

THE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM OF LOUISE ERDRICH

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which Louise Erdrich's use of Catholic symbols progress over the course of four of her novels including, Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, Tracks and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. Throughout her works, Erdrich repeatedly rewrites Catholic symbols, particularly the symbols of baptism and the Virgin Mary. With each repetition, Erdrich adjusts the narrative by rewriting the Catholic symbolism to fit within a syncretic understanding, slowly erasing previous tensions that existed between the Catholic belief system and the Ojibwe traditional religion. The symbols are ultimately brought to a syncretic resolution in the character of Father Damien as she appears in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. Erdrich also uses her repetition of Catholic symbolism to explore questions of gender and cultural identity that are embedded within the religious history of Catholicism and Ojibwe traditional religion.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations for the novels of Louise Erdrich appear as follows:

BD: Baptism of Desire

BQ: The Beet Queen

LM: Love Medicine: Revised Version

LR: The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

T: Tracks

TBL: Tales of Burning Love

I. INTRODUCTION

Although you never change once you're raised a Catholic—you've got that. You've got that symbolism, that guilt, you've got the whole works...[It's] easy to talk about because you have to exorcise it somehow.

—Louise Erdrich¹

In several interviews, Louise Erdrich discusses her relationship with the religions of her heritage—the Catholicism of her father and the Ojibwe² traditional religion of her mother. In a 1994 interview, she recounts that Native Americans who have knowledge of both belief systems are torn between the two stating, “Religion is a deep force, and people magnetize around the core of a belief system. It is very difficult for one to remain loyal to both” (Chavkin 230). Yet, seven years later, in an interview with Katie Bacon, Erdrich states, “There is no tension in my life regarding the two [systems of belief].” The change in her response seems to indicate that Erdrich has undergone a type of reconciliation in the time span between these interviews.

Erdrich's shift in perspective regarding her relationship to Catholic and Ojibwe religion is also reflected in her novels over a similar time span. Looking closely at her use

¹ This quote is taken from an interview that Erdrich gave in 1987. She is responding to the interviewer's question asking why there is so much Catholicism in her first two novels (Bruchac, 100).

² Throughout my work, I have used the term “Ojibwe” in place of the terms “Anishinabe” or “Chippewa” in accordance with Erdrich's use of terms in her later work. For additional clarification, please refer to the introduction of Beidler and Barton's A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich: Revised and Expanded Edition.

of religious symbolism over the course of her novels, Erdrich seems to have worked out a relationship between the two systems of belief, allowing her to move from a place of conflict to a place of complementary syncretic acceptance—a place of balance. The reconciliation that she achieves does not come from a theological synthesis of the beliefs held by the respective religions; rather it results from Erdrich's ability to find a way to move past the painful historical relationship that has existed between the two religions. This change in perspective is reflected in Erdrich's use of religious symbolism within her novels. For the purpose of this study, I began by looking at Erdrich's use of religious symbols in her first novel, Love Medicine, which was published in 1984. Then I followed her symbols through The Beet Queen and Tracks, finally ending with her 2001 The Last Report on the Miracle at Little No Horse where many of her religious themes arrive at a type of culmination.

While Erdrich's novels are rife with religious symbolism, two prevalent symbols stand out: Christian baptism and the statue of the Virgin Mary. Both of these images are repeated several times over the course of her work and with each repetition, the symbols accrue a new dimension of understanding as Erdrich adds to their embedded meaning. Her renderings of baptism and the Virgin Mary are presented as sites of complex spiritual and cultural intersection, both highlighting the historical tension that exists between the Catholic religion and the Ojibwe people while at the same time exploring their shared values and beliefs.

The accrual of meaning and tension within these symbols continues until both reach a synchronistic resolution at the hands of Father Damien³ in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. As a female masquerading as a male Catholic Priest who comes to practice Ojibwe traditional religion, Father Damien challenges conventional historical, religious and gender standards. Because of her ability to defy categories, Father Damien not only serves to synthesize Erdrich's religious symbols, but also functions as the ultimate symbol of religious syncretism in that she actualizes the sense of balance that Erdrich is trying to create.

While Erdrich uses religious symbols as a means of examining the spiritual and cultural relationship between Catholicism and Ojibwe traditional beliefs, she addresses these symbols from her vantage point as a female and mother. In a 1996 interview with Robert Spillman, Erdrich says that her role as a mother has changed her as an artist in that it has allowed her to be "emotionally engaged in ways [she] wouldn't have been otherwise." This maternal emotional engagement is reflected in the symbols that Erdrich chooses to use in her religious exploration. The symbol of baptism is intimately tied to the birth of children, the statue of the Virgin Mary is a symbolic representation of motherhood and virginity, and finally, Father Damien's love for the Ojibwe is depicted as the love of a mother for her child. Because of this markedly maternal perspective, Erdrich's religious symbols not only address historical and religious relationships, but also provide a commentary on the place that the female occupies within both cultures.

³ In accordance with Erdrich's practices in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, I have alternatively referred to Father Damien using both "he" and "she" depending on the textual context.

In conducting my research on Erdrich's religious symbolism, I was heavily influenced by Susan Stanford Friedman's article "Identity, Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich's Tracks" as well as Jeana DelRosso's book Writing Catholic Women. Friedman's article outlining the religious syncretism in Tracks provided me with a framework with which to look at Erdrich in terms of her religious syncretism that I then applied to Erdrich's other novels. My search to find interconnections among the novels is in line with Erdrich's assertion that she is "working on one big continuous novel" (Bacon par. 10). Additionally, while Friedman's syncretist reading suggests "that Nanapush and Pauline exist in perpetual interplay as positive and negative manifestations of similar forces" (126), I have tried to show that the positive and negative forces are not limited to specific characters or aligned with a specific religion. Rather, that Erdrich's exploration of religious themes is an ongoing dialogue that continues to progress over the course of her novels.

DelRosso's work was very useful to me in that it provided a perspective on Erdrich that placed her within a canon of Catholic writers. While scholars often refer to Erdrich's Catholic upbringing, the majority of scholarship focused on her religious background has been done in terms of her work as an Ojibwe writer working against a negative Catholic influence. This perspective, while important, is contrary to many of Erdrich's own assertions regarding Catholicism in which she acknowledges her complex relationship with the religion. In a 2005 interview with Gail Caldwell, Erdrich recounts that while Catholicism has been a destructive force among the Native American people, when she would go and stay with the Benedictine sisters on the reservation, she "would

be in the presence of this overwhelming love.” She continues saying “I’ve never been able to get to the bottom of that dichotomy and I think that’s what a lot of the work is about.”

II. BAPTISM

...we hung by the flesh,
as in the moment before birth
when the spirit is quenched
in whole pain, suspended
until there is no choice, the body
slams to earth,
the new life starts.

