Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*: Loving Over Time and Distance

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Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* appeared in 1984, just fifteen years after the Pulitzer Prize was awarded to N. Scott Momaday for his novel of contemporary Indian American life, *House Made of Dawn*. Momaday’s novel is generally recognized as setting off the renaissance of written imaginative native American works that followed in the next two decades. This span of years saw the publication of works by native Americans D’Arcy McNickle (*The Surrounded* and *Wind from an Enemy Sky*), Leslie Silko (*Ceremony*), and James Welch (*Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*), among others.

The sudden appearance of so many novels by native American writers coincides with the social and political activism that dominated Indian life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the novels written during this period have as their theme the sociopolitical problems of native Americans—problems associated with poverty, alcoholism, education, and jobs (Standiford 168–69). They also deal with specific Indian American issues, such as reservation life and the problems of relocation and termination. Often, the conflict in the novels arises out of the native American concern for connectedness with the land and the interrelatedness of all life. When the Indian American moves off the reservation and begins life in a culture essentially different from his own, the results can be disastrous. Likewise, alienation from tribal customs and a historical past creates conflicts for the Indian who relocates in an environment away from the reservation. According to William Bevis, white American novelists approach the subject of relocation in a way that is distinct from the approach of Indian American writers (582). The classic American novel is a “leaving” plot, a movement by an individual toward freedom, independence, growth, and fulfillment away from his original home and society. The typical native American story, however, has a “homing” plot. In these stories the hero finds fulfillment,
personal growth, and value in returning home, in finding himself in his cultural past among his own people. As Bevis says, “In all these books, Indian ‘homing’ is presented as the opposite of competitive individualism, which is white success” (584–85). To the Indian American, tribalism is more than just home and family: “To Indians tribe means family, not just bloodlines but extended family, clan, community, ceremonial exchanges with nature, and an animate regard for all creation as sensible and powerful” (Lincoln 8). Fulfillment for the Indian American, according to Bevis, results from unification with his native society, his cultural past, and his inherited place (586). Thus, many contemporary native American novels have as their “homing” plot the return of the hero to his tribe and the renewal of self through connection with these three elements.

Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine, always compassionate and sometimes comic, looks at Indian American reservation life in a less optimistic light. In this novel, the returning Indian finds that the tribe has disintegrated, the past has been forgotten, and the reservation lands no longer support a livelihood. For some Chippewa who grew up on the North Dakota reservation that provides the novel’s setting, leaving home is the road to fulfillment. Albertine Johnson, for one, runs off to Fargo as a young girl, eventually completes her education in nursing, then continues her studies to become a doctor. Her narratives reveal a secure, self-defined individual who has survived the life outside. But her success is an exception to the rule, for the characters in this story seem to find neither preparedness for life on the outside nor happiness by remaining on the reservation.

The story centers on the family of Nector and Marie Kashpaw and their relationship to Lulu Lamartine and her children. The story is at once one of disintegration and breaking connections, and of bonding and restoration. The novel has no single point of view, but its fourteen chapters contain six different first-person narrators and the limited omniscience of five other characters. Presenting the story from so many different points of view suggests not tribal or family unity but separation and difference. At the same time, the points of view, in a Faulknerian way, are unified around the subject of one family. The presentation of these diverse points of view accentuates the theme of the breakdown of relationships, while showing the unique tie the family and reservation life have for these people.

Likewise, the setting is not limited to a single location. In addition to the reservation, we see King’s apartment in Minneapolis, Henry Jr.’s hotel room in Fargo, and the frozen fields outside Williston where June walks to her death. The time span is fifty years. The first story is set in 1981, the year of June Kashpaw’s death. The next story goes back to 1934 and the chance meeting of Marie Lazarre and Nector Kashpaw on the hill outside the convent. The stories that follow are in chronological order and end two years after the death of Nector by choking. This last story, set in 1984, returns to
the subject of June, as Lipsia Morrissey learns she is his mother and Jerry Nanapush his father.

