of New England Indian tribes against the English colonists in 1675. King Phillip's War was bloody, and the Indians almost overcame the colonists, but the Indians had to retreat from lack of food, manpower, and arms. The war effectively ended when King Phillip was killed a few months later, ironically, by an Indian from a hostile tribe. Apess dared to equate King Phillip to Washington.

Apess was truly one of the first American Indian political writers to use the white men's own words and logic to prick their conscience over the treatment of American Indians. Many Indian tribes already knew the power of the word through their oral tradition, but Indians such as Apess demonstrated the power of using the white man's words against him. Apess's political consciousness would be reflected in the 1960s as well-educated American Indians once again realized the importance of their special status as sovereign nations under United State Government treaties.

By the middle of the 1800s, the Eastern and Southeastern tribes were either exterminated, mostly through disease and intermarriage; or contained in small reservations areas, such as the Iroquois; or removed to the West, such as the Cherokee to Oklahoma in the Trail of Tears. White settlers were compelled to move ever westward as the land vacated by Eastern and Southeastern tribes was quickly settled. In the 1840s and 1850s the Plains tribes allowed white settlers to pass through their territory on the Bozeman and Oregon Trails in route to California and Oregon. By 1869, railroads crossed the plains, and steamboats traveled the Missouri, the Columbia, and the Colorado (Utley 101). The buffalo began to disappear; by 1889 only a few hundred remained (Isenberg 143). The deer, antelope, and elk were also overhunted by settlers on their way west. The Plains tribes began to fight back against the slow destruction of their way of life.

Chief Red Cloud and his band, along with Cheyenne allies, fought the U.S. Military in the Red Cloud War from 1866-68 to stop travel on the Bozeman Trail. Red Cloud masterminded the Fetterman Massacre and the Wagon Box Fight and forced the Government to abandon the Bozeman Trail (Utley 100). To end the hostilities, the

Government signed the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1868 with the Lakota and several other Plains tribes. The Ft. Laramie Treaty created the Great Sioux Reservation, which covered the western Dakota Territory, including the Black Hills. Some Lakota bands, such as Red Cloud's Oglala, moved to the reservation while others, such as Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull and their followers, continued to resist placement on reservations. After General George Armstrong Custer's 7th Calvary was wiped out by Lakota and Cheyenne bands in 1876 at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana, the United States Army became more aggressive and focused on tracking down resisters to move them to reservations. After successfully isolating Indians on reservations, the government's policy changed from extermination, which proved physically and morally untenable, to assimilating the "savage" into the white culture. By 1890 the last American Indian tribes were confined to reservations, and the policy of civilizing the savages began.

First and foremost, Indian children were removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools to begin the "civilizing" process. In 1880, the Board of Indian Commissioners reported, much to their apparent disappointment, that the Indian population, instead of dying out, was increasing. After noting that "the theory of extermination" was no longer advocated, the Commissioners' Twelfth Annual Report states:

> As we must have him [the Indian] among us, self-interest, humanity and Christianity require that we should accept the situation and go resolutely to work to make him a safe and useful factor in our body politic. As a savage we cannot tolerate him any more than as a half-civilized parasite,

> wanderer or vagabond. The only alternative left is to fit him by education for civilized life. (Katanski 3)

Thus in the 1880s the United States Government's policy switched from annihilation to educating the Indian for "civilized" society.

As the government immediately began removing Indian children to boarding schools, many of the schools were modeled after Richard Pratt's Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Richard Henry Pratt, an Army officer, was an advocate of assimilating Indians through education. He first developed his philosophy of assimilation while working on educating a group of Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne prisoners at Ft. Marion, Florida. After cutting their hair, dressing them in army uniforms, drilling them like soldiers, and teaching them to speak and read English, he concluded that "wild Indians could be transformed into peaceful, enlightened citizens" (Katanski 4). Pratt, having established the Carlisle Indian School in 1879, was more than willing to share his philosophy on educating the Indian:

> I suppose the end to be gained, however far away it may be, is complete civilization of the Indian and his absorption into our national life, with all the rights and privileges guaranteed to every other individual, the Indian to lose his identity as such, to give up his tribal relations and to be made to feel that he is an American citizen. If I am correct in this supposition, then the sooner all tribal relations are broken up; the sooner the Indian loses all his Indian ways, even his language, the better it will be for him and for the government and the greater will be the economy to both. . . To accomplish that, his removal and personal isolation is necessary. (Katanski 4)

The callousness and arrogance in Pratt's comments show an underlying white attitude of superiority to the Indian "savage"; therefore, whites believed that Indians would one day be grateful to the benevolent Great White Father for saving them from their ignorant and decadent lives. This attitude continued to dominate Government-Indian relations into the mid- twentieth century.

Ironically, instead of bestowing "the rights and privileges guaranteed to every other individual" upon the Indian, the United States Government began its attempt to eradicate the "Indianness" in Indian children by removing them from their homes, placing them in government boarding schools, and attempting to strip them of their culture and identity as Indians. These children were not allowed to speak their native language, wear Indian clothing, or practice Indian customs. They cut the males' hair, dressed the boys in wool suits and the girls in gingham dresses, renamed them with European first names, and translated their last names into English. These children were terrorized with long separations from their parents, humiliated by having their long hair cut, and physically abused for even whispering in their language. Irreparable harm was done to their personal and cultural identity, and to their psychological well-being. The boarding schools were effective at eradicating the Indian children's sense of identity and leaving deep psychological wounds. Rose Mary (Shingobe) Barstow (Ojibwe) recalls an incident in boarding school:

> I went back to school in the fall . . . We read a history book about "the savages." The pictures were in color. There was one of a group of warrior attacking white people—a woman held a baby in her arms. I saw hatchets, blood dripping, feathers flying. I showed the picture to the

> Sister. She said, "Rose Mary, don't you know you're Indian?" I said, "No, I'm not." She said, "Yes, you are." I said, "No!" And I ran behind a clump of juniper trees and cried and cried. (*The Native Americans: An Illustrated History* 356).

Indian children were taught to reject their own identity, and they were constantly reminded that they were inferior as Indians. They were supposed to become like whites but never to be allowed to assume they were equal to whites.

To plan strategies on saving the Indian, Indian philanthropic organizations would meet at Lake Mohonk in New York. The Lake Mohonk conferences were annual events and produced on-going platforms to educate the Indian. With their encouragement, the Government opened boarding schools and funneled money into Catholic and Protestant boarding schools. These boarding schools emphasized manual skills, such as farming, carpentry, and blacksmithing for the boys and cooking and sewing for the girls; they also taught Christian values and "American" patriotism. The teachers were instructed that they "should carefully avoid any unnecessary reference to the fact that they are Indians" (qtd. in Utley 215). At one Lake Mohonk conference, a young Indian boy stated the goal of the group: "I believe in education because I believe it will kill the Indian that is in me and leave the man and citizen" (qtd. in Utley 215). The "Indian" must be exterminated, no longer through physical violence but now through psychological aggression.

The annual Lake Mohonk conferences were organized by Albert Smiley, named to the Board of Indian Commissioners in 1879. He invited other members to meet at his home on Lake Mohonk in the Catskill Mountains, about a hundred miles from New York City (Utley 203). He also invited other organizations, such as the Indian Rights

Association, the Women's National Indian Association, and the Ladies National Indian League, to the Lake Mohonk Conference of the Friends of the Indian (Utley 205). The people who gathered were well-educated, religious, business and professional people but had no contact with actual Indians and were generally ignorant of their subject. However, they were all intent upon "civilizing" the Indian. One of these reformers, Senator Henry Dawes was the author of the Dawes Allotment Act, which broke the reservations up into allotments with 160 acres to the head of a family, 80 acres to a single male, and 40 acres to a child (Utley 213-14). Just as the family structure was destroyed by separating the children from the parents, so the families were now to be separated from each other in an attempt to eliminate communal living, which is the heart of the tribal organization. Indians should participate in the bounty of the capitalistic American society. Amherst President Merrill E. Gates stated that the Indian had to be made "intelligently selfish" and removed "out of the blanket and into trousers,--the trousers with a pocket in them, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars" (qtd. in Utley 212-13). Ironically, it would be the white corrupt officials and white settlers, instead of the Indians, who would profit from breaking up Indian land.

The Dawes Allotment Act did receive some opposition; to his credit, Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado predicted: "There is not a wild Indian living who knows what a fee-simple is . . . when thirty or forty years shall have passed and these Indians shall have parted with their title, they will curse the hand that was raised professedly in their defense to secure this kind of legislation" (qtd. in Utley 213). Although using racist terminology, his sentiment proved painfully true. Red Cloud, Oglala Lakota, stated the irony of the situation: "They [the white man] made us many promises, more than I can

remember. They never kept but one—they promised to take our land, and they took it (*Through Indian Eyes* 335). The loss of land to deceitful whites with the resulting damage to Indian unity and identity is a reoccurring theme in Erdrich's novels and stories.

However, just as American Indians could not physically be eliminated from this continent, so their language and cultural identity could not be totally removed from the children. Some Indian children were hidden and kept at home where they were trained in their own tribal culture. As more boarding schools sprang up on or near reservations, children went home for the summer where their elders spoke to them in their native language and taught them the old ways. By 1930 the Government finally admitted that the boarding school policy was a failure and began closing Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, but many of churches, especially the Catholic Church, kept their boarding schools open although attendance was no longer mandatory. These government policies of extermination and assimilation had failed in their goals, but they left lasting scars on American Indians who had to suffer what whites perceived as help, but Indians saw as torture.

After centuries of struggling to survive the European onslaught to their lives, culture, and identity, American Indians continue to fight the historical trauma that continues to plague them today:

> Indians experience twelve times the U. S. national rate of malnutrition, nine times the rate of alcoholism, and seven times the rate of infant mortality; as of the early 1990s, the life expectancy of reservation-based men was just over forty-four years, with reservation-based women

> enjoying on average, a life-expectancy of under forty-seven years. (qtd. in Lunquist 25)

The suffering of the American Indian today is no secret to Americans, and as an Indian growing up on the reservation, poverty seemed normal. In fact, I had no concept of what the middle-class entailed, as far as owning a home, taking vacations, owning anything but a used car, or even going to a restaurant. I realized that education was the key to moving economically from the lower class to the middle class, but in college I had to grapple with some severe psychological and emotional issues, which sometimes seemed too great to overcome. Adolescence is difficult at best, but without strong family and cultural support systems, it can become an overpoweringly depressive sink hole. In 2005, Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.C.S., Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service, reported that the suicide rate for American Indian/Alaska Native youth aged 15 to 24 is 3.3 times higher than the national average. In fact, young people aged 15-24 make up 40 percent of all suicides in Indian Country (Indian Country is a term American Indians use for reservations that connotes ownership instead of containment). Also, there are an estimated 13 nonfatal injuries due to suicidal behavior for every fatality (Carmona). The attempt is usually a cry for help, and if there is no help, more attempts will be made until the person finally succeeds. I left the reservation because I came to the realization that I could not solve the problems on the reservation and that I could not extricate myself from those problems by remaining there; I felt a terrible guilt for feeling like I was abandoning my own people when I left. Erdrich's novels deal with these many conflicts that Indians face in attempting to come to terms with the problems of poverty

and hopelessness that derive from past and present treatment of American Indians by the Government and well-meaning whites.

Ironically, American Indians were given promises that if they moved to the reservations, they would receive fresh meat and supplies, medical care, and housing. Those promises proved hollow, and Indians have long suspected the U.S. Government's policy, inconsistent at best and genocide at worst, has been more concerned with the removal of Indians from land desirable for farming, mineral resources, oil, and water than with any humanitarian feeling toward Indians. Many American Indians believe that the eradication of the American Indian tribes was the primary goal of Government policies. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Ph.D. and Assistant Professor at the University of Denver, contends that the Government employed "genocide intent and actions against American Indians" (288). She cites a U.S. Senate document to demonstrate the Government's intent: "[Indians] are to go upon said reservations . . . they are to have no alternative but to choose between this policy of the government and extermination" (U.S. Senate Miscellaneous Document No. 1, 40th Congress, 2nd Session, 1868, 1319 [Yellow Horse Brave Heart 288]). The mention of extermination in the context of human beings shows how whites during this period considered Indians more as animals and nuisances than people. The constant attack upon their lives and culture produced psychological trauma that has been passed from generation to generation.

Because the U.S. Government has never had a consistent policy concerning the American Indian, its policies have been piecemeal, confusing, usually ineffective, and almost always harmful to the Indian. From the inception of reservations, they were controlled by corrupt Government agents, who were usually appointed through the spoils

system as rewards for help in electing a candidate. Therefore, more than seventy years of incompetent and immoral Government policies created poverty-ridden reservations where Indians struggled to survive the resulting hopelessness. By the 1960s, these desperate conditions fostered an anger and discontent among young Indians on reservations and in inner cities, such as Denver and Minneapolis (two of the cities where American Indians were relocated under the Relocation Act of 1958). The Relocation Act, another ill-conceived program, attempted to assimilate American Indians by relocating them to large cities in the 1950s, which only created new centers of Indian poverty. The resulting discontent among Indians in the inner cities and on the reservations produced the militant American Indian Movement (AIM), which was born in Minneapolis in the 1970s and was nurtured into a full-fledged movement on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

AIM chose to use confrontation and violence to counter the Government's continuing marginalization of American Indians. However, AIM's takeover of Wounded Knee in 1973 and the killing of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1975 were intolerable to many Indian tribes, who had been striving to make progress as sovereign nations for the betterment of their people. But AIM's actions did change the relationship between the Government and Indian tribes forever. American Indian tribes began to take back control of the education of their children and reassert their culture on the reservations. Tribes have created tribal colleges on their reservations, developed economic programs for jobs and business creation, and regained legal jurisdiction over their people and tribal lands. The cultural and psychological damage of over two

hundred years of repression has not been dispelled in a few decades, but now American Indians, not the United States Government, control their own destiny.