—Louise Erdrich, “The Sacraments”⁴

As an Ojibwe as well as a person with a Catholic background, it would be almost impossible for Erdrich to prevent the water imagery from seeping into her novels, as the image of water is symbolically important within both cultures. The image of water also pervades both Catholicism and the Ojibwe religion. In one it is a source of blessing, the other a source of fear. Erdrich not only allows water imagery to work its way into her work, she wholeheartedly embraces it, to such an extent that her first novel, Love Medicine, revolves around the theme of water. Erdrich states in a 1986 interview with Hertha D. Wong that, in the work, “the main image is the recurring image of the water—transformation (walking over snow or water) and a sort of transcendence” (44). In her later works, Erdrich continues to give water an important role by filling the novels with

⁴ “The Sacraments” is a six-part poem found in Erdrich’s book Baptism of Desire. Each segment of the poem corresponds to one of the six Catholic sacraments. This selection is taken from the first section which corresponds to the sacrament of baptism.

scenes of drowning, freezing, water monsters, and baptisms. It is this last use of water that offers a means of understanding more about the religious significance that she embeds within her water symbolism. Erdrich's scenes of Christian baptism are sites of complex cultural and religious intersection. In her novels, her portrayals of baptism allude to a violent history of Christian conversion as well as an Ojibwe fear and respect of the water as a powerful force. Yet, amidst the conflicting cultural meanings of the symbol, Erdrich finds a way to approach baptism as a place of powerful affirmation and transformation. Her understanding allows us to see baptism with the same sense of enchantment and delight that Father Damien feels at the baptism of Lulu in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse.

When creating her scenes of baptism, Erdrich draws strongly on a historically Christian understanding of baptism which serves to definitively place the scenes within a Catholic context. Within the Christian dialogue, the image of baptism is fundamentally tied to the concept of conversion. In the Catholic Church, baptism is listed first among the sacraments because it functions as the entryway into the Church—it is the believer's first step on the path to a Christian life. In The Catholic Encyclopedia, baptism is defined as “the sacrament by which we are born again of water and the Holy Ghost...by which we receive in a new and spiritual life, the dignity of adoption as sons of God and heirs of God's kingdom.” The water is a symbolic sign of transformation as the participant undergoes a conversion from the sinful self, or old self, to join the Christian life and become a new person in Christ—a new creation. In the Christian church, the symbol of

baptism works on both a literal and figurative level as it refers concurrently to a physical act as well as a spiritual and cultural transformation.

Erdrich's descriptions of baptism focus not only on the Christian understanding of baptism, but also place baptism in the context of the Ojibwe understanding as an imported ritual. The positive association of baptism as a symbol of rebirth and a means of bringing new believers into the fold is complicated when regarded through the lens of the Ojibwe community. As the *intent* of baptism is conversion, within the missionary history of the Catholics among the Ojibwe, the *act* of baptism is conversion. However, as an Ojibwe, the focus of conversion is not necessarily associated with the beginning of a new life as a Christian, rather it often meant a turning away from one's cultural and religious identity as an Ojibwe.

In their article, "The Ojibwa-Jesuit Debate at Walpole Island, 1844," Denys Delânge and Helen Hornbeck Tanner provide a detailed historical context that helps us to better understand the Ojibwe perspective and provides us with a context to Erdrich's baptismal descriptions. In a series of speeches between the Ojibwe Chief Petrokeshig and the Jesuit Father Pierre Chazelle, the two men articulate a defense of their respective religious beliefs. While Father Chazelle maintains a sense of respect for the Ojibwe beliefs, he continues to reinforce the Ojibwe's need to believe in "the light that the son of the Great Spirit brought, by becoming man" (309) i.e. Christ. In response, Chief Petrokeshig rejects Chazelle's calls for Christianity on the grounds that it would require him to "give up the blessings of the Ancestor" (311) and "make the ancient customs disappear" (313).

As the speeches indicated, Chief Petrokeshig's reason for rejecting Christianity was not based on any moral determination of right or wrong as Father Chazelle is trying to argue, rather, the Chief's focus is grounded in the understanding that if he were to accept the "son of the Great Spirit" (304), it would require him to turn his back on his cultural traditions. As the argument proceeds, the two men continue to reiterate their points using their divergent methods of reasoning which illustrates the fundamental cultural misunderstanding which existed between the two systems of beliefs. For the Ojibwe, acceptance of Christianity did not merely require a spiritual adjustment, but it also required acceptance of the European customs and worldview. In a sense, for an Ojibwe to be Catholic, he must stop being Ojibwe.

Chief Petrokeshig's rejection of Christianity and refusal of baptism does not reflect the response of all of the Native people when it came to baptism. Among the Ojibwe, several Native people were baptized, however, their reasons for undergoing baptism were not necessarily based on a spiritual or cultural desires. Instead, they were often motivated by fear. In his article, "Baptism and Alliance: The Symbolic Meditations of Religious Syncretism," Kenneth Morrison describes the Jesuits early work with the Montagnais people in Canada. The Montagnais were an Algonquin speaking tribe and were relatives of the Ojibwe. Morrison articulates that at the time of the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries, the Montagnais people were struggling to understand their changing reality, "particularly the increasing pain of postcontact life and the meaning of death" (420). Within a framework of increasing disease and social upheaval, the Montagnais came to view the act of baptism as a powerful ritual that brought about the death of the

participant because of the Catholic practice of baptizing those on their deathbed. As Morrison writes, “Thinking in terms of the vital symbols of traditional power, the Montagnais concluded that if baptism could kill, it might also cure” (420). Morrison continues explaining that, “Since [the Jesuits] held that ‘fear is the forerunner of faith,’ [they] made baptism the main symbolic vehicle by which the French offered the Montagnais religious safety as well as a political, economic, and military alliance” (420-421). As both of these articles illustrate, the historical Indian perspective on baptism was strongly filtered through a cultural lens. For the Ojibwe, participating in the act of baptism required much more of them than an acceptance of Christianity’s spiritual message.

An additional factor complicating the relationship between the Ojibwe and baptism is found in the Ojibwe’s own understanding of the role that water plays within their belief system. In contrast to a symbolic Christian understanding of water as symbolic of life and transformation, for the Ojibwe, water occupies a much more ambiguous place. While water is still respected as a source of life and affirmation for the Ojibwe, it also contained the power to destroy and as such, demanded fear and respect. In her book, The Islands of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life-World, Theresa Smith writes that, while on one level, water was understood as the life-blood of the community in that it “provided sustenance and transportation to Anishnaabeg,” at the same time, the Ojibwe approached the water with a sense of fear as it was a place unknown to humans and controlled by powerful spiritual beings. In the Ojibwe understanding “humans do not belong in the water” and as

foreigners, “they may only hope that their presence on or near it will at least be suffered by the manitouk who dwell there” (121). Erdrich’s novels reflect this fear of the water in her many allusions to the powerful water monster, Misshepeshu. As Erdrich scholar Connie Jacobs articulates, Misshepeshu had the “power to calm the waters, to send the killing squalls, or to grant safe passage over the frozen waters in wintertime.” As people dependent upon the water for food and transportation, this power for the Ojibwe “means the difference between life and death,” making Misshepeshu “the ‘most powerful of all the Algonkian Manitos’” (161). The presence of a powerful water monster adds a decidedly darker angle on a Christian call for the Ojibwe people to immerse themselves in water as a means of finding life.

