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Foundational Myths Revisited: Traditional and Contemporary Identity in the Novels of Louise Erdrich

William Blazek

The importance of Ojibwa¹ foundational myths in Louise Erdrich's first five novels of what might still be called the "Love Medicine"² series has been interpreted by critics with an increasing confidence and complexity that parallels the fiction's own development. The criticism most often emphasizes Erdrich's adaptations of traditional mythology to contemporary Native American experience in order to explore modern identity as a web of personal, community, and mytho-historic strands; but less often addressed is the author's delineation of such "classic" Euro-American myths as the American Dream of economic prosperity, the machine and technology as the means of exploiting new frontiers, and the road as symbol of escape and discovery.³ Even a brief foray into such territory should re-affirm the need for balanced investigation of Erdrich's work as a dialogue between Native American and Euro-American history and myth as it lives in the present and looks to the future. The subject for my own consideration of syncretic identity in the Love Medicine series will be the latest two novels, *The Bingo Palace* (1994) and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996). My focus will chiefly be on the ways in which the topic is developed through interwoven characters within the novel sequence, with particular attention to how the fifth volume, *Tales of Burning Love*, both consolidates and extends the quintet's interests and refashions American foundational myths.

¹ For discussions of the name Ojibwa and alternative forms, especially Chippewa and Anishnaabe, see Beidler and Barton 1, n. 1, T. Smith 3-6, Vizenor 13-21, and Wong 9.

² Beidler and Barton label the quintet "Louise Erdrich's Matchimanito novels" (ii). The name may catch on. A sixth volume will be published in 2001.

³ Beidler and Barton neatly understate: "The scholarship on Erdrich's work is rich and complex" (243). Besides other works cited in this essay, relevant scholarship includes Bak, Chavkin, Chavkin & Chavkin, Clarke, Friedman, Pittman, Ruppert, Schultz, and Walsh.

Tales of Burning Love continues a reconfiguration evident in the earlier works, a re-visioning of Native American identity within regional and national influences, one which demands new definitions of cultural boundaries, one which questions the relegated agency of the oppressed, and emphasizes deep interactions and transmigrations between cultures. Giving evidence of their multicultural era, the narrative ingenuities and diversity of styles in Erdrich's writing connect with tragic-comic themes of transcendence and forgiveness. *Tales of Burning Love* further develops such matters, as its authorial command is notably different from the previous novels, particularly shown in its more epigrammatic prose, emphatic voice, and expansive but firmly structured narrative form. Above all, *Tales of Burning Love* sharpens the focus which can now clearly be seen to have guided the project all along – a meditation (and I do not mean to over-simplify this) on the power of love, both to cause pain and longing and to transform and heal, an analysis of and for contemporary America as important and revealing as the mythic discourse on chivalric love or the origin and purpose of sin was to medieval Europe.

By exploring the sources of human love – its deep complexities and reliance on uncertain hope – the fifth novel of the series, especially, acknowledges and pursues contemporary debate about multiculturalism, projecting a simple answer within a complicated and contentious story: we are all connected, and there is no escaping the present we are in. Thus the central device of the narrative – an updating of traditional Ojibwa storytelling and Western oral-literary sources including Chaucer and Boccaccio, placing an ethnic and class mixture of four women, all once married to the same man, in a deadly situation, a kind of Long Night's Journey into Dawn, in which they must tell intimate stories in order to survive a sudden North Dakota blizzard. So the act of storytelling itself becomes an essential part of the story, the immediate present a self-regarding collaboration between reader and writer, interpreting stories which become literary tales that could only exist on the page and in a mind suspending disbelief – not just with regard to the tales told but also to the manner of telling, which is elaborately embroidered with the richly decorative yet fierce style that characterizes Erdrich's other novels. So on the one hand the character-specific chapter titles and up-to-the-minute time notations that are inserted alongside emphasize the role of the individual in contemporary events. On the other hand, there is a self-reflectiveness in the theme of transcendence which the stories take up, signaling a change in the direction of contemporary discourse about multiculturalism and building

national consensus, as if to say “We’ve gone through all that already; now can we hear about something else, something deeper and more personal.”

