



# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

<b>Louise Erdrich 1954-</b> .....	1
<i>American novelist, short story writer, poet, memoirist, author of children's books, historian, and travel writer</i>	
<b>Abdelkebir Khatibi 1938-2009</b> .....	100
<i>Moroccan novelist, social and cultural theorist, essayist, critic, poet, and playwright</i>	
<b>Speculative Fiction in North America</b>	
<i>Introduction</i> .....	185
<i>Representative Works</i> .....	186
<i>Surveys of the Literature</i> .....	187
<i>Major Authors</i> .....	188
<i>Imagining an Alternative Female Identity</i> .....	213
<i>Speculative Fiction and Technocapitalism</i> .....	230
<i>The Debate: "Popular" Fiction or "Literary" Fiction?</i> .....	251
<i>Further Reading</i> .....	259
<b>Judith Wright 1915-2000</b> .....	260
<i>Australian poet, critic, essayist, nonfiction writer, autobiographer, biographer, editor, and author of children's books</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 345

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 465

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 487

CLC-327 Title Index 503

# Louise Erdrich

## 1954-

(Born Karen Louise Erdrich; also wrote under the pseudonyms Milou North and Heidi Louise) American novelist, short story writer, poet, memoirist, author of children's books, historian, and travel writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Erdrich's career through 2011. For additional information on Erdrich's life and writings, see *CLC*, Volumes 39, 54, 120, and 176.

### INTRODUCTION

The daughter of a German American father and a French Ojibwe mother, Erdrich is one of the most celebrated and popular writers of Native American descent. Erdrich won the National Book Critics Circle Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Award, the Sue Kaufman Prize, and the American Book Award for her debut novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), which introduces characters Erdrich has repeatedly revisited in a series of novels chronicling life in and around an Ojibwe reservation near the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota. The novels, known as the "North Dakota" or "Argus" cycle, describe the history of several inter-related Anishinaabe (also known as Ojibwe or Chippewa) families from 1912 to the present. The books portray Native characters as they mix with European immigrants and struggle with the influences of white civilization. The novels also examine questions of split identity and multiple cultural allegiances. Erdrich's North Dakota landscape has been frequently compared to William Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, for its epic evocation of place and character and circular method of storytelling which features multiple narrative perspectives and shifting chronology. The themes of home, alienation, dispossession, and cultural collision that figure prominently in the North Dakota novels are also featured in Erdrich's acclaimed children's stories about a group of Ojibwe forced by white expansionists to move westward from their island home in Lake Superior in the 1850s. Though primarily known for her fiction, Erdrich has also published poetry, much of it exploring her ancestral heritage and centering on the conflict between Native and non-Native religions and family structures. As an author associated with the

second generation of the Native American Literary Renaissance—the explosion of literature produced by indigenous authors in the wake of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning *House Made of Dawn* (1968)—Erdrich has undertaken a role for preserving the Native American history and culture and for ensuring the continuing relevance of these traditions in modern life. Erdrich won the Anisfeld-Wolf Award for contributions to the understanding of racism for her novel *The Plague of Doves* (2008), a *New York Times* bestseller that was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Erdrich is also the recipient of the Scott O'Dell Award for juvenile historical fiction for *The Game of Silence* (2005).

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The first of seven children born to Ralph Louis Erdrich and Rita Joanne Gourneau, Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, and raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where both her parents worked as teachers at a boarding school operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Erdrich graduated from a Catholic high school in 1972 and was part of the first class of women at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. At Dartmouth, Erdrich started writing poems and stories incorporating her Ojibwe heritage as related to her in stories told by her mother and grandmother. It was also at Dartmouth that Erdrich met her future husband, Michael Dorris, chair of the newly established Native American Studies Department. After graduating in 1976, Erdrich joined a writing program at Johns Hopkins University, earning a master's degree in 1979 with a collection of poems as her thesis. In 1981, Erdrich returned to Dartmouth as writer-in-residence, the same year she married Dorris. The two collaborated on a variety of projects: a travel memoir, *Route 2* (1981), of their trip from New Hampshire to Washington along the road of the title; a provocative and well-researched novel exploring the Christopher Columbus myth, *The Crown of Columbus* (1991); and more than two dozen interviews collected in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris* (1994). Erdrich recalls Dorris as the impetus behind her first successful short story, "The World's Greatest Fisherman" (1982), winner of the \$5,000 Nelson Algren competition. A tale of the mysterious circumstances surround-

ing the hypothermia death of Ojibwe divorcée June Morrissey Kashpaw and the relatives in attendance at her funeral, the story, now titled “The World’s Greatest Fishermen,” became the first chapter of *Love Medicine*. Many other magazine stories have found their way into Erdrich’s novels throughout her career, including the 1987 O. Henry Award winner, “Fleur,” which first appeared in *Esquire* and was later incorporated into *Tracks* (1988) as the narrative of one of its main characters, Fleur Pillager, a woman who scandalizes the Ojibwe with her unconventional behavior, leaves the reservation for Argus, and then returns, only to see her land sold out from under her to whites due to the betrayal of one of her own.

Erdrich’s literary successes were marred by personal tragedy. Erdrich and Dorris had three daughters together in addition to three children—two boys and a girl—that Dorris had adopted before their marriage. One of the adopted children, Reynold Abel, diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome and the subject of one of Dorris’s books, was killed in a car accident in 1991. Erdrich and Dorris separated four years later following a legal battle with adopted son Jeffrey Sava, who had accused them both of child abuse. Amidst allegations of possible abuse against one of his daughters, Dorris committed suicide in 1997. During this period, Erdrich continued to write prolifically, publishing what is considered her most important work of nonfiction, a memoir of new motherhood titled *The Blue Jay’s Dance: A Birth Year* (1995), as well as her first children’s book, *Grandmother’s Pigeon* (1996), and the fifth in the series of North Dakota novels, *Tales of Burning Love* (1996). In 1999, Erdrich and her three biological daughters relocated from New Hampshire to Minneapolis to be closer to her parents. The following year Erdrich and her sister opened an independent bookstore, Birchbark Books, which they still operate. Erdrich continues to publish novels regularly and is also a frequent contributor of stories to *New Yorker* magazine. She is teaching the Ojibwe language to her youngest daughter, born in 2001.

## MAJOR WORKS

The evocation of place is central to Erdrich’s construction of the Native American identity. Many of her works depict Chippewa characters residing on the Little No Horse reservation or, more commonly, moving between there and the town of Argus, or the actual towns of Fargo, North Dakota, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The overall impression is one of crossing back and forth between borders representative of traditional and modern ways, so that the Chippewa identity

emerges as a fluid construct partaking of both worlds. This duality of self is developed in other ways as well. Perhaps the most obvious example is the character Father Damien Modeste. A priest who ministers a mixture of Catholic and Native American religions to his Ojibwe congregation, Modeste is revealed in *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) to actually be a woman, Agnes DeWitt, who was in times past both a nun and a common-law wife to a white farmer. These transformations have been related to the traditional Ojibwe belief in “two-spirit” persons who fulfill mixed gender roles. But the “two-spirit” person also signifies Erdrich’s notion of the conflicted Native American identity, suggestively described with reference to the author by Cally Roy in *The Antelope Wife* (1998): “Some bloods they go together like water—the French Ojibwas: you mix those up and it is all one person. Like me. Others are a little less predictable. You make a person from a German and an Indian, for instance, and you’re creating a two-souled warrior always fighting themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of her latest work of fiction, *Shadow Tag* (2010), all of Erdrich’s novels have followed the stylistic model of *Love Medicine*—a series of interconnected tales that move back and forth in time as related by multiple narrators, sometimes describing the same or similar episodes. *Shadow Tag* marks a departure from the multilayered, intergenerational saga to focus on a single Minnesota couple and their failing marriage, a portrait some critics say mirrors Erdrich’s own relationship with Dorris. All of Erdrich’s other novels are in some sense autobiographical, modeled in many ways on the Turtle Mountain Reservation near Belcourt, North Dakota, where Erdrich’s mother was born and where Erdrich herself is now a tribal citizen.

