

**The Figure of the Mixedblood in Louise  
Erdrich's Love Medicine**

**شخصية مختلط الدم في رواية دواء الحب - لويس إيردرج**

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**Abstract**

Native American people were encouraged by the U. S. government to leave the reservations during the 1950s and 1960s, as if the constant violation of treaty rights, compulsory attendance at boarding schools, and the near extinction of these people were not enough. Such historical, social, and cultural contexts influenced the themes and forms of works by American Indian writers who encouraged individuals to reject any sense of shame of their culture. In addition, their actions coincided with a return of the people to their traditions after the disappointment, mental illness, and loss of meaning of life resulted from the impact of the mainstream American society. Among these writers, Louise Erdrich (1954- ), a mixed-blood woman, became among the most celebrated authors. The trail blazed by N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko was followed by Erdrich in her writing as she shares the same interest in presenting characters who are trapped between Native traditions and white mainstream expectations.

Erdrich introduces many characters who struggle to have a voice, but they resolve their conflict by rejecting the sacrificial role assigned to mixed-blood figures, especially that of the nineteenth century. The mixed-blood figures in Love Medicine are to be seen as a source of power, something to be celebrated rather than mourned.

This paper is a part of an M.A. thesis entitled "The Cultural Crisis of Mixed-blood Figures in Indian-American Fiction: A Study of Selected Novels By N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise

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Erdrich” prepared at the University of Al-Qadisiya, College of Education, Department of English.

**Keywords: Mixed-blood, Indian American, Multiculturalism, stereotype, victim, Colonialism.**

### **1. Introduction:**

Fiction by Native North American writers has developed increasingly with both general readers and academics since N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1969. Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor (1934), and James Welch (1940-2003) are linked with the first wave of writers of the Native American Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> Emphasis on traditional perspectives and ways of life is also reflected in the works of the second wave, which includes Simon Ortiz (1941), Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008), Louise Erdrich, and others. Erdrich is a registered member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewas whose most notable novel *Love Medicine*, like many works from the Native American Renaissance, fuses the tradition of the Euro-American novel with the folktales, myths, and oral traditions of her Ojibway ancestors. Among the themes depicted in the novel are the clash with modernity, the effects of U.S. government policy on natives, and the clash of cultures that occurs as some characters struggle to maintain their identity. The change and diminution of spiritual life is also charted with tremendous pathos, and Erdrich introduces another special representation of native American life in the twentieth century, obviously advancing the tradition that emerges with Momaday and Silko.<sup>2</sup>

Erdrich constructs characters who arise from two traditions: the Chippewas culture of their ancestors and the Western traditions of the Catholic missionaries whose purpose was to civilize the tribe. The collision of worlds explored in the novel leads to a cultural tension on the part of many characters who experience confusion as well as spiritual and psychological ill health. These characters, including mixed-blood men and women, face a difficult task as they attempt to reconcile their Native American heritage with the expectations of the dominant white culture in the modern and postmodern United States.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, in contrast to the “myth of the vanishing American” and its ideology intended to justify the genocidal policies toward Native peoples, Erdrich, like Momaday and Silko, presents novels which centre around the empowerment and survival of these people through their

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cultures and traditions. Moreover, in John Carlos Rowe's view, writers like Erdrich aims to "write back to reaffirm the different cultures of Pueblo, Ojibway, Lakota, and other native peoples in the face of their continuing exclusion by the dominant American ideology."<sup>4</sup>

However, while *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn* are postsecular in one sense, they reflect less patience with respect to the modern, secular ways of being. Indeed, *Momaday* and *Silko* make powerful dramatic arguments for the inclusion of mixed blood individuals in tribal communities. The case for intertribal sharing and the inclusion of mixed bloods are made within the circle of Native American life, a case that suggests less interest in imagining a postsecular attitude that would blend Western secular and Native American sacred habits of being on the terrain of technological and cultural postmodernity.<sup>5</sup>

Erdrich's semisecularized characters who most bear a resemblance to Abel and Tayo keep coming and going between nominally Native American and emphatically Euro-American zones right to the end. However, Erdrich insists that these characters are empowered and improved by their experiments.<sup>6</sup> As Karla Sanders suggests,

Love Medicine presents characters searching for a healthy balance between seemingly diametrically opposed cultures. This search for a healthy balance is evinced in the characters' belief systems, in their relationships with each other, and within their own sense of personal identity. Marie Kashpaw, June Kashpaw, Lulu Lamartine, Nector Kashpaw, and Lipsha Morrissey contend with their personal identities and beliefs, others' perceptions and expectations, and their place in their families and community. Love Medicine depicts characters whose searches lead them to discard obsolete identities as they journey towards a sense of subjectivity and self-knowledge; this journey becomes a process of healing.<sup>7</sup>

### **2. Louise Erdrich: Life and Career:**

Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota in 1954 as the eldest of seven children. Although both of her parents taught at Wahpeton Indian Boarding school, only her mother was a French Ojibwe (Chippewa), a Native American woman. Her father was of German-American origin. Raised among the Turtle Mountain Chippewa People, a community rich in storytelling traditions, she became influenced in both

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her choice of a career and in her sense of narrative. Among the influence was her grandfather, a tribal leader with a special gift for storytelling and a determination to preserve the Native culture.<sup>8</sup>

The multilingual and multinational heritage of Erdrich influenced her life. Her novels, *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), mirror the ambivalence and tension that mark the lives of people from dual cultural backgrounds. As Katherine Rainwater remarks, "Erdrich's novels feature Native Americans, mixed bloods, and other culturally and socially displaced characters whose marginal status is simultaneously an advantage and disadvantage, a source of power and powerlessness."<sup>9</sup>