As, simultaneously, a fictional world within our contemporary view and a planet within its own solar system, this latest instalment from Erdrich’s imagined universe accepts its own history: answering some questions about what happened to the characters in the earlier books, extending the web to include new ones, some with unexpected or unacknowledged connections to previously created ones, and drawing together plot and fated action through the women’s husband-in-common Jack Mauser in a way similar to the attention given to the love-lorn, would-be healer Lipsha Morrissey in *The Bingo Palace*. The mainly off-reservation setting of *Tales of Burning Love* is in large measure a more often comic repast following the bitter taste left by *The Beet Queen*, a novel which required the magical flights of fancy of its last fifty pages to lift itself above the hellish, techno-psychotic landscape of the small-town America it portrays – a strange meeting of a marginalized yet life-enriching Native world with Lewis’ *Main Street* and Dante’s *Inferno*. The latest book also assumes its place within the larger context of the quintet’s twentieth-century chronicle, mainly based in the conflicts and transactions between and among Native and Euro-American cultures. In such a way, the novel *Tracks*, the first of the five books in terms of story chronology, assumes knowledge of the nineteenth-century and earlier history of relations between the U.S. and Native Americans, the opening scene like a frozen aftermath of Wounded Knee. So, too, *Tales of Burning Love* takes its place within contemporary political issues, such as the legal status of casinos on reservation land and the value of sub-regional economic development. It also accommodates previous stories within the series – in particular catching up with the furious Dot Adare from *The Beet Queen* and the trickster convict Gerry Nanapush, first introduced in *Love Medicine*, with important reprises from Sister Leopolda and the spirit of June Morrissey, and the immediate fate of Lipsha Morrissey from *The Bingo Palace* answered. The phrase “tales of burning love” itself can first be found in *The Beet Queen*, in a disparaging description of the false romance of cheap “romance novels” which never mention bastard children nor the panic and pain of giving birth (139). The assiduous reader can explore the developed meanings of the phrase in *The Bingo Palace*, in which the character Zelda drunkenly recounts her tale of burning love, confesses how she refused her one chance for a life-giving love (46).

One can see how the five novels lay down compelling trails and perform difficult balancing tricks, both intra-textually and socioculturally. In that

way, they are self-contained as well as boundless, much like the bi-modular design of individual chapters, especially noticeable in the first two novels. This feature allows parts of them to be published as freestanding short stories or as integrated and integral chapters within the novels, which are themselves aspects of a greater chronicle.

One particular theme of the quintet, prioritized here among several other opportunities, is money – its sources, what it influences, and whether or not it can be utilized for any good effect. Money and number-based value systems feature prominently in the books and supply special resonance because of the recent economic empowerment of many Native American groups through widespread casino and other gaming developments, and because of consequent challenges to political authority and repositionings of cultural identity and status. However, money's chief importance in the novel sequence is that it stands as the nemesis of love. Money is the fuel of mobile American Dreams, but it can burn love, poison hope, and disintegrate lives.

The two novels that focus most specifically on money matters are *The Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love*, one chiefly set on reservation land near the Canadian border and the other mainly in the fictional Argus and an often unnervingly well-observed Fargo, North Dakota. However, the arguments about money in these two works spring in part from the lack of such capital and consequent hardships illustrated in *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Beet Queen*. In *Tracks* those consequences include death by starvation and disease, suffering from lack of adequate shelter, uncertain survivals. Unceasingly regular payments for land allotments must be made, and the novel uses these factually based circumstances to demonstrate both the dearth and the richness of the reservation inhabitants as they sell animal pelts and strip cranberry bark to meet the season's financial requirements. However, in doing so, in being forced to deal with monetary values and to rely upon the possession of their own sources of power, that local, nature-centered power is diminished, particularly that of the central shamanic figure, Fleur Pillager: "Her dreams lied, her vision was obscured, her helper slept deep in the lake, . . ." (177). Enough money for another deadline is barely accumulated, but the inevitable loss occurs, unforgivably but perhaps just as inevitably through betrayal within the household group, the funds used by Nector Kashpaw to pay for his mother's allotment. In *Love Medicine* we learn the nonnegotiable price paid by Nector, who becomes a tribal leader but is emptied of life and cursed with dissatisfactions.