*Love Medicine* set the stage for much of the fiction that was to follow, gathering fourteen interconnected stories related by seven different members from three generations of the Kashpaw and Lamartine families of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa community. The story begins in 1981 with the death of June Kashpaw and in a series of flashbacks chronicles events of the preceding fifty years, also introducing members of the Morrissey and Pillager families. The separate chapters of *Love Medicine*, like the novels in their entirety, are structured like puzzles in which details about the characters are revealed very slowly, in seemingly random fashion. In order to aid in the understanding, Erdrich published an enlarged edition of *Love Medicine* in 1993 she hoped would more fully integrate events of the novel *The Bingo Palace* (1994), which takes up the subjects of tribal gaming and the contemporary



powwow circuit. June Kashpaw's story, as it is partially revealed in *Love Medicine*, introduces several themes that predominate in the novels: abandonment; promiscuity; alienation; the devastating effects of alcoholism and suicide in Native American communities; the fracturing of families; the tensions between traditional and modern ways; the conflicts between Catholicism and Native American spirituality. But Erdrich also emphasizes the more positive aspects of tribal life, including the strength of the shared cultural heritage, the power of the ancient legends to heal and guide life in the twentieth century, and the hope and redemption offered by the bonds of community.

While exploring the modern interaction of the reservation and the city, Erdrich often employs elder figures to supply the memory of the Native American history of cultural and land dispossession. One of the narrators of *Tracks* is an incarnation of the traditional Chippewa trickster figure Nanabozho, an old man who is the last of his family and also the last in his tribe to remember when his Indian nation was free to roam and hunt. Other stories also revolve around the unifying presence of a powerful figure from the spirit world or a human being with magical powers. For example, the strange Cree woman Step-and-a-Half, of *Master Butchers Singing Club* (2002), survived the battle of Wounded Knee in 1890 and is a "medicine woman" possessed of magical healing powers. *The Antelope Wife* and *The Plague of Doves* enlarge Erdrich's canvas. The first, mostly set in Minneapolis, describes the descendants of a white cavalry officer and a Chippewa woman whose lives were brought together by a post-Civil War raid of a North Dakota reservation. The second reimagines an actual historical event, the 1897 mob lynching of three Native Americans jailed in North Dakota on charges of murdering six members of a white family.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Most of the critical commentary on Erdrich's work concerns her long fiction. Since the publication of *Love Medicine*, critics and readers have debated the strengths and weaknesses of her narrative technique. Comparisons to Faulkner and praise for the lyrical qualities of Erdrich's prose stand against complaints that her fictional world is bewilderingly complex, requiring a genealogical chart to keep track of myriad familial and sexual interrelationships. Some critics have interpreted her narrative strategy as a celebration of the oral storytelling traditions of Native peoples and their communal ethos. Others have argued that the narrative discontinuities reflect the chaos and dispos-

session of Ojibwe life. Elizabeth Gargano, in a review of the children's books *The Birchbark House* (1999) and *The Game of Silence*, argued that the aesthetic model of the oral tradition "achieves a dynamic balance between continuity and innovation. . . . The storytelling tradition can open at any point to include new elements. Hospitable to contemporary experiences, it maintains a profound cultural relevance and significance." In perhaps the most controversial review of Erdrich's technique, Native American novelist Leslie Marmon Silko charged Erdrich with using a post-modernist prose style that obscured the harsh realities of the Native American condition. Erdrich has been accused by other Native American writers of pandering to white audiences and focusing too much on assimilated characters. Erdrich's style has sometimes been labeled as "magic realism," though she has objected to the use of the term, claiming that most of the unusual events she describes are actually documented in newspaper accounts.

Erdrich's fiction frequently elicits thematic studies. Critics have analyzed cultural collision and the effects of dispossession as they are manifested in the novels in a variety of ways: disputes over land and how it should be controlled, an abundance of orphans and abandoning mothers, continuing problems with alcoholism, and conflicts over the growth of casinos and other money-making ventures. Scholars have addressed the modern realities of the tragic losses the Ojibwe tribes suffered at the hands of white expansionists, many of them observing that Erdrich's novels are histories of imperialism. The novels have been studied in the classroom setting as models of postcolonial literary theory. John Carlos Rowe concluded, "The miracle of [Erdrich's] writing is its ability to dive into the violent past and emerge with new life for the multicultural peoples of the upper Midwest—Ojibwe, *métis*, and Euroamerican. Her writings should not be understood as good objects of postcolonial study, but as postcolonial studies in their own right."

---

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Route 2* [with Michael Dorris] (travel sketch) 1981  
*Jacklight* (poetry) 1984  
*Love Medicine* (novel) 1984; expanded ed., 1993  
*The Beet Queen* (novel) 1986  
*Tracks* (novel) 1988  
*Baptism of Desire* (poetry) 1989  
*The Crown of Columbus* [with Michael Dorris] (novel) 1991

*The Bingo Palace* (novel) 1994  
*Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris* (interviews) 1994  
*The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* (memoir) 1995  
*Grandmother's Pigeon* [illustrations by Jim LaMarche] (juvenile fiction) 1996  
*Tales of Burning Love* (novel) 1996  
*The Antelope Wife* (novel) 1998  
*The Birchbark House* [illustrations by the author] (juvenile fiction) 1999  
*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (novel) 2001  
*Master Butchers Singing Club* (novel) 2002  
*The Range Eternal* [illustrated by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher] (juvenile fiction) 2002  
*Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (memoir and history) 2003  
*Original Fire: Selected and New Poems* (poetry) 2003  
*Four Souls* (novel) 2004  
*The Game of Silence* [illustrations by the author] (juvenile fiction) 2005  
*The Painted Drum* (novel) 2005  
*The Plague of Doves* (novel) 2008  
*The Porcupine Year* [illustrations by the author] (juvenile fiction) 2008  
*The Red Convertible: Selected and New Stories, 1978-2008* (short stories) 2009  
*Shadow Tag* (novel) 2010

---

## CRITICISM

### Ute Lischke-McNab (essay date 2002)

SOURCE: Lischke-McNab, Ute. "An Introduction to Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*." In *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, edited by Colin G. Calloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop, pp. 281-86. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

[In the following essay, Lischke-McNab focuses on Erdrich's interest in questions of split identity and cultural mixing, especially as they inform the themes and structure of *The Antelope Wife*.]

One of the most prolific and respected contemporary American writers, Louise Erdrich—of Ojibwa and German descent—has written a series of works in which she interweaves stories that focus on the lives of Anishinabe (Chippewa) families. Her novels *Love Medicine* (1984, 1993), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), *The Antelope Wife* (1998), and *Last*

*Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) form an interconnected epic of contemporary Indian life. Written in a nonlinear, nonchronological, multivocal postmodern style, they relate the memories, loves, and battles of Native characters as they live and struggle alongside European immigrants on and off reservations. Erdrich has also published several volumes of poetry, and many of her short stories have appeared in periodicals such as the *New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine*. Recently, she has also turned to writing books for children, for instance, *Grandmother's Pigeon* (1996) and *The Birchbark House* (1999). Illustrated by the author herself, the latter is an autobiographical account of growing up as a Native American. Similarly, her anthology *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* (1995) is a collection of autobiographical essays and meditations that deal with her life as a wife, mother, and writer. Despite their profound differences, all of Erdrich's texts are, on some level, autobiographical. And all address, in one way or another, the interconnected, often conflicted relationships between Native Americans and Europeans as well as the complex relationship between "native" and "German" cultural traditions that the author herself experiences.