The socioeconomic problems of the Indian American are not the essential focus of the stories, although many familiar subjects are treated. In the typical native American plots of the novels of the previous decades, a protagonist is involved in a struggle to find identity and fulfillment, and the process of loss and recovery constitutes the story line. The conflict is often between native American and white, with the struggle ending in tragedy for the Indian. *Love Medicine*, however, has no central conflict or protagonist. Instead of a clearly defined conflict, the novel portrays a variety of characters attempting to love and survive in a world where God and the government seem to have forsaken them. Left to their own devices, many of them—the men especially—flounder. Lipsia Morrissey provides the philosophy that underlies these characters’ lives and experiences when he asks, “Was there any sense relying on a God whose ears was stopped? Just like the government? I says then, right off, maybe we got nothing but ourselves. And that’s not much, just personally speaking” (195). Lipsia has little to rely upon, for even his grandmother calls him “the biggest waste on the reservation” (189), but he is not alone in feeling that he has been abandoned with limited resources. Gordie Kashpaw has a feeling not only that the Indian American has been left to himself, but that the system is actually rigged against him. His insight comes as he tries to unlock his trunk while on a drunken escapade to escape the memory of his dead wife, June:

> Everything worked against him. He could not remember when this had started to happen. Probably from the first, always and ever afterward, things had worked against him. . . . He had never really understood before but now, because two keys were made to open his one car, he saw clearly that the setup of life was rigged and he was trapped. (179)

Believing that doom is inevitable, Gordie puts up little resistance. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as his life is reduced to brawling and alcoholism until he drives his wife away and loses her to the frozen plains.

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

Nector Kashpaw exemplifies the ineffectuality of male leadership on the reservation. Although he is elected tribal leader, it is Marie who nominates him and keeps him sober so he can perform his duties. Nector makes only a
few decisions about his life; the rest have been made for him. Lulu says, "He had brains and heart to spare but never had to use them for himself. He never fought. So when his senses started slipping he let them dribble out" (229). Lulu professes to having loved Nector all her life, but she never married him because "he dawdled." While courting Lulu, he runs into fourteen-year-old Marie Lazarre fleeing the convent and Sister Leopolda. He attempts to stop her from escaping with what he believes are stolen altar linens but in the process ends up having sex with her, committing himself to marriage with the offer of the wild geese. But Nector does not accept responsibility for his actions. Instead he says, "And then I am caught, I give way. I cannot help myself" (61). He tells Marie, "You made me! You forced me!" (62). Nector takes no responsibility for the bad things that happen to him, nor can he account for the fortunate things that come his way. Having the stereotypical look of the brave Indian warrior, he is offered a bit part in a Western movie and poses for the classic portrait Plunge of the Brave, which hangs in the capital state house. Nector's evaluation of his situation is simple: "I never wanted much, and I needed even less, but what happened was that I got everything handed to me on a plate" (89).

The one decision he makes is to leave Marie for Lulu, not knowing that Lulu has decided to marry her brother-in-law, Bev Lamartine. Nector assesses his situation one afternoon when stillness settles over him:

It seems as though, all my life up till now, I have not had to make a decision. I just did what came along, went wherever I was taken, accepted when I was called on. I never said no. But now it is one or the other, and my mind can't stretch far enough to understand this. (106)

Nector is saved from his decision when he inadvertently sets fire to Lulu's house. It is clearly an accident, but, true to character, Nector denies responsibility: "I see that I do nothing to help the fire along... I have done nothing" (109). Nector is not victimized by his indecisiveness; instead, he profits from the help of others. Lulu calls him greedy for taking his pleasure, "his candy," wherever he can get it, pleasing himself first and letting the rest look out for themselves: "He always did have to have his candy come what might and whether Lulu or Marie was damaged by his taking it. All that mattered was his greed" (231). His character is one with the waters, an image often associated with Nector: he flows with the current and generally through fertile grounds.

The other male characters, descendants of Nector or Lulu, are seldom as fortunate. The same sense of separation from things Indian and tribal, a separation from values and customs of the past, haunts the lives of Howard "King" Kashpaw, June and Gordie's son, and Gerry Nanapush, Lulu's oldest son. When June dies, her insurance money is left to King because, as Grandma Kashpaw says, "he took after her the most" (22). His wife
Lynette says, "His mom gave him the money... because she wanted him to have responsibility. He never had responsibility. She wanted him to take care of his family" (33). Instead, King buys an expensive sportscar with a tape deck and all the other features. His return to the reservation for June's funeral is marred by drunkenness and quarrels with his wife and family. King inherits June's wildness and independence, marrying a white woman and leaving the reservation to live in Minneapolis. He lies about seeing action in Vietnam. His step-brother Lipsha tells Albertine that King once took a potshot at him while the two were out hunting. Lipsha, who grew up with King, says, "You can't never predict when he'll turn" (35). King's nature is violent, resulting in a full-scale battle when his aunts and grandmother leave the house to visit June's grave. King attempts to drown Lynette, battles with his father Gordie, and insults his half-brother Lipsha. The pies, so lovingly baked by his aunts and grandmother, are smashed by the fighting men. After Albertine fails to restore the broken pies, she observes, "once they smash there is no way to put them right" (39). Like the pies, the lives that King smashes with his bitterness and violence cannot be mended. His son, who prefers to be called Howard rather than King, finds an identity separate from his father's, and, when troopers raid their Minneapolis apartment looking for Jerry Nanapush, Howard Jr., betrays his father to them.