His son Lyman Lamartine (whose name connotes both "layman" and "lieman," and perhaps Willy Loman), takes on the paternal role with a modern

monetarist vengeance, becoming an Upper-Midwest mover-and-shaker in *Tales of Burning Love*, “not so much changed as consolidated,” both physically and politically (404). He wears a mask of confidence, but he suffers from the same unbalanced spirit as his father, even though his embrace of commercial forces and his stock-market mentality are targeted on the objective of reclaiming a wider reservation holding from the surrounding farmland and providing for the tribal members the goods and services that Western capital can acquire. “Land is the only thing that lasts life to life,” he hears Fleur Pillager tell him in a dream (*Bingo Palace* 148). Yet his interpretation of that message – “Use a patch of federal trust land somewhere, anywhere near his employee base. Add to it, diversify, recycle what money came in immediately into land-based operations” (149) – uses the language of money and thereby debases his goal. The costs and rewards of such associations, in particular the gift and the threat of “bingo cash,” are not ignored within the reservation, not even by Lyman, whose experience during a business trip to a Reno casino, detailed in the chapter “Lyman’s Luck” in *The Bingo Palace*, explores the meaning of obsession (or possession), his gambler’s luck first easily gaining and then quickly losing money and belongings, including the temporary surrender to a pawn shop of his half-brother Lipsha’s traditional pipe, with all of its tribal and personal history and weight. The special significance and allure of casino gambling for the Ojibwa and Lyman’s overconfident assertions of control over the gambling impulse both rely on the contemporariness of arguments about reservation gaming legislation, on the example of Fleur Pillager in winning her land back through gambling, and on connections with Ojibwa traditions and mythology, especially the re-creation myth of Nanabozho. The hope which bingo cash represents, therefore, has extensive roots; and its attachment to and manipulation of greedy materialism outside of the reservation is a considered transaction, holding indeterminate dangers.

The other mitigating explanation for Lyman’s enthusiasm for money’s power is his curious and tortured hope that it can somehow purchase some equilibrium from the haunting memory of his other half-brother Henry’s drowning in a river through a car accident. Fearing that a regular hospital would keep his brother captive, Lyman attempts to repair the automobile and use it either as a medicine to cure Henry’s fading life – which has become doubly disjointed by experiences in Vietnam in the service of the U.S. government – or as transport for Henry along the Path of Souls. Lyman’s failure possesses him through three volumes of the *Love Medicine* series, and the effects are compounded by his growing political and financial influence on

the reservation and in the region. His efforts at exculpation, such as a vision quest and dancing in Henry's old-style powwow outfit, are only partially successful, due largely to his selfish purpose. To put the message in a limited Western context, selfishness, or more often greed, is the unpardonable and original sin in Erdrich's fiction.

Although Lyman Lamartine's transactions with U.S. business and bureaucracy are less ambiguous in their lessons to the reader, those of Lipsha Morrissey, his foil in *The Bingo Palace*, point more directly to the need for a more personal resolution through self-awareness. He enters the story as a foreigner to his own people, returning to the reservation during a circle dance, slowly able to tell his captive narrative (one of many examples of this ironic reversal in the series) of how he took a job shovelling sugar in a Fargo sugar beet plant, the rotten, industrially refined sweetness collecting and hardening in layers around him. Jumping in and out of Lyman's circle of business and love affairs only compounds his problems. However, a deeper need for understanding drives Lipsha, so that his flaws and failures seem more forgivable and likely to achieve forgiveness. He is able to recognize, for example, that the van he has acquired in a bingo jackpot is merely "transportation" and "insulation," meeting necessities but not the destination nor the source of his desire. As part of an inventive remaking of certain Midwestern state boundaries (e.g. Minnesota with its feminine torso), he realizes that his van is the shape of North Dakota, with its imposed constraints and divisions, and he is saved from having it tattooed on his skin.