Questions of split identity and multiple allegiances have figured prominently in Erdrich's thinking. In an interview with John Blades for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1986, she expressed her hope that *The Beet Queen*, her second novel, would establish her as an American writer—not as a hyphenated American and not just as a writer about American Indians. It was her hope that she would come to be regarded as a writer of American experiences in all their diversity. In another interview with Allan and Nancy Feyl Chavkin about eight years later, Erdrich was asked if she had concerns about being labeled a Native-American writer or a woman writer.<sup>1</sup> She responded that such labels have their origins in course descriptions, and that if a work of literature survived, these labels would eventually fall away, and different criteria would establish its value to its readers. Erdrich did express regret, however, that *The Beet Queen*, which is less concerned with Native American characters than are *Love Medicine* or *Tracks* and instead attests to her desire to explore the European side of her heritage and experience, does not often appear on course syllabi.

Curiously, much of the critical literature about Erdrich—while stressing her Native roots—has ignored her European, or German, connections. Critics have often characterized her as a writer of "magical realism," a characterization Erdrich herself has questioned.<sup>2</sup> Rather, her peculiar type of storytelling blends

Chippewa/Cree traditions, where orally transmitted myths are still an integral part of the culture, with European narrative forms introduced to her by her father, an immigrant of German, Austrian Catholic, and Jewish origins.<sup>3</sup> Erdrich proudly acknowledges her rural European background—her German forefathers were farmers and butchers, *Metzger*—in *The Blue Jay's Dance*: “On my father’s side, the Erdrich family was established in Pforzheim, near the Black Forest, as Metzger Meistern [*sic*] 1882. They raised a Bauernhof that still stands in the Renchtal. The last of the Indian treaties were signed, opening up the West. Most of the Anishinabe were concentrated in small holdings of land in the territory west of the Great Lakes” (99). Like a signpost, the inserted date, the year 1882, immediately links the German events with occurrences on the American soil—the Indian treaties and relocation of Indian tribes that directly affected her mother’s family. “All land west of the Appalachians was still Indian territory and the people from whom I am descended on my mother’s side, the Ojibwa or Anishinabe, lived lightly upon it, leaving few traces of their complicated passage other than their own teeth and bones. They levered no stones from the earth. Their houses, made of sapling frames and birchbark rolls, were not meant to last” (98). On the one hand, then, we find the earthiness and rootedness of European farmers, the weight and traces of history (the farm still stands), and on the other the Natives, who “lived lightly” upon the land, leaving few traces. The dualism Erdrich fashions for herself also translates to literary traditions. In her recollections of her father, she stresses how he, a highly educated teacher, encouraged his children to write by promising them money for every story they had written. The tradition of encouraging education through “literature” and writing is contrasted with the oral traditions of her mother’s peoples, who transmit experience and who teach, not through writing, but through story telling. As Erdrich suggests, her own thinking and writing has incorporated both traditions—the emphasis on history and on the written word as well as on orality, myth, and spirituality. They form a productive, although not always harmonious or easy mix.

The complications arising from different, at times warring, allegiances are stressed in an interview with Mickey Pearlman in 1989, in which Erdrich paints a much less upbeat picture of her origins and the traditions from which she draws<sup>4</sup>:

I think . . . that if you believe in any sort of race memory, I am getting a triple whammy from my background—in regard to place and home and space. . . . The connection that is Chippewa is a connection to a place and to a background, and to the

comfort of knowing, somehow, that you are connected here before *and before* the first settler. . . . Add to that that the German part of my family is most probably converted Jews and the Jewish search for place, and you have this awful mix. A person can only end up writing—in order to resolve it. You can even throw in the French part of the background—the wanderers, the voyagers, which my people also come from. There is just no way to get away from all this, and the only way to resolve it, without going totally crazy looking for a home, is to write about it. The Germans have a word for it—*unziemliches Verlangen*, unseemly longing. . . . I feel that I am very fortunate to have some place to put these longings because otherwise they would become very destructive.

(151-52)

The quote suggests that the source of Erdrich’s writing is not so much the knowledge of belonging to either, or both, cultural traditions, but the longing to belong: an “unseemly” desire to belong to the peoples who populated America before the European conquerors, colonists, and settlers arrived; and an unseemly desire to find an imaginary home in and through writing. While her family history forms the point of departure, the raw material and stimulus for her writings, her ultimate aim is to expose and possibly resolve the tensions between wandering and immigrating, on the one hand, and settling or “being,” on the other, between foreign and native, European and (Native) American.

Although most of Erdrich’s fictions deal with this European-Native American tension, in her recent novel, *The Antelope Wife*, published in 1998, questions of multiple origin and cultural mix form the main topic and structuring device of the whole narrative. Set mostly in present-day Gakahbekong (contemporary Minneapolis), the novel interweaves Native American myth, spirituality, and traditional culture with historical and contemporary stories. Like earlier novels by Erdrich, it thematizes the ways in which the lives of contemporary mixed-blood Ojibwa Indians are affected by the history of earlier generations—and how they reconcile family patterns with the culture-sapping effects of modern urban life. It portrays the American Indian experience from a variety of narrative perspectives, bouncing back and forth in time, giving voice to characters of every age and social standing, mixing the mythical with the prosaic, the historical with the contemporary.

The actual beginning of the story—in the magic year 1882 mentioned above!—is prefaced by a kind of foundational myth: the image of twin sisters who, since the beginnings of time, have been sewing beads into an indiscernible pattern. The twins are juxtaposed:

one sewing with light, one with dark thread; one attaching cut-glass white and pale beads, the other glittering deep red and blue-black indigo ones; one using an awl made of an otter's sharpened penis bone, the other that of a bear. And yet they are weaving with a single sinew thread, furiously competing with each other to set one more bead into the pattern than the competitor, thereby "trying to upset the balance of the world." They are at once different and the same, divided and united by the ambitions of their lives' work. They describe parallel paths like the Two Row Wampum of the white and the red cultures.

The image of the identical twins in furious competition is a fitting preamble for the novel's underlying preoccupation with dualisms, unity, and diversity; the beadwork of the two sisters is a metaphor for the novel's complex structure and its secret meanings. Like beads in a necklace, its different stories have a decorative-aesthetic as well as symbolic role; like the beads, the many stories in the novel are strung together by the many narrative voices, creating oneness from multiplicity, meaning from chaos.<sup>5</sup> Like beads, they are perfect in themselves; yet, in their composition, they create an even more perfect whole.

The novel opens in the late nineteenth century with a young U.S. Cavalry private, a Pennsylvania Quaker named Scranton Roy, who during an attack on an Indian village kills an old woman who is chasing a dog. Scranton follows the dog, which has a *tikinagun* tied to its back that encloses a child in moss and is trailing blue beads; he retrieves the child, suckles it on his own breast, and raises her as his own, until her mother, Blue Prairie Woman, comes for her. Shortly after, the newly motherless girl is sheltered by a herd of antelope that somehow sense that she is one of them. She will return again to civilization to begin a cycle of restlessness and unbelonging that afflicts her descendants and the men who love them.

From this haunting beginning, a powerful and dauntingly elliptical tale of obsession and separation evolves that moves backward and forward through time from Northern Plains Indian settlements to present-day Minneapolis. Revolving around the complex relationship between the Roy and Shawano families, the novel's striking characters include: Sweetheart Calico, silent and wrathful, as the "antelope wife" of the title, named for the fabric that ties her to Klaus Shawano, the man who abducts and enchants her away from the open places where land meets sky; Klaus Shawano, who acquires "the antelope woman" but cannot keep her (one of several tales of kidnapping and captivity in the novel), as she languishes in the urban prison of Min-

neapolis; several sets of twin daughters, all frustratingly distant from the men who claim them; Richard Whiteheart Beads, who causes the deaths of those he loves and attempts to take his own life when his beleaguered former wife remarries; and the ghostly "windigo dog," a creature magically akin to the humans it patiently serves and protects.