During this political revolution among tribes, another American Indian revolution and awakening was developing in the literary arena. Centuries of physical and emotional pain finally produced a generation of American Indians who were nurtured by their families on reservations in an underground culture while being educated in boarding schools into a foreign language and culture. These young Indians were prepared to use the English and communication skills learned from the whites to find their own voices again in repudiating the Government's policy of trying to make Indians into whites. As a boarding school survivor, Dine (Navajo) poet and scholar Laura Tohe wrote a piece in 1991 called "Letter to General Pratt." She writes this letter in direct repudiation of Pratt's arrogance and obvious contempt of American Indian culture. Tohe writes:

> I voice this letter to you now because I speak of American culture, my tongue silenced. The land, the Dine, the Dine culture is how I define myself and my writing . . . To write is powerful and even dangerous. To have no stories is to be an empty person. Writing is a way for me to claim my voice, my heritage, my stories, my culture, my people, and my history. (qtd. in Katanski 2)

Even though many Indian children were forced to learn a foreign culture and language in boarding schools, Indians managed to pass down their oral tradition and storytelling to their children.

Although in the late 1800s not all Indian children went to boarding schools, those who did were sometimes misfits when they returned to the reservation because they

straddled two cultures. An example of this dissonance is Charles Eastman, Santee Lakota, who struggled to reconnect to his people after he was placed in mission schools, attended Dartmouth College and earned his M.D. degree at Boston University medical school. He returned to the reservation to treat his people, but he was now more culturally a white man than an Indian. Even so, he became a strong advocate for his people and published several books. The balancing act between educating young American Indians to deal with the white man's world while strengthening their sense of family and tribal affiliation is difficult at best and traumatizing at worst. Some of Erdrich's characters struggle with this dilemma, which is so relevant to the modern Indian on and off the reservation.

By the early 1900s, almost all Indian children on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation (my tribe) were being placed in BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) boarding schools or Catholic boarding schools on the reservation. My mother and her siblings were sent to these boarding schools as early as the age of five or six. Many of these children were punished simply for being homesick and crying at night for their parents. They were also punished for speaking their Native language. My aunt remembers kneeling on a wood floor in a cold hallway all night for speaking Lakota. A blanket statement that all boarding schools were this harsh or brutal would be simplistic, but even without the physical abuse, simply removing small children from their parents for nine months and forcing them to give up the language and traditions in which they find comfort and identity is a truly "uncivilized" and inhumane act. But these barbaric conditions could not prevent the Indian children from continuing to talk to one another in their Native language. Ironically, one of my uncles pointed out that the teachers at the boarding

schools would always remind them that they were "Indians," usually said in a derogatory tone, while they stripped them of the vestiges of their heritage.

Louise Erdrich articulates this struggle of Indian children to protect an ancient identity in *Four Souls.* Margaret Kashpaw (nee Center of the Sky) explains the assault on herself:

> After the priests came among us, my great-grandmother said, She Knows the Bear became Marie. Sloping Cloud was christened Jeanne. Taking Care of the Day and Yellow Day Woman turned into Catherines. I became Margaret, but I always knew that would happen. The year they carried my great-grandmother out the western window, wrapped in red cloth and then tied into birch bark, the school finally got me. The girl who was named Center of the Sky became Margaret, then Margaret Kashpaw and then Rushes Bear. But I had already seen far back in time by then. I knew who I was in relation to all who went before. Therefore, although I went to school I was not harmed, nor while I was there did I forget my language. Not Margaret. Every time I was struck or shamed for speaking Ojibwemowin, I said to myself, *There's another word I won't forget.* I tamped it down. I took it in. I grew hard inside so that the girl named Center of the Sky could survive. (*Four Souls* 179)

The white culture, believing it was enlightening a backward people, attempted to destroy a culture and value system they deemed worthless; the killing of the soul proved to be as insidious to the Indian as the physical annihilation perpetuated upon them. The Indians would quietly, yet stubbornly, struggle to retain a piece of their core.

The American Indian identity scattered into thousands of seeds germinating through the years in the hearts of young Indian children in boarding schools and on reservations. Watered by the tears of their mothers and fathers, those seeds burst into bloom in the 1960s. Beginning in the 1960s, after centuries of struggling for survival as Indian nations with histories, cultures, and languages separate from the dominant white culture, American Indians discovered emancipation through the written language of the white man. Beginning with (Lakota) Vine Deloria, Jr.'s accusatory *Custer Died for Your Sins* in 1969, American Indian thought burst into the white culture's consciousness. (In high school, Deloria's book had a major impact on me, infusing me with a pride in being Indian and preparing me for the white perspective of Indians that I would encounter constantly off the reservation.)

In a more biographical and less controversial vein, (Kiowa) N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) impressed literary critics and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. A slew of Indian writers followed, such as Simon Ortiz, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, Joy Harjo, Sherman Alexie, and Louise Erdrich, to name only a few. Although from different tribes, these writers embodied a pan-Indianism that presented a view into the Indian culture from the Indian perspective, much the way *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry allowed the non-African American to see into the workings of the African American family. These American Indian writers join Langston Hughes in saying, "I, too, sing America" (Hughes).

Louise Erdrich is a member of the vanguard in the American Indian literary renaissance. Scholars have debated whether Erdrich is an "Indian writer" or an "American writer" who is Indian. The point is irrelevant to my thesis because I focus on

our similarities in our American Indian experience, which in no way negates the critiques of her work as an American writer by non-Indian writers. I believe she is both, and the debate concerning whether she is only one or the other trivializes the perspectives of both Indian and non-Indian readers. I chose her novels and stories for my thesis, not only because I appreciate the lyrical beauty and complexity of her style but also for the frankness in her rendition of reservation life. Erdrich was a poet first, so her prose writing retains a poetic rhythm and imagery that is a joy to read. Erdrich uses humor to illustrate some of the ironies and absurdities intrinsic in the circumstances that Indians find themselves in because of our long struggle to survive the oppression and help of one of world's strongest nations. Erdrich's use of the Indian's ability to see the humor in otherwise depressing situations infuses hope and humanity into her stories.

Erdrich infuses music into a description with her use of metaphors and imagery. Nanapush, a strong medicine man, illustrates how his power of speech allows him to dominate his conversations with the local Catholic priest (and which allows him to avoid actually attending church services):

> My voice rasped at first when I tried to speak, but then, oiled by strong tea, lard and bread, I was off and talking. Even a sledge won't stop me once I start. Father Damien looked astonished, and then wary, as I began to creak and roll. I gathered speed. I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle. The sound of my own voice convinced me that I was alive. I kept Father Damien listening all night, his green eyes round, his thin face straining to understand, his odd brown hair in curls and clipped knots. Occasionally,

> he took in air, as if to add observations of his, but I pushed him under with my words. (Erdrich *Tracks* 7)

Erdrich's use of language is imaginative and powerful. Reading her books is truly like reading poetry. The serenity and beauty of her writing alleviates some of the misery and seeming hopelessness of reservation life. Much like Nanapush, Erdrich captivates and holds the reader's attention.

Erdrich humorous scenarios are elaborate and complex. Many of her tales run through four or five books from five or six different narrators. I will describe an elaborate story later in my thesis, but here I will illustrate a simpler example of Erdrich's sense of humor. In *Love Medicine,* Gerry Nanapush is the original Nanapush's great-grandson because his single Indian name becomes a last name under white rules. After a barroom altercation in which Gerry fights by reservation rules and kicks a cowboy in his crotch, he is charged with assault. Gerry figures that since there were both white and Indian witnesses that the case would not come to trial, but he forgot that "white people are good witnesses to have on your side, because they have names, addresses, social security numbers, and work phones" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 162). For the same reason, whites are terrible to have as witnesses against you, which is the case for Gerry. They are almost as "bad as having Indians witness for you" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 162). Not only do his Indian witnesses lack all forms of identification, they disappear because he is tried during powwow time. The few that do show up do not look the judge or jury in the eyes because they do not trust the judicial system since past Indian-government relations have not turned out well. A local doctor testifies that the cowboy's fertility might be impaired, so Gerry receives a "sentence that was heavy for a first offense, but not bad for

an Indian" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 162). According to Gerry, the only good thing to come out of the experience is that the cowboy will not have any little cowboys.

This small example shows the type of witty and biting humor that Erdrich engages. Indians are not always treated fairly in state courts with white judges and white juries, and there are many white juries because Indians may be difficult to find for jury duty or not be called because of racism. Gerry believes "in justice, not laws" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 163). The white man's laws have usually harmed Indians, and justice for Indians has definitely been lacking in the last two hundred years. "[I]t was difficult for Gerry, as an Indian, to retain the natural good humor of his ancestors in these modern circumstances" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 163). But Indians do keep the humor alive to ward off some of the harsh realities of reservation life.

This dark humor and ironic view of life is intricately woven into the American Indian heritage, partly forced upon them as a survival mechanism when their continent was stolen, their children were incarcerated in boarding schools, and their people were consigned to reservations. Indians had to resort to psychological maneuvers to survive as a people. One of the techniques used by for survival has always been humor. Whether in Jewish ghettos in World War II or in prisons, people have used humor to psychologically overcome crushing circumstances.

Along with the wit and humor, Erdrich is not afraid to write about the harsh realities on reservations. Some Indian writers have criticized her for not having a political agenda in her writing, but Erdrich is undaunted by what others say her writing. In her Dartmouth Commencement Keynote Address in 2009, Erdrich tells a story about chopping sixty pounds of onions at her job in the Dartmouth cafeteria when she attended

the university in the 1970s. When she went to class immediately following her job, she smelled like an onion. As she walked into her class, she noticed that everyone backed away from her and sat far from her. She developed what she calls "the law of the onion": "you have to risk humiliation if you want to move forward . . . don't take things personally. If other people's opinions are not personal to you, good or bad, you have the freedom to be who you are" (Erdrich "Dartmouth"). She is such an effective writer because she writes what she sees and feels without worrying about her critics or presenting an idealized picture of Indian life. Indian writers such as Erdrich reject the derogatory stereotypes of barbaric savage and the idealized noble savage. In her novels, Louise Erdrich realistically renders Indian people as complex people with shortcomings and virtues. Indians feel a kinship with Erdrich's characters because they live with these people or they are these people. Her characters shortcomings and tragedies give Indians a sense of validation while they also feel pride in the portrayal of compassion and humanity in the characters.

Allowing Indian readers to access writings that are personal and reflective of the harsh realities in their lives can be therapeutic and healing to a group of people who have endured massive cultural and personal trauma. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart completed a study in 1998 on the consequences of generational impaired grief due to massive cumulative trauma associated with cataclysmic events among the Lakota (Teton Sioux). Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work and Director/Co-Founder of the Takini Network for Lakota Holocaust Survivors. She lists such cataclysmic events endured by the Lakota as the assassination of Sitting Bull, the Wounded Knee Massacre, and the

forced removal of Lakota children to boarding schools. The extermination of the buffalo, enforced reservation placement, and starvation can also be added to this list of traumas.

The death of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee Massacre were connected to the rise of the Ghost Dance religion on the Lakota reservations. The Ghost Dance religion, started in Nevada by Wovoka, a Paiute shaman, had spread to the reservations in South Dakota. Wovoka had a vision where God showed him a world with no whites and where all the dead Indians and huge herds of buffalo would return. By performing the Ghost dance and saying certain prayers, Indians would be caught up in the heavens when the Messiah came to rescue them. Worried that the Ghost Dance religion could cause Indian uprisings, the Government sent military reinforcements to the reservations to keep the peace. Forty Indian police were sent to Sitting Bull's camp to bring him to the Standing Rock Agency on December 15, 1890. Sitting Bull was shot in the back of the head by an Indian police officer during his arrest (Josephy 18). Having Indians do the white man's dirty work added insult to injury, but this divide and conquer strategy was successfully used by the Government against Indians. Sitting Bull was the spiritual leader of the last successful battle against the Government in the Battle of the Big Horn (or Custer's Last Stand as it is known by whites). Sitting Bull was arrested because his people still respected and followed him, and this allegiance interfered with the Government's plan of forced confinement of Indians on the reservations. His assassination was a crushing blow to tribal morale.

Losing Sitting Bull was followed two weeks later on December 29 by the terrible massacre at Wounded Knee. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. recounts the following details of the massacre, gleaned through government documents and interviews from survivors

(Josephy 21-27). Chief Big Foot and his 350 followers (120 men and 230 women and children) were traveling to the Pine Ridge reservation for food and shelter when they were intercepted by a well-armed U.S. military troop with Hotchkiss cannons on December 27, 1890. Later that night, Colonel Forsyth's 7th Calvary arrived as reinforcements; the 7th Calvary was Custer's Calvary that was wiped by the Sioux at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Some have wondered if their disarming of Big Foot's people and subsequent massacre was a measure of revenge for what the Sioux had done to Custer and his men. The next morning, the Army soldiers searched the tipis for guns, and then Colonel Forsyth asked the warriors to open the blankets wrapped around them to check for concealed guns. Several more rifles were discovered, and the young warriors became agitated. Meanwhile Yellow Bird, a medicine man, was furiously dancing and throwing dirt into the air while the searches were taking place. In the rear of the warrior group, a deaf Indian raised his rifle above his head and insisted that he would not give it up without being paid for it. Two soldiers grabbed him, and in the struggle, the rifle fired into the air, which caused fears on both sides to explode into chaotic violence. Women and children were cut down as they attempted to flee, and warriors fought hand to hand when their rifles ran out of ammunition. The next day 84 men and boys, 44 women, and 18 children were buried in a mass grave on a hill where the Hotchkiss guns had been.

Again, this show of military strength was a demonstration of total white domination—submit or die. The Oglala holy man Black Elk later said that the Lakota nations' hoop had been broken and scattered at Wounded Knee (Josephy 27). The Wounded Knee Massacre became a symbol of the last brutal crush of Indian resistance by the United States Government. Dee Brown used the title *Bury My Heart at Wounded*

Knee as a universal code for the injustices suffered by Indians at the hands of the U.S. Government and whites. AIM (American Indian Movement), a radical Indian organization, occupied the Wounded Knee site in 1973 as a symbol of the renewal of Indian resistance to white domination today.

Finally, Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart mentions the devastation of the forced institution of Lakota children in boarding schools. She defines these events as historical trauma in the "collective and compounding emotional and psychic wounding both over the life span and across generations" (288). She points out that this type of trauma has also been referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (288). For Indians, this unresolved historical grief resulted from the Government's prohibition of American Indian ceremonies, which purpose was cathartic grief healing, and the larger white society's denial of the magnitude of their genocidal policies (288).