Family stories of life during the hard times of the 1930s, told by her grandfather Patrick Gourneau, had a strong impression on Erdrich, and the settings of both *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen* are acknowledged to have a lot of depression. While she was in high school, Erdrich read poetry and continued to write and record her observations and experiences in a series of journals. In 1972, she entered Dartmouth College among the first female students admitted to the college. Moreover, it was during that year that Dartmouth established its Native American Studies department. There, she met her future husband, anthropologist Michael Dorris, who was hired as a chairman to the college's new Native American Studies Program.<sup>10</sup> Her work at Dartmouth was the beginning of exploring her Native American heritage. She and Dorris collaborated on a children's story which was published in an Indian magazine. Later, she was encouraged to poetry writing and one of her poems won the 1975 American Academy of Poets Prize.<sup>11</sup>

Erdrich's first major publication was a collection of poems entitled *Jacklight* (1984). She had also began writing the stories that later became *Tracks*, one of which she published under the title "Fleur."<sup>12</sup> In 1976, after graduating from Dartmouth, she returned to North Dakota to conduct poetry workshops and then moved to Boston to edit the Boston Indian Council's newspaper, the *Circle*. She also worked various jobs as a beet weeder, lifeguard, psychiatric aide, construction worker, and others. These jobs provided her with experiences and materials she uses in her fiction writing.<sup>13</sup> Through working at these jobs, especially for the Boston Indian Council, Erdrich gained an understanding of and compassion for people of mixed blood. As she says in an interview,

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There were lots of people with mixed blood, lots of people who had their own confusions. I realized that this was part of my life – it wasn't something that I was making up – and that it was something I wanted to write about. I wanted to tell it because it was something that should be told. I was forced to write about it.<sup>14</sup>

Motivated to focus on her writing, Erdrich enrolled in a creative writing program at Johns Hopkins University. After receiving her master's degree in 1979, she returned to Dartmouth College, hired as a writer-in-residence. She and Dorris got married in 1981, beginning a period of collaboration and influencing each other. In 1982 Erdrich received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. "The World's Greatest Fisherman," a story collaboratively composed with Dorris, won the Nelson Algren Fiction competition. This story became the first chapter of Erdrich's best-known novel *Love Medicine*.<sup>15</sup>

In 1985 Erdrich won the O. Henry Prize for *Saint Marie*, a story that appears as the second chapter of *Love Medicine*. Erdrich's novel, which garnered the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, spans 50 years and illustrates the struggles of a dispossessed people grappling with the modern "white and half-breed" world. It was the first of Erdrich's four-volume saga about several interrelated Indian families living on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota from the early 1900s until the present. Many of the novel's characters reappear, to a greater or lesser degree, in the saga's three other novels: *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace*.<sup>16</sup>

In *Baptism of Desire* (1989), her next collection of poetry, Louise Erdrich examines the intersections of her Chippewa traditions, Roman Catholic religion, and human sexuality. The work takes its title from an obscure tenet of the Catholic Church. The book itself concerns spirituality and the hybrid form of religion, with Roman Catholic and Native values mingling but also conflicting, that Erdrich grew up practicing.<sup>17</sup> Two years later, Erdrich and Dorris together wrote *The Crown of Columbus*, the only novel upon which both of their names appear. This work is in part historical fiction and in part a mystery-adventure and a tale of romance. The plot raises important questions about the meaning of Columbus's voyage for Europeans and Native Americans today. As Lorena L. Stookey suggests, the work reflects that Columbus's gift to the New World serves as an emblem of the suffering

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of Native American peoples after contact with the Christians of Europe.<sup>18</sup>

In 1995 Erdrich published a memoir, *The Blue Jay's Dance*, a work that offers readers a glimpse of her life as both mother and writer during the busy years of the 1980s and early 1990s. However, the decade of the 1990s witnessed a tragedy within the Erdrich-Dorris household. Their oldest child, Abel, was struck and killed by a car in 1991. Abel suffered from the mental and physical disabilities characteristic of severe instances of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Under the pressure of these conditions, Erdrich and Dorris separated in 1996, and in the following year Dorris committed suicide.<sup>19</sup>

In 1998, after Dorris's death, Erdrich published *The Antelope Wife*, a novel dedicated to Erdrich's five children. This work contained a prefatory note in which Erdrich states that her novel was written before her husband's death and that he is now remembered with love by his family. Yet, the novel's suicide and its account of two failing marriages suggest possible autobiographical elements. This work introduces a new set of characters, members of the Ojibwa now living in Minneapolis. The Nanapushes, Kashpaws, and other families from the North Dakota novels are back in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), a work that returns to the harsh early years of the reservation.<sup>20</sup>

After 2000, Erdrich continued writing effectively and setting her stories mostly in North Dakota and the Chippewa landscape for which she is most famous. Other novels written by Erdrich include *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), *Four Souls* (2004), and *The Painted Drum* (2005). Her most recent novel, *The Plague of Doves* (2008), portrays a murder mystery set in the rural countryside of North Dakota in 1911 and its effect on future generations. In addition to her fiction, Erdrich has written four children's books: *Grandmother's Pigeon* (1996), *The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Range Eternal* (2002), and *The Game of Silence* (2005). She has also written another nonfiction work, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003).<sup>21</sup>

### **3. *Love Medicine*: An Indian-American Version of Postmodern Fiction:**

While planning to go back to the abode she left years ago, June Kashpaw, the central character in the novel, lingers, at the Easter weekend of 1981, for a little time with a blue-collar white man she meets in a bar. After they make love, she resumes her plan to home but a

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snowstorm kills her en route. June appears again in the novel like a disturbing ghost haunting the members of her big family.

June's family, including her sister, Zelda, Zelda's daughter, Albertine Johnson, the narrator of this sequence; her cousin Lipsha; and June's son King and his white wife, Lynette, perform commemoration ceremonies for her. Suddenly, King, feeling estranged from the reservation, which was once his home, pours his anger on his wife attempting to kill her. The violence results in smashing the pies the women had baked for the occasion.