Told from the perspective of these and other characters, the deft episodes often have the quality of independent short stories that are powerfully dramatized. One of them includes a wedding scene that is spectacularly disrupted by the failed suicide of the bride's uninvited former husband. The following episode, "Blitzkuchen," which occurs halfway through the novel, shares the elliptical, dreamlike storytelling found throughout the novel. In a recasting of the traditional captivity narrative, Klaus Shawano tells how he—a kidnapped German prisoner of war—is adopted into the tribe after baking a delicious "blitzkuchen." This blending/baking ritual leads ultimately to a mixing of bloods, which Cally Roy—who describes herself as "a Roy, a Whiteheart Beads, a Shawano by way of the Roy and Shawano proximity . . . a huge can of family lumped together like a can of those mixed party nuts"—feels is a particularly dangerous one: "Some bloods they go together like water—the French Ojibwas: you mix those up and it is all one person. Like me. Others are a little less predictable. You make a person from a German and an Indian, for instance, and you're creating a two-souled warrior always fighting himself" (110).

The (un-)German word "blitzkuchen," or "lightning cake," which combines allusions to warfare (*blitzkrieg*) with those to ritualistic feasts (sweet pastry), has, of course, multiple connotations. It connects the Germans' use of lightning air strikes during the war with the Anishinabe concept of lightning as a transforming agent.<sup>6</sup> The cake made in a hurry, under threat of death, has the power to magically transform the relationship between Indians and Germans into one of communication, communion, and cultural adoption, as Klaus, the baker, becomes one of the Shawano family. Yet in a subsequent story, set just after World War II, the reader hears about how young Frank Shawano's taste of the blitzkuchen pastry inspires Frank's career as a baker and his lifelong quest for the exquisite blitzkuchen recipe. It is only at his own wedding feast, when the possibility of a poisoned blitzkuchen wedding cake threatens the party guests, that Frank finally learns of its secret ingredient—fear.

#### Notes

1. Chavkin and Chavkin, "Interview with Louise Erdrich."



2. Chavkin and Chavkin, "Interview with Louise Erdrich," 221.
3. Foley, *Teaching Oral Traditions*, 151-61, 225-38.
4. Chavkin and Chavkin, "Interview with Louise Erdrich," 221.
5. Beads are significant in Erdrich's work and in Indian culture, as Gerald Hausman reminds us:

"The Cherokee word for bead and the word for money are the same. The pearl necklace did not come to the Indians from Europe. It was made on Turtle Island. And from the milk tooth of the elk, the canine tooth of the bear, and from birds' beaks and talons came a multitude of lovely beads. What was the purpose of the bead? Tied into the hair, worn singly on strings, dangling from wrist, waist, and lower limb, the bead made the wearer proud. It celebrated heraldic animals; it told stories and prophesied power; it carried for the wearer an aura of symmetry, suggesting family, tribe, culture. Attractive and precious, sacred and ornamental, the bead was a wealth of things—all of them symbolizing the power of good health and excellent living. As such, the bead did not represent the material world as much as the nonmaterial one.

The bead, like the basket, is round; and, like the old tribal culture, a single part of many other parts. The string of beads, the blazon of beads told a story in which the single bead was a necessary link to all the others.

One and many; the meaning of the tribe. Together there is strength, unity. The tribal man or woman was as strong as the tribe from which he/she came. And the tribe, naturally, got its strength from the single bead, the pearl, the individual man or woman."

(Hausman, "Turtle Island Alphabet," 8-9)

6. Erdrich, *The Blue Jay's Dance*, 98-99.

### Bibliography

#### PRIMARY LITERATURE

Erdrich, Louise. *The Antelope Wife*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

———. *The Birchbark House*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.

———. *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

#### SECONDARY LITERATURE

Chavkin, Allan, and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, eds. "An Interview with Louise Erdrich" In *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, 220-53. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.

Foley, John Miles, ed. *Teaching Oral Traditions*. New York: MLA, 1998.

Hausman, Gerald. "Turtle Island Alphabet." In *A Lexicon of Native American Symbols and Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

### Maria del Mar Gallego (essay date 2002)

SOURCE: Gallego, Maria del Mar. "The Borders of the Self: Identity and Community in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." In *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands*, edited by Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzananas, pp. 145-57. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2002.

[In the essay below, Gallego argues that Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* depict mixed-blood female characters who use their "in-between" status on the borders of two cultures as a powerful tool for renegotiating individual and collective identity in defiance of Western patriarchal norms.]

The quest for a satisfying sense of personal identity runs parallel to a rediscovery of the collective sense of community in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984) and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). In these works both authors explore the productive concept of the "border," especially concerned with a redefinition and reconstruction of the crucial notion of self. The negotiations of "the borders of self" that these two authors undertake in their narratives point out the problematic nature of shaping a sustaining and nurturing sense of identity for mixed-blood or diasporic characters who need to come to terms with their multicultural heritage and their multiethnic allegiances. In so doing, Erdrich as well as Marshall engage in a revisionist project that entails a direct challenge to Western hegemonic discourse and calls into question its gender hierarchy by providing an alternative matriarchal worldview, in which women recover their significant roles in community-building and decision-making.

Before dealing with the texts under discussion, the whole concept of blurred and polifaceted identities should be addressed from the perspective of the border. Locating the self at the crossroads of a multilayered confrontation effectively interrogates the very foundations of Western thought, since it opens up new venues for exposing its inherent contradictions and its manifold gaps. In this sense, it seems appropriate to approach the concept of the border from a theoretical framework that analyzes in depth the profound implications of placing the notion of self in a sort of "in-between space," which serves as main instrument

to destabilize the powerful influence of Western dominant discourse and its trend toward categorization and homogenization. Trying to map out a significant theory of the liminal being, I have adopted Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner's classical characterization of liminal entities, but I also take into account contemporary renderings of literary liminality.

#### I-RITES OF PASSAGE: LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITY

The anthropological definition of ritual and, more specifically, of "rites of passage" highlights the importance of claiming for an in-between space. The term "rites of passage" was coined in 1900 by Van Gennep, who defined them as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position or age" (1960: 11). Three stages are noticeable in any rite of passage: separation, in which the individual is separated from his/her previous life; transition, during which the individual remains in a liminal space preparing him/herself for the integration into a new status; and, finally, incorporation, whereby the individual achieves social acceptance and integration. Using another set of terms, Van Gennep describes these rites as "preliminal, liminal, and postliminal" phases respectively.

The stage that mostly characterizes rites of passage is obviously the so-called "liminal" period. The importance attributed to this period signals its central role for a clear understanding of the whole significance of rites of passage and their socio-cultural implications. The liminal period is charted by the presence of certain distinct liminal features. It becomes associated with the idea of ambiguity, that is, the liminal position is uncertain, as it lies outside any possible social categorization. The liminal persona is not yet classified nor classifiable according to social conventions. He/she has been plucked out of his/her status, as it were. In this ambiguous position the person becomes constantly linked with an entire set of images that deal with the absence of status or the uncertainty of possessing one. As Turner puts it: "liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun and the moon" (1977: 95). Other features must be added to this description such as the loss of any kind of personal distinguishing attributes such as gender, name, etc. The individual is equated to a tabula rasa, "a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group" (Turner 1977: 103). This last quote reminds the reader of the dynamic relationship between liminal entities and society, in which the former is entirely dependent upon the latter.