While the death of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee Massacre were losses to the members through their tribal identity, the boarding school experiences were profoundly personal to each child and to each parent and relative who was denied the opportunity to nurture the children. Children were abused physically as well as psychologically. Also, the deficient health standards at the boarding schools caused a tuberculosis epidemic among the Sioux that contributed to a tuberculosis death rate seven times the national rate between 1936 and 1941 (Yellow Horse Brave Heart 289). This legacy of disease was devastating not only physically but also psychologically, which continues today.

Madonna Swan, a Lakota, who attended Catholic Boarding School describes the psychologically effects of TB on her and her friends in her memoir, *Madonna Swan: A*

Lakota Woman's Story. She relates her experiences in boarding school in the 1940s when she and her friends began contracting TB. She relates how one friend was swinging on the playground when she fell off the swing and began bleeding from her mouth. The girl was taken to the sanatorium, and they were told that she died two months later (Swann 53). Madonna was playing basketball with another girl when the girl jumped to catch a rebound and began clutching at her chest; soon she was bleeding at the mouth. The next day the students were told that the girl passed away from "quick consumption" (Swann 55). The girls began watching each other closely and discussing when they had chest pains, wondering who would fall ill next.

Swann did contract TB when she was sixteen and had to enter the Sioux Sanatorium in Rapid City (Swann 87). Swann called these years "wani'yetu tona oi'yokisilya" (the years of sad isolation or the years of loneliness) (Swann 86). Although she talked with other girls there and continued schoolwork, she laments, "Time passed so slowly that loneliness for my family stayed with me, growing all the time, like a hunger that would not leave" (Swann 73). Also several of her new friends at the sanatorium died, and she constantly worried if she would be the next to die. When an Indian grows up on the reservation, death becomes a very personal acquaintance.

Even today this legacy of trauma lives on; I can remember as a child and a teenager receiving a TB test every year in school. I had cousins and friends who went through treatments for TB; I remember people talking about Sioux San, a sanatorium for TB patients in Rapid City, a city near the Pine Ridge Reservation and a short distance from the Rosebud Reservation. To this day, I have a fear of hospitals and doctors because people many times did not return from the hospital. A teenage girl at my school

went to the Indian hospital in Rosebud to have her tonsils taken out and died. I still have my tonsils even though there were times as a child and teenager when my tonsils would swell so much that I could hardly swallow. I am actually grateful that I was not taken to the hospital through most of my childhood illnesses, such as German measles, chicken pox, and illnesses where my fever was so high that I hallucinated; I believe that this may have saved my life, and surviving the illnesses actually made me physically stronger. This is an example of the type of thinking and suspicion of the white man that an Indian develops through the suffering caused by the white man's culture with its disease, broken treaties, forced incarceration on reservations, failed policies toward the Indian, and its inability to leave us alone. Erdrich's characters have this same suspicious nature of anything purported to "help" the Indian that comes from the white culture or U.S. Government. Indians would appreciate less help and more voice in our lives.

Suffering caused by a dominant culture upon a weaker one is not new. These types of unresolved grief and trauma among generations have been observed in other populations as well, such as Holocaust survivors and Japanese Internment victims and their descendants (Yellow Horse Brave Heart 291). Some of the traumatic responses suffered and passed down by these groups to their children include "(a) withdrawal and psychic numbing, (b) anxiety and hypervigilance, (c) guilt, (d) identification with ancestral pain and death, and (e) chronic sadness and depression" (Fogelman; Kestenberg; Lifton; qtd. in Yellow Horse Brave Heart 291). Just as Holocaust survivors and Japanese Internment victims developed psychological defense mechanisms, which deprived their children of models of healthy psychological constructs in dealing with the

world, so did American Indians pass on their psychological anxieties and depression to the next generation in a vicious cycle.

Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart also notes on the incidence of historical trauma, "Generalizability to other tribes may be limited to other Plains groups. However, my experience in presenting the study to other audiences including Southwestern and Northwestern tribes and Native Pacific Islanders suggest this model is universally relevant among native people" (300). Indians today realize that while they are separate tribes with distinct cultures, they also share characteristics and responses to the traumatic invasion of the Europeans. Again the American Indian threads the needle of the dichotomy between the importance of tribal identity and pan-Indianism.

Erdrich's writing addresses issues that reflect a type of pan-Indianism because many tribes have shared similar painful experiences in their clash with the white culture. I have met hundreds of Indians from tribes all over the United States, and I agree that we share a commonality in suffering some of the types of trauma responses listed above. Thus the resulting psychological and societal problems tend to be the same from reservation to reservation and from Indian to Indian, but tribes, while sharing ideas, need to develop solutions based on their unique tribal cultures.

For her study, Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart developed a psychoeducational intervention based on traditional Lakota values. She found that the following psychoeducational steps promoted healing among a group of 45 Lakota human service providers (287, 292-3):

1) Education about historical trauma leads to increased awareness about the trauma, its impact, and the grief-related effects it evokes.

2) The process of sharing these effects with other of similar background within a traditional Lakota context leads to a cathartic sense of grief.
3) Psychoeducation initiates a healing and mourning process, which results in a reduction of grief effects, an experience of more positive group identity, and an increased commitment to continuing healing work both for individuals and the community.

Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart's study reaches some dramatic conclusions about the root causes of many of the problems plaguing Indians today, and I believe that as an Indian, I am drawn to Erdrich's writings because her stories contain these healing elements within a traditional Indian context. Again, her writing contains distinctive Ojibwe traditions, but also addresses issues that are common to every tribe and reservation, such as alcoholism, land grabs by whites, and identity crises.

I believe that Erdrich's novels provide a positive psychological effect to Indian readers because of the veracity of her descriptions within the underlying historical context and the humor in an Indian storytelling style. Erdrich's stories are filled with the psychological devastation on reservations directly caused by the attempted genocide, land theft, introduction of alcohol, breakup of the family and psychological damage to the children through the boarding school experience, and resulting poverty. For American Indians, relating to these injustices through the eyes of another Indian provides a cathartic sense of grief. Erdrich's storytelling allows Indians to share these experiences, not in guilt or shame, but in grief. Through this process of sharing comes mourning, understanding, and, ultimately, healing. With this healing experience, hopefully, the next generation can finally begin to break the insidious cycle of tragedy to form "a more

positive group identity and an increased commitment to continuing healing work both for individuals and the community" (as Dr. Yellow Hawk Brave Heart so aptly stated).

Many Lakota tribes, as well as other tribes, are starting to hold healing workshops to gather Indians to discuss and resolve issues related to historical psychological trauma. Of course, while the direct psychoeducational intervention described by Dr. Yellow Hawk Brave Heart may present the optimum opportunity for grief resolution, I would propose that the widely disseminated writings by Indian authors can provide a positive affirmation for Indians.

Erdrich's storytelling style makes her characters and stories emotionally accessible to Indian readers. In an interview, Erdrich explains, "Indians from different tribes who have read it [*Love Medicine*] and said, 'This is what happened here and it's so much like what happened to me, or to someone I know.' It's a kind of universalizing experience . . . We wanted the reservation in *Love Medicine* to kind of ring true to people from lots of different tribes" (*Conversations* 25). Indians can relate to Erdrich's characters because they live with these people. At last someone writes about people I know.

Although a mixed blood, Erdrich's identity is first and foremost Indian. She explains that one of her primary purposes in writing is to relate stories that connect with other American Indian readers. In an interview of Erdrich and her husband, Michael Dorris, Erdrich acknowledged:

> My first audience that I would write for, that we write for as a couple, is American Indians, hoping that they will read, laugh, cry, really take in the work . . . Michael has had lots of mail from readers of *Love Medicine*,

> Indians from different tribes who have read it and said, "This is what happened here and it's so much like what happened to me, or to someone I know." It's a kind of universalizing experience. The book does touch some universals, which is what we're talking about, Pan-Indianism. We wanted the reservation in *Love Medicine* to kind of ring true to people from lots of different tribes. (*Conversations* 24-25)

I have this response when I read her works, which is a liberating experience. I do laugh and cry when I read her books because they mirror my experiences on the reservation. This is why I feel compelled to write this thesis from the reader response perspective of an American Indian.

Just by being a popular Indian writer, Erdrich strengthens the Indians' sense of their place and importance in American society. Erdrich as a mixed blood comes from both worlds with German, French, and Ojibwe blood in her background. She demonstrates how the two races do meet at points and co-exist in harmony. She does voice that she is keenly aware of her position as an Indian. In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, Erdrich notes that the strongest inner voice for her is American Indian:

> I think that's because that is the part of you that is culturally different. When you live in the mainstream and you know that you're not quite, not really there, you listen for a voice to direct you. I think, besides that, you also are a member of another nation. It gives you a strange feeling, this dual citizenship. So, in a way it isn't surprising that's so strong. (Erdrich and Bruchac)

As a mixed blood, I also feel that the American Indian identity is strongest, especially if one has been raised on a reservation.

As a mixed blood raised on the Rosebud Reservation of the Lakota in South Dakota, I was always known as American Indian by people on the reservation even though I am fair skinned. Reservations originally were created as a homeland for American Indians only, but soon whites began buying up "excess" Indian land opened to white settlers by the Government. Today, whites own or lease a majority of the land on the reservations, as well as own many of the businesses on the reservation. On most reservations, mixed bloods were viewed as Indian by both Indians and whites. Racism on the reservation can range from blatant to subtle. For example, when one of my friends would go to her white friend's house, her friend's brother would say in a hostile voice, "Who let the Indian in?" I personally had very few white friends because of such remarks and an uncomfortable feeling of not being sure of when such remarks would occur.

As a mixed blood, I was aware of which side most Indians and non-Indians considered me to be on. More importantly, no matter what the outward appearance, the mixed blood child psychologically bonds with his or her American Indian family and culture, partly because it is a natural human response to identify with one's parents and partly because many whites on the reservation reinforce the practice that the person's American Indian blood is his or her defining identity.

I also bonded with my Indian relatives because I did not know who my white father was. I was a tow-headed five-year-old firmly entrenched in the knowledge that I was an "Indian" and not a "wasicu" (Lakota for "white" person). When my Indian uncle

teased me that I looked like a wasicu, I adamantly stomped my foot and insisted that I was an "Indian," as though he had called me a dirty name.

Erdrich sums up the mixed blood's confusion about his or her identity: "One of the characteristics of being a mixed-blood is searching. You look back and say, 'Who am I from?' You must question. You must make certain choices. You're able to. And it's a blessing and it's a curse" (Erdrich and Bruchac). Because Erdrich was raised by both her white father and her American Indian mother, with strong ties to both sides of the family, she straddles two worlds and her writings deal with issues surrounding mixed bloods, or full bloods raised off the reservation, and their search for cultural identity, which is critical to young Indians struggling to find purpose in life.

Erdrich understands the power of words and the American Indian tradition of storytelling. She uses written words the way traditional Indian storytellers use oral words. Words contain power. Indians have tapped into this spiritual power for generations. Momaday explains:

> Words are intrinsically powerful . . . By means of words can one bring about physical change in the universe. By means of words can one quiet the raging weather, bring forth the harvest, ward off evil, rid the body of sickness and pain, subdue an enemy, capture the heart of a lover, live in the proper way, venture beyond death. Indeed, there is nothing more powerful. When one ventures to speak, when he utters a prayer or tells a story, he is dealing with forces that are supernatural and irresistible (16).

Erdrich's words contain this spiritual power. Anthropologists have a word to express this type of force: *mana*. The term *mana* was coined by anthropologist R.H. Codrington in

1891 in a book he wrote on Melanesian religion. He described Melanesian *mana* "as a force existing everywhere which acts in all ways for good and evil and which is of utmost importance for man to possess and control" (Norbeck 39). Since Codrington's time, *mana* has come to generally mean supernatural power or force, which can be impersonal or personified (Norbeck 39). *Mana* can be used to describe the Indian's idea of luck or a force that a person possesses, which he or she can use for good or evil.

Erdrich herself has *mana* in her ability to effectively and lyrically write metaphors, allusions, and other figurative language in telling the American Indian experience. Crazy Horse, Oglala Lakota, would be one who possesses *mana*. Luther Standing Bear, Lakota, describes Crazy Horse's power:

> The faith of Crazy Horse in the power of the Great Mystery to guide and protect him was a marvel to all the people of the tribe, given to faith as they were. He seemed to lead a charmed life in battle. He exposed himself openly to both Indian foes and to the troops of the white man, yet he was never even wounded. (4)

Erdrich uses this concept of force or power in her novels. She herself is aware of the power of words and her responsibility to her own people. In the article "Where I Ought to Be," Erdrich explains her task as an American Indian writer:

> Contemporary American Indian 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 the catastrophe [of

> white invasion and the annihilation of American Indian culture]" (Wong 48).

Just as traditional oral storytellers in the past carried on the story of the people to the next generation, so do American Indian writers today. Indian writers have the responsibility to tell history from the American Indian experience.

According to Brian Swann, American Indian writing is "a desire for wholeness—for balance, reconciliation, and healing—within the individual, the tribe, the community, the nation; one sees an insistence on these things, on growth, on rich survival" (qtd. in Lundquist 6). Erdrich's works deal extensively with Indians' desire to discover who they are and their place in the family and in the tribe. Different times in the lives of her characters appear through several of her works; thus, she creates a feeling that reconciliation and balance can be attained at any time in life and are always continuing. Continuance and growth are indispensable messages to American Indians because then the future does not appear so bleak.

The component that drew me originally to Erdrich's books is her use of humor, even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. Sometimes non-Indians may find Indian humor *noir* and disconcerting. Referring to *Love Medicine*, Erdrich notes, "In talking to tribal people who've read the book, the first thing they say is, 'Oh, yes, that funny book.' It's not like they self-consciously pick out the humor, but on the whole it's funnier than a lot of critics who read it who were kind of saying this is devastating" (*Conversations* 49). In another interview, she elaborates: I really think the question about humor is very important. It's one of the most important parts of American Indian life and literature, and one thing that always hits us is just that Indian people really have a great sense of humor

and when it's survival humor, you learn to laugh at things (*Conversations* 24). Erdrich's writing incorporates an underlying humor to highlight a defense mechanism historically used by American Indians to survive the onslaught to their culture and identity.