Flashing back forty-seven years, specifically in 1934, the novel tells the story of the family matriarch, Marie Lazarre. Attempting to be a nun during youth, Marie meets Nector Kashpaw; a meeting which fatefully changes both their lives. Nector has gone back to the reservation to marry his first love, Lulu Nanapush, but he could not help forgetting Marie. Although he ultimately marries Marie, Nector is still attracted to Lulu and ends up sharing his life with both women.

As for Lulu, she marries Henry Lamartine who later dies. Then, her dealings with several different men result in eight sons. In an episode set in 1957, Beverly Lamartine, the childless brother of Henry, visits Lulu to take Henry Jr. away to raise as his own. Instead, Lulu manages to seduce him and make him share life with two women as his brother Nector. This same year, Nector leaves Marie for Lulu but will later return to Marie.

The story shifts back to Albertine, who in 1973 forsakes home and settles in Fargo, North Dakota. At a motel there, she accidentally meets Henry Lamartine Jr., who is coming back from military service in the Vietnam War. Due to his troubling war experience, Henry kills himself the next year. His cousin

Lyman symbolically sinks his car into river.

Lulu's other troubled son, Gerry Nanapush, has spent much of his adult life in and out of prison. Gerry keeps breaking out of jail to be with his wife, Dot Alore, but when he kills a state trooper, he is sentenced to life in prison, and Dot is left to raise their baby daughter alone.

Returning to 1981, the novel speaks of Gordie, June's former husband, who is tormented by guilt at her demise and gets drunk. Driving home, he hits a deer and loads it into his car, thinking he can sell the meat. But the deer is only stunned and revives in the car. Believing the animal is possessed by June's spirit, Gordie beats the deer to death with a crowbar. Then he drives to the convent and confesses to a bewildered

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nun that he has murdered his wife. He runs away and later is arrested by the tribal police.

Lipsha Morrissey desires to reconcile his grandfather Nector with his grandmother Marie. He resolves to grand her “love medicine,” raw turkey heart, to feed Nector and break the spell that Lulu still holds over him. Ironically, Nector chokes on the turkey heart and dies, his ghost returning to haunt both Lipsha and Marie. Lulu, now old and nearly blind, also beholds Nector’s ghost. Marie makes her peace with her longtime enemy and takes care of Lulu after she undergoes an eye operation.

In 1984, Lipsha visits King and Lynette, hoping to learn about Gerry, his father. As they play cards, a report comes on television that Gerry has escaped from prison again. Suddenly, Gerry enters the house and accuses King of betraying him while in prison. The men play cards for King’s car, bought with the insurance money from June’s death. Lipsha wins the game. The police break in to recapture Gerry, but he escapes. Later, driving King’s car, Lipsha discovers his father hiding in the trunk. Father and son reconnect and exchange stories as they drive. Lipsha takes his father to the Canadian border and freedom and then returns home, feeling free and whole.

Love Medicine consists of sixteen chapters, each narrated in the first person; at other times, the characters speak in the third person. Seven members of the five families – the Kashpaws, Lazarres, Lamartines, Nanapushes, and Morrisseys – tell their stories throughout the novel. Sometimes, characters reflect their views about the same incidents. For example, both Nector and Marie tell about their meeting on the hill below the convent. Such technique is considered as a strength, since it enables the reader to know both sides of the story.<sup>22</sup> One of the interesting thing about the novel is that the point of view is the community voice and the means of exchanging information is gossip. Therefore, there is no narrator, no single protagonist, but rather it is the entire community dealing with the upheavals that emerge from the book.<sup>23</sup> Lipsha Morrissey, as he searches for the right ingredients for his love potion, comments, “After a while I started to remember things I’d heard gossiped over” (LM, 237). Commenting on this topic, Kathleen M. Sands writes:

The very nature of gossip is instability, with each teller limited by his or her own experience and circumstances. It is often from all the episodes, told by

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many individuals in random order, that the whole may be known – probably not to some community member but, ironically, to some outsider who has been patient enough to listen and frame the episodes into a coherent whole. In forming that integrated whole, the collector has many choices but only a single intention, to present a complete story in a stable form.<sup>24</sup>

Erdrich's use of the form of the novel lies in the tradition of William Faulkner, because she also situates multiple narrators within the mythic landscape of a regional community. However, the novel as genre is transfigured in her hands. She "specializes in a hybrid genre, fiction with the intensity and lyricism of poetry, short story sequences that transcend themselves to become novels."<sup>25</sup> In addition, as Hertha D. Wong points out, Erdrich and Faulkner not only share similarities in the usage of multiple narration, but they are also both interested in the "effects of race, miscegenation, the haunting power of the past, and the ironic intersections of the comic and the tragic." Similarly, like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *Love Medicine* opens with an event that introduces the death of a central female character, one that is essential to initiate the actions and memories of the characters and, to a great degree, unifies the narrative sequence.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, the incorporation of multiple narrators has often been read as going back to Native American storytelling, inserted into the form of the novel. This is because traditional American stories work dynamically amid clusters of loosely connected circles. The emphasis of action changes from one character to another as the story unfolds. There is no 'point of view' as the term is generally understood, unless the action itself, the story's purpose, can be termed 'point of view'.<sup>27</sup> Explaining the importance of oral tradition in her work, Erdrich states:

It is the reason so many stories are written in the first person – I hear the story told. At the same time I believe in and deeply cherish books. . . . The town library was my teacher every bit as much as sitting in the kitchen or out under the trees swapping stories or listening to older relatives. So the two are not incompatible to me. I love the voice and I love the texture of writing, the feel of the words on the page, the construction.<sup>28</sup>

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Consequently, Erdrich's novel is informed by both Native American and Western literary traditions. Both blend in the use of multiple perspectives. On the one hand, the novel reflects a postmodern approach, since using multiple narratives forces the reader to acknowledge the multiplicity of the realities around them. On the other hand, it suggests native American storytelling because structural remnants of the oral tradition are incorporated into written literature through the use of many different first-person narrators.<sup>29</sup> James Ruppert points out that the use of multiple narrators in Erdrich's novel gives the reader an opportunity to have insight into each character:

For both Native and non-Native implied readers, the stories Erdrich tells address, clarify, and define the various ways that identity exists in both cultural frameworks. As she layers these identities in the text, they become visible through the merging of epistemological codes that are used to signify psychological, social, communal, and mythic senses of identity. The mediational actions of the author serve to protect and celebrate culture by a continuing recreation of the multiple facets of identity through multiple narratives allowing negotiation to replace simple concepts of identity in either system.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, Erdrich reduces the distance between the storyteller and audience by having some of the characters directly address their audience in their performance. For example, Lipsha, at the end of *Love Medicine*, suddenly addresses the reader with the 'you', in the same way as traditional storytellers address their audience. As they are on the way to Canada, he asks his father whether or not he had killed the trooper, a crime for which he had been sent to jail for two consecutive life sentences. Lipsha says, "If I tell you he said no, you will think he was lying," and he then ends his speech with "I'm sorry but I just don't trust to write down what he answered, yes or no" (LM, 330-331). Here, the effect that Erdrich creates is one of immediacy and intimacy, making the reader a participant in the process of reading and creation of meaning.<sup>31</sup> The reader has an active role to play. He has to work with the "spiral structure" that Erdrich adopts in the novel. This structure "circles through time to reveal with each swing more information about past events that

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tie the narrative together.” Therefore, the reader must untangle events and straighten out the fishing line of lives in order to discern the patterns.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, using a circular structure to the novel establishes a sense of perfection and completeness. The reader is invited to go back and forth in time, reading, decoding, and participating actively in the marvelous disclosure of the characters’ lives. June’s death at the beginning of the novel, for example, is to be understood later on as different characters react to her death and tell stories about her love relationship with Gerry Nanapush and about their son Lipsha. The reader also discovers, only after several chapters, that the girl walking up the hill towards the Sacred Heart Convent is the same Grandma Kshpaw that adopts both June first and her son Lipsha later. In addition, she is the same Marie Lazare whom Nector Kashpaw marries.<sup>33</sup> Besides, the opening of the novel is intimately connected to the ending, a connection that is related to the identity of both characters as mixed-blood figures. In fact, the novel begins with June and ends with Lipsha, both of them going back home.<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, though Erdrich presents a novel intensely marked by the tradition of the American novel, she, as with many contemporary native American writers, has fashioned a hybrid of the traditional story and the novel. Such mix of forms demonstrates that mixed-bloodedness, literal or figural, is to be viewed as a fundamental characteristic of the contemporary native American Novel. In this way, Erdrich writes what might be called “mixed-blood narrative” since her “texts occupy, in terms of subject matter and formal qualities, the margin between purely traditional Native American modes of representation and those modes common in European American culture.”<sup>35</sup>

Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* also resembles the works produced by Momaday, Silko and others, particularly in its focus on the theme of homecoming. Yet, this theme is refashioned in the novel. For example, whereas writers such as McNickle, Momaday, Silko, and James Welch all depict the return of male characters, in Erdrich’s fiction the notion of discovering identity is shared by male and female characters.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, *Love Medicine* has little of the violence that characterize the novels written by McNickle, Momaday, and Silko. It simply presents a variety of personal relationships and the conflict of families in their search for identity. Commenting on this point of the novel, Louis Owens states that

Erdrich does not ignore the racism and brutality of Euramerica's dealings with Indian people, but for the first time in a novel by a Native American author, she makes the universality of Indian lives and tragedies easily accessible to non-Indian readers...These tangled lives are not so radically different from the common catastrophes of mainstream Americans... yet no reader can come away from *Love Medicine* without recognizing the essential Indianess of Erdrich's cast and concerns.<sup>37</sup>

#### 1.4: *Love Medicine* and the Cultural Crisis of the Mixed-blood:

Native American mixed-bloods in American fiction, mainly that of the nineteenth century, have often been characterized as an “unfortunate group of people, genetically marked as doomed, defective, and double-crossed by racial and cultural confusion.” Apparently torn between two worlds, several mixedblood protagonists move inevitably towards their deaths on the altars of “manifest destiny.”<sup>38</sup> Mixed-bloods have been linked to the idea of pollution, abandoned historically by the colonizing power. The hybrids of the union of Indians and Europeans were not considered a part of the progress of man, but a “faulty stock,” a degeneracy that portended the demise of civilization. By mid-nineteenth century, mixed-bloods were no longer regarded as the agents of civilization.<sup>39</sup>

Robert Bieder states that the prevailing notion among most Americans by the 1850s was:

If a person possessed some Indian blood, he was an Indian. Blood not only gave a person his identity but served to shape the public's expectations of his destiny . . . Not only were mixed-bloods considered ‘faulty stock,’ but they were believed to prefer Indian life and to have cast their lot with the Indian. Like the Indian, the mixed-blood was viewed as headed for extinction.<sup>40</sup>

According to William Scheick in *The Half blood: A Cultural Symbol in 19th-century American Fiction*, the sacrifice of the mixedblood character is “the simplest literary strategy for resolving the dilemma his existence poses.” This is because his status among frontier perils is precarious, because he is genetically thought to be inferior, because his relationship to the white race remains dubious. In short, the very

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existence of the mixed-blood is “enigmatically ambiguous.”<sup>41</sup> Though employed by some contemporary Native American novelists, this strategy, with its variations of voicelessness and inaction, is a final solution that Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* firmly rejects. In her novel, Erdrich is against the rigid views of oppositional dualism that have often imprisoned mixedbloods within a stereotype of condemnation.<sup>42</sup>