In fact, liminality is defined by its marginal position with respect to the social system of values. Although it can bring about a certain kind of autonomy, it is nevertheless intrinsically related to the outside world. It can be seen as an "inter-structural" position, that is to say, a position from which society can be both scrutinized and internalized. It also possesses inherent power, which lies at the very heart of the liminal situation due to its transgression of the very norms or rules that regulate social intercourse. From the anthropological standpoint, this power relates to ideas of the sacred and holy because the transitional person literally "wavers between two worlds" (Van Gennep 1960: 18). Even more, this power is seen as posing a threat, due to its potential negation of the arbitrariness and subsequent constructiveness of the social apparatus. However, it is usually directed and controlled by society to perpetuate itself and its value system. This phase is where the actual social creation or social production is prone to take place, since it is the place where the normative expectations and notions of the world are questioned and new expectations are engendered.

The concept of liminality is most productive when applied to the study of literary texts, as Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton propose in *Margins and Thresholds* (2000). Their definitions of liminality are very useful for our purposes here, since they definitely offer a suitable framework to deal with the two texts under scrutiny. On one hand, they understand the notion of liminal texts as those "generated between two or more discourses, a transition area between two or more universes which thereby shares in two or more poetics" (2000: 9). Erdrich's and Marshall's novels partake of at least two discourses and, therefore, two poetics respectively: in Erdrich's case, these two universes are the Chippewa and Western legacies, whereas for Marshall her Afro-Caribbean roots intertwine with her Westernized education. So the female protagonists portrayed in their novels need to constantly negotiate between those two divergent worlds and allegiances. On the other hand, Aguirre et al. assign another possible meaning to the liminal phenomenon in literary texts which "centered around the notion of the threshold, or whose fundamental theme is the idea of crossover, a transgression or an entry into the Other" (2000: 9). In this second sense, I contend that both novels focus on the key presence of the threshold as an autonomous area by depicting liminal characters who inhabit that threshold, expanding its limits and claiming its central position. Their liminal status allows them to reconsider and reconceptual-

ize themselves and their own community in an attempt to rewrite the “borders of the self,” both individually and collectively.

II-*LOVE MEDICINE* AND *PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW*: THE TRIUMPH OF LIMINALITY

Erdrich and Marshall create polyphonic narratives in which liminality is assessed as an efficient critical tool to unmask Western hegemonic discourse and its imposed univocal definition of self. Employing the “discourse of the threshold,” both authors sustain a radical critique of a central Western self by means of depicting characters who figuratively and successfully waver between two worlds and, hence, consistently break away with constraining racial and sexual binary oppositions and rigid categories promoting a more fluid constitution of the female self. I wish to further demonstrate that, in fact, the female characters chosen by Erdrich and Marshall inhabit a liminal space, which becomes thus a suitable scenario, a ritualistic ground, for the enactment of both processes: the personal and the communal quest for identity. Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine in *Love Medicine* and Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* act as living embodiments of liminal selves, mediating the borderlands of their own selves and those of their communities. Being insiders and outsiders simultaneously, they attempt to effect an actual reconciliation of the multiplicity of selves which constantly plague them, in order to reach a satisfactory balance between the need to remember the past and the urge to construct a hopeful future. Although in seemingly different ways in the two cases, the three women are envisioned by their creators as powerful nurturing entities for their communities that defy the established Western patriarchal rule and offer new possibilities for achieving some satisfying sense of self.

For Erdrich, Marie and Lulu personify liminal figures *par excellence* from an ethnic, social and cultural perspective, since from the beginning they seem to step out of the conventional representation of Native American women. Marie acknowledges her mixed origins and considers entering the convent on the grounds that “I don’t have that much Indian blood” (Erdrich 1984: 40). Obviously the idea of going to the convent reflects Marie’s cultural alienation from her tribal origins, since her main purpose is to turn into a Christian saint rejecting Chippewa traditions and beliefs. Nevertheless, the main motivation behind her desire to enter the convent does not lie in her Christian devotion, but in a sort of competition with another nun, Sister Leopolda, who happens to be her actual mother though she never finds it out. Her mixed love-hatred feelings with respect to the nun encourage her

to embark on a sadistic enterprise at her hands which results in the final abandonment of her religious aspirations and her seemingly reluctant return to the Chippewa community. Lulu also sets herself apart from the rest of the community thanks to what many regard as her “unruly” behavior. Lulu has always been known as a “flirt” (76), and the fact that she has eight boys, all looking completely different from one another, undoubtedly corroborates her unconventional stance. Already from these introductory remarks, Erdrich presents us with autonomous and self-assured women, very unlikely, and perhaps unwilling, to become leaders of their community, which they both seem to reject at first. Throughout the novel they must undergo a process of change and transformation that eventually leads to mutual understanding and finally coming to terms with themselves and their vital role in the community.

The same holds true of Avey, the widow protagonist of Marshall’s text, who is radically alienated from her African American/Afro-Caribbean community living in an exclusive upper class neighborhood, and completely estranged from her origins and traditions. As with Erdrich’s characters, Avey seems to be an unlikely griot. Nevertheless, she becomes involved in a transformative act, setting out on a journey that will cross oceans and lands. Not only in a strict geographical sense taking her from the United States to the Caribbean Islands, but more fully in a metaphorical way allowing her to meet and reconcile with all her older selves, her forlorn past and her broken dreams. But this reconciliation is not possible without taking into account a sustaining community, which plays a crucial role throughout the narration and also transforms itself by means of Avey’s conciliation with herself.

The main factor that is going to affect these three women very deeply in compelling them to establish closer ties with the community is the crucial fact of family and motherhood. Marie and Lulu give birth to many children. As mentioned above, Lulu has eight sons; while Marie not only has many children, she also takes in others all the time allowing for a “surplus of babies” which overflows her house. Mothering is central to the creation and maintenance of the Native American community in both a literal and a symbolic sense. First, having children implies continuity, it repopulates the reservation, re-membling the community and disavowing past policies of extermination of the entire Native American population that went on for a significant number of years and that almost meant the literal death of the community.<sup>1</sup> But from a symbolic point of view, the mother is even more



important in Native American tradition because she symbolizes, as Wong suggests, "not merely one's biological parent; she is all one's relations" (1991: 177). Indeed, the mother represents the direct link to one's tribe and therefore to one's tribal identity and heritage. As Wong continues, mothers and families become the primary source of personal and collective identities even reaching cosmic dimensions.<sup>2</sup>

On the contrary, Avey's motherhood does not seem to provide any positive ground for self-shaping and self-fashioning, despite the importance attributed to motherhood in the African diaspora.<sup>3</sup> In these communities mothering is also conceived as a responsibility for extended women-centered networks, where it is seen as "a symbol of power" (Hill Collins 1987: 5). So mothering is also essential for the well-being of the entire community, as it usually brings along social status and political activism. Coming from an African perspective on motherhood, the figure of the mother is invested with the symbolic powers of creativity and continuity. In spite of this positive vision of motherhood, Avey lives her own as a sort of traumatic nightmare, or a heavy burden, so this is a clear instance of her estrangement from her African American/Afro-Caribbean roots. She always connects it to negative moments of her life, especially to her unsuccessful attempt at abortion when she gets pregnant for the third time. In her case it is precisely the lack of familial ties which pushes Avey to recover her lost sense of identity and identification with her community. When she finally reencounters herself and her community at the end of the novel, she also reestablishes the lost links with her children. Then, she becomes a mother once more in a similar way to Marie and Lulu, that is, a mother for both her own children and all the future generations to come.

### III-*LOVE MEDICINE*: TRICKSTERS AND SURVIVORS

Erdrich chooses to stress the liminal position that Marie and Lulu occupy in the novel by means of their identification with trickster figures. As John Slack observes, "many of the stories in *Love Medicine* are related *to* and are a relating *of* the once verbally preserved cycle of Chippewa folk tales of the trickster" (1993: 118; author's emphasis), and then he goes on to recount Marie's and Lulu's stories as two of the "twenty-three possible trickster narratives in *Love Medicine*" (120). What is interesting in Slack's analysis is the condition of survivor that is associated with the trickster figure, which basically fits both Marie's and Lulu's roles in the novel. They are born survivors, since they survive despite all odds. Marie shows this quality in her frightening encounter with Sister Leopolda, who tortures her. Later on, she also

survives Nector's rape, transforming it into the beginning of their married life. As far as Lulu is concerned, she also survives different disasters throughout her life such as a fire that leaves her bald, an attempt at eviction and the rage of many women on the reservation who suspect her of ensnaring their husbands.