The Ojibwe’s apprehension of the water was not limited to fear of physical death by drowning, but also included a fear of spiritual isolation. Within the Ojibwe belief system, it was held that those who undergo death by drowning are not allowed to enter the Ojibwe afterlife. As Smith describes, when the Ojibwe journeyed to the land of souls, they must cross a bridge over a raging river. While crossing the bridge, the Ojibwe are faced with the constant fear of failing because falling means that they “will never be able to reach the land of souls but will, instead, haunt the riverbanks, or alternatively, disappear altogether” (107). Erdrich illustrates this idea in Love Medicine when she describes Lulu Lamartine’s response to the drowning death of her son Henry. When Lulu is told of Henry’s death, she recounts that Moses Pillager once told her that “drowning was the worst death for a Chippewa to experience” because the drowned, “weren’t allowed into the next life, but forced to wander forever, broken shoed, cold, shore and

ragged” as “there was no place for the drowned in heaven or anywhere on earth” (LM 295). The Ojibwe fear of spiritual death and alienation that comes as the result of drowning serves as an ironic contrast to the Catholic understanding of the water as a place of spiritual renewal. For the Ojibwe, the act of drowning bars them from entry into the afterlife while, for Christians, the symbolic “old self” must be drowned as a necessary prerequisite before they are able to enter into the afterlife.

It is within the complex cultural history that Erdrich comes to her scenes of baptism. Contained within her depictions, Erdrich includes elements of both a Catholic understanding as well as those of the Ojibwe. However, while her scenes draw in the conflicting cultural history, Erdrich does not remain at a place of conflict. Instead of using her scenes as a means of continuing a dialogue in which both parties are coming to the table from vastly different perspectives, Erdrich tries to shift baptism over the course of her novels from a symbol of conflict to a place of understanding.

Baptism in The Beet Queen

Erdrich refers to Love Medicine as her water novel, yet first scene of Christian baptism occurs in her second novel, The Beet Queen published in 1986. The baptism scene in The Beet Queen is important to examine because it establishes a foundation from which Erdrich continues to work and develop in her later depictions of baptism. The Beet Queen is set within the German-American community of Argus, North Dakota, a small town outside of the reservation. As we follow Erdrich’s scenes of baptism through Tracks

and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, the setting moves from the Argus community to the reservation community. The sequence mirrors the historical trajectory of baptism within North America as baptism originated in the European community and was later brought to the Native Americans.⁵

The Beet Queen baptism is that of Wallacette “Dot” Adare, a child who is the result of a brief relationship between the German-Ojibwe Celestine James and the transient Karl Adare. In setting the scene for the baptism of Dot, Erdrich brings together several characters who would be otherwise isolated from each other and the rest of the Argus community. Included among the participants are: Dot’s godfather, Wallace Pfef, who is a homosexual male living outside of the community both physically and socially; Mary Adare, Dot’s aunt, who is a spiritual eccentric and Dot’s mother; Celestine Johnson, who, as a person of mixed heritage and lives on the fringes of both the Argus community and the nearby reservation. Dot’s baptism is the first time in the novel that these three characters set aside their difference and come together for a common purpose. Celestine acknowledges this new unity when she remarks after the baptism that, the child, like the spider in her hair, “threw out invisible strings and caught them” creating “a complicated house, that [she] could not bring herself to destroy” (BQ 176).

The unity that Erdrich establishes at the baptism of Dot continues through the rest of the novel. Several years following the baptism, Wallace recounts, “More than anything we had in common, Dot’s spite drove Celestine, Mary, and me together” (BQ 301).

⁵ I understand that in the timeline of the story, the baptism in Tracks takes place 40 years earlier than the baptism in The Beet Queen. What I am trying to illustrate, however, is in Erdrich’s writing, she first creates a traditional baptism in a traditional Christian setting and then moves the setting to the reservation to explore the implications.

Though their relationship is tenuous and strained at times, they never abandon their sense of community and loyalty to the child that was first established at the baptism. In bringing together these characters at Dot's baptism, Erdrich emphasizes baptism's intimate tie to the birth of children and establishes it as a practice that brings isolated individuals together into a new community. This perspective on baptism works within a Christian understanding of baptism as a symbol used to bring isolated characters into a new community—the church.

Emphasizing baptism's creation of a new sense of communal unity begins the process of opening up the symbolism of baptism to an Ojibwe understanding as well a Christian one, based in their mutual appreciation of the importance of community. The new unity that is created at Dot's baptism comprises individuals of both Ojibwe and German descent. Erdrich's focus on baptism as a site of a new community formed by previously isolated individuals changes the focus of baptism away from its mainly negative association within the Ojibwe historical context—that of religious conversion—and instead places it within a context that is more amenable to the Ojibwe—that of community.

At the same time that Erdrich adjusts the interpretation of baptism, she does not completely disregard baptism's negative historical associations. As the priest completes the traditional ceremony, he moves to drop the holy water on Dot's forehead. In response to this, Dot "roared on and on as if she'd never stop" (BQ 174). As a mixed blood Ojibwe, Dot's roar of protest is a roar against both the cultural and spiritual effects of baptism on the Ojibwe. It places her among the ranks of her ancestors like Chief

Petrokeshig's who have fought against the cultural conversion that comes with baptism. It also expresses an Ojibwe cultural fear and respect for water. In this small act of defiance, Erdrich keeps alive the cultural voice of the Ojibwe people amidst the German community. By including the creation of new community as a result of baptism, while, at the same time, maintaining a voice of protest allows Erdrich to respect the importance of the Catholic sacrament of baptism, as well as use the scene to speak against the negative effects with which baptism has been historically used on the Ojibwe people.

Baptism in Tracks

In her 1988 novel, Tracks, Erdrich uses the themes established in Dot's baptism and expands upon them in her depiction of Lulu Nanapush's baptism. While Dot's baptism took place within a church in the Argus community, Lulu's baptism takes place on the Ojibwe reservation, outside of both the community and the church. Additionally, while the majority of the participants in Dot's baptism were of German descent, except for the mixed-bloods, Celestine and Dot, at Lulu's baptism, the majority of the participants are Ojibwe, except for the priest. The change of setting allows Erdrich to take the themes established in the baptism at Argus and explore them at a deeper, more historically conflicted place.

As in Dot's baptism, Erdrich ties the act of baptism to the creation of a new community by bringing together several previously isolated individuals around the birth⁶, and subsequent baptism, of a child. Present at Lulu's baptism are Fleur, Margaret, Nanapush, Pauline and Father Damien. The new unity that is formed is particularly evident in change that takes place in the interactions between Fleur and Margaret. Prior to the birth of Lulu, Margaret is antagonistic to Fleur because of Fleur's relationship with Margaret's son, Eli. "With a confidence no one could shake," Margaret tries "to draw [Eli] back into her arms" (T 55) and away from Fleur. However, once the child is born, and the baptism takes place, Margaret and Fleur reconcile their differences and come together to raise the child⁷. Pauline remarks that after the baptism, Margaret, Nanapush and Fleur "formed a kind of clan, the new made up with bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new" (T 70). In this statement, Pauline not only accounts for the formation of a new community, but also provides a commentary on their new syncretism of religious beliefs as Margaret practices the "new" religion, Catholicism and Fleur practices the "old" Ojibwe traditional religion. The symbolism of baptism plays into this religious syncretism as it is the act that initiates the creation of a new clan of Kashpaws and Pillagers. In Tracks, baptism plays a greater role in the formation of community than it did in The Beet Queen because it not only unifies isolated individuals, is also unifies characters of different religions. In The Beet Queen, the new community

⁶ It could be argued that it is the birth of the child alone which forms this new community, however, I would respond that by continuing to describe the baptism as directly attached to the birth of the child, Erdrich is strategically giving the act of baptism a role to play in the creation of community.