In the opening chapter of *Love Medicine*, entitled “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” Erdrich introduces June Kashpaw, a mixedblood woman who, while in a bar in Williston, North Dakota, drunk and hungry, is approached by a mud engineer named Andy. Despite having a bus ticket to return to the reservation, June is lulled by the warmth of the bar and the liquor. Her relationship with Andy eventually leads to an attempt at sex in his truck. However, after he passes out, she appears to have died accidentally in a snowstorm. From the first chapter of the novel, the reader may interpret June as a prostitute who is easily driven to casual sex. Moreover, he may also understand that Erdrich, by beginning the novel with the death of a mixed-blood figure, gives a nod to the fate assigned to the mixed-bloods in the literary American tradition. In addition, the author risks inscribing in June the image of the drunken Indian.<sup>43</sup>

However, right from the very beginning of the novel, Erdrich presents the untimely death of June on the eve of Easter Sunday:

The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. She was a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved. Probably it was the way she moved, easy as a young girl on slim hard legs, that caught the eye of the man who rapped at her from inside the window of the Rigger Bar. (LM, 1)

Therefore, despite June’s vulnerability, she is depicted in terms of time associated with death and rebirth. It is the morning before Easter Sunday, and as the novel progresses the symbolic associations with rebirth will play out as well.<sup>44</sup>

By introducing June as one who “kills time,” Erdrich associates her with the mythological trickster. Ironically, she attempts to “break the entropic grip of linear, Western time while it is precisely this time that is

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killing June.” Of course, June’s search for identity is not without difficulty. When she decides to go with Andy rather than return to the reservation, she thinks, “The bus ticket would stay good, maybe forever. They weren’t expecting her up home on the reservation. She didn’t even have a man there, except the one she’d divorced. Gordie” (LM, 3). In this sense, June takes the role of a permanent traveler, with no family to expect her return.<sup>45</sup>

June’s life on the reservation is also difficult. She wanders in the worlds of masculine and feminine ritual inconsistently. When she is a child, she tries to participate in masculine ritual with Eli, wearing a hat just like his. “They went into the woods with their snares and never came home empty-handed” (LM, 91). Marie Kashpaw is aware of June’s identification with Eli and traces it back to the incompetence of June’s mother, due to her neglecting the child and fostering a mistrust woman. “It was a mother she couldn’t trust after what had happened in the woods. But Eli was different” (LM, 91). June’s marriage is “on-again-off-again,” and she lets her second son, Lipsha, to be raised by Marie, watching him only from a distance. In addition, her efforts to have a successful life in the white world as beautician, clerk, secretary, and waitress fail, too.<sup>46</sup>

After the failed liaison with Andy, she begins to understand that being away from home will destroy her, “And then she knew that if she lay there any longer she would crack wide open, not in one place but in many pieces” (LM, 5). She recognized that being away from the reservation only hastens her destruction. Seeking bustling bars and slick city men is not enough to sustain her, and the fact that she is ready to die indicates that she has learned a lot from being away.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, June begins to sense her own fragility as a mixed-blood. So, she decides to free herself from the bondage of stereotyping and open the door to freedom. “She thought to pull herself back together. So she hooked an arm over her head and brought her elbow down slowly on the handle, releasing it. The door suddenly sprang wide” (LM, 5). Melissa Schoeffel suggests:

June’s unwillingness to let herself “crack open” signals her investment in maintaining a coherent, seamless, and above all individualist sense of self, and reveals her assimilation into the white culture, an assimilation that can only be overcome by death. Seen from this angle, June’s encounter with Andy can be rescripted in a way that begins to deconstruct the oppositional thinking that sees June only as the victim of white oppression

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and Andy only as the white oppressor, and does so in a way that does not devalue or dismiss the fatal influence of dominant white culture on Native American selves. Instead of June's deathblow, her encounter with Andy is her final chance at life, one that she is too worn and scared to take.<sup>48</sup>

June's fear of cracking into "many pieces" can be understood in two different ways. Taken from a Euramerican view, it may underscore her alienation, approaching schizophrenia that indicates her loss of a centered identity. On the other hand, fragmentation, in Native American mythology, does not represent a bad sign. "For the traditional culture hero, the necessary annihilation of the self that prefigures healing and wholeness and a return to the tribal community often takes the form of physical fragmentation, bodily as well as psychic deconstruction."<sup>49</sup>

Commenting on such interpretation, Mark Shackleton suggests that both readings are accepted. While it is possible to see June's psychic breakdown as real, its significance is to link the individual with the community. In other words, June's utterance, though the novel contains Christian affirmation, needs to be placed in the epistemological framework of indigenous people. Just as the literate modernists had the right to demand that readers have knowledge about Greek and Roman mythology and the literary history of the Western world, writers such as Erdrich have begun to demand readers hear a new voice, even a new life with respect to the characterization of Indian American people and mixed-blood protagonists.<sup>50</sup> E. Shelley Reid also comments on Erdrich's characterization of June as a mixed-blood. She suggests that the self-less appearance of June in the beginning of the novel invites the reader to expect a novel about the "return to the wholeness of a culturally tuned sense of self." It is just like the Native American literary tradition that has chronicled the confusion of Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*. Though death prevents June from telling her own story, she is literally going home to the reservation as she perishes in the blizzard. Her existence is evident in the voice of other characters because her self comprises all the selves of her family and tribe.<sup>51</sup> Validating this point, John Purdy suggests that:

June's return is subtly veiled, for she does not return "physically." Instead, she comes home as vivid, warm, unshakable memories for all the characters who speak to us after, or more pointedly, she comes home as a

character in the stories they tell, the oral literary canon they all share that tells them who they are in relation to others.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, by making June's death on the eve of Easter Sunday, Erdrich prepares the reader to see how the echoes of resurrection are inevitable. The resolution imbued is one of reconciliation and transcendence. This is obvious in using Easter eggs that convey a symbolic significance of June's metamorphosis and her progress toward transcendence. She is established as egg-like early in the time that she spends with the mud engineer.<sup>53</sup> As the novel declares:

He peeled an egg for her, a pink one, saying it matched her turtleneck. She told him it was no turtleneck. You call these things shells. He said he would peel that for her, too, if she wanted, then he grinned at the bartender and handed her the naked egg. (LM, 2)

Andy's peeling of Easter eggs when they meet foretells the way in which this meeting will threaten to crack June's "shell" as well. Learning that Andy is a "mud engineer" prompts a reverie about "that one she'd heard was killed by a pressurized hose. The hose had shot up into his stomach from underground" (LM, 3). June "thought she knew what it might be like" to have been that man in the "one moment of realizing you were totally empty" (LM, 3). The horror of this kind of death prompts her assertion to Andy: "You got to be different," (LM, 4) thinking that her experiment with this man will be different. Later, after the afternoon wears on, this optimism fades during her barhopping with Andy. June begins to sense her own fragility. "She was afraid to bump against anything because her skin felt hard and brittle and she knew it was possible, in this condition, to fall apart at the slightest touch" (LM, 4).<sup>54</sup>

During their sexual encounter, June begins to feel that she is exploited by Andy. The heater's control is suddenly activated by Andy's hand, as if it is "open at her shoulder like a pair of jaws, blasting heat" (LM, 5). At this moment, June experiences "the momentary and voluptuous sensation that she was lying stretched out before a great wide mouth" (LM, 5). She lies ritually prone as on sacrificial altar.<sup>55</sup> Andy clumsily wrestles with her clothing, and then as he is moaning, June ironically says "he wasn't doing anything, just moving his hips on top of her, and at last his head

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fell heavily” (LM, 5). Here, she becomes conscious “how exploited and abused she is.”<sup>56</sup>

The sexual abuse and the exploitation of Chippewa women can be traced back to the contact between the fur traders and Native Americans. The traders married often married Algonquian-speaking women and their children were labeled as mixed-blood or Metis. In addition to bringing the disastrous effect of alcoholism, most of these traders, after their service are no longer needed, returned to eastern Canada, leaving their wives and children behind.<sup>57</sup> In other words, these woman were regarded by the white man as only a pile of flesh that is good only for sex. That is, they are to be connected with a temporary lust to be left behind and forgotten. Such argument is supported later on by June’s niece, Albertine. As he concludes, “to these types an Indian woman’s nothing but an easy night” (LM, 9). Therefore, treating these people in this way suggests that, as Michael Dorris points out, that “the seeds of the problem” of “ethnocentrism” is the inability of the colonizer to see “what was there” but to see only “what he expected to see.” This is what most of Erdrich’s characters are “constantly struggling with.”<sup>58</sup>

Sensing her own fragility, June begins to change from within, and the events show a further illumination, akin to a vision, that reveals her as strong and pristine as she rests inside a stall in the Ladies’ room: “she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone. Sitting, she leaned down and rested her forehead on the top of the metal toilet-roll dispenser. She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked” (LM, 4). At this moment, the doorknob, which June carries for security, rolls out of her purse. The doorknob, an egg that is hard as stone, represents a kind of personal medicine that wards off fragility. “She put it in the deep pocket of her jacket and, holding it, walked back to the booth through the gathering crowd. Her room was locked. And she was ready for him now” (LM, 5).<sup>59</sup>

At this point of the novel, it is evident that June begins to step towards metamorphosis and transcendence. That she is a Christ figure is represented, as it is noted earlier, in the morning before Easter Sunday. This time is associated with the day after Christ’s death and the day before his resurrection. Therefore, June feels that she is entombed in Williston and decides to break out of her shell to return to the reservation. After the sexual encounter with Andy, June goes through a symbolic rebirth or resurrection in the cab of Andy.<sup>60</sup>

She felt herself slipping along the smooth plastic seat, slipping away, until she wedged the crown of her head against the driver's door. . . . June had wedged herself so tight against the door that when she sprang the latch she fell out. Into the cold. It was a shock like being born. (LM, 5-6)

After releasing the car door, June recovers her jacket, adjusts her clothing and "pulled her shell down." Thus, she begins a new journey towards reclaiming the power lost while she is under the weight of the white man. As Marvin Magalaner suggests, June plows through the drifts toward the reservation undaunted.<sup>61</sup> Immediately; therefore, June decides to go home on foot, slipping out of the car into the snowy cold. While at the beginning she could not securely reconcile her past with her present in life, she begins to walk, imagining that she is going back to her uncle Eli's "warm, man-smelling kitchen" (LM, 6). Here, June is viewed to walk with an air of certainty and confidence. Though she dies, she remains a powerful presence throughout the novel.<sup>62</sup>

Even when it started to snow she did not lose her sense of direction. Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the distance. The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course. She continued. Even when her heart clenched and skin turned cracking cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on.

The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home. (LM, 6-7)

The quotation brings to mind the ethereal mythology of returning to the Native American homeland rather than the Christian ascendancy into the realm of heaven. According to Native American beliefs, June's spirit mingles with the living. Here, Native American notions of immortality counter-balances the Christian code of death and resurrection. This issue represents only "the beginning of a rich patterns of cultural duality."<sup>63</sup>

Throughout the story of June, Erdrich surrounds her character with water imagery that appears as a dominant and recurrent symbol in the novel. *Love Medicine* opens with June crossing the snow, walking "over it like water" and closes with Lipsha Morrissey as he crosses the water after discovering his identity. In between, the novel also draws upon

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several instances of images of water to create a motif that reverberates throughout the book.<sup>64</sup>

Earlier in the novel, when June enters the bar, Erdrich introduces the event as if it “was like going under water” (LM, 2). The fact that June experiences some sort of immersion “under water” suggests that she will undertake a transcendence of her situation. The stain associated with June as a mixed-blood character must be changed and a new life shaped to take its place. “Going under water” plays as a kind of liberation for the mixed-bloods, one that prefigures the termination of the stereotypical characterization that presents nothing other than a negative view with respect to the mixed-blood figures. To put it simply, June, being a mixed-blood figure, underscores a kind of baptism that leads her to reject the image of powerlessness and loss. This argument of rebirth and baptism connected with the image of water is validated by Harry Eiss in his *Divine Madness*. Eiss argues that immersion in water indicates a return to the preformal state. This state carries a sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life-force. Moreover,