So Marie and Lulu embody the liminal figure of the trickster in its "dual role of culture-hero and fool" (Catt 1991: 74). On one hand, both characters are honored, especially later in life, for their powers and their important contributions to the community. For instance, at the end of the novel the Chippewas start recognizing Lulu's "knowledge as an old-time traditional" (268). But both of them also play the role of the fool by deliberately violating all taboos, either social or sexual ones. Socially speaking, both characters climb up the social ladder: Marie becomes part of one of the most important families, Kashpaw, by marrying Nector; whereas Lulu obtains all she desires by having children with different men on the reservation. From a sexual point of view, Lulu clearly stands out as the sublimation of sexual greed, "a kind of greed that is typical of the Trickster" (Catt 1991: 78). Although Marie is not so outspoken about sex, the fact that she mothers many children is also a sign of her greedy nature.

Besides, another factor to take into account in their position as border figures concerns their gender identification. Even though Marie and Lulu give prime importance to their role as mothers, their liminal gender status within the community is also signaled in the text by some markers like their continuous gender-crossing, almost exemplifying the prototype of the "berdache" in Native American tradition:

[A] person [. . .] who was anatomically normal but assumed the dress, occupations and behavior of the other sex to effect a change in their gender status. This shift was not complete; rather, it was a movement toward a somewhat intermediate status that combined social attributes of males and females.

(Callender and Kochems, qtd. in Barak 1996: 51)

As Barak has further noticed, berdaches and tricksters share their liminal status in the community. This liminal position allows for the multiple talents attributed to them, among which active sex lives, healing abilities and exceptional skills to combine both traditional male and female activities. Both Lulu and Marie fit easily into this pattern, since they are basically the heads of their families, even in the periods when they are actually married, and perform male and female roles. Thus their behavior questions any neat separation of genders and promotes a new sexual hierarchy, where again notions of fluidity, adaptability, and ambiguity are ascribed utmost importance.

The connection between berdaches and tricksters is also very illuminating in their search for a self-defined identity. Both Marie and Lulu seem to engage in a process of discovery and recovery of their own selves through a reconstruction of a troubled love relationship, a love triangle, as both are actually in love with the same man: Nector, Marie's legal husband. This love posits a serious threat to their friendship, since it seems to represent some sort of psychological obstacle between them. Tharp accounts for it from a gender point of view, commenting that "heterosexuality as it has been influenced by Anglo culture takes over women's community and therefore divides women and dissipates tribal strength" (1993: 175). In a sense, Tharp is pointing at the loss of female bonding that takes place when patriarchal gender is imposed upon Native American women. But the separation between Marie and Lulu can be also understood as a result of the internalization of certain damaging patterns springing from a Western legacy that eroded the original organization of tribes in matriarchal units. As Allen remarks, the destruction of the matriarchal tribes justifies an increasingly tense atmosphere between sexes, bringing about such undesirable consequences as rape, battering, etc., and why not rivalry among women that never existed before.<sup>4</sup>

Marie and Lulu are *de facto* separated for most of their lives because of their love for the same man and it is not until Nector dies that the insurmountable impediment is overcome. Then there is some intimation of a possible return to a traditional sense of matriarchy which has to break away with centuries of Western domination. In fact, feelings of female bonding and solidarity emerge right away. These feelings are aptly pictured by Lulu's first description of Marie employing mother-child images: "She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just born child" (236). Here Erdrich is clearly directing the reader's attention to the possibility of new beginnings, metaphorically encoded in the crucial figure of the mother with a child. Obviously, it signifies the vital importance of the mother principle for Native American women like Marie and Lulu who, through recovering their lost links to their real and symbolic mothers, can claim back their rightful position as matriarchs in their community.

Another idea connected to Marie and Lulu's growing friendship is the fact that it also implies a sort of symbolic rebirth, since their "vision" or hidden powers increase in relation to their closeness, achieving what Tharp denominates a "'near divine' power of vision" (1993: 177). The liminal powers of the trickster return with unprecedented strength to them, as Lulu

confirms: "[T]he less I saw the more I had developed my senses" (229). If prior to their meeting the two women have been related to trickster abilities as mediators between two worlds, now they finally acquire the power to actually see beyond, in order to heal not only themselves, but also their community from the damaging effects of the Western colonization of the mind. As Tharp further notices, "female friendship enables the women [. . .] to recreate an empowering matrix that was frequently lost or disrupted through colonization or acculturation" (1993: 179). Envisioning a return to a lost gynocracy, the reconstruction of this "empowering matrix" is regarded by Marie and Lulu as a direct challenge to Western rules and hierarchies. Moreover, I would argue that, through the complementary relation that these two matriarchs establish, Erdrich successfully portrays a twofold mother figure which legitimates her critique of Western dominant ideology. Resisting this imposed code, Marie and Lulu learn together to use their inherent trickster power in order to become political activists in favor of the preservation of the Chippewa land and the Chippewa ways. Hence, they turn into true survivors, since for them to survive is to do so in community, and into useful tricksters that provide "a model for establishing identity in the presence of change" (Catt 1991: 75), ensuring the continuity of the tribe by saving all their children.

#### IV-*PRaisesong for the Widow*: RITUALISTIC SPIRITUAL BECOMING

Here I intend to deal with the transformative process undergone by Avey in the novel, since the crucial notion of liminality is raised by Marshall's conscious redrawing of boundaries, at both a personal and a communal level. A fitting framework for the analysis of Avey's spiritual search is found in the so-called "rites of passage" as explained above. Applying their tripartite structure to Avey's transformation, one can identify the three main stages of any rite of passage: separation from her old self, transition to a new one and then incorporation to the community. These three steps are clearly signaled in the novel by means of temporal, but especially geographical markers, due to the fact that each of the stages roughly corresponds to one of the three main geographical sites in which the story develops: the ship, the island Grenada and Carriacou.<sup>5</sup> I further contend that throughout the story Avey personifies a liminal entity, as she inhabits the threshold between two worlds, Western and African American/Afro-Caribbean, never coming to terms with her liminal status until the very end. So Marshall's use of liminality is twofold: her protagonist needs to undergo a complete rite of passage in order to discover and accept her liminal role in the community.

On board the ship, Avey suffers from a series of nervous disorders that result in her need to abandon it swiftly. Her hasty leaving can be readily associated with a rite of separation, in which Avey realizes the greatness of her loss: she feels she has lost her sense of direction, her self, her past and even her name. On the ship she feels out of place, like a prisoner, or "a sneak thief" (10), who does not fit there, very much in consonance with liminal feelings of not belonging. Her predicament is born out of a lack of harmony with her internal self, as it is made clear in a mirror scene that appears very early in the novel. The fact that there is a mirror scene in each of the phases of Avey's rite of passage emphasizes the significance of her confrontation with the mirror. In this first instance, the pattern for the following scenes is basically set out. When Avey looks at herself in the mirror, she is unable to acknowledge herself. Actually, she contemplates herself as she would do with a stranger:

And in the way she always did she would quickly note the stranger's clothes. The well-cut suit, coat or ensemble depending on the season. The carefully coordinated accessories. The muted colors. Everything in good taste and appropriate to her age.