⁷ A similar relationship develops between Margaret and Marie after the birth of Marie's last child, Eugene. See Love Medicine, pg 104.

created does not require a sense of religious unity, as the characters were all nominally Catholic.

While the characters in Tracks do accept baptism as a part of their syncretic practices, they do not consider Catholicism a requirement of partaking in the ceremony. Nanapush narrates that the reason they performed the baptism of Lulu was because it was a “custom by which we obliged our friend Father Damien” (T 61). This allows Nanapush to maintain a distance from the baptism, while at the same time, showing respect for the person and practices of Father Damien. As Father Damien arrives, Margaret brings the child to him without Fleur’s knowledge. While he is performing the ceremony, in an act reminiscent of Dot’s wailing in The Beet Queen, Fleur reaches out and pulls the child back to her in an effort to protect her child from the influence of the priest. Fleur’s protest is important because it establishes her as voice for Ojibwe traditional religion and also serves as a stand against a history of conversion that is implicit in baptism.

Yet, while Fleur stops the completion of the baptism, a version of the ceremony still continues. After she has taken back the child, Father Damien needs to complete the church records for the birth by giving the child a name. This provides a segue from the halted baptismal ceremony into a traditional naming ceremony. As Basil Johnston describes in his work, Ojibwe Heritage, the naming ceremony within the Ojibwe community was a simple ceremony in which the child was presented by the parents to the elders who gave the child its name (141). As the scene transfers from the baptism to the naming ceremony, the control of the scene shifts from Father Damien to Nanapush. If we look at the ceremony that follows in light of Johnson’s description, Nanapush plays the

role of both the parent and the elder. He acts as a parent in the sense that he initiates the ceremony and gives the child his last name, and he acts as an elder in that he performs the act of naming the child. However, in a sign of religious syncretism, Nanapush allows Father Damien to play a role as a co-spiritual leader at the ceremony as Father Damien is allowed to remain present and permitted to record the name within the church records. Nanapush's inclusion does not mean that Father Damien is fully incorporated into the community as his presence is still protested by Fleur and he is not listed as part of the new community that is forming around the birth of the child.

The name that Nanapush chooses, "Lulu Nanapush," also represents a mixture of traditions in that it is comprised of both German and Ojibwe names. Nanapush combines the diminutive of Erdrich's own German name "Louise" meaning "warrior" and his own name, Nanapush, a name given to him in honor of the Ojibwe Manitou Nanbozho. Earlier in the novel, Nanapush tells us that his father named him Nanapush because it has "got to do with trickery and living in the bush. Because it's got to do with something a girl can't resist. The first Nanapush stole fire. You will steal hearts" (T 33). By giving the child the name "Lulu Nanapush," Nanapush confers on her the strengths of both cultures—the power of the warrior and the power of the trickster.

In this portrayal of Lulu's baptism, Erdrich continues her work transforming the symbolism of baptism. Moving the ceremony to the reservation community requires Erdrich to rethink the roots of baptism. Instead of a serving as a sign of Catholic dominance, Erdrich includes the Ojibwe naming ceremony as a way to incorporate Ojibwe traditional elements into the Catholic symbol, reinterpreting its significance. Yet,

while this scene includes traditional religious elements from both cultures, there are still significant acts of protests and exclusion that take place—Fleur pulls the child back and Father Damien remains outside of the new community that is forming.

Baptism in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

The last scene of baptism is found in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. Within this baptismal scene, the tension that was present in the earlier two descriptions of baptism is resolved as Erdrich presents an alternative, workable understanding of the symbolism of baptism. To achieve this, Erdrich again describes the baptism of Lulu Nanapush. However, in her second adaptation of the scene, Erdrich chooses to describe the events from the perspective of Father Damien. Father Damien's narration completes a trajectory of narrators that started in The Beet Queen with Wallace Pfef. Erdrich first looks at the Christian baptism from a German-American perspective, then explores the Ojibwe perspective through the eyes of Nanapush and arrives at a place of religious syncretism through the narration of Father Damien who practices both Catholic and Ojibwe traditions. All three of the perspectives provided are those of men (or a performing male in the case of Father Damien) who are unable to have children of their own⁸. As such, the power of baptism is particularly powerful to them because it invites them into a community that they could not enter on their own.

⁸ I use "unable" not in a physical sense, but in the sense that the world of the novel will not allow them to have children. As a closeted homosexual male in a small community, Wallace Pfef has no means of becoming a father. Nanapush is considered too old to father a child and Father Damien, in her role as male priest, is barred from having a child of her own.

In the second telling of Lulu's baptism, Erdrich introduces the baptism by first describing Father Damien's encounter with a bear on his way to the birth house. We can assume that this is the same bear that Nanapush describes in Tracks as "the last bear" on the reservation (T 58). In Nanapush's account, the bear had gotten drunk on his wine and then came lumbering towards the birth house. Neither Nanapush nor Margaret are able to stop it from entering and its arrival fills Fleur "with such fear and power that she raised herself on the mound of blankets and gave birth" (T 60). Pauline then shoots the bear in the heart and it moves away from the birth house. As Nanapush watches it leave, he notices that "it left no trail either, so it could have been a spirit bear" (T 60). This statement leads us to presume that the bear was perhaps the spirit of Fleur. As Michelle Hessler describes in her article "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's Tracks" in Ojibwe spirituality "each person possesses two souls which they can metamorphize into other animate objects as they travel (41)." At the birth of Lulu, Fleur metamorphosed into the bear as a "bearwalker" (42), which gives us an indication of her considerable spiritual power. The bear at the baptism in both Tracks and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse is not only a wild animal in the woods, but instead serves as a powerful symbol of Fleur's Ojibwe spirituality.

In Father Damien's account of the baptism, he comes upon the bear after the bear has left the birth house. Instead of running from the bear as Nanapush and Margaret, or shooting at the bear as Pauline does, Father Damien takes out her holy water and blesses the bear (LR 183). If we understand the bear to represent Fleur's spirit animal, Father Damien's action are particularly significant. First, Father Damien immediately recognizes

the spiritual significance of the animal. Second, in blessing the bear as a representative of Fleur, Father Damien comes to the baptismal ceremony having already indicated his respect for Fleur's considerable powers and, by extension, her Ojibwe spirituality.