Many Indian writers use ironic humor because it reflects the essence of reservation life. For American Indians, reading Erdrich's novels creates laughter and a sense of connection. Erdrich sees the humor as dominant:

> It's really there, and I think Simon Ortiz is one person who has a lot of funny things happen, responding to the world and to things that happen to you; it's a different way of looking at the world, very different from the stereotype, the stoic, unflinching Indian standing, looking at the sunset. It's really there, the humor, and I really hope that beside the serious part in this particular book [*Love Medicine*], people would see the humor. (*Conversations* 24)

Erdrich's exquisitely beautiful use of imagery and metaphors, combined with her use of humor, sometimes subtle and ironic but sometimes flat out slapstick, and her Indian storytelling talent, creates novels that for the Indian reader are an affirmation of our unique identity.

In this thesis, I will examine the irony and absurdity in the lives of Erdrich's characters as they attempt to find their place in a world that tried to erase them and their history. As a fellow American Indian, I find that to examine her work, I must interweave my experiences with hers. As an American Indian reader, I will also be commenting on Erdrich's portrayal of the Indian experience by comparing it to my own experiences as an Indian. Although most of her Indian characters are Ojibwe, I will be referencing Lakota

lore, traditions, and experiences because Erdrich's writing lends itself to a pan-Indianism study and because I personally can relate to her characters from the perspective of a Lakota, a traditional enemy but modern ally. Literature lends itself to more than one interpretation, and her writing is so popular among Indians because we use our own tribal view when reading her novels. Since Erdrich's characters tell their stories through intertwined tales in more than one book, incidents may be told by various characters in different books. I will be analyzing characters from several books, *Love Medicine, The Antelope Wife, Tracks, Four Souls,* and *The Bingo Palace*, as well as including some of her poetry. Also I will focus on the use of humor in surviving and healing traumatic experiences. Louise Erdrich employs humor and irony, sometimes through seemingly absurd situations, to deal with overwhelming emotions and to teach survival lessons to others. Her biting and self-deprecating humor derives directly from the reservation.

In an interview discussing *Love Medicine,* Erdrich describes the ubiquitous nature of humor among American Indians: "But, if there is any ceremony which goes across the board and is practiced by lots and lots of tribal people, it is having a sense of humor about things and laughing" (Erdrich and Bruchac). When asked in an interview about the difference in the use of humor in the old Indian stories and in the contemporary ones, Erdrich admitted, "The humor is a little blacker and bleaker now" (*Conversations* 23). Because American Indians have not for some time had many positive experiences to laugh about, they have by necessity turned to irony to infuse some laughter into an otherwise depressing existence. Humor, probably always part of the American Indian personality, has developed by necessity into a darker comedy for survival purposes.

Erdrich's writings exemplify the healing and teaching power of humor in the face of overwhelming hopelessness.

III. DOGS AND BUFFALO IN SURVIVAL

Several of Erdrich's humorous anecdotes involve dogs as pets and as food. The Ojibwe prepared a feast of dog as a sacred ceremony, and some tribes considered dog to be a delicacy. After Indians were placed on reservations, eating dog became a necessity instead of a luxury. When their hunting grounds were restricted and the promised beef from the U. S. Government did not materialize, Indians resorted to eating dog. Corrupt Indian agents, a shortage of promised commodities, and scarce wild game produced starvation conditions for the reservations. The story of the white puppy incorporates pathos and humor to illustrate the plight of the Indian.

One of the chapters in *The Antelope Wife* is narrated by a pure white puppy. This puppy explains that he has survived into old age through dog magic, dog wit, dog skill, and medicine; all passed down through his relatives. Now he will tell his story and pass this knowledge down to his relatives.

Traditionally, American Indians have close ties to animals. Black Elk, a Lakota holy man, explains: "The hawk swoops down on its prey; so does the Indian. In his lament he is like an animal. For instance, the coyote is sly; so is the Indian. The eagle is the same. That is why the Indian is always feathered up; he is a relative to the wings of the air" (*The Sixth Grandfather* 317). Indian coyote trickster stories are common in almost every tribe. Talking animals are the norm in Indian culture, and Indians may talk with them or turn into different animal forms. To the American Indians, animals are their brothers.

So it is not unusual for the white dog to relate his story for his posterity. It is a tongue in cheek parallel to the American Indian experience with the white usurper. The

puppy does not "mind saying to you that I'm not a full-blood Ojibwa reservation dog" (*The Antelope Wife* 75). He is part coyote and part Dakota. Many American Indians in the Midwest today have some mixed blood from intermarriage with French and Scottish trappers, and with German immigrants from the early 1700s. Erdrich's dog continues to amuse the reader as he explains that his mother always taught him to stay dirty because as a pure white dog, he was considered especially tender. The dog does not want to sacrifice himself for mankind. The white man's attempt to first annihilate the American Indians as a people and then, when that failed, to annihilate all traces of their culture, was an attempt to cover up their sin of greed in the theft of a continent. Much like the white puppy, the American Indian exists as the sacrifice for the white man's sin of greed.

Despite all attempts by his mother to keep him dirty, to not be noticed, the grandmother sends her grandson to catch him. Despite the American Indians' attempts, after being placed on reservations, to be left in peace, whites felt compelled to "save us," "educate us," and "civilize us." Vine Deloria, Jr. (Lakota) likens the Government's handling of Indian affairs to a grade B western: "You can go to sleep and miss a long sequence of the action, but every time you look at the screen, it's the same group of guys chasing the other guys around the same rock" (*Through Indian Eyes* 374). With good reason, I have come to fear any Government program, just as the puppy fears the grandmother.

The puppy is put in a sack and explains, "Just another human habit I'll get used to, this stuffing dogs in sacks" (*The Antelope Wife* 76). As an American Indian growing up on the reservation, I became accustomed to many insidious policies of the Government in its treatment of American Indians. When I was in grade school, Indian

Health doctors and nurses came to our schools, took all the American Indian children out of classes, lined us up in the gym, and gave us shots. No one explained to us what shots we were getting; no one asked for a permission slip; no one, except us, informed our parents that we had been given shots; and no one questioned what the Indian Health doctors and nurses did; it was just another government habit that we had no choice but to tolerate. Every year, just before school started, a bus came around to our houses and picked up the children--no parents, only children. We were taken to a dentist at the hospital; I never went to this office except when the bus picked me up. I do not think adults went to this office except to get all their teeth pulled and be fitted for dentures. Years later, when one of my cousins went into the military, a dentist asked him why he had a perfect hole, obviously made by a dental drill, in the side of one his molars. He had no idea, just another government habit to get used to. Unlike the puppy in this story, many of us did not resist or struggle against the coercion of the Government.

Almost too late, the white puppy "thinks furious" when he realizes that he is about to become soup (*The Antelope Wife* 77). He has only one weapon: "puppyness." As he is pulled out of the bag, he frantically looks around for the nearest female child. He spots her; she is the granddaughter. He looks at her, gives a friendly whine, a yap, and then a loud bark. The girl turns to see the puppy in her grandmother's hands and asks her grandmother what she is going to do with the puppy. The grandmother mumbles and hedges. The girl's cousin tells the girl that her grandmother is about to boil the puppy to make dog soup. The girl does not believe his words and reaches for the puppy.

The puppy says, "I throw puppy love right at her in loopy yo-yos, puppy drool, joy, and big-pawed puppy clabber, ear perks, eye contact, most of all the potent weapon

of all puppies, the head cock and puppy grin" (*The Antelope Wife* 78). The girl starts yelling, "GIMMEDAPUPPY!GIMMEDA PUPPY!" (*The Antelope Wife* 78). The puppy switches into high gear: "Now it's time for me to wiggle, all over, to give the high-quotient adorability wiggle all puppies know...I do it double time, triple time, full of puppy determination, desperate to live" (*The Antelope Wife* 78). Realizing she has lost, the grandmother hands the puppy to the girl. The girl takes the puppy away, and this is when he receives his naming: "And my girl calls back, without hesitation, the name I will bear from then on into my age, the name that has given so many of our breedless breed hope, the name that will live on in dogness down through the generations. You've heard it. You know it. Almost Soup" (*The Antelope Wife* 79).

In this story, Erdrich uses the puppy to illustrate the American Indian ability, handed down through generations, to survive the force of a greater power trying to eradicate them and their memory from the American landscape. It has taken all our "puppyness" just to survive. American Indians have had to develop skills to survive in two cultures, the Indian culture and the white mainstream culture; mainstream people never have to learn skills to work in two worlds. Indian children were wrenched out of their homes and coerced to learn to maneuver in the mainstream culture, and then they had to return home and attempt to reconnect with their own traditional culture. This balancing act is typified in the puppy's struggle to survive by engaging the little girl's attention to thwart the intentions of the grandmother.

Erdrich's injection of humor in this anecdote illustrates several points in a larger scenario of survival for American Indians. This story demonstrates American Indians' desperation when the Government reneged on its promises to supply the American

Indians with fresh beef, causing them to rely on dogs as a food staple. Reverend Peter Jones, Ojibwe, writes in 1861 that the Ojibwe traditionally used the dog as a meritorious sacrifice in *Uhnemoosh* (Dog Feast) (98). After they killed the dog and singed off all the hair, they cooked the dog without breaking any bones. The meat was divided among the guests and a portion was used as a burnt offering. The Ojibwe considered the dog an "ominous animal and supposed to possess great virtue" (Jones 98). Instead of a sacred meal infusing the feasters with spiritual virtue, the dog becomes an everyday "puppy soup" to simply sustain the people.

Traditionally, the plains tribes subsisted on the buffalo, which roamed the plains in huge numbers until their demise due to hunters, disease, and overgrazing. The buffalo provided a huge food reserve for the plains Indians as they roamed in relatively safe environment since the hunting of the Indians never threatened to destroy the herds. Tom McHugh, a zoologist who studied buffalo in Yellowstone Park, calculated that a maximum of 32 million buffalo could have subsisted on the plains; he used the amount of grazing land available in the 1800s and the amount of grazing land required for each buffalo (Isenberg 25). Historian Dan Flores has arrived at a similar figure through a similar methodology; he estimated between 28 to 30 million buffalo roamed the plains (Isenberg 25). Traditionally, American Indians carefully used all of the buffalo and gave thanks to *Wanka Tanka* (Lakota for "Great Spirit") for the bounty that would allow the tribe to continue to survive. *Tatanka* (Lakota for "largest of the great" or "buffalo") was strong because of its size and also because it sustains the people. A name with *Tatanka* is considered to contain great power or *mana,* to use the archeologist term referred to earlier; for example, *Tatanka Iyotanka* (Sitting Bull) describes a buffalo bull sitting on its

haunches. *Tatanka Iyotanka* was the medicine man at the Battle of the Little Big Horn who had a vision of the blue coats falling upside down out of the sky. The loss of millions of buffalo to a few hundred by 1889 was devastating to the plains Indians' lifestyle (Isenberg 143). The destruction of *tatanka* was also another ebbing of *mana* for the Indians.

The destruction of the Indians' main food source, the buffalo, helped bring the final holdouts onto the reservation. When American Indians were faced with starvation or surrender, some surrendered and settled on the reservations in exchange for promises of fresh meat. Others, such as my tribe, the Lakota, held out as long as possible by hunting small game and deer, and when even these became scarce because of the white settlers overrunning the Indians' traditional hunting grounds, they resorted to eating dogs, which continued even after settling on the reservations since promised meat was many times scarcer than the buffalo. *Sunka wahumpi* (Lakota for dog soup) became a part of our heritage. Thus, Erdrich's use of the "white puppy" symbolizes the American Indian's struggle to survive.

The color of the puppy is also important because as a "white" puppy, he is believed to be the tenderest. The color white signifies purity or sacredness in many cultures, and, among the Lakota, a white buffalo is believed to be sacred. In Lakota tradition, White Buffalo Woman gave to humankind the sacred pipe and showed them how to use it to pray to the Great Spirit. When she came with the gift, the people were starving because no animals were to be seen on the prairie that summer. She told the people that the pipe would connect them to the earth, sky, animals, and other people. All things and people on earth were created by the Great Spirit, and the people were

responsible for caring for the earth, animals, and each other. If the people followed this admonition, the animals would return. The pipe would keep the people together until the end of time. As White Buffalo Woman left the camp, she rolled over once and turned into a black buffalo, twice and became a brown one, three times and became a red one, and finally, on the fourth turn, became a white buffalo, the most holy thing a man could see (Crowl 15).

So in this story the white puppy replaces the white buffalo as a sacred animal, and the younger generation may be the ones to save the people if they will return to the traditional ways, which is a popular message on reservations today. Indian leaders remind their people that alcoholism, spousal abuse, and child abuse are not traditional tribal values; instead cooperation and working for the people are core values.

In Erdrich's funny, but tragic, story of the white puppy, she shows how far Indians had fallen, from nations covering the United States from coast to coast to a people living on the scraps of society in pockets of poverty called reservations. The white puppy, instead of being sacred, must disguise itself with dirt and try not to be noticed because otherwise it will be eaten.

Historically, many whites dealing with Indians have felt that the "savages" should be thankful for the good being bestowed upon them and be humble to the superior white man. The goal of many Indian programs and their administrators, such as the Indian agents, was to completely dominate and demoralize the Indian. DeWitt Clinton Poole was an Indian agent among the Sioux in South Dakota from 1869 to 1870, and he accompanied a delegation with Chief Red Cloud and Chief Spotted Tail to Washington, D.C. in 1870 to meet the President and other dignitaries. The Secretary of the Interior

told the chiefs to "tell us what is in your own hearts, all you feel, and what your condition is, so that we have a perfect understanding, that we may make a peace that shall last forever" (Poole 171). Red Cloud proceeded to ask for rations and ammunition to kill game; he also asked that his family be telegraphed to let them know that he arrived safely. These would seem like small requests of one leader to another, but Poole characterizes the exchange by writing: "This chief is a typical representative of his race, who are often egotistical, arrogant, and abounding in self-esteem (Poole 179). Poole is also affronted that these "savages" were not appropriately in awe of the wealth surrounding them in the marble and treasures of the Capitol. He observes that "their uncultivated minds passed it by without study or thought. Nevertheless, these same savages were the leaders of a people, who, stirred by the magic of their rude eloquence and personal prowess, could put a fighting force into the field" (Poole 173-174). These chiefs were leaders of Indian nations and should have been treated as such, but many corrupt Indian agents simply wanted to debase them and steal their money.