His awakening to the possibilities of his first neglected and then misunderstood power as a healer come through Fleur Pillager, and involve a form of transit for each of them. He shares her amphibious Pillager nature, part of the mythic substance of Erdrich's chronicles, a power-laden association with water-manitouk that enables each of these characters to cheat death. Like hers, the healing power in his touch disappears when it is required, relied upon – in his case the healing source dries up when he charges customers for the service, in the misguided attempt to win the love of Shawnee Ray by recreating himself as a career-minded professional. He is closest to obtaining her love when he is least selfish about it. In the process of self-discovery and re-attachment to others, though, he flounders and leaps, stating in one moment of inspiration for a new way forward with her, "My luck's uneven, but it's coming back. I have a wild, uncanny hope" (*Bingo Palace* 82-83). Fleur has retrieved her family land and exacted revenge by using reliable human greed and a white Agent's fondness for technological display (the bait of a white-colored Pierce-Arrow car, in fact, one of Erdrich's playful reclama-

tions of car names from commercial culture), and the author weds Fleur's ruthless vengeance to Lipsha's search for understanding and reconciliation. They each undertake journeys of self-sacrifice, Fleur finally taking up her sled with the Pillager bones to walk the death road in order to rescue the life of Lipsha, who in turn demonstrates his worthiness for survival by sheltering with his own body a (supposed) white baby who would otherwise freeze to death in a car broken down during an escape from government police. He quietly declares ". . . here is one child who was never left behind" (258). The implications of this act are dependent on the many instances in Erdrich's novels of children traumatized early in their lives – the most important example, because of her wandering and uncanny spiritual presence through the series, is June Morrissey, whose "wild" life is most immediately the consequence of being raped as a child by her alcoholic mother's boyfriend. Furthermore, Lipsha's act of giving depends on the discourse of Native and U.S. history and contemporary debate; so the ostensibly descriptive sentence "An unknown path opens up before us, an empty trail shuts behind" (259) grows full of uncertainties as well as possibilities.

Just when many readers thought that the *Love Medicine* series would end on such tetralogical dis-closures, *Tales of Burning Love* appeared, to complicate matters and pursue the debate about what to do or how to live in a present burdened by history, hopeless misunderstandings, and horrible consequences. I would not suggest that it offers more than the possibility of affirmation. In a description of a sunflower field, temporarily saved from urban development by a ten-year lease, Erdrich writes: "There was no golden life out there. Only the uncertain ripening of fields" (421). The two short sentences function together in the sense that Theresa S. Smith asserts that the Thunderers and water monsters of Ojibwa mythology operate, "not a duality but a dialectic," a balancing and interdependent relationship between the upper and lower worlds, with the earth fixed precariously in between (183). The anticipation of harvest in *Tales of Burning Love*, however (even of sunflowers, which Midwestern farmers think of as benevolent weeds), holds a promise that cannot be fully asserted in *The Bingo Palace*. In that earlier novel, Lipsha thinks of the ancient and modern North Dakota landscape, the destructive but mutable efforts of humans to transform and control it, and "the chaos underneath" which may still resist human impositions. The emphasis is more on the present and the future in *Tales of Burning Love*, even though the force of technological determinism in paving the earth may be the threat that replaces government-sponsored racism and territorial imperialism.