Father Damien's baptism of the bear also provides a counter image to Fleur's rejection of Father Damien in Tracks. While Fleur actively rejects Father Damien's religious practices, Father Damien comes to Fleur's birth house showing his respect for her spirituality. The intention of this comparison is not to show that Father Damien is more "open-minded" than Fleur, rather it serves to model the appropriate attitude with which an outsider should approach Ojibwe spirituality. Furthermore, portraying Father Damien's respectful approach provides a counter image to a historical narrative of the Catholic priests abusing the sacrament of baptism among the Native American population.

Erdrich continues to differentiate between the baptism in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse and that described in Tracks through Father Damien's completion of the baptismal ceremony. Whereas Nanapush tells us that Fleur reached out and stopped the ceremony in Tracks, Father Damien recounts that, despite his qualms about baptizing in secret, "the tender damage was done" (LR 183), which indicates that the baptism was completed without Fleur's interruption. Father Damien's act of respect for Fleur before the ceremony seems to be a key reason that Fleur allows the ceremony to continue. Furthermore, Father Damien is allowed to take the child in his arms after the ceremony reinforcing that Fleur did not pull the child back into the birth house.

Even though Fleur doesn't protest the baptism in Father Damien's version of the tale, Erdrich still uses the scene to allude to baptisms historical tie to cultural conversion. Immediately before Father Damien encounters the bear, he is praying "uneasily for the conversion of Nanapush" and then for "his own enlightenment in case converting Nanapush was a mistake" (LR 182). In a type of answer to his prayer, Erdrich enacts a new variation of the conversion narrative. After Father Damien takes Lulu into his arms, he is so moved by the experience that a reverse conversion begins to take place. Father Damien's love for the child draws him into the community, till he "simply found himself related" (LR 184). Instead of a conversion based in fear, the mother-like love pushes Father Damien away from his efforts to convert the Ojibwe and instead he starts to appreciate and practice their spirituality. The mother-like love also propels Father Damien to add his name to the birth certificate along with Nanapush. In doing so, the image of baptism creating community is continued and completed. Father Damien is no longer on the outside of the community; instead he is drawn into the middle of it, taking his place alongside Nanapush as a co-parent of the newborn child. The completion of Lulu's baptism creates a whole and complete community made up of both German and Ojibwe participants coming together both spiritually and culturally out of their shared love for the child.

The final scene of baptism brings Erdrich's religious symbolism full circle, reinterpreting the idea of conversion and relieving the tension that is present in the earlier two accounts. Instead of baptism serving as a purely Christian symbol, it now reads as a more syncretic symbol, reflecting the importance of community and understanding.

Instead of fear motivating conversion, Erdrich explores what it would look like to have the love of child serve as a motivation for change. Erdrich's understanding of baptism within these scenes may not adhere to a traditional understanding, nevertheless, the traditional understanding of baptism must be reinterpreted if it is to be of any use to an Ojibwe community struggling to move past a negative history of missionary exploits.

II. THE VIRGIN MARY

The sympathy of Her knowledge had caused Her response.

—Louise Erdrich, Tracks

As Erdrich rewrites the terms of baptism, making them amenable to both her Catholic and Ojibwe background, the symbolism of the Virgin Mary also undergoes a similar transformation over the course of her novels. Like baptism, she uses the Virgin as a means of exploring the complex relationship that exists between Catholicism and Ojibwe traditional religion. While the symbolism of the Virgin Mary follows a similar history in its use as a symbol of Catholic identity, it also contains additional significance as a symbol of the role of the female within the Catholic traditions. As such, Erdrich uses the symbolism of the Virgin Mary to explore not only the cultural and spiritual relationship between the two religions, but also the role that female perception plays within the within both communities.

Erdrich's descriptions of the Virgin Mary almost always describe her as a physical statue with which the other characters interact. To date, at least five of her novels include a Virgin Mary statue. This portrayal of the statued Virgin Mary places Erdrich in dialogue with a Catholic tradition that has depicted the Virgin Mary as a statue for hundreds of years. Furthermore, the medium of sculpture adds additional significance by opening up more avenues of interpretation—the Virgin Mary as either icon, or statue—each reading involving its own distinct function.

If we look at the Virgin Mary statute as an icon, the intention is to draw the mind of the observer upward as a reminder of the missing physical body, or as a means of embodying a spiritual presence. As Chris Eipper writes in his article, “Moving Statues and Moving Images: Religious Artefacts and the Spiritualisation of Materiality,” the Virgin Mary statue functions as “a physical analogue for the metaphysical” (258). Eipper explains, “the divine may be sublime, but it is from the beautiful that we get glimpses of that which transcends it” (255). In this sense, Erdrich’s depictions of the Virgin Mary can be understood as a symbolic representation of a spiritual presence.

On the other hand, religious statues have also historically been placed in the category of idols. Because a statue is an interpretation of an absent person or missing spiritual presence, the image that the statue presents to the viewer is controlled by someone outside of the presence that is being represented. A sculptor creates a statue based on her interpretation and a viewer regards it through his own personal lens. The statue, or the person that the statue is representing, no longer controls the interpretation. As a result, the statue can be used as an idol, subject to each individual desire or perception.

Tied into these two readings of the statue is Erdrich choice of statue—that of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary’s image has historically been seen as a standard of female perfection and ideal sexuality which makes the perception of the Virgin Mary, as statue of idol, intimately tied into ideas of gender and female sexuality. In analyzing Erdrich’s use of the Virgin Mary statue, it is helpful to look at the statue from both perspectives, both as an icon and as an idol. While these categorizations may not always correspond

completely to Erdrich's depictions, they are a helpful way to track the progressive meaning of the Virgin Mary through Erdrich's novels.

Looking at the statue as an icon allows us to read Erdrich's scenes in terms of the commentary that they provide on the spiritual view being presented—specifically the relationship between a Christian and Ojibwe understanding of spirituality. Placing the statue in the category of idol allows us to focus on Erdrich's analysis of the female experience, particularly that of the Native American female. In the same way that the image of the Virgin Mary has been historically interpreted to promote various causes or interpretations, the image of the Native American female has been controlled by external expectations and images. In her article "Of Vision Quests and Spirit Guardians: Female Power in the Novels of Louise Erdrich," Annette Van Dyke quotes Erdrich as saying that Native American women "are taught to present a demure face to the world and yet there is a kind of wild energy behind it in many women that is transformational energy, and not only transforming to them but to other people" (131). Like the Virgin Mary, who has historically been viewed in terms of her virginity, the Native American female is also trapped behind a chiseled image that others have projected upon her.

The Virgin Mary Statue in Love Medicine

Like the symbol of baptism, it is helpful to analyze the occurrences of the Virgin Mary statue chronologically, according to the order that the texts were published as a means of determining the layered progression of the symbol over time. The first allusion to the statue of the Virgin Mary is found in the chapter "Saint Marie" in Erdrich's first

novel, Love Medicine. As Marie, an unknowing orphan searching for her identity, is climbing up to the convent with the intention of joining, she idealizes herself as a statue of the Virgin Mary, “carved in pure gold” that the nuns “will have to kneel to” (LM 43). Her vision is soon quelled as she encounters the difficult Sister Leopolda, which ultimately leads her to reject both her desire to be a nun and the Catholic religion. As with the description of baptism in The Beet Queen, the first allusion to the statue of the Virgin Mary is tied to a traditional understanding of Catholicism.