Another aspect of Erdrich's story deals with the young, who are always the hope of the future. The granddaughter in the story saves the puppy from becoming soup, as she takes the puppy from her grandmother's hands. Hopefully, puppy soup is a symbol of my grandmother and mother's time; few in my generation ate *shunka wahumpi* ("dog soup" in Lakota). I heard my aunts and uncles talk about *shunka wahumpi* being served at a church function. My Uncle Howard always played with the dog that hung around the church, and that day, my aunts said, they were not aware that they were served *shunka wahumpi* until Howard found the dog's skull in his soup. Of course, they laugh and grimace while telling this tale. I am sure that the dog in the soup was the one Howard

played with, but I am also aware that they add the skull part for dramatic effect, which it always has had on me. This story shows the helplessness and impotence of my mother's generation. When events happened that they could not control or find protection from, they used humor to cover up the pain and feelings of vulnerability. They were a generation who were taken from their parents at an early age to attend boarding school, with no one but themselves to protect or comfort them from childhood bogeymen and scraped knees. As my generation, the children of the boarding school generation, began to attend college and become politically aware, we supplanted the BIA programs with tribal programs run by Indians and regained more and more autonomy for the tribes.

On a personal note as an Indian reader, I relate to the white puppy story because I have childhood experiences with puppy soup. When I was a child, we had a neighbor, Lizzie, who owned a huge pack of dogs, which followed her everywhere. Once in awhile we would hear from her yard a dog or puppy yelping, and my aunt would say that Lizzie was making *shunka wahumpi*. Afraid that she would set her sights on my dog, I would promptly find Poncho and hide him in the house. I know my aunt was not teasing about the puppy soup because everyone knew Lizzie made puppy soup. I would block out what she was doing, much as I blocked out many of the more psychologically damaging incidents I endured growing up on the reservation.

IV. SATRICAL HUMOR TO SURVIVE HARSH REALITIES

Another humorous story involving dogs in *The Antelope Wife* is told in the tradition of Shakespearean comic relief in the midst of disaster. In fact, the joke is told in the middle of a story with no seeming connection to the story. The tale is a typical reservation joke that many Indians share in a display of self-deprecation. The comic story is introduced during the dream of a tormented white man who is being haunted by the ghost of an American Indian grandmother he killed while participating in the massacre of an American Indian village. The joke begins with a canine rabies outbreak in Minnesota. Three dog catchers are hired to catch stray dogs. One dog catcher is Norwegian, the second is Swedish, and the third is an Indian. Each possesses his own truck but travels as a squad. They spend all morning catching dogs until they finally decide to break for lunch. They chain the back of the trucks but forget to lock the doors. Wiggling and pushing, some of the dogs manage to wedge open the doors and slip out.

When the dogcatchers return, the Norwegian and Swede notice that all their dogs are missing, but the dogs in the Indian dogcatcher's truck are still in the back of the truck. The Swede and the Norwegian ask the Indian why his dogs have not escaped. The Indian replies, "Oh, mine are Indian dogs. Wherever they are, that's their rez. Every time one of them tries to sneak off, they pull him back" (*The Antelope Wife* 224).

I laugh when I read the joke because regretfully it typifies the situation on reservations. Leaving the reservation was probably one of the hardest feats I have ever accomplished, not physically but psychologically. The lack of moral support to leave and attend college is sometimes overwhelming, and many of those who leave to better themselves end up returning. Some Indians, unable themselves to leave the reservation,

disparage those who attempt to leave and better themselves. Fear of venturing into unknown territory—both physically and psychologically—prevents some from leaving the reservation. A cousin mocked me for thinking that I could experience a better life by leaving for college. He informed me that I would find out that every place was the same as the reservation. I feared that he might be right, but once I went to college out of state, I realized that he was wrong.

As American Indians, we have developed a satirical humor to deal with the injustice of our situation. Lulu Lamartine in *Love Medicine* succinctly and humorously explains some of the American Indian animosity toward the Government and all Government programs. Lulu remarks on the Government's motives, "I never let the United States census in my door, even though they say it's good for Indians. Well, quote me. I say that every time they counted us they knew the precise number to get rid of" (221). Much of Indian humor is based upon truth.

Once at a Pow Wow, my Aunt Margy said, "They were trying to take a picture of a group of dancers, but every time the photographer said, 'Cheese,' the Indians started to line up." This joke refers to the fact that the Government continues to pay us for a continent with cheese and other commodities that the Government buys from farmers who overproduce. One has to laugh at the absurdity of receiving cheese in exchange for a continent, no matter how good the cheese is. This anecdote is humorous while making a social commentary on Government injustice.

Erdrich's poem "Rez Litany" mockingly lists the injustices the Government has heaped upon the Indian:

Let us now pray to those beatified

within the Holy Colonial church

beginning with Saint Assimilus,

patron of residential and of government

boarding schools, whose skin was dark

but who miraculously bled white milk

for all to drink.

To cure the gut aches that resulted

as ninety percent of Native children are

lactose intolerant, let us now pray to the

patron saint of the Indian Health Service,

who is also guardian of slot machines,

Our Lady of Luck, she who carries

in one hand mistaken blood tests and botched

surgeries and in the other hand the heart

of a courageous doctor squeezed dry. . . .

and nurses, whose tasks are manifold and made more difficult

by the twin saints of commodity food,

Saint Bloatinus and Saint Cholestrus,

who were martyred at the stake of body fat

and who preside now in heaven

at the gates of the Grand Casino Buffet.

Saint Macaronia and Saint Diabeta, hear our prayer.

. . .

Good Saint Pyromane,

Enemy of the BIA,

Deliver us from those who seek to bury us

in files and triplicate documents and directives.

Saint Quantum, Martyr of Blood

and Holy Protector of the Tribal Rolls,

assist us in the final shredding which shall proceed . . .

Saint Odium of the hundred-proof blood

and Saint Tremens of the great pagan spiders

dripping from the light fixtures.

You powerful triumvirate, intercede for us

drunks stalled in the bars,

float our asses off the cracked stools

and over to the tribal college . . . (Erdrich *Original Fire* 123-124)

Erdrich bitingly mocks the Catholic Church, the Government's ill-conceived assimilation efforts, boarding schools, unhealthful food commodities, poorly staffed Indian Health Service, the incompetent BIA, ridiculous quantum regulations for Indian status, and the destructive effects of alcohol. One of Erdrich's characters, Nanapush, a wise Indian elder, reiterates the list of grievances: "Smallpox ravaged us quick, tuberculosis killed us slow, liquor made us stupid, religion meddled with our souls, but the bureaucrats did the worst and finally bored us to death" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 75-76). Erdrich's insightful and incisive analysis of the issues Indians confront is expressed with lyrical precision, with a sense of commonality among Indians.

V. DEER TALES

Deer, as well as buffalo, have sustained American Indians. In her poem "Jacklight," Erdrich prefaces it with a quotation from R.W. Dunning, a sociologist: "The same Chippewa word is used both for flirting and hunting game, while another Chippewa word connotes both using force in intercourse and also killing a bear with one's bare hands (Erdrich *Original Fire* 3). This idea of the hunter and hunted as a metaphor between a married couple in an abusive relationship is played out in *Love Medicine.* June Morrissey Kashpaw, Gordie Kashpaw's ex-wife, left Gordie because he physically abused her. June has been dead a month when Gordie has guilt-ridden drunken run in with June's ghost. Gordie takes his first drink since his ex-wife June died a month ago. Gordie still loves June, but he also realizes that her leaving him years ago was probably directly attributable to his physical abuse of her. Now that she is dead, he drinks to forget his guilt over his treatment of her:

> From the beginning it was his hands that made him drink. They remembered things his mind could not—curve of hip and taut breast. . . His hands remembered things he forced his mind away from—how they flew out from his sides in rage so sudden that he could not control the force and the speed of their striking. He'd been a boxer in the Golden Gloves. But what his hands remembered now were the times they struck June" (*Love Medicine* 172-73).

He begins drinking at June's adopted father Eli's house. Eli attempts to feed him and sober him up, but Gordie walks home and calls a friend to bring him liquor. After several days of bingeing, Gordie calls out to June that he loves her. Remembering that his

grandmother told him never to call out to the dead, Gordie now becomes nervous. He locks all the doors and windows, and then he begins turning on all the lights and appliances so that the noise will drown out the silence. He is turning on his shaver in the bathroom when he glances up to see June's pale face with a bloody mouth at the bathroom window. As he runs to the kitchen, he hears the window breaking. "He stood in the humming light of the refrigerator, believing the cold radiance would protect him. Nothing could stop her though. There was nothing he could do, and then he did the wrong thing. He plugged the toaster into the wall" (*Love Medicine* 178). As he plugs in the toaster, all the lights go out in the house. June comes through the window after him; Gordie must escape. He grabs the car keys to his Malibu, starts the car, and races into the night over a gravel road.

In his inebriated state, he has to drive with one eye closed, so he does not see double. He swerves several times, almost missing turns, which causes him to hit a deer. He stops and gets out of the car to inspect the deer. Thinking that someone might give him a bottle of booze for the deer, he loads it into the car. Because he is missing the key to the trunk, he must awkwardly stuff the deer into the back seat. He continues driving into town, but he does not know that the deer is only stunned. When the deer wakes up and makes eye contact with him through the rearview mirror, he reaches under the front seat, retrieves a crowbar, and proceeds to hit the deer between the eyes. In his drunken state, he thinks that the deer, which he has just killed, is June. He must get rid of the evidence.

He ends up stopping at a Catholic convent where an insomniac nun is up in the middle of night playing her clarinet. Frightened out of her wits when she hears him at the

door, she finally figures out that he is drunk. When she asks him what he wants, he begins bawling that he killed June and needs to confess to the priest. Unable to convince Gordie that she will wake the priest, she finally gives up and listens to his confession. She finally has to stop him because the image of a woman beaten to death overcomes her. Gordie leads her to the car. As she peers into the back seat, expecting to see a dead woman, she is more stunned to see a deer. She breaks down crying from the shock of the situation. The nun attempts to explain that he is mistaken about killing a woman, but by this point, he hysterically runs weeping into an orchard. Even after the tribal police arrive, they can hear him wailing in the woods.

The images of the drunken Gordie stuffing a deer in the back seat of his car, the deer's head popping up in the back seat, and the deer locking eyes with Gordie in the rearview mirror paint a hilarious montage of comedy. Of course, Gordie again resorts to physical abuse on the deer, just as he did years ago with June. Gordie has not really changed in his abusive nature. Gordie's delusion that the deer is June is merely retribution on the drunken Gordie for his sins against June. Perhaps if Gordie had not beaten her, they would still be together and she would still be alive. Or he would be in prison for killing her during one of the beatings. What if, what if, what if. Too many American Indians live with the regret of what if because of domestic abuse.

The symbol of June as a deer demonstrates the hunted and vulnerable position of women in domestic abuse situations. Alcoholism goes hand in hand with domestic abuse on the reservation. People who are the gentlest, kindest spouses can transform into abusive monsters when drinking. Until recently, American Indian women had no refuge from domestic abuse. My grandmother used to flee to the buttes with her daughters in

tow when her husband and his friends began drinking. My grandfather was a loving, teasing husband and father when he was sober, but drunk, he would beat his wife. As I thumb through pictures, I see my grandfather smiling, but I only see my grandmother with her arms folded over chest and a grim expression. Too many of the women in my family wore frightened or nervous expressions when men's drunken voices rose in anger. I cannot begin, nor do I want to, enumerate all the women I know on the reservation who have suffered physical and emotional abuse from drunken spouses or boyfriends. A non-Indian friend Peggy, the wife of one of my teachers, related a phone call from a mutual acquaintance Gina. Gina had called her and asked her to stay on the phone with her because her drunken boyfriend would not beat her if she was on the phone. Peggy was appalled, but I have to confess that I was not surprised. Today among the Sicangu Lakota (my tribe), the White Buffalo Calf Woman Society has worked diligently to rescue and empower women to reject abusive relationships and provide group counseling to Indian men in order to break the cycle of abuse. American Indians are reminded in ads in the local paper, floats in parades during Pow Wows, and posters in tribal offices and around the reservation that alcohol is not an Indian tradition. American Indians are encouraged to reject the white man's temptations and return to the old tribal traditions that once produced a strong, healthy people. I am greatly amused as I read Gordie's story, but I understand on a personal level the widespread repercussions of the white plague of alcohol.

VI. THE BANE OF FIREWATER

In *Four Souls,* Fleur Pillager, a Trickster, uses alcohol to set up her trap to regain her Indian allotment land back from the swindling white men who stole it. Again, Erdrich uses the serious topic of firewater, which has consumed so many minds and lives. Erdrich also examines the importance of land to the Indian and the thievery of the white man in stealing the land twice, once when they placed Indians on reservations and again when they bought up allocated Indian land on the reservation. They purchased "excess" reservation land after plots of land were delegated to individual Indians, and then they swindled these allotment sections from Indians, sometimes by loopholes in the law and sometimes through marriage.

Even though Indians did not believe that it was possible to own the land, they had an inter-relationship with the land. The land provided all that the people needed for survival--water, game, and shelter. What land they could retain took on greater significance as the white man took more and more from the Indians. Without the land, Indians were no longer able to provide for their families and nurture their spiritual connection with the land. For example, ceremonies were performed after buffalo hunts to celebrate the bounty received through the land from the Great Spirit. Young men went on vision quests to sacred areas to communicate with the natural world and animals in quest for their warrior name. These types of ceremonies bonded the people together, bonded them with the Great Spirit, and bonded them with nature and all living creatures. Without the land, Indians began to lose their sense of community and of their spiritual roots.