The character in *Tales of Burning Love* in whom contemporary questions about identity are most fully explored and in whom the force of change principally resides is Jack Mauser. There may be an allusion here to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, but more directly the surname in German means "moulting," and his persistent attempts at marriage are but one aspect of his fault-riddled efforts at self-redefinition and personal renewal. In the scene that drives the plot of the novel, his new, grandly designed but poorly constructed house burns down, and his close escape from immolation leaves him naked outdoors on a New Year's Eve, slouching towards Fargo to be reborn. Among its many hi-tech features, the house had been designed to maintain and protect itself, but still it burns down. The inferno reflects not only the risk of technological dependence but also Jack's selfish reliance on others and, eventually, his hard-earned recognition of the interdependence and mutuality which that need involves.⁴

The nearly frozen blood in him is "a mixture of Tatar-Slavic, Hun, Ojibwa" (61) – a reminder of other tribal migrations in world history, whether because of natural growth or territorial conquest. The Ojibwa portion from his mother is not only hidden and unacknowledged at first, but also resisted. He whispers his mother's family name so low that the reader cannot hear, and only gradually does her identity gain purchase – that of a very mixed-blood Native North American, of uncertain ancestry from various tribes and some French. His eventual recognition of her ". . . secret, wild, despairing love . . ." (185) for him co-mingles with his acceptance of a childhood spent for a time on the reservation.

Acknowledgement of these long-buried affinities is one thing, but making use of them is another. Only after his own premature funeral, undertaken in his absence because of his presumed death in the house fire, can some form of regeneration take place. His return to the reservation is marked by "pure and strange" memories that re-awaken his senses and signal his potential emergence into a new self: "As he got closer he could breathe the difference. . . . The hiss of ice forming in bands on the October Lake. . . . Crescent of soft grass alongside a hill where he'd once hidden all day while his mother howled in a rhythmical sequence. A bell ringing over winter fields. A rosary in someone's cracked hands" (401). What Erdrich elsewhere (Wong 223)

⁴ House fires leap across the novels: consider "The Good Tears" chapter in *Love Medicine*. The hi-tech house has roots in Sita's house in *The Beet Queen*: "Lying here, I imagine all that I could do by remote control" (282). The "Zelda's Luck" chapter in *The Bingo Palace* makes the connection between houses and human suffering and rebirth: "She was a house falling apart, the nails, each in turn wrenched from the wood with a sob . . . the inner beams shouting *huhnh, huhnh, huhnh*, panting with the sound of a woman giving birth" (242-43).

calls a mother's "milk wisdom" seeps into this passage, along with allusions to the rhythms of nature and links to religion as a local and cosmic place. Furthermore, the chapter title, "Mauser and Mauser," seeks to confirm Jack's family connections – to his mother, wives, and baby son – this time through honest emotion rather than as the bogus corporate title painted on his construction-company trucks has been used to give the impression of stability and generations of effort and care. Yet his involvement in the construction industry – in particular laying interstate highways and, ominously, blackmailed into running the new reservation-casino building project for Lyman Lamartine – shackles him to bankers and lawyers and presents a barbed-wired barrier to self-directed renewal. Moreover, his efficiency in completing projects on time and within budget is rewarded only with financial problems and a failing business – marks of his displacement and the "careless persistence" of the technocratic world identified in *Tracks* (217). The irony of his rescue from bankruptcy and prison, because the banks have to reinvest in him in order to recoup their losses, contains the seeds for some kind of individual and (by implication) tribal empowerment, but in a weed-strewn field. Only through faltering circumstances and by repositioning his hope onto the intimate rather than the grand designs of his life does he gain a contingent happiness. His return to his ex-wife Eleanor with a more mature understanding of love's demands and gifts is presented as a tentative and partial union.

A parallel lesson about loss and the opportunities it opens up is given in the story about Eleanor's parents, Anna and Lawrence Schlick. In part, their at first comic-grotesque but later richly pathetic presence in the latest novel of the series provides a conclusive reminder that Native Americans have no monopoly on displacement, alienation, or suffering – and that Euro-American cultures are not the monolithic entity often assumed in criticism of Native writing. On the other hand, Lawrence's pursuit and support of the public expectations of the American Dream place them in a frozen circle of business interests, civic-leadership responsibilities, and torpid inner lives. Jack Mauser's catalytic entry into the Schlicks' lives alters everything for the family. Lawrence's exaggerated imaginings of an affair between Jack and Anna soon run alongside the thoroughness with which he cuts off his wife and daughter from the capital of his business fiefdom.