As a spiritual symbol of Christianity, this Virgin Mary allusion identifies Catholicism as a foreign religion in contrast to the Ojibwe traditional religion. For Marie, the idea of Catholicism as an imported, powerful religion is appealing as it provides a means for her to escape her Ojibwe identity. Marie is a member of the Lazzare family—a mixed blood family of “horse-thieving drunks” (LM 62)—and thus ostracized by the Ojibwe community. She desires to find a place where she is accepted and looks to the convent for answers. Climbing the hill, Marie tells herself that the nuns in the convent “were not any lighter than me” and that she doesn’t “have that much Indian blood” (LM 43), emphasizing the requirement that those who join the convent must be white. For Marie, the Virgin Mary represents a cultural Catholicism only available to those who are white or can pass as white. The pre-fabricated white identity that the nuns present appeals to Marie who is struggling to find her own sense of cultural identity.

As a means of foreshadowing her later depictions of the Virgin Mary, Erdrich does include a slight indication that the spirituality of Christianity is not being fully represented by Marie’s perception of the nuns. Marie indicates, “maybe Jesus did not

take my bait, but them Sisters tried to cram me right down whole” (LM 44). This slight differentiation between Jesus and the actions of the Sisters represents the beginning of a spiritual dialogue tied to the presence of the Virgin Mary statue that Erdrich continues in her later novels.

The imagery of the Virgin Mary statue in Love Medicine also provides us with a commentary on the role of the female within the Native American community. Marie’s desire to join the convent is not only based on her desire to escape the Ojibwe culture, but also on her desire to find a female role model—whom she thinks she will find in Sister Leopolda. As Karla Sanders writes in her article, “A Healthy Balance: Religion, Identity, and Community in Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine,” “Marie lacks a sense of who she is, of her own personal identity, so she creates a vision of herself that is borrowed from the role model proscribed by the nuns, the Virgin Mary” (135). Abandoned by her mother and excluded from the community, Marie is trying to find a pre-fabricated female identity. Choosing to pursue the Virgin Mary as her source of identity continues a cycle in which the female compares herself to role models that have been constructed to meet impossible standards.

Marie’s visualization of herself as the Virgin Mary requires her to become something that she is not. As she comes down from the hill after her experience at the convent, she rejects her former desire to become the Virgin Mary through her immediate encounter with Nector Kashpaw. As Sanders points out, “through sexual intercourse with Nector, Marie separates herself from her identification with the Virgin Mary; this separation from an old identity opens the way for a new identity: Mrs. Kashpaw, wife of

the tribal chairman” (137). Her relationship with Nector works against her former draw to the image of the Virgin Mary, as her identification with Nector, a full-blood Ojibwe, reverses her desire to be culturally white as well as her desire to maintain the Virgin Mary’s sexual status of virginity.

The Virgin Mary Statue in Tracks

Unlike the Virgin Mary statue in Love Medicine, in Tracks we get a much more nuanced image of the Virgin Mary, as the statue reacts to her venerators and displays human emotions. Yet, in Tracks, Erdrich chooses to describe the statue through the narration of Pauline Puyat (Sister Leopolda), a narrator with a definite agenda, rather than the omniscient narrator used in Love Medicine. Like Marie, Pauline is looking to the Virgin Mary to give her, what Sheila Hassel Hughes calls “a white identification” (99). Yet, while Marie stops pursuing this identity when she leaves the convent, Pauline continues throughout her lifetime to project herself as a white Catholic saint. As Hassel Hughes writes, “[Pauline’s] Indian becomes a hero only by ceasing to be Indian” (100). Because of Pauline’s role as narrator, the depictions of the Virgin Mary in Tracks have to be considered in the context of which they are told.

In Pauline’s tale, the statue of the Virgin is brought from the church in an effort to free Sophie Morrissey from a trance induced by Fleur Pillager. When the Virgin statue sees the state of Sophie, she begins to cry. As the tears “struck the poised snake” (T 94) on which the statue was carved, Fleur’s hold is broken and Sophie is released. On the surface, this description seems to promote Catholic triumphalism as the powers of the

Catholic female, the Virgin Mary, defeat those of the Ojibwe female, Fleur. Told in this way, the tale reinforces Pauline's choice to follow the more powerful Catholicism over the Ojibwe traditional religion.

Looking closer at the story, however, we can see Erdrich's clever use of Catholic hagiography puts the story in another light. Fleur's actions in pinning Sophie to the ground reflect the actions of the Catholic Saint Clare. In her poem "St. Clare," Erdrich tells the tale of its namesake by giving the reader an entry from the Pocket Dictionary of Saints (BD 5). At a young age St. Clare left her home and ran away to join the convent. Against their father's wishes, Clare's younger sister Agnes soon follows her. As their father sends soldiers to retrieve Agnes, "Clare's prayers rendered her so heavy they were unable to budge her" (BD 5). This is similar to what Fleur has done to Sophie in pinning her to the ground outside of her cabin. By describing Fleur's actions in a manner that mirrors a Catholic saint, Erdrich undermines Pauline's narration and puts Fleur's spirituality on par with that of Saint Clare.

Yet, Erdrich does not completely dismiss Pauline's narration. Rather, she challenges Pauline's claim to spiritual dominance while at the same time uses her to present the Virgin as a living person. This is done primarily through Pauline's description of the Virgin's tears. Pauline describes that, "Although [the Virgin's] expression never changed, She wept a hail of rain from Her wide brown eyes" (T 94). As Chris Eipper writes, for Catholic devotees, "a weeping painting or moving statue is symbolic of the power of the supernatural to intrude where it will and when it will, to express itself in signs which we ignore at our peril" (255). The Virgin's tears allow the person represented

by the statue to break through and connect with those who are looking to her for help, in this case, Pauline and Sophie.

The tears also play an important role in presenting the Virgin as a realistic female role model. As Jeana DelRossa writes in her book Writing Catholic Women: Contemporary International Catholic Girlhood Narratives, in describing the Virgin's tears,

Pauline offers us an interpretation of Mary not just as virgin and mother, but also as a woman who has experienced that essential bridge of realized sexuality that inextricably links those two roles. This vision depicts Mary as a more realistic role model for Catholic women, because she no longer embodies the impossible: motherhood without sexuality (68).

While this scene does present the Virgin in terms of realized sexuality, it also takes the image further, emphasizing the conflicting emotions that the Virgin must have experienced in her role as the Virgin Mother. Pauline explains her interpretation of the reason for the Virgin's tears, saying:

The sympathy of Her knowledge had caused Her response. In God's spiritual embrace She experienced a loss more ruthless than we can image. She wept, pinned full weight to the earth, known in the brain and known in the flesh and

planted like earth. She did not want Him, or was thoughtless like Sophie, and young, frightened at the touch of His great hand upon Her mind (T 95).