King has ambitions to greatness, calling himself "King" and "the world's greatest fisherman," but this ambition is only talk. He tells Lipsha, "I'm gonna rise... One day I'm gonna rise. They can't keep down the Indians" (252), but in the same breath he blames others for his failure: "You'd think the Indians that got up there would look out for their own! Once they start earning twenty-five, thirty grand they move off in a suburb and forget about their cousins. They look down on you" (253). King apparently has forgotten his own betrayal of Gerry Nanapush, gaining his confidence and betraying him to the authorities for money. The dog-eat-dog world he complains about is of his own cruel making.

The most famous Indian on the reservation is the fugitive Gerry Nanapush. His son Lipsha describes him as "Gerry Nanapush, famous politicking hero, dangerous armed criminal, judo expert, escape artist, charismatic member of the American Indian Movement, and smoker of many pipes of kinnikinnick in the most radical groups... That was... Dad" (248). Gerry has complete disregard for the law, believing instead in a personal system of justice. His initial conflict, a barroom brawl with a white cowboy, leads to his incarceration and education in the ways of the criminal:

He admitted it [prison] had done him some good when he was younger, hadn't known how to be a criminal, and so had taken lessons from professionals. Now that he knew all there was to know, however, he couldn't see the point of staying in a prison and taking the same lessons over and over. (161)
Gerry’s political activism on the Pine Ridge Reservation leads to the murder of a federal agent. He eventually flees to Canada with the help of his son Lipsha, an exile that reunites him with his girlfriend and young daughter.

Unlike King Kashpaw, Gerry, who has attained notoriety for murder and other crimes, is treated with much awe and respect by both the Indian tribe and his own family. His mother Lulu says, “They’re all jealous of Gerry Nanapush on this reservation” (244); later she says of her famous son, “[i]n and out of prison, yet inspiring the Indian people, that was his life. Like myself he could not hold his wildness in” (227). Gerry’s life and inspirational deeds are not chronicled in the text; instead, he is portrayed as nonviolent and gentle, a giant of a man with a large heart for his own people. Lipsha describes him as “suave, grand, gigantic” (166), “enormous, gentle” (258). Gerry, unlike King, does not blame anyone else for his lot in life. Instead, he sees his fate as being like a hand dealt to him in poker: “We got dealt our hand before we were even born, and as we grow we have to play as best as we can” (263). Gerry plays his as a fugitive, always on the run but never in a hurry. He fights a system of white laws that have branded him a criminal, when all he wants in life is freedom to be with his family and friends, freedom to live out his time with some dignity. King, the violent one, is allowed to live and raise his family in freedom, while Gerry, the gentle criminal, is forever a fugitive.

Another casualty of the reservation is Henry Lamartine, Jr., Lulu’s son, who takes his own life as his father had, although for a different reason. Henry Sr., unable to tolerate his wife’s continued unfaithfulness, parks his car on the railway tracks to end his misery. Henry Jr. returns from Vietnam where he had been a prisoner of war, and he is unable to put the war behind him. In spite of the efforts of his brother Lyman to restore his interest in life, Henry admits, “I can’t help it. It’s no use” (152). Henry and his brother have a drunken picnic, and Henry walks into the river and drowns. He is less a victim of reservation life than of a war that is not of his own making. The Indian brave no longer fights for his own land and food but in a foreign war in which he has no stake.

One of the survivors of reservation life is Lipsha Morrissey, abandoned by his mother June and raised by “Grandma” Kashpaw. Lipsha narrates two central chapters—one gives the novel its title, and the other ends the book and is a link to the opening chapter and the death of June. Lipsha, “the biggest waste on the reservation” (189), says of himself, “the thing I know how to do best in this world, the thing I been training for all my life, is to wait. Sitting there and sitting there was no hardship on me” (201). Lipsha has trouble in school but says he quit for “the betterment of [his] mental powers” (269). He has no profession and no future, and he contents himself with caring for Grandma Kashpaw, now living at the Senior Citizens’ Center.