It represents death and interment, life and resurrection. .  
. . . When we plunge our head beneath water, as in a  
sepulcher, the old man becomes completely immersed  
and buried. When we leave the water, the new man  
suddenly appears.<sup>65</sup>

Consequently, June dies, but not in spirit. She offers her own way of salvation, making her death a redemptive one. Erdrich here presides over the deconstruction of the sacrificial role assigned to mixed-blood stereotype. Kenneth Lincoln supports this as he suggests that June “dies at the beginning to trigger all the stories as martyred savior.” The sentence “The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home,” in Lincoln’s view, “cadences a three-in-one heroine walking beyond her death: the crucifixion (Easter), temptation in the wilderness (her forty years), and prophesied resurrection (came home).” It is through the spirit of this “martyred-and-mythically-reborn” woman that Lipsha is able to discover his identity and self-knowledge at the end of the novel.<sup>66</sup>

Although June dies, Erdrich’s description does not include any sense of death. Evidences of magic and miracles are made through the references to Easter and walking upon water. June’s personal ability to

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survive, even under the most difficult circumstances, is seen through her family's memories. Though she appears initially as blind, she works her way through the dark water into a sinister situation, defining herself through risk, transformation, and death.<sup>67</sup>

Actually, the recuperation of June's identity is told immediately by Albertine who introduces her to the whole tribal self that comprises "an extended family that reciprocates among people, places," and history. June is indeed connected to a family and a place in their lives, and thus a clear, established identity despite the pains and doubts of her daily life. As she is woven into the stories of other characters, the reader is invited to piece the self of June.<sup>68</sup>

Further illustration that refers to June as a successful character in the book is her childhood, narrated by her Aunt and foster mother, Marie Kashpaw. June is brought to Marie half-starved after the death of her mother, Lucille. She is forced, due to the severe conditions, to live a wild life like an animal. As Marie narrates, "But then the two drunk ones told me how the girl had survived – by eating pine sap in the woods. Her mother was my sister, Lucille. She died alone with the girl out in the bush" (LM, 84).<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, June chooses her own way of death as she walks over the snow like water. She must cross a bridge to another world, one in which she is able to free herself from the manacles that have imprisoned mixed-blood characters in a world of no hope to survive. This idea is further revealed by Albertine when she rejects her mother's interpretation of June's death: "But June grew up on the plains. Even drunk she'd have known a storm was coming. She'd have known by the heaviness in the air, the smell in the clouds" (LM, 9-10).<sup>70</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Erdrich creates characters who show no resemblance to the figure of the tragic mulatto. She refuses to echo any beliefs with regard to the assumed negative consequences of miscegenation. In other words, what can be deduced from reading the novel is that the alienation and sense of loss are not to be regarded as the sole state of biological mixed-bloods. This means that they are not inborn traits of mixed-blood persons. Rather, such state is also imposed from outside, especially by the Euro-American notion of domination.

The negative stereotype is totally overturned in *Love Medicine*. Though the mixed-blood characters often experience problematic and painful way

of living, the end of their lives are not tragedies. As they reject any sense of shame, they begin to elevate their status, emerging triumphantly beyond the stereotype of the tragic mixed-blood or the figure of doom that has maimed many characters before them. Author of Love Medicine has produced a kind of fiction in which mixed-blood characters are not viewed as scapegoats moving inevitably towards their demise. In addition, they depart from associating mixed-bloods with the images of pollution, brutality and degradation common in nineteenth century American literature.

### ملخص البحث:

ان شعوب امريكا الاصليين قد شجعوا من قبل الحكومة الامريكية الى ترك اراضيهم خلال فترة الخمسينات والستينات من القرن العشرين كما لو انه لم يكفي الانتهاك المتواصل لحقوق المعاهدات التي ابرمت والحضور الالزامي للمدارس الداخلية وشبه حالة الانقراض التي حصلت لهذه المجتمعات. مثل هذه الاحداث التاريخية والاجتماعية والثقافية اثرت بشكل ملحوظ على كثير من مفاهيم واشكال الاعمال لدى الروائيين الهنود الامريكيين. فمن اهم ما قام به هؤلاء الكتاب هو تشجيع الشخصية الفردية على رفض اي شكل من اشكال الشعور بالحجل فيما يخص ثقافتهم. اضافة الى ذلك تزامنت الاعمال التي قدمها الكتاب مع عودة الكثير من هذه الشعوب الى تقاليدهم وثقافتهم بعد خيبة الامل والصراع النفسي وفقدان معنى الحياة جراء تأثير المجتمع الامريكي. من بين هؤلاء الكتاب اصبحت الروائية لويز ايردرج ، وهي امرأة من اصل مختلط الدم، من بين الكتاب الاكثر شهرة. ان الاثر الذي اطلقه الكتاب الهنود الامريكيين ان سكوت مومادي و لزلي مارمون سيلكو قد سارت عليه ايردرج في كتاباتها فهي تمتلك نفس الاهتمام الذي يعنى بعرض الشخصيات التي تصارع بين عالمي تقاليد الهنود الامريكيين وتطلعات المجتمع الامريكي الابيض.

لقد قدمت ايردرج العديد من الشخصيات التي تصارع من اجل الحصول على صوت لكن بدورها استطاعت ان تحل الصراع من خلال رفضها للدور الذي وضع

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لشخصية مختلط الدم وخاصة في القرن التاسع عشر. في رواية دواء الحب هذه الشخصيات عكست رؤية شخصية مختلط الدم كمصدر للقوة والتمجيد بدلاً للدور المساوي.