Pauline's perspective on the Virgin's sexuality not only presents her "realized sexuality," but also emphasizes her ability to relate to a conflicted and confused sexual experience. Like Pauline's relationship with Napoleon or Sophie's encounter with Eli, the sexual relationship that the Virgin can relate to is one of confusion, pain and a lack of agency. As a female, Erdrich no longer associates the Virgin Mary only with virginity or presents sexuality only as a method of producing a child. Instead, she presents sex as a powerful and conflicted experience, creating an image of the Virgin Mary that makes her accessible to females of both cultures, inside and outside of the marriage experience.

In this way, Erdrich's use of the Virgin Mary statue complicates the relationship between the two religions. Whereas in Love Medicine, the Virgin Mary's spirituality was representative of a negative history of conversion as well as a white cultural identity, in Tracks, the Virgin Mary's spirituality is not focused on domination of one religion over the other. Instead, the Virgin Mary's actions are based on individual sympathy. Additionally, while she does overcome the Ojibwe powers of Fleur, the impetus for this is not based in cultural dominance, as Fleur is recognized on an equal level with the Virgin. Rather she overcomes Fleur's powers because of the strong sympathy that she feels with Sophie's situation.

The Virgin Mary Statue in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

The final two examples of the Virgin Mary are found in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, and serve to more fully develop the Virgin Mary as a female role model. They also bring the image of the Virgin that was first presented in Love Medicine⁹ to a place of completion. The first presentation of the Virgin Mary is the same one that is described in Tracks and continues to depict the Virgin in terms of her association with Pauline. The setting is the Feast of the Virgin, which The Catholic Encyclopedia describes as a feast commemorating “the happy departure of Mary from this life” and “the assumption of her body into heaven.”

The way that Erdrich sets this scene gives the reader an indication of the increasing tension that exists between Pauline and the statue of the Virgin Mary. Whereas in Tracks, Pauline was controlling the narration and able to present the Virgin in her terms, in Last Report, the narration has moved back to the third person giving us an outsider’s view of Pauline. Erdrich describes Pauline’s gaze as holding a “withering power” (LR 108). As she passes by Father Damien, he feels “an agitation of the heart produced by those great, dead, appalling eyes” (LR 109). This description serves to present Pauline as a character increasingly separated from those around her and not at all reflecting the image of a saint that she desires to project. As Pauline is increasingly

⁹ Erdrich’s fifth novel, Tales of Burning Love, also contains a number of Virgin Mary statues. In the early pages of the book, Sister Leopolda dies under Jack posing as a statue of the Virgin, and in the final pages of the book, Jack is almost crushed by a stone Virgin Mary statue. The stone statue functions in some ways as a precursor for the Madonna of the Serpents in that it is a new version of the Virgin, fashioned out of grief. Yet, Jack’s experience with the statue brings him to an understanding of forgiveness and a sense of new life. While the Virgin statue motifs in Tales of Burning Love deserve more exploration, for the purpose of this study, I was particularly interested in the chronological first and last instances of the Virgin motif.

desperate to hold onto her power, even the Virgin is described in terms of her desire to distance herself from Pauline as Erdrich writes that, “the poor, chipped Virgin wore an expression of distaste” (LR 109).

Using an omniscient narrator, Erdrich breaks down the association that exists in earlier novels between Pauline and the statue of the Virgin Mary. In both Love Medicine and Tracks, the statue is intimately tied to Pauline’s perception of Christianity as the dominant religion. Here, that reading of the Virgin is brought into question as the Virgin herself begins to rebel against the power of Pauline. As a means of reinforcing this distance, Erdrich shows Pauline’s attempts to manipulate the Virgin as comical.

After the parade has begun, a commotion sends the statue of the Virgin through the air and into the window of a nearby house. As a result, the seven drunks kneel, “bless themselves...and convert—not to Catholicism, but to at least a much less potent form of alcohol: to wine” (LR 111). This act of conversion uses humor to take away the power and fear historically tied to the relationship between the Ojibwe and Catholicism. The statue is no longer a threat to the Ojibwe culture; rather its only effect is to change the method of inducing drunkenness. It is a significant indicator of Pauline’s loss of power that one of the “converted” drunks is Sophie Morrisey. This presents a vivid contrast to the relationship that existed between Pauline and Sophie in Tracks where Pauline was able to manipulate Sophie into a relationship with Eli as well as able to use the Virgin to free Sophie from Fleur’s control.

To reinforce the lack of power associated with Pauline, Erdrich takes the image even farther and shows the events of the feast producing a “reverse” conversion in the

character of Kashpaw. Kashpaw, an Ojibwe elder, who arrives at the feast “newly baptized and morose” (LR 109), is driving the cart from which the Virgin is thrown. The commotion of events causes the cart to lose control and Kashpaw is speared by a low-branched tree (LR 111). As he is dying, his Catholic conversion is reversed as he converts back to his traditional religion, smoking the pipe, speaking Ojibwe and receiving warnings from the Ojibwe spirits that he had previously known (LR 112). The reverse conversion serves to completely sever Pauline’s religious power—no longer can she manipulate the symbols of Christianity. Instead, her efforts produce a result that is antagonistic to her desire.

Reading the appearances of the Virgin in sequence, this third presentation of the Virgin completes a trajectory that began with Love Medicine by disconnection the historical power structure that existed between Catholicism as a dominant religion and the Ojibwe traditional beliefs as secondary. While this scene dismisses the threat of the Pauline and the statue’s religious powers, it is not a dismissal of the importance of the Virgin or the beliefs of Catholicism. Instead it is a dismissal of those who misuse their religious powers to manipulate the actions and beliefs of others. It also frees the way for a new interpretation of the Virgin Mary statue as occurs later on in the novel through the narration of Father Damien.

Though Pauline is required to relinquish control of the narration as well as her place as the dominant representative of Catholicism, Erdrich does not exile Pauline, but rather brings her back into the community. After Pauline’s commotion has caused the mortal wounding of both Quill and Kashpaw, Pauline approaches Quill “with an audacity

that spoke both the boundless arrogance and violent compassion of her nature” (LR 113). Pauline’s tender nursing gives Quill the lucidity to pronounce her final words—a call for feuding Ojibwe factions to join together against the forces that threaten their land. Ending in this manner moves the religious relationship out of the dichotomy in which it previously existed. Instead of calling for the dominance of the Ojibwe religion to triumph over Catholicism, Erdrich uses Quill’s call to move the discussion away from an understanding based in retribution or rightness and instead tries to refocus the community onto what it is important, which for Erdrich, is unity.

Alongside the call for unity, Erdrich uses the Feast of the Virgin to provide a commentary tying together the negative history of female treatment within both the Ojibwe and the Catholic communities. With the framework of the Feast of the Virgin, Erdrich makes subtle allusions to a traditional Ojibwe practice, which highlights the impossible role that both religions delegate to the female. While Erdrich herself has not verified this, it is insightful to read the scene of the Virgin’s Feast in terms of Mary Eastman’s description of “The Virgin’s Feast” found in her 1849 book Dacotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling. Mary Eastman, wife of Brigadier General Seth Eastman, lived at Fort Snelling, MN in the middle of the 19th century and tried to capture the experience of the Sioux female by telling stories she claims to have heard from the Sioux medicine woman, Checkered Cloud (Bellin 118). While this work is primarily written about the Sioux experience, Eastman and her husband also worked among the Ojibwe, recording their tales and painting their images. Apart from their

similar titles, reading the two scenes of cultural rituals in terms of each other allows us to gain a richer perspective on both.