Today, many Indian tribes, impatient for the return of land that the courts have deemed rightfully theirs, are paradoxically buying back their tribal lands. The Indian General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Allotment Act, split up the land on reservations and allotted 160 acres to each Indian. This act was sponsored by Henry Dawes, a regular attendee of the Lake Mohonk conferences. This legislation was another attempt to assimilate the Indians into white society by supplanting the concept of communal sharing with capitalistic private ownership. This act was devastating to Indian ownership of land because it was amended to allow any surplus land remaining after the allotment to the Indians to be put up for public sale. By 1932 whites had acquired two-thirds of the 138,000,000 acres the Indians had held in 1887 ("Dawes General Allotment Act"). Again, help for the Indian meant more harm. Erdrich's character Nanapush, a Trickster, explains:

> Attempting to keep what was left of our land was like walking through a landscape of webs. With a flare of ink down in the capital city, rights were taken and given. . . We acquired an Allotment Agent to make it easier for us to sell our land to white people. Then we got a Farmer in Charge to help us chop our trees down, our shelter, and cut the earth up, our mother. Land dwindled until there wasn't enough to call a hunting territory. . . We were going to have to plant seeds the rest of our lives, and yet we'd only just grown used to the idea that we owned land—something that could not possibly belong to any human. (Erdrich *Four Souls* 79)

The white man became a better Trickster than Indians could ever make up in their stories.

But recently, Indian tribes have resorted to litigation in seeking the return of land promised to them in treaties with the United States Government. The Sioux prevailed in the Supreme Court case, United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians, 448 U.S. 371 (1980), which stated that the Government must pay the Sioux over 17 million dollars for the land that was illegally taken ("United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians). The Black Hills was illegally taken in 1877 because gold was discovered in it. Because *Paha Sapa* ("Black Hills" in Lakota) is considered sacred by the Lakota, the Sioux nation will not accept money for it; they want it returned to them because this land is the Lakota's traditional hunting grounds and was used for religious ceremonies as well; one would not consider selling his or her own mother, so Indians have a sacred duty to protect the land. United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians states:

> Under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the United States pledged that the Great Sioux Reservation, including the Black Hills, would be "set apart for the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation" of the Sioux Nation (Sioux), and that no treaty for the cession of any part of the reservation would be valid as against the Sioux unless executed and signed by at least three-fourths of the adult male Sioux population. ("United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians")

Many Indian tribes, not just the Sioux, were swindled out of land reserved to them by treaty. Indians were placed in the absurd position of being forced to sign treaties that allowed them to keep *some* of their land and then being swindled out of most of that land.

When I was in high school in the 1960s, a running joke involved asking to borrow money from a friend and telling them that you would pay them back when you received

your Black Hills money, which meant "never." The tribes may have settled for a monetary settlement, but by the time the case was finally settled in 1980, the Lakota tribes had gained more tribal autonomy and more confidence in fighting the U. S. Government in the legal arena. Now the Lakota tribes refuse to sell their land for thirty pieces of silver. Nanapush, Erdrich's Trickster, explains the Indian's viewpoint: "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier" (*Tracks* 33). I wear a Black Hills gold ring to remind me that the Black Hills belong to us. We have waited over a hundred years for the return of our land, so we can wait as long as it takes the white man to hear his conscience.

Instead of idly waiting for the white man's integrity to emerge, Indian tribes have resorted to purchasing back lost tribal lands. The Associated Press reported that from 1998 to 2007, Indian tribes have put more than 840,000 acres into trust ("Native American Tribes" 1). Emily White Hat, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, said that the struggle to acquire and protect the land is about the "preservation of our culture, our way of life and our traditions. All of it is connected. With your land, you have that relationship to the culture" ("Native American Tribes" 1). Rodney Bordeaux, President of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, states the obvious--tribes should not have to buy back land that was illegally taken ("Native American Tribes" 10). However, tribes realize that they must beat the white man at his own game, which is what Fleur Pillager does in *Four Souls*.

Fleur realizes that the land and the Indian identity are interconnected and based upon the sacred duty to protect the land. Fleur's name, French for "flower," is deceiving

because Fleur possesses *mana*, that archeology term which refers to great spiritual power or force. Fleur's *mana* comes through several generations of Pillagers, especially her grandmother, whose name is Four Souls. Four Souls is a strong name embodying the concept of more than one life in a person. The Pillagers, of the bear clan, refused to smoke the peace pipe with the U.S. Government or part with their land. The bear represents strength, and their resistance to the white man is further proof of their power. Their land around Matchimanito Lake has great sanctity and power. When Fleur's family dies from consumption, Fleur becomes the keeper of the family land and power.

In the winter of 1912, Fleur is one of the last in her family to survive a tuberculosis epidemic. In *Tracks,* Nanapush rescues Fleur, who is discovered with a burning fever in a house with her dead family. After recovering, Fleur's obsession becomes protecting the land from the Government and greedy whites. Fleur uses her power to thwart a Government agent who demands payment of fees on her allotment land. Her reputation as a strong medicine woman begins when the Government agent becomes lost in the woods in his attempt to find Fleur. Nanapush reports the jealousy and fear of people as Fleur exerts her power: "You know how old chickens scratch and gabble. That's how the tales started, all the gossip, the wondering, all the things people said without knowing and then believed, since they heard it with their own ears, from their own lips, each word" (Erdrich *Tracks* 9). "[T]hey heard it with their own ears from their own lips" points out the cyclical nature of gossip. People fear Fleur but cannot totally pinpoint the cause.

Fleur's *mana* is further revealed by her power to cause two men, who save her from drowning, to take her place with death. One disappears, and one is run over by his

surveyor's cart. "By saving Fleur Pillage, those two had lost themselves" (Erdrich *Tracks 10).* Another man, who simply bends over her when she is washed ashore after drowning, hears her hiss at him: "You take my place" (*Tracks* 11). After this experience, he avoids large bodies of water, only to drown in his new tin bathtub. People want to run Fleur off the reservation but fear her *mana.*

Luckily, she leaves on her own for Argus, North Dakota, where she displays her ability to use her *mana* with cards, a game of chance. In the evenings, she begins playing poker with her white, male co-workers. She lures the men into thinking that she is a poor poker player. Fleur's "power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth . . . [and] comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted . . . with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards" (*Tracks* 31). She appears to be inept at bluffing, but proves the men's gullibility when she successfully bluffs on the last hand to win the pot. Enraged at being beaten by a woman and an Indian no less, they rape her. Fleur uses her *mana* to extract revenge in epic proportions when a huge tornado sweeps through the town right after the rape, and all three men become locked in a meat freezer. Several days later the locker is found and opened; the townspeople discover the men frozen in the act of playing a game of cards. The message is clear that Fleur will exact retribution on those who wrong her.

Fleur's next target of revenge involves John James Mauser, who swindled her and other Indians out of their land. She becomes a servant in his household to gain access to kill him. In an ironic twist, Mauser is incapacitated with debilitating muscle spasms; therefore, Fleur feels compelled to restore Mauser to a healthy state so that he will be a worthy opponent. In the process of healing Mauser, Fleur also snares his heart: "Men

made brainless fools out of themselves in pursuit. They adored her and feared her in equal measure . . . as Mauser did now" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 72). She enmeshes Mauser in her web, but she also traps herself: "She had come to kill and humiliate and take back her land, which he had stolen so carelessly that he wasn't aware of it, but then Mauser made himself her dog anyway and wanted her in such an absence of self that she put aside her knife" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 73). She withholds her sexual favors until he signs over the land he swindled; then she marries him. As his legal wife she will inherit all his property, once she figures out how to kill him.

Mauser dazzles Fleur by introducing her to new places, new foods, and new luxuries until Fleur waits too long to dispatch him and becomes pregnant. "Once she carried the child, Fleur was caught and she knew it, for although she was enduring, strong, bold, and remarkable, she had a weakness" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 75). Her weakness is regretfully an all too common weakness among Indians—alcohol: "the liquor sneaked up and grabbed her, got into her mind and talked to her, fooled her into thinking she was thinking for herself when really it was the whiskey thinking whiskey thoughts" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 75). Fleur plays a convoluted game of revenge, only to be caught in her own web. Erdrich masterfully employs irony to demonstrate the pitfalls for Indians in attempting to resort to one of the white Man's favorite weapons--duplicity. Even Fleur's calloused heart is no match for the white Man's pitiable state and fire water.

Any Indian living on the reservation can relate to this of tale of ruin caused by the use of alcohol. My birth mother died in her early fifties from cirrhosis of the liver from drinking her life away. I am extremely lucky not to be a fetal alcohol syndrome baby, probably due to the fact that Indians were not allowed in bars at the time of my birth. My

Aunt Margie worked serving drinks at a bar, but she was not allowed in the bar when she was off duty. She and another Indian waitress would sneak drinks in the kitchen. My birth mother first started denying her Indian blood so that she could get into bars; she was fair enough to pass for white. Sometimes Indians will throw away their pride and identity for alcohol; it is an insidious scourge among Indians.

Whereas my birth mother would drink every day but still maintain the ability to work as a nurse, one of my favorite uncles would drink until he was totally inebriated whenever he started to drink. He would work at jobs for months without a drink, but periodically, he felt the need to go on drinking binges and would end up passed out on Main Street. I can remember driving up Main Street with my aunt on a Sunday morning looking for my uncle, who would be lying on the sidewalk, sleeping off a drunken binge.

Even with his drinking problem, I loved him dearly, and luckily, I only saw him drunk once when I was a teenager. I was enraged at seeing him stumbling and falling; I know he was hurt and confused by my tirade about his drunken state. I now realize that I was angry not at him personally but at how the alcohol was destroying his life. Also, I remember at the age of ten going with my cousin Rose to drag her mother out of a bar and stumbling home with her mother between us. Not only were we as children exposed to people drinking, but we would beg sips of beer and wine from our parents when they were drinking, which they would give us. As an adult, I swore that my own children would never be exposed to drunks. I have kept that promise.

Although not raised around alcohol, my children are still acutely aware of the alcoholism rampant in my family. They have also picked up my wry "Indian" sense of humor that sometimes expresses my disapproval, but in a teasing manner. While visiting

relatives on the reservation, I overheard my twelve-year-old son talking to his cousins. Standing by a dog house with empty beer cans all around it, my son asked his cousin, "So how long has your dog been drinking?" I laughed at the comment but with an underlying sadness at what alcohol has wrought among my people. Erdrich's Mauser explains, "The stuff is poison to them. It's their downfall. They'd have beaten us back and kept their lands if it wasn't for the liquor. They can't help it. One taste, one teaspoon of it, and they're utterly doomed" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 128). Indians still struggle against the effects of alcoholism, but today tribes are actively strengthening their people with help and alternatives. Tribes have returned to Handsome Lake's words: "Whiskey is a great and monstrous evil and has reared a high mound of bones. So now all must say, 'I will use it nevermore'" (*Through Indian Eyes* 151). Many reservations have outlawed the consumption and sale of alcohol on the reservation, and tribes are developing programs to combat addictions.

So it is not surprising that alcohol, the Indian's nemesis, plays a major role in Fleur's downfall in her plot to destroy Mauser for stealing Indian land. After the alcohol consumes her life, she loses interest in Mauser, her life, and even her child. She is roused out of her stupor when she discovers that Mauser has lost all his money and even the land he stole from her. Mauser is planning to leave the country to escape his debtors and wants her to join him, but she is driven to return to the reservation in search of her land again. The thought of losing the land returns her to her original mission of protecting the land from the white man.

She arrives at the reservation in her white suit in her white car, the white symbolizing her return to purity in her quest to regain her land, her original goal. Erdrich

emphasizes, "Fleur was dressed in the same white suit she'd worn when she first appeared on the reservation. The fabric was unmarred. The suit's lines were the same, stiff and elegant" (Erdrich *Four Souls* 186). Fleur's suit remains as unbending and unrelenting as her new resolve to take back the one thing that remains immutable: land. She returns to the role of the avenger out to regain her land. Regretfully, Mauser defaulted on the tax payments on her former land, just as she did, so she visits the tribal land office every day to find out who now owns the title. Jewett Parker Tatro bought the land from the state; as a white, he should not have been able to purchase Indian land, but there was a Government loophole that year, which permitted Tatro to buy it. Tatro is a former Indian agent (white men who supervised the Indian agencies on the reservation) and the owner of a local bar, the Wild Goose, both despicable occupations to an Indian.

Fleur, who was tricked by Mauser and her weakness for alcohol, transforms into the trickster as she confronts Tatro. Fleur's power lies in her ability to use Tatro's prejudices against him. First, to set the trap, she frequents the Wild Goose every night to play cards. Fleur's son tags along with his mother but stares into space, unaware of his surroundings. Tatro sometimes joins in the card game. Tatro notices that Fleur does not win any large pots and loses several hands to him. Second, after days of luring Tatro into a feeling of complacency, Fleur calls out for a double whiskey in the middle of a game, playing on Tatro's assumption that all Indians' minds become clouded quickly with alcohol. She loses hand after hand, all the while calling for more whiskey. Displaying her further lack of control, she even stumbles into someone's lap. Finally, she has nothing left to bet but her car, and she maneuvers Tatro into betting the land that was originally hers. At this point, she further plays on Tatro's assumption about her son that

he is an idiot since he simply sits beside her, staring into space. She hands her cards to her son to play. Even though he appears to be simple, he has Fleur's *mana* for cards. The bet was the best of six out of ten; the boy wins the first six games. As the ultimate Trickster, Fleur cons the white thief out of his ill-gotten gains and redeems herself with this last play in regaining her land. Her *mana* is still strong.