Lipsha recognizes that life on the reservation is bleak, more so than ever
before. He bemoans the loss of faith in the Chippewa gods and the inefficacy of praying to the Catholic god, who does not seem to hear. The absence of an attentive god is part of the problem of the Indian Americans, according to Lipsha:

I looked around me. How else could I explain what all I had seen in my short life—King smashing his fist in things, Gordie drinking himself down to the Bismarck hospitals, or Aunt June left by a white man to wander off in the snow. How else to explain the times my touch don’t work, and farther back, to the old time Indians who was swept away in the outright germ warfare and dirty-dog killing of the whites. In those times, us Indians was so much kindlier than now. (195)

In the absence of a god, Lipsha attempts to help his family and friends by restoring the primitive art of witch doctoring. He believes himself to have healing powers, which he calls “the touch.” He even quits school because he believes that formal education interferes with his ability to heal. But Lipsha’s resorting to the superstitious rites of the past is proven ineffectual, comic, and even destructive. He attempts to heal the rift between his grandparents by having them eat the raw heart of a wild goose. Since wild geese mate for life, Lipsha believes that eating the goose heart will lessen the separation that has developed between his grandparents over Nector’s affair with Lulu. His attempt to work love medicine is made comic when he fails to shoot a wild goose and resorts to using a frozen supermarket turkey heart. The final deflation comes when old Nector Kashpaw chokes and dies trying to swallow the heart.

Instead of the “healing touch,” Lipsha works a different kind of “love medicine.” As he compassionately tells his grandmother:

Love medicine ain’t what brings him back to you, Grandma. No, it’s something else. He loved you over time and distance, but he went off so quick he never got the chance to tell you how he loves you, how he doesn’t blame you, how he understands. It’s true feeling, not no magic. (214)

Lipsha is a type of gentle love child, more the son of Gerry Nanapush than of the wild June he never knew. Gerry tells him that he will not have to serve in the army because like his father, “we all have this odd thing with our hearts,” a physical defect in the Nanapush line. More accurately, Lipsha has a loving, affectionate nature that is repelled by violence and pain. Even Grandpa Kashpaw identifies the “defect” in Lipsha when he jokingly compares him to the giant snapper that tows them around the lake. Lipsha objects to the comparison: “I ain’t no snapper. Snappers is so stupid they stay alive when their head’s chopped off” (209). Grandpa’s reply explains the comparison: “That ain’t stupidity. Their brain’s just in their heart, like yours is.” Lipsha’s real insight, his gift, is the strong feeling of a man raised on love but feeling rejected because he never knew his mother.
The priestess of love—the saint in the story—is Marie Lazarre Kashpaw. As a young girl, Marie's ambition was to escape reservation life by joining the convent. Marie says, "I had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town" (41). Marie prays for a vocation so she will be accepted into the Sacred Heart Convent on the hill. After her grueling battle with the sadistic Sister Leopaldal, Marie escapes back down the hill and finds her life's vocation in young Nector Kashpaw. Her ability to spring back from adversity sets her apart from many others on the reservation, who turn to acceptance as a much easier path. Nector describes her after their encounter on the hill as "rail-tough and pale as birch, her face loose and raging beneath the white cloth... Marie is the kind of tree that doubles back and springs up, whips singing" (59). When Marie loses two of her children, she takes in orphans—her niece June and later June's sons, Lipsha and Howard. When her husband succumbs to alcoholism, she weans him back into sobriety. When his life lacks purpose and meaning, she gets him elected tribal leader. When he chases after Lulu Lamartine, she forgives him and saves his dignity when he returns home. Her saintliness lies not in deprivation and asceticism, nor in the self-promoting sadomasochism of Sister Leopaldal, but in the humane everyday acts of caring for others. She tells Leopaldal, "I've been good to my neighbors. I fed my children from my own mouth. I kept Nector from hurting himself" (119).

Marie is the embodiment of the saintly virtues of compassion, forgiveness, and love. Even her rival Lulu is forgiven in the end. After Lulu's operation to restore her vision, Marie comes to put the drops in her eyes, saying, "There's a pattern of three lines in the wood," a reference to the three lives that were affected by Lulu's affair with Nector. She helps Lulu to feel for others when she forgives her, saying, "Somebody had to put the tears into your eyes" (235). Forgiving her husband's lover as she had forgiven her husband, caring for Lulu in her time of need, and sharing with her the loss of Nector make Marie a saint on earth.