(48)

Thus Avey is portrayed as a woman who is very self-conscious, and even race conscious. But what really marks Avey in this first stage is her constant remembrance of a happier past. This past takes several forms but two figures are really crucial to discern Avey's confusion: her great aunt and her husband. Her great aunt Cuney appears to her in a dream asking her to perform a ritual that was ingrained in her mind as a child: a walk on Tatem Island, which would end with the retelling of the story of Ibo landing. Avey senses that with this story, "the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill" (42). Her dilemma is that she does not comprehend the nature of this mission nor is she ready to fulfill it. She will need to undergo a complete rite of passage to reach that knowledge.

Along with her great aunt, she keeps remembering her past life with her husband. But she actually remembers two husbands, as it were, two different men with two different names: Jay and Jerome. On one hand, she recalls Jay, a man who made life very special in Halsey Street despite their poverty. And then Jerome, the man he became later with a set determination to succeed. But it is Halsey Street the necessary step for Avey to overcome the liminal phase. So she needs to return to her origins, to reclaim them. In this sense, a sentence that Jerome pronounces with reference to Halsey Street becomes very meaningful in the narra-

tion: "[Y]ou must want to wind up back where we started" (88). Obviously, Jerome implies his negative vision of their beginnings, especially of the fateful night in which he almost left her, back in the winter of '47. But Avey needs to recover that part of her life to feel whole, so she starts reclaiming Halsey Street as her nurturing origins, where love intermingled with music, dancing, poetry and sex. For her, "those were things which would have counted for little in the world's eye. To an outsider, some of them would even appear ridiculous, childish, *cullud* [. . .] They had nonetheless been of the utmost importance" (136). Avey realizes the highest significance of those rites for their lives since their loss meant the destruction of their love and their inner selves.

On this journey back to the past, an episode stands out: the annual boat ride up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain. She describes it as follows:

[S]he would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her [. . .] While the impression lasted she would cease being herself [. . .] instead, for those moments, she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity.

(190-1)

The idea of confraternity is associated to a sense of a nurturing and sustaining community of which Avey felt part back then, which ensured her a link with her past and ancestry. So she needs to return to that feeling of confraternity in order to work out her inner struggle. In one word, she must become a child again. The vision of Avey as a child is a constant trait in her characterization as a liminal figure. Quite appropriately, she is identified with a *tabula rasa*, because "her mind [. . .] had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years" (151). So right now she is at the pure transitional or liminal state. A clear illustration can be detected in her name, which sounds "almost like someone else's name" (186). Her naming uncertainty reaches deeper levels, since she finds increasingly difficult to identify with it. Avey's unstable sense of identity is the resulting effect of her liminal status, being unable to find her true self, her true name and her true community. Thus, her personal quest becomes intimately related to the recovery of a sense of confraternity she had felt especially in Tatem, in the annual boat ride, and she will feel again in Carriacou.

The strong sense of correlation between Tatem and the island culture is what triggers off Avey's memories in the first place. Avey has finally come full circle, in the sense that she begins to accept the "hole" that the past thirty years had meant in her life. Once she has

reached this step of the process, Avey is definitely ready to face the last stage or incorporation to the community. Two events in the novel signal the preparation for the reintegration: vomiting and washing while crossing over to Carriacou.<sup>6</sup> These acts can be interpreted as part of the process of cleansing the liminal self, in which she finally becomes "the child in the washtub again" (221). Achieving a complete regression to her childhood, she recalls a strong sense of female bonding which facilitates her return to the community. The last part of her rite of passage takes the form of a collective dance in Carriacou, where Avey feels finally free and alive.<sup>7</sup> For her, it is the ultimate step to go back to her great aunt and Tatem, as she describes it: "[S]he had finally after all these decades made it across" (248). But also to that sense of confraternity she used to feel on the annual boat ride. With this return to her source of sustenance, the community, she recovers her lost identity and her name—"Avey, short for Avatara" (251).

What is more important, she finally understands the mission her great aunt had entrusted her with and which has been puzzling her all those years: to continue the tradition that her great aunt had passed down to her by telling her future grandchildren and visitors about the Ibos and their pride in their community, as the only possible source and fountain for wholeness in life. In the closing pages of the novel Avey has rediscovered her rightful place in her community. As a mother figure, she is going to nurture future generations and preserve traditions in order to ensure the continuation of the community. Having completed a rite of passage to return to her community, Avey is finally able to come to terms with her liminal status. Recovering her place in the community assures her a liminal role in it as a mediator between two worlds—Afro-Caribbean and Western—and between the borders of her self and those of her community. By going back to the island, Avey demonstrates her willingness to perform the mission of spiritual mother following her aunt's steps. Hence, she acknowledges liminality "in a more or less permanent way" (Aguirre 74, n. 13) as Erdrich's characters. Accepting their role as empowered liminal beings, the three characters are thus able to continue inhabiting the productive liminal territory of the border, and to offer an alternative worldview to the dominant order.

#### V-CONCLUSION

Both Marshall's and Erdrich's novels postulate that to feel restored to a "proper axis" means to acknowledge differences as enriching the personal and communal processes of coming to terms with the notion of a multiple self that can encompass diversity and still

suggest unity. Moreover, their exploration of the issue of liminality highlights similar concerns in their redefinition of the notion of female identity as inhabiting a threshold zone which relates two worlds, two universes at the same time: Afro-Caribbean/Western in Marshall, and Chippewa/Western in Erdrich. Nevertheless, they present different perspectives about approaching liminality: Marshall prefers to portray Avey as a pure liminal entity undergoing an entire rite of passage, whereas Erdrich endows her female protagonists with trickster abilities. Despite their apparent differences, both novelists reach a similar conclusion: the only way to work out a satisfying sense of self for their female protagonists is to fulfill their mission as mother figures for their communities. Hence, to feel reconnected to the community and to be restored to their role of matriarchs proves crucial for the three protagonists' reconciliation with themselves and their manifold borders. So for these spiritual mother figures transcending the boundaries of their own selves to nurture others becomes a plausible way to inhabit liminality. Their liminal status enables them to overthrow Western hegemonic discourse and to make sense of the multiethnic reality these women face by means of a female-based alternative conception of motherhood.

#### Notes

1. Paula Gunn Allen denounces the policy of what she calls "physical and cultural genocide" (1986: 3) in her groundbreaking work *The Sacred Hoop*, in which she accounts for it as a Western patriarchal response to Native American gynocratic societies.
2. In her article "Adoptive Mothers and Thrown-Away Children in the novels of Louise Erdrich" (1991), Hertha Wong explains the distinctions between theories of mothering based on Western constructions of femininity and motherhood and Native American definitions intrinsically linked to the concepts of tribal identity and extended family. Therefore the figure of the mother acquires great significance in the Native American tradition, since it constitutes the main basis for a sense of identity that goes far beyond mother-child relationships.
3. As there are many significant studies devoted to the topic, I can only mention a few. A groundbreaking work is "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships" by Patricia Hill Collins (1987), where she investigates the notion of an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood. Two other publications which analyze the issue in detail are *Claiming the Heritage* (1991) by Missy Dehn Kubitschek and *Women of Color* edited by Elisabeth Brown (1996).
4. Allen considers that this negative aftermath of Western patriarchal imposition is due, ironically, to the "proximity to the 'civilizing effects' of white Christians" (1986: 50).



5. Although many critics have asserted the importance of the ritualistic structure in the novel (especially Christian 1983; Wilenz 1992: 107; Pettis 1990 and 1995), there has not been any detailed description following Van Gennep and Turner's model.
6. Some critics have brilliantly argued that Avey's journey to Carriacou can be defined as the "Middle Passage back" following Washington's term (1981: 324), by means of which Avey experiences "the horrors of Middle Passage" (Lindberg-Seyersted 1994: 44) in order to be able to reintegrate into her community.
7. For a fuller account of the significance of this communal dance, see Denniston 1983; Collier 1984; and Gikandi 1996.