VII. BEHIND EVERY GREAT MAN IS A WOMAN OR TWO

Because many women, including those in the plains tribes, have lived in male-dominated societies, they have developed subversive tactics to achieve their goals. In *Love Medicine* Marie Kashpaw is the moving force in her marriage. Nector Kashpaw never has a chance against her greater *mana*, created from a cunning developed through survival instincts. Marie's mother Pauline Puyat wants to abort her, but Bernadette Morrissey prevents her and takes Marie when Pauline abandons the baby to join a convent. Bernadette dies of consumption, and Sophie Lazarre and her husband raise Marie. Sophie and her husband are drunks, so Marie grows up as a "dirty Lazarre." Marie is raised in the backwoods and only comes to town for church and to attend the Sacred Heart Convent school. In a typical Erdrich plot twist, Sister Leopolda, who makes it her mission to drive the devil out of Marie, is actually her birth mother. In fact, Sister Leopolda believes that the Devil is stalking Marie. Sister Leopolda says, "You don't know it, but [the Devil] has come around here sulking . . . [H]e's going to make a last ditch try to get you back. Don't let him. We'll be a long time getting rid of him" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 47). Sister Leopolda attacks Marie to save her soul and proceeds to pour scalding water on Marie's back to exorcize the Devil. Marie retaliates by trying to kick her into the oven, but Sister Leopolda comes back at Marie, stabbing her in the hand with a bread fork and knocking her out with a poker. Marie wakes up to find several sisters at her bedside; Sister Leopolda has told them that the holes in Marie's hand are a miraculous stigmata, wounds like Christ's that appear on saints' hands. The nuns dress her wounds with pillow cases. Marie's ability to survive the many attempts to destroy her means that her *mana* is strong.

As Marie runs from the convent with a bandaged hand and head, she literally runs into Nector carrying two geese that his brother and he shot. Nector sees the SHC (Sacred Heart Convent) on the pillow case dressing on Marie's hand and assumes the worst since Marie's family is made up of drunks and ne'er do wells. Because Marie is "the youngest daughter of a family of horse-thieving drunks," Nector assumes that she too is a thief (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 58). He feels obligated to stop Marie and retrieve the Church's property. They struggle, and Nector ends up on top of Marie. As his hormones kick in and he becomes aroused, he takes Marie on the side of the road, but he is horrified after the sexual act. Even though Nector was planning to propose to his girlfriend Lulu Nanapush when he encounters Marie, he feels obligated to marry Marie instead. He blames Marie for tricking him.

Symbolically, Nector is carrying two geese when he and Marie run into each other, and geese mate for life. He does remain married to Marie for life, but he also maintains an illicit affair with Lulu, even having a child by her. Marie's hold on his mind is never released, but Lulu always retains his heart. Even into old age, when Nector, Marie, and Lulu end up in the same nursing home, Nector, who is senile, still tries to make love to Lulu in the laundry room.

After years of his affair with Lulu and jealousy burning him up as she marries man after man, Nector decides to follow his heart. Marie's hold on him is too strong; he can never quite break free. Nector is torn between his responsibilities to his wife and family, and his passion for Lulu. Finally, after years of marriage and many children, Nector writes a letter telling Marie that he has been carrying on an affair with Lulu for

years and that now he is leaving Marie for her. He leaves the note under the sugar jar on the table.

He arrives at Lulu's house, only to find her gone. He has also written a letter to Lulu, in which he asks her to marry him. Waiting for Lulu, he becomes frustrated and begins thinking about Marie's sadness when she reads her letter; he crumples up the letter to Lulu and throws it down. He is chain smoking because he begins to doubt his decision, which is how the accident happens. He throws away a still-lit cigarette that lands on the crumpled letter; ironically, the burning letter causes a fire that burns down Lulu's house, symbolizing the destruction of their love. Nector thinks, "I feel the heat rise up my legs and collect, burning for Lulu, but burning her out of me" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 110). "Burning," used in describing Nector's lust, is also used paradoxically for his cleansing from lust with the real fire. Not only is the burning house a sign for what he should do, much like the burning bush, but he turns to "see Marie standing in the bush . . . She stands tall, straight and stern as an angel" (110). He believes that he sees the fourteen-year-old Marie standing, watching him, but in fact, it is his daughter Zelda who has come in search of him. He reacts, "I go down on my knees, a man of rags and tinder. I am ready to be burned in the fire, too, but she reaches down and lifts me up" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 110). Nector's vision of Marie decides his fate. When Nector first encountered Marie, he accused her of seducing him, "You made me! You forced me!" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 62). Again it appears that Marie decides his fate, but actually, it is Nector who gives up his autonomy to her both times.

As a final twist to Nector's story, Marie has found Nector's letter, read it, and is in the process of deciding her next move. Her emotions swing from anger, to thoughts of

violence against Nector and Lulu, to resignation that "He's a man!" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 125). She also contemplates suicide, but finally resorts to peeling potatoes and waxing her floor. These mundane chores symbolize Marie's constant daily care and nurturing of the family while Nector leaves her to cavort with his mistress. Again, the decision as to their remaining together is in Marie's hands, not Nector's. She finally decides that she loves Nector and will keep him. Marie is always in charge of their relationship because she possesses the greater *mana.*

Marie decides to return the letter under the sugar can where she found it but then reconsiders. When she hears him returning, Marie narrates, "I folded the letter up, exactly as it had been found, and I put it beneath the salt can. . . I would never talk about this letter but instead let him wonder. Sometimes he'd look at me, I'd smile, and he'd think to himself: salt or sugar? But he would never be sure" (*Love Medicine* 129). She retains the control in their relationship. When he begins to cross the room to Marie, she sees him hesitate in indecision. Marie continues, "I put my hand through what scared him. I held it out there for him. And when he took it with all the strength of his arms, I pulled him in" (*Love Medicine* 129). Marie pulls him through life because he does not truly want to control his life. Nector never quite has the bravery to act on his desires.

Nector's lack of decisiveness can be traced back to his boarding school days because he lost part of himself long ago when he was taken from his home to the boarding school; someone else took control of his life and he never regained it. Erdrich contrasts Nector and his twin brother Eli to demonstrate one of the effects of the boarding school experience. Nector's mother gave up Nector to the boarding school while she hid Eli, his twin brother, from the Government agents. Eli grows up in the native culture,

hunting and fishing on the tribal land. Eli remains connected to his people and culture while Nector floats in indecision throughout his life, never really finding himself or his place in the white or Indian world, even though he appears successful because he serves as the tribal chairman and provides a house and comforts for his family. Erdrich's story of Nector is replete with irony but also demonstrates the cost to Indian children taken from their parents to live most of their young lives in boarding schools. Again Indians face a conundrum in the issue of their identity.

In my family, my Uncle Homer remembered one year when he was attending boarding school that his parents could not pick him up after school dismissed for the summer; he went home with one of his cousins and did not see his parents all summer because the distances were too long when a horse and wagon was the only mode of transportation. Uncle Homer did not see his parents for almost two full years, and he was around ten or eleven years old. His older brother Howard would run away from the boarding school on a regular basis, only to be returned and beaten. But he was persistent, and his parents finally let him stay home. None of my eight aunts and uncles except my uncle Homer graduated from high school; he went on to graduate from college and became a lieutenant colonel and pilot during World War II. Uncle Homer was a war hero, worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, encouraged his child and his nieces and nephews to go to college, and visited us on the reservation every year. I think he found a way to deal with the loss of close family ties as a child by forging close relationships with his brothers, sisters, and their families as an adult.

I remember looking forward to his visit every year. In high school, the highlight of my summer was visiting him and Aunt Esther. He encouraged me to attend college

and helped me obtain educational grants from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Only years later, when he was in his seventies, did I persuade him to talk about his youth and experiences in the boarding schools. He spoke about feeling disconnected from his mother, father, brothers, and sisters because he did not spend much time at home. He was taken to the boarding school at six, only came home in the summer, and went to college in the fall after he graduated from high school. In fact, the superintendent of his boarding school came to his home a week after college classes started and told Homer he was accepted at college if he wanted to go. Homer stuffed all his clothes in a bag, and the superintendent drove him to college. After college, he went into the Army at the start of World War II; he was stationed in California when his commander asked for volunteers to learn to fly planes. He said it had to be better than marching and carrying a gun, so he volunteered. He became a pilot and flew missions over Germany and Poland.

He reminds me of Nector in his disconnection from the traditional culture. Even though both attempt to maintain their roots, they are constantly pulled into the mainstream culture. I don't believe that my uncle ever regretted his choice; in fact, he felt gratitude for the opportunities that ultimately allowed him to travel and live in middle-class comfort. In the past, when one was an American Indian, sometimes one had to choose to leave the reservation in order to achieve material success and a certain amount of guilt and loss accompanied that decision. Today, with tribal colleges on the reservation and more opportunities, many Indians can stay and achieve a middle-class lifestyle while retaining their cultural and family connections, which is psychologically healthier than leaving to enter an unknown, possibly hostile, environment. The issue of

family and tribal connections and identity are a legacy of the European invasion that Indians may finally be coming to terms with.

VIII. WHO AM I?

American Indians traditionally lived in structured tribal units with strong family connections. Each person knew his or her place within the family and the tribe; each contributed to the greater good of the tribe. Family genealogy was passed from one generation to the next by the elders. Whether the system was matriarchal as with some Southwestern and Southeastern tribes or patriarchal as with the Plains tribes, children knew their parentage and lineage. When the French and Scottish trappers moved into the plains areas, they began intermarrying with Indian women. The resulting half-bloods married quarter-bloods, who married three-quarters until the mixed-bloods came to be called half-breeds, but in reality their Indian blood quantum became more and more mathematically intricate.

After the Plains tribes were moved to reservations, the Indian agents began taking censuses, assigning first names or letting Indians choose their first names, and translating their Indian names into English and using them as last names. Now instead of orally handing down family lineages, American Indians' heritage became the tribal roll sheets of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These tribal roll sheets developed into holy script on who was Indian and how much each member received of the promised payments from the Government. They were used to determine who received 160 acres under the Dawes Allotment Act. They were consulted to determine the quantity of commodities each family received each month, which is the case even today. Since tribes no longer could practice their traditions and ceremonies, the elderly no longer kept the record of the lineages. Indians were forced to rely on Government records, which became more and more convoluted as parents died and land was passed to all the children, sometimes by

several wives and non-wives, and grandchildren when children had died before the parent. In the traditional societies, all children born to a tribal member would be part of the tribe, no matter what their Indian blood level; some tribes, such as the Lakota, would adopt captives into their tribes, after which no distinction would be made between the adopted child or adult and one born to a tribal member. The white man's way changed that system forever, and today, blood quantum is everything.

In my Sicangu tribe, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe (the name given my band when they were placed on the Rosebud Reservation and the one they have decided to keep for historical purposes), allows anyone with one-quarter Sicangu blood to be enrolled while some tribes allow anyone with one-eight American Indian blood to be enrolled in their tribe. The tribes receive money from the Federal government partly based on tribal membership, so some tribes have expanded their membership by allowing those with a lower blood quantum level to be registered while other tribes jealously restrict membership in their tribes. The Federal government recognizes anyone with one-fourth blood quantum level of American Indian blood for purposes of educational grants and other funding. My grandfather was one-half blood quantum (his father was one-half and his mother was one-half), and my grandmother was three-quarters (her father was half and her mother was full-blood), so my mother was five-eighths, and I am registered as three-eighths (actually that should be five-sixteenths, but it is rounded up). Because I am over a quarter, I am enrolled in the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, I received Federal grants to attend college, I am allowed free medical and dental care (as long as I live on a reservation), I am able to receive commodities if I live on an Indian reservation, I am under Federal and tribal jurisdiction while on tribal land, and I can (and do) own tribal

land. But my friend Mary is one-eighth Sicangu so that she is not eligible for any of the above. We used to joke in high school that I should give her one-eighth of my blood quantum, so she would have help paying for her college education. So while my entire undergraduate education plus expenses was paid for, Mary earned money and took out student loans to attend college. If I am speeding on tribal land, a State trooper can stop me, but he must contact a Tribal officer to write me a ticket or arrest me. If I commit a crime against another American Indian on a reservation, the FBI has jurisdiction over the investigation, and the case is tried in Federal Court. Adoption of Indian children is regulated by Tribal law and courts; some tribes have interceded in the adoption of Indian children with as low a blood quantum level as one-sixty-fourth. These are some simplified basic ownership, jurisdiction, and monetary problems that arise with all the complications inherent in the blood quantum question and the question "Who is Indian?"

Even among Indians, prejudices arise. Growing up on the reservation, I carried a certain disdain for "urban Indians." Then there were full-bloods who held me in contempt as a mixed-blood and as fair skinned. At one college I attended, the Navajos, who fluently speak their native language, would ridicule the many Plains Indian students who did not speak their native tongue. Finally, in the 1960s, many Indians began to realize that these feuds within and between tribes weakened our political power instead of strengthening it. The pan-Indian movement tried to unite diverse tribes in a common cause for more tribal empowerment. Today, tribes continue to work together on the common goal of more Tribal control to strengthen Tribal values and create a better tomorrow for the next generation while they also retain an awareness that each tribe has a unique and separate culture and identity.

I chronicle this background on the components of Indian identity to lead into the next topic that Erdrich tackles in many of her books, which is the confusion that many Indians feel about who they are. Some of the Indian characters in her novels are born out of wedlock and raised by other members of the family; these characters come to a point in their lives where they want to know who sired them and where they belong in the family structure, which helps them in their tribal identity. Also, because of the importance of the quantum blood identity of being an Indian, they feel a need to know exactly who their parents are. For many tribes, eligibility in tribal enrollment is based on Government records of blood relatives. American Indian children adopted out to non-Indians off the reservation in the 1960s are returning to the reservations in search of relatives; Indians whose parents moved off the reservations return for summer vacations to connect with relatives; some raised off the reservation return as adults to live on the reservation; some, whose parents never took them to visit relatives, return in search of connections; some return to reconnect and help others. Erdrich's novels address the issue of the American Indian's search for identity.

Lipsha Morrissey is one such Indian in search of an identity. Lipsha Morrissey is raised by his "grandmother" Marie Kashpaw (Nector's wife of the salt can). Marie calls herself his grandmother because she took in his mother June Morrissey, who is the daughter of Lucille Lazarre, Marie's adoptive sister. June is also Gordie's dead wife who comes back to haunt him. Accounts in several different novels give different versions of how June abandoned her son Lipsha. One account has June trying to drown Lipsha and Marie saving him, which is the story Marie tells him as a child. Another account

describes how June realizes that she cannot be a fit mother, so she hands him over to Marie.