The most tragic character in the novel is June Kashpaw, a figure more often on the perimeter of others' lives than clearly a center of focus. June Kashpaw's final night begins the novel. Her last affair with a drunken oil boomer outside a Williston, North Dakota, bar ends with her death as she attempts to walk home in a snowstorm. While her death was not defined as a suicide, anyone familiar with the intensity of a North Dakota snowstorm would know the risk involved in such a venture. While June's body dies in the snow, "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" (6).

June's story is one of abandonment and tragedy. When her mother dies in the bush, June survives by eating pine sap. Marie sees that she is more
like the rugged Eli Kashpaw—"The woods were in June" (65)—but she has Marie’s resiliency and ambition to have something more than the life fate hands her. She marries her cousin Gordie but separates from him repeatedly. She gives birth to two children, one by Gordie and one by Gerry Nana-push, but abandons them to Marie and Nector. June, like her children Lipsha and Howard, is a lost soul. Paula Allen, writing in The Sacred Hoop, identifies the problem of growing up without knowing one’s mother:

Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost, isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life. (209-10)

June’s attempts to make something of her life—as a beautician, a secretary, a waitress or salesclerk, a wife and mother—become the story of failure: “As time went by she broke, little by little, into someone whose shoulders sagged when she thought no one was looking, a woman with long ragged nails and hair always growing from its beauty-parlor cut. Her clothes were full of safety pins and hidden tears” (8). Albertine Johnson memorializes her dead aunt and the life she had led:

She would be dancing if there was a dance hall in space. She would be dancing a two-step for wandering souls. Her long legs lifting and falling. Her laugh an ace. Her sweet perfume the way all grown-up women were supposed to smell. Her amusement at both the bad and the good. Her defeat. Her reckless victory. Her sons. (35)

June was a hard-living, hard-loving woman who wanted beauty and love in her life. She was the victim of a cold world where some survive through stamina and grit, such as Lulu and Marie, and others fall through the cracks, such as Henry Jr. and his father.

June’s death is recorded in the first pages of the novel, but she is recalled at the novel’s end by her son, Lipsha. He is driving the car purchased with June’s insurance money, and he stops to look into the river that bounds the reservation:

How weakly I remembered her. If it made any sense at all, she was part of the great loneliness being carried up the driving current. I tell you, there was good in what she did for me, I know now. The son that she acknowledged suffered more than Lipsha Morrissey did. The thought of June grabbed my heart so, but I was lucky she turned me over to Grandma Kashpaw. (271-72)

Lipsha has reconciled himself to abandonment by June and accepted the knowledge that the gentle criminal Gerry is his father. Lipsha will not be consumed by depression, by loss, by drowning and destruction. Instead, he returns to the reservation to face his life with a sane and philosophical out-
look. He thinks about the river as he drives home in King’s car, the car revered as though it were June herself, and rejects the idea of suicide:

I’d heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the river, and bring her home. (272)

Lipsha has learned that we have to face problems, but we live on dry land and do not let them overwhelm us until we drown. His future may not be a bright one, but he has as his model the enduring saintliness of Grandma Kashpaw to inspire him.

Louise Erdrich’s story is not one of continuity, relatedness, and harmony with the land and nature, with culture and tradition—the “Universal Life Continuity” that shapes much native American fiction (Standiford 180). Instead, she depicts a cultural milieu where the sacred ceremonies, tribal rituals, and Indian cultural identity have disappeared. Eli Kashpaw is the last man on the reservation who could snare a deer, who knew how to skin a skunk and knew the ways of the woods. His twin, Nector, educated in the schools, loses his mind and cannot remember the history of his tribal battles to tell his granddaughter. Much of the reservation land allotted to the Indians has been sold to whites “and lost forever” (11). Thus, the connectedness to the land has disappeared, the means to make a living is gone, and the younger generation—King Jr., Albertine, Gordie, Lipsha, and others—must find work off the reservation or stay there and flounder.

Erdrich’s Love Medicine, while untraditional in many ways, gives a compassionate humanistic account of the lives of reservation Indians without glorifying their culture yet without demeaning them in their weaknesses and failure. Through comic deflation, Erdrich is able to present realistically their unique characters and situations, focusing upon the Indian American as a race with definite problems but with the same enduring nature as all Americans.

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