Only after Anna's death can Lawrence find release from the suffering that love, hatred, jealousy, and desire cause him – a final transformation that binds the personal to the metahistorical strands of the *Love Medicine* novels in the deliberate but desperate suicide via cremation with his deceased wife that Lawrence enacts in the fourth-from-last chapter of *Tales of Burning*

Love. Its position in the volume and its title, “A Light from the West,” suggest its significance. Love meets death through the technology of the furnace’s timer switching on with “a thick roar of consuming fire” (435). The reconciling deaths of Eleanor’s parents are mediated through the technologies of medicine and cremation, some of the machinery that drives the contemporary world to its uncertain end. Before then, everyone – whether Polish-German like Eleanor or French-Germanic-Ojibwa like Jack – must perform “balancing tricks” to avoid egotism yet create an adequate space and sense of self or, more accurately, selves in order to endure within an unsettled and unfinished universe. “A Last Chapter” at the end of the novel speaks to the hope within the unlikely but enduring bond that draws Eleanor and Jack together.

Because that fragile and ferocious hope relates to so much in Louise Erdrich’s fiction, and because she creates from hermeneutic structures and multifold layers of understanding, the last sentence in *Tales of Burning Love* incorporates the ambiguities and accepts the uncertainties of individual lives and community dreams even as it celebrates their survival: “But it was also hard to bear the pain of coming back to life” (452).⁵ En route to these concluding words, the first five *Love Medicine* novels – some 1,656 pages of fictional life – reach deeply into the human condition as they chronicle and reinscribe ethnic history, examine the pain of loss – especially the diminution of the sacred in contemporary life. They also project Ojibwa mythology and their own imagined cosmos as ways of understanding the different worlds we inhabit, and progress the course of dialogue between America’s many selves.

While the traditional and contemporary sources of identity move with ever-more rapid flux, Erdrich’s reinventions of Ojibwa and Euro-American mythology present – within individual, tribal, and national stories – a dynamic vision of interconnectedness and understanding, but without easy reconciliations. Jeanne Rosier Smith in *Writing Tricksters* proposes that we understand Erdrich as a “trickster author”, with the ability to shape-shift myth into new patterns of survival and celebration. Smith argues more particularly that “Erdrich views identity as ‘transpersonal’: a strong sense of self must be based not on isolation but on personal connections to community and to myth” (74). In an ethnographic study that deserves wider circulation

⁵ In an often-cited paragraph from “Where I Ought to Be,” Erdrich writes: “In the light of enormous loss, [contemporary Native American writers] must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe” (Wong 48). My argument is that in *Tales of Burning Love* she goes beyond that essential foundational purpose.

among Erdrich scholars, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg* (1995), Theresa S. Smith makes a related but more comprehensive assertion about the place of humans “within the fluidity of the Ojibwe life-world” (17). In describing that world as a dialectic between forces of order and chaos, balance and imbalance, the author discusses the goal of traditional Ojibwa life: *bimaadiziwin* – “living well,” with its rewards of good health, security, harmony, and longevity. While Erdrich’s characters never successfully receive this combination of gifts, they are shown in the difficult but necessary act of balancing self and community – seeking equilibrium and recreating identities in a contemporary world which often denies mythic connections. With a compunction born of a need to find new definitions for myth in a multi-ethnic and technocratic America, the *Love Medicine* novels follow old and new trails in an effort to understand the power and fragility of love. The route rather than the destination holds our attention, and it is marked by an interdependent need for respect, directed not only towards other persons (including non-human persons) but also towards the sustaining earth, our populated island between water and sky. Erdrich’s role, then, in what might be called American transcendental as well as transcultural renewal, places her in association with the Seventh Prophecy of the Anishnaabeg, which foretells of the emergence of a new people, reborn into the light of rekindled fires (T. Smith 38).

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