June has her own issues due to traumatic events in her childhood. She is abused by an alcoholic mother and raped by her mother's boyfriend. At various times June is found freezing in an outhouse, in a ditch, and on some church convent steps. A nine-year-old June is with her mother in the woods when her mother dies. June survives on pine sap and grass until her drunken father finds her and takes her to Marie. No one can be surprised that June has problems bonding with other people. I wish that I could say that this scenario is exaggerated, but regretfully, it is similar to stories in my own family and among people I know on the reservation.

Although Lipsha finishes high school and scores high on college entrance exams, he does not attend college; instead, he goes to the city in search of his father. Before he can begin his future, he is compelled to discover his past, where he comes from. His Grandmother Lulu (Nector's mistress) has already told him that his father is Gerry Nanapush, who is in prison. Lipsha meets him after he escapes prison and establishes a connection with his father as he drives him to the Canadian border. He cannot resist asking his father about June and if his father loved her. Gerry reminisces:

> In love with her like everybody else. I know she burned out young. I heard that. But I always keep seeing her the way she was at the time of my first incarceration . . . Long legged . . . Always with a nice, a really nice laugh, but she was a shy one. So far away sometimes you couldn't touch her. (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 268-69)

Lipsha gains not only a connection with his father but with his mother through these intimate details. Lipsha only dimly remembers seeing her as a child, so as his father relates small details about how she liked order and would always straighten up the motel rooms they lived in and about her beautiful fingers, Lipsha finally gains an insight into who she was. Lipsha compares her to the river they are crossing: "If it made any sense at all, she was part of the great loneliness being carried up the driving current. I tell you, there was good in what she did for me . . . The thought of June grabbed my heart so, but I was lucky she turned me over to Grandma Kashpaw" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 272). Lipsha realizes that June, with her myriad problems, was not a person who wanted to destroy him, but someone who cared enough to give him to a person who could love him.

Lipsha also gains a connection with his father. Gerry acknowledges his son when he talks about a heart defect that kept him out of the army: "It [his heart] goes something like *ti-rum-ti-ti* instead of *ta-dum* . . . You're a Nanapush man. We all have this odd thing with our hearts" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 270-71). Lipsha feels a newness about himself: "To be a son of a father was like that. In that night I felt expansion, as if the world was branching out in shoots and growing faster than the eye could see" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 271). Lipsha and his father "held each other's arms, tight and manly" when they part at the border (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 271). Lipsha begins his journey to find himself with this resolution of who his parents are and why they gave him up.

To complete his journey, he will return to his home, the reservation. No matter how far Indians travel from the reservation, or how much their lifestyle changes, they are still drawn back. Lipsha relates the feeling: "I have this sudden knowledge that no matter what I do with my life, no matter how far away I go, or change, or grow and gain, I will

never get away from here" (*The Bingo Palace* 21). You can take the Indian off the reservation, but you can never destroy the connection with the reservation. Lipsha leaves the reservation, only to return.

When he returns, Lipsha is smitten with Shawnee Ray Toose. But a problem arises because she is the mother of Lyman Lamartine's son and the woman Lyman wants to marry. Lipsha tries to clarify his relationship to Lyman: "His real father was my stepfather. His mother is my grandmother. His half brother is my father" (Erdrich *The Bingo Palace* 16). Lipsha continues to explain the Indian's complicated identity: "But us Indians, we're so used to inner plot twists that we just laugh. We're born heavier, but scales don't weigh us. From day one, we're loaded down. History, personal politics, tangled bloodlines. We're too preoccupied with setting things right around us to get rich" (17). Even though Lipsha now understands why his mother gave him to Grandma Kashpaw, he still has to work out his relationships with his extended family and find his place in the family and the tribe.

Lipsha is stymied in making his own career and marriage choices until he establishes his own feeling of family and connectedness. Lipsha is smart enough to attend college but passes up the opportunity in order to connect with his father and return to the reservation to reconnect with his family and tribe. This dilemma drives many Indians to pass up opportunities in higher education and careers until they can gain a sense of identity. I spent so much of my life resolving my personal quest to understand my place in the world that I gave up financial and career opportunities. The existential question of my identity just overwhelmed all other questions in my mind. I took numerous college courses in philosophy, psychology, and American Indian studies, and I

questioned family members extensively on family genealogy and family stories; I combed tribal and BIA records, and I read history and American Indian political books, all in search of gaining a sense of resolution to my identity. I contacted siblings that I knew existed from family stories but had never met because they grew up with other relatives. Not surprisingly, they had similar questions and doubts.

For Lipsha, his great-grandmother Fleur holds some of the answers he is seeking. This is the same Fleur of the bear clan, who has power to cause others to take her place with death, and who can manipulate the cards. Lipsha goes to his great-grandmother Fleur for a love medicine to gain Shawnee's love, but she gives him much more. Subliminally, what he is searching for is love medicine that will put the last piece in the puzzle that is Lipsha. He simply says, "I need a love medicine" (*The Bingo Palace* 136). Fleur turns into a bear and whispers her thoughts to him, but he explains that "the important ones have entered my understanding from the inside" (*The Bingo Palace* 151). The answer always lies within him; he only needs to be reminded by others to tap into this power. In his dream, he sees Fleur when she was young and hears her telling him her bear thoughts; she says, "*Admit your love . . . take it in although it tears you up* (*The Bingo Palace* 151). Lipsha does not yet understand that this message has more to do with Lipsha's love for himself and his parents than about the love of a girl.

Therefore, he goes to Shawnee to admit his love by asking her to marry him, but she rejects him by saying, "You talk so big about your feelings and you can't even make it back to school" (*The Bingo Palace* 188). She realizes that he is putting his life on hold because of unresolved issues in his life while she is focused on going to college and improving her financial situation. She does not have time to deal with Lipsha or Lyman

and their petty rivalry. She kicks both men out of her life. Both, especially Lipsha, need to find themselves before they can love anyone else.

Rejected and dejected, Lipsha and Lyman decide to embark on vision quests. Actually Lyman talks a reluctant Lipsha into joining him. As he begins his quest, Lipsha is overcome with a great sadness. When Lyman asks him what is wrong, Lipsha says, "I miss my mother" (*The Bingo Palace* 194). Awareness of the reason June abandoned him does not negate the sorrow of the loss. Also, his awareness of who his birth parents are causes a feeling of missing out on knowing their extended family members. He has relationships with some of his Grandmother Marie's children and grandchildren, but the white world has intruded to remind him that these are not his direct relatives; no longer does the tribal custom of adopting children as equal to birth children apply in the white world. The white culture creates doubts and insecurities about tribal and family identities by disregarding the age-old tribal structures in place to protect and nurture the children.

After days of fasting and wandering in the wilderness alone, a vision finally appears to Lipsha in the form of a skunk, who tells him, "*This ain't real estate*" just before she sprays him (*The Bingo Palace* 200). This message reminds Lipsha of what his great-grandmother Fleur fought so hard to preserve and what is enduring—the land. American Indian identity is always tied to the land—this continent is the only land we have known and owned and had stolen from us. The skunk is also a female, tying Lipsha to his great-grandmother, who is a strong woman, and to his mother since the skunk will now be his guide and nurturer in life. The spraying adds permanence to the message, lest he forget easily. Also, the spraying can represent the baptism of Lipsha into his new identity and the skunk marking Lipsha as one of her own.

When Lipsha returns to the group after his vision, the others roar in laughter at his spraying by a skunk. A skunk may seem like a weak animal to have as one's protector and source of power, but although the skunk is small, it does engender the power to ward off other much larger animals. In fact, one of clans of the Creek Indians in the Southeast is the Skunk Clan. Indians understand that power is not always blatant, but can be subtle and effective. Lipsha may seem disconnected and powerless when he returns to the reservation because he lacks a sense of purpose, but, like the skunk, he retains a hidden power, which he is finally learning to use sparingly and wisely. Through the skunk's message, Lipsha begins to comprehend that his destiny is tied up with the land.

This connection to the land is why the Lakota refuse to accept money for the Black Hills, why tribes are buying back tribal land, and why tribes restrict non-Indians from owning allotment land that has been passed down in Indian families. I receive a check for $15 every year or so when the lease revenues in my tribal account build up to an amount worth cutting a check for. My mother would receive a check for a dollar plus change each year for the lease revenues on a small percentage of allotment land from her father, mother, grandparents, and great-grandparents. The amount of land I own is miniscule and on two reservations, but it connects me to my people.

A few days after his vision quest, the skunk returns to Lipsha in a dream to repeat her message and adds, "Luck don't stick when you sell it" (Erdrich *The Bingo Palace* 220). This advice is critical to Lipsha in finding his identity because he has inherited *mana* or luck from his great-grandmother Fleur Pillager, and he is using his luck to win money at bingo, which he and Lyman will use to open a casino by Matchimanito Lake, the traditional land of his great-grandmother Fleur. He inherits his luck at games of

chance from Fleur; his is in bingo, hers is in cards. But unlike Fleur, he is not comfortable in his skin because he does not realize who he is or what his responsibility to the tribe and land is.

Lipsha is feeling productive in winning at bingo and putting the money into a joint account with Lyman for the casino. He is using his *mana* for selfish reasons, not for the people or to protect the land. Luckily, Lyman is even more selfish than Lipsha, and Lipsha notices that their joint bank account balance is zero. This turns Lipsha away from the casino plan; instead of confronting Lyman, Lipsha simply quits playing. Slowly he is coming to the realization that money is not where his *mana* should be directed.

At the same time that he quits the casino scheme, he has a dream where he sees his father Gerry in prison, working in the laundry room. The dream alerts him that his father will escape again. He waits patiently for his father to contact him. Sure enough, Gerry's *mana* comes through when the plane transporting him to another prison crashes, allowing him to escape. With pride and awe, Lipsha describes his father: "he dissolves his shackles. He's not made of human stuff. Rain melts him. Snow turns him to clay. The sun revives him. He's a Chippewa" (Erdrich *The Bingo Palace* 220). Then Lipsha reminds the reader that, on the other hand, Gerry always ends up getting caught and sent back to prison.

His father calls him and tells him where to find him, yet he relays the message in "the old-time language," which Lipsha has trouble deciphering (Erdrich *The Bingo Palace* 233). Lipsha ends up checking three different locations in Fargo and running down the battery on the get-away van by leaving on the lights. Lipsha finally locates his father. It is the middle of winter and nighttime, and they have no transportation because

Lipsha ran the battery down in the van. Lipsha and his father resort to stealing an idling car, only to find a baby in the backseat.

As they race through the night in a stolen car, a snow storm rages around them, and their combined luck finally brings them behind a snowplow. As long as they follow the snow plow, they should arrive safely at the next town. Suddenly a blue car appears beside them, and they both recognize June (dead at this time) in the driver's seat of her car, stolen previously. They call it June's car, not because she owned it but because it was bought with the insurance money from her death. Ironically, June seems to accomplish more and own more in death than she did in life. She veers her car off the highway into the snow-covered fields, much as she walked over the snow-covered fields years ago to be found frozen the next day. Gerry is irresistibly drawn to her as Lipsha explains, "He wants her so hard that the desire takes me over too and I can't catch him back because I'm caught up in the anxious necessity" (Erdrich *The Bingo Palace* 257). Lipsha wants his mother as much as Gerry wants his woman. June's car stops, and Gerry jumps out of the stolen car to join her. Lipsha wants to join his parents, except the crying baby in the backsea

Unlike his parents, Lipsha takes responsibility for a helpless child, who Lipsha declares will not be abandoned as he was. Lipsha is not like his parents, who abandoned him. He comes into his own identity with the realization that when called upon to consider the well-being of a vulnerable baby over his, he will. His ability to act for the good of the group and not only for himself fulfills his vision quest to find his identity. He has earned his manhood as all warriors did on their vision quests by acting in bravery, which sometimes requires the ability to act for others over self.

He spends the rest of the night with the heater running and the baby, close to his heart, zipped up in his jacket. In this second abandonment by his parents, he understands his power in defining himself. The reader also discovers at the end of *The Bingo Palace* that Fleur completes the cycle of elder protecting and giving to the next generation by voluntarily giving her life for Lipsha's: "she went thinking of the boy out there. Annoyed, she took his place" (Erdrich *The Bingo Palace* 272). In her usual unsentimental way, Fleur grudgingly protects her great-grandchild and through him the land. It is from his great-grandmother that Lipsha inherits his *mana* and his courage to act for the survival of the "people," a term which Indians use to identify the tribe. She travels to the Matchimanito Lake, where in the past she sent others to take her place with death, to meet her ancestors.

Tales of Burning Love explains that Jack Mauser, the baby's father, rescues the baby and Lipsha. Ironically, Jack is the son of Fleur, or in other words, Lipsha's uncle, and the baby is his cousin. Never realizing it until he gains the ability to love by giving of himself for others, Lipsha is surrounded by relatives who are protecting him. Lipsha learns that his great-grandmother Fleur was giving him love medicine when she told him to admit his love because he needed to learn to accept himself with all his human frailties. Only then can he admit his love for his parents so that he can finally forgive them and move on with his life. With the help of the community, Lipsha has found his place and purpose in ensuring the survival of the tribe.

IX. CONCLUSION

Erdrich says it best at the end of her novel *Four Souls*: "Change is chaos and pain. There was no order in our making. This reservation came about in a time of desperation, and upon it we will see things occur more desperate yet" (210). She also refers to the weaknesses in the oral storytelling tradition, which was almost defeated by the United States Government separating the children from their elders and thus from their stories, history, and culture: "Once we were a people who left no tracks. Now we are different. I have left my own tracks, too. I have left behind these words" (*Four Souls* 210). American Indians have survived the onslaught of a culture ruled by Manifest Destiny; however, their stories and culture stealthily burrowed away in the shadows, whispering from one generation to another until the time when American Indian writing is not only allowed but welcomed by the dominant culture.

An old Apache oral prophecy relates the Indian's wish for the dominant culture's understanding of the nature of the Indian or at the very least, a realization of the Indian's right to equal consideration. This prophecy speaks of the end of the earth because no rain falls, all water on the earth dries up, and only three dammed up places of water will be left. The last of the people will kill each other over the water. "When the new world comes after that, the white people will be Indians and the Indians will be white people" (Nabokov 470). Finally, American Indians will have their wish fulfilled that whites will gain true insight into the American Indian experience upon this continent.

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