### Notes

- 1 Hertha D. Sweet Wong, ed., *Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.
- 2 Nicholas Monk, "The Native American Renaissance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of the American West*, edited by Steven Frye (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 145.
- 3 Karla Sanders, "A Healthy Balance: Religion, Identity, and Community in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," *MELUS* 23.2 (Summer 1998): 129.
- 4 John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997), xii.
- 5 John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 151.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 7 Sanders, 129-130.
- 8 Mary Loving Blanchard and Cara Falcetti, *Poets For Young Adults: Their Lives and Works* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 80.
- 9 Catherine Rainwater, "Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," in Wong, 163.
- 10 Lorena L. Stookey, *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 2-3.
- 11 Sheryl Ciccarelli and Marie Rose Napierkowski, eds., *Novels For Students*, Vol. 5 (Detroit: Gale, 1999), 210.
- 12 Abby H. P. Werlock, ed., *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story*, 2nd ed. (New York: Facts On File, 2010), 225.
- 13 Carol Kort, *A To Z of American Women Writers* (New York: Facts On File, 2007), 84.
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- 15 Kort, 84.
- 16 *Ibid.*

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- 18 Stookey, 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 20 Christopher MacGowan, *The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 187.
- 21 Bruce E. Johansen, ed., *Native Americans Today: A Biographical Dictionary* (Santa Barbara, Ca: Greenwood, 2010), 91-92.
- 22 Ciccarelli and Napierkowski, 216-217.
- 23 Chavkin and Chavkin, 22. See also Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1999), 184-185.
- 24 Kathleen M. Sands, "Love Medicine: Voices and Margins," in Wong, 37.
- 25 Stookey, 13.
- 26 Hertha D. Sweet Wong, "Love Medicine: Narrative Communities and the Short Story Cycle," in Wong, 98.
- 27 Quennet, 53.
- 28 Chavkin and Chavkin, 231.
- 29 Quennet, 54.
- 30 Ruppert, 132.
- 31 Quennet, 58.
- 32 John Lloyd Purdy, *Writing Indian, Native Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 86.
- 33 Guillermina Saravia, "Circularity in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," [https://www.google.iq/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi\\_ntO9q6zOAhXkdpoKHQV4BMcQFggiMAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fbdigital.uncu.edu.ar%2Fobjetos\\_digitales%2F2646%2Fsaraviacircularitylove.pdf&usg=AFQjCNG791I-xZqVV6zMFJs4fMQF6LsWbw&bvm=bv.129391328,d.bGs](https://www.google.iq/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi_ntO9q6zOAhXkdpoKHQV4BMcQFggiMAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fbdigital.uncu.edu.ar%2Fobjetos_digitales%2F2646%2Fsaraviacircularitylove.pdf&usg=AFQjCNG791I-xZqVV6zMFJs4fMQF6LsWbw&bvm=bv.129391328,d.bGs) (Accessed: July, 28, 2016), 250-251.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 253-254.
- 35 Berninghausen, 191.
- 36 Stookey, 14-15.
- 37 Owens, 205.

- 38 Patricia Riley, "There Is No Limit to this Dust: The Refusal of Sacrifice in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, Vol. 12, No. 2, Louise Erdrich (Summer 2000), 13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20736959>. (Accessed: 24-05-2016). Perhaps the most familiar example of the negative characterization of mixedbloods in the nineteenth century can be found in Mark Twain's portrayal of the brutal and degraded Injun Joe in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. For a discussion of Twain's portrayal see Patricia Riley, "'That Murderin' Halfbreed': The Abjection of the Mixedblood in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" in *Native North America: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*, Renee Hulan, ed. Toronto: ECW Press, 1999.
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- 40 As Qtd. in *Ibid.*
- 41 William J. Scheick, *The Half-Blood: A Cultural Symbol in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 83.
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- 43 Linda Karell, "As If The Sky Were One Gigantic memory For Us All: Louise Erdrich and Native American Authorship," in *The Shadow of the Precursor*, edited by Diana Glenn and et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 273.
- 44 Laurie Alberts, *Showing & Telling: Learn How to Show & When to Tell for Powerful & Balanced Writing* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2010), 79.
- 45 Owens, 195.
- 46 Nora Barry and Mary Prescott, "The Triumph of the Brave: *Love Medicine's* Holistic Vision," *Critique* 30.2 (Winter 1989): 130.
- 47 Michelle Pacht, "Creating Community: Motherhood and the Search for Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," in *Narratives of Community: Womens Short Story Sequences*, edited by Roxanne Harde (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 158-159.
- 48 Melissa Schoeffel, *Maternal Conditions: Reading Kingsolver, Castillo, Erdrich, and Ozeki* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 85.
- 49 Owens, 195.

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- 50 Mark Shackleton, ““June Walked over It like Water and Came Home”:  
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Press, 2007), 190-191.
- 51 Reid, 77.
- 52 John Purdy, “Building Bridges: Crossing the Waters to a Love Medicine,” in  
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Maitino and David R. Peck (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press,  
1996), 85.
- 53 Barry and Prescott, 130-131.
- 54 Schoeffel, 82.
- 55 Marvin Magalaner, “Louise Erdrich: Of Cars, Time, and the River,” in  
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102.
- 56 Khader, 99.
- 57 Maristuen-Rodakowski, 16.
- 58 Chavkin and Chavkin, 170.
- 59 Barry and Prescott, 131.
- 60 Patsy J. Daniels, *Voice of the Oppressed in the Language of the Oppressor:  
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America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 142.
- 61 Magalaner, 106.
- 62 Rosenthal, 112.
- 63 Nagel, 26.
- 64 Stookey, 17. For a detailed discussion of the image of water in *Love  
Medicine*, see Magalaner, 95-101.
- 65 Harry Eiss, *Divine Madness* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars  
Publishing, 2011), 215.
- 66 Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (New  
York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 219.
- 67 Barry and Prescott, 132.
- 68 Reid, 77-78.
- 69 Larson, 88.

70 Nagel, 26.

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