#### Bibliography

- Aguirre, M., R. Quance, P. Sutton 2000. *Margins and Thresholds. An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies. Studies in Liminality and Literature 1*. Madrid: The Gateway Press.
- Allen, Paula Gunn 1996. "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective." In Glotfelty & Fromm, eds., 241-263.
- Allen, Paula Gunn 1986. *The Sacred Hoop*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Barak, Julie 1996. "Blurs, Blends, Berdaches: Gender Mixing in the Novels of Louise Erdrich." *Sail* 8.3: 49-62.
- Brown, Elisabeth, ed. 1996. *Women of Color. Mother-Daughter Relationships in Twentieth Century Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Catt, Catherine 1991. "Ancient Myth in Modern America: The Trickster in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich." *Platte-Valley Review* 19.1: 71-81.
- Christian, Barbara 1983. "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Callaloo* 6.2: 74-84.
- Collier, Eugenia 1984. "The Closing of the Circle: Movement from Division to Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction." In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950-80)*. New York: Doubleday. 295-315.
- Denniston, Dorothy 1983. "Recognition and Discovery." *The Fiction of Paule Marshall*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. 126-45.
- Erdrich, Louise 1984. *Love Medicine*. New York: Bantam.
- Gikandi, Simon 1996. "The Circle of Meaning: Paule Marshall, Modernism and the Masks of History." In Ade Ojo, ed. *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press. 143-55.
- Hill Collins, Patricia 1987. "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships." *Sage* 4.2: 3-9.
- Kubitschek, Missy Dehn 1991. *Claiming the Heritage*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Lindberg-Seyersted, Brita 1994. *Black and Female*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Marshall, Paule 1983. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Dutton.
- Pettis, Joyce 1990. "Self-Definition and Redefinition in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." In Harry Shaw, ed. *Perspectives of Black Popular Culture*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 93-100.
- 1995. "The Journey Completed: Spiritual Regeneration in *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Toward Wholeness In Paule Marshall's Fiction*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 106-135.
- Slack, John 1993. "The Comic Savior: The Dominance of the Trickster in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*." *North Dakota Quarterly* 61.3: 118-29.
- Tharp, Julie 1993. "Women's Community and Survival in the Novels of Louise Erdrich." In Janet Ward and Joanna Mink, eds. *Communication and Women's Friendship*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular. 165-80.
- Turner, Victor 1977 (1969). *The Ritual Process*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Van Gennep, Arnold 1960 (1908). *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. Monika V. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Washington, Mary Helen 1981 (1959). "Afterword." *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press. 311-24.
- Wilenz, Gay. 1992. *Binding Cultures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wong, Hertha 1991. "Adoptive Mothers and Thrown-Away Children in the Novels of Louise Erdrich." In Brenda Dally and Maureen Reddy, eds. *Narrating Mothers: Theorising Maternal Subjectivities*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. 174-192.

#### Kellie Jensen (essay date fall 2005)

SOURCE: Jensen, Kellie. "Sacred Passions/Profane Saints." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 3 (fall 2005): 18-23.

[In the following essay on Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, Jensen illustrates that Erdrich invests the term passion with both positive and negative meaning, much as the Greek word *pharmakon* is used to signify both a remedy and a poison.]

In her novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Louise Erdrich engages her readers in a story of emotional complexities. Agnes, the novel's central figure, has an existence marked by emotional and spiritual tug-of-war, her identity as elusive as her spirituality. Known first as Sister Cecilia, Agnes sheds her identity as a Catholic nun after failing to reconcile her love for music with her love for faith. Agnes becomes the common law wife of farmer Berndt Vogel, but amidst her new life of thriving sexuality, Agnes soon discovers her faith cannot be ignored. When Berndt Vogel dies, Agnes resumes her religious devotion after suppressing her other passions and hiding her gender by becoming the priest, Father Damien. For her ministry's duration, Agnes struggles to reconcile her earlier life with the demands of her new life among the Ojibwe people. Agnes's several intense and often conflicting passions, her music, her sexuality, and her faith, become central to the novel. In the resulting friction, Agnes evolves and grows as a character.

Throughout the novel, Erdrich uses passion to "play upon" the multiple meanings of one signifier, just as Jacques Derrida accuses Plato of doing in the *Phaedrus* (1847). Erdrich regularly chooses the term "passion" to signify the emotional extremes of agony and ecstasy. As a result, "passion" functions as a thread in the novel, tying Agnes's past life to her present life, her emotional life to her spiritual life. Agnes's tendency to view her world through the binary opposite sacred/profane shapes her struggle to reconcile her conflicting passions. For Agnes, dealing with her passions proves to be both agonizing and ecstatic. Erdrich regularly chooses the term "passion" to signify both of these emotional extremes. As a result, "passion" functions as a thread in the novel tying Agnes's past life to her present life, her emotional life to her spiritual life. Erdrich's insistence on the signifier "passion" reveals that it is not despite but because of its ambiguous nature that she uses the term.

Agnes's tendency to view her world through the binary opposite sacred/profane also shapes her struggle to reconcile her passions. Just as Derrida deconstructs the binary opposites that shape Platonic thought, Erdrich challenges the binary opposites that dominate Agnes. As long as Agnes views her world in the framework of this opposition, her many passions cannot peacefully coexist. Tracing "passion" throughout *The Last Report [The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse]* and examining its multiple signifieds reveals that binary opposites dissolve in favor of a richer, more complex depiction of Agnes's existence.

#### "PASSION" AND PLATO'S "PHARMAKON"

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato likens writing to a "pharmakon," a Greek word meaning both remedy and poison. "Passion" in *The Last Report* works in much the same way as "pharmakon" does in *Phaedrus*. Derrida deconstructs the oppositions that form Plato's argument against writing: original/copy; speech/writing; philosopher/sophist, etc. (1846). Derrida illustrates how Plato's use of "pharmakon" ultimately undermines his argument that writing is inferior to speech. The "pharmakon" can never be entirely beneficial or entirely harmful since it carries both signifieds simultaneously. Similarly, in *The Last Report*, "passion" is never completely positive or negative since each distinct passion contains a complete emotional spectrum. Erdrich uses "passion" to emphasize the relationship between agony and ecstasy. As they merge to change Agnes's life, these emotions cannot exist in isolation. Like Plato's "pharmakon," Erdrich's "passion" is "caught in a chain of significations" (Derrida 1846). As "passion" surfaces in the novel, it carries with it a slightly different meaning, forging a new link in the chain. In effect, each "passion" in the novel is dependent on all other instances of the word before the true complexity of its meaning will emerge.

When the word "passion" first appears in chapter one, it is already caught in the chain of signifieds: "In her music Sister Cecilia explored profound emotions. Her phrasing described her faith and doubt, her passion as the bride of Christ, her loneliness, shame, ultimate redemption" (14). In this passage, "passion" describes both Agnes's love for her music and the emotions she experiences when engaged in this love. It also evokes a third definition: the suffering of one for his or her faith, most notably the suffering of Christ on the cross. This definition of "passion" surfaces frequently in the novel, usually as chapter or section headings, such as "The Passions," the title of part four of the novel (255).

Even in its Christian context, "passion" signifies more than simply one's suffering for his or her religion. The section in chapter six describing the end of Kashpaw's family unit is entitled "Kashpaw's Passion" (100). Here, Kashpaw parts with all but one of his wives because it is the will of the Catholic Church. In a sense, Kashpaw is suffering for his religion (he is soon to be baptized), but he is not suffering a "passion" in the traditional sense of the word. Here Kashpaw suffers the loss of those he loves. The meaning of the word "passion" in the section title is ambiguous; it may be referring to a Christian suffering, to Kashpaw's intense love for his wives, or to his intense sadness at having to say goodbye. The text suggests that the meaning is a combination of these definitions, for