In Eastman's account of the Virgin's Feast, the female virgins of the tribe are required to come out and dance in a circle. The dance is intended "to put to the test the virtue of the maiden" (64). As Eastman describes, while one of the maidens, Winona, is dancing in the circle, she is falsely accused of no longer being a virgin by a stilted suitor. The resulting shame leads her to flee to the woods, thrust a knife in her chest and die. Drawing comparisons between this Native American ritual and the Catholic Feast of the Virgin, we see that both feasts are centered on the celebration of a female's virginity. For the Catholic feast, it is a celebration of the Virgin Mary, and for the Sioux, a celebration of the purity of their young maidens.

In Erdrich's portrayal of the Feast of the Virgin and Eastman's description of the Virgin's Feast, the Native American female partakes in a ceremonial ritual that ends in her death. Furthermore, the death that arrives comes from no fault of her own, but instead is brought about because she is unable to survive the impossible martial expectations that have been placed upon her. As Winona cannot survive in a system where she cannot marry whom she chooses, Quill and Kashpaw's marriage cannot survive under the Catholic system, which does not allow them to practice the polygamy that previously ensured their survival.

Looking at the two ceremonies in tandem provides perspective on the role that misogyny played within the Catholic and the Native American cultures. In both communities, the female was held to an impossible sexual standard and regarded in terms

of her virginity. Erdrich's focus is not to place blame on a particular tradition, but rather to prepare the way to present a new image of female sexuality as she does in her final portrayal of the Virgin Mary. Additionally, the inclusion of Eastman's work reinforces Erdrich tie between the Virgin Mary statue and the female image. As in Love Medicine and Tracks, the female character again challenges the external expectations that are placed upon her and exemplified in the statue of the Virgin Mary.

The Madonna of the Serpents

By disconnecting Pauline from her association with the statue of the Virgin Mary, Erdrich leaves the door open for a new interpretation of the statue. This new interpretation comes in the second half of The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse with Father Damien's creation of the Madonna of the Serpents. The Madonna of the Serpents represents Erdrich's actualized idea of a female spiritual image that is accessible to both Catholic and Ojibwe belief systems.

Father Damien commissions the Madonna of the Serpents after she has recovered her memory of the events that occurred before she came to the reservation. She remembers that she has a large sum of money stored in a bank and uses that money to create the statue. The recovery of her memory and the commissioning of the statue occur several years after Father Damien has been on the reservation. In that time, she comes to develop a deep friendship with Nanapush and an understanding of the Ojibwe system of belief. Both the recovery of her memory and her developed friendship with Nanpush are important to the statue's creation. The recovery of her memory indicates that Father

Damien is a completed and complex person—both male and female, artist and priest. Her deep friendship with Nanapush indicates that Father Damien has come to a place of syncretic understanding where she loves and appreciates Catholic and Ojibwe practices. She commissions the statue from all of these positions.

In that sense the Madonna of the Serpents is created for a different purpose than the previous version of the statue. Whereas the statue of the Virgin was earlier triumphed as a sign of Christianity's precedence over the Ojibwe traditional religion, the Madonna of the Serpents is created to sit comfortably in the middle of the two religions. Erdrich removes any association of Pauline with the new version of the Virgin to the point that the Madonna of the Serpents and Pauline are never mentioned in conjunction with one another. Instead, Father Damien uses the statue as part of her religious practice which she describes as a "mixture of faiths" in which she "kept the pipe, translated hymns or brought in the drum" all under the watchful eye of the Madonna of the Serpents who was "solid, dark, kind eyed, hideous, and gentle" (LR 276). In this description, the tension that was found in earlier depictions of the Virgin Mary is absent. Rather, the symbolic meaning associate with the Virgin Mary statue has been transformed to fit into a balanced belief system in which neither religion retains precedence.

The Madonna of the Serpents also provides a realistic image of female representation within the Native American society. As the stonecutter fashions the statue, he is thinking of his lover, who is extremely ugly, yet he recounts "she was a good person...and her eyes were very beautiful, sad and kind" (LR 225). When he looks at the Virgin statue that he has made the following morning, the stonecutter realizes he has

made her ugly, but in the same manner as his bride, “her eyes were both kind and extremely alive” (LR 225). This image of the Virgin sharply contrasts the one Pauline describes in Tracks, who was “perfect” with a “full figure curving to a slim waist, broad hip...” (T 92). While Pauline’s virgin responds to the rape of Sophie with tears of empathy because she has had a similar experience, the Madonna of the Serpents provides an image of the Virgin Mary fashioned after a woman who has experienced sex as a result of love. She is a lover viewed from the perspective of her beloved who cherishes her for her kindness rather than her physical appearance. As Father Damien mentions, “Who is to say among all creation God should choose only a beautiful human mother for His son” (LR 226). By basing the representation on an existing female model, Erdrich moves away from an image of the Virgin Mary as an impossible female role model and instead presents an achievable image of the female body and female sexuality.

Another important element of the Madonna of the Serpents, as her name suggests, is her relationship to the snake carved at the bottom of her statue. This is not the first time that Erdrich comments on the relationship between the snake and the Virgin Mary. Similar allusions are found in Tracks and Erdrich’s book of poems, Baptism of Desire. The image of the snake and the Virgin Mary is a historical image that goes back to the second century. The imagery comes from a comparison between the Virgin Mary and the first Biblical woman, Eve. According to the Biblical account, Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden because of the serpent’s temptation. As God casts them out, he gives each of them a curse as punishment for their disobedience. The curse given to the Serpent is that he and Eve “will be enemies” and his “offspring and her offspring will be

enemies.” Furthermore, the children of Eve (humanity) “will crush [the Serpent’s] head” and, in turn, the Serpent “will strike [mankind’s] heel” (New Living Translation Genesis 3:15). Because of Eve and Adam’s disobedience, it is also understood that humanity was condemned to death.

In the same way that Christ is often referred to as the second Adam, church tradition holds that the obedience of Mary redeemed the disobedience of Eve. However, it is not only Mary’s obedience that allowed her to compensate for Eve’s failure, it is also their equal status as virgins. In 180 AD The Catholic Bishop Irenaeus wrote in his work Against Heresies:

...but Eve, disobedient, for she disobeyed while still a virgin...by disobeying became the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race. So also Mary, with a husband predestined for her but yet a virgin, was obedient and because, [became] the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race (Grant 140).

To indicate Mary’s status as redeemer of the sin that Eve committed, historical portrayals of the Virgin Mary have included the image of Mary crushing a snake with the heel of her foot.

Furthermore, when Erdrich uses the imagery of the snake, she is not only alluding to the historical Catholic perspective of the snake, but also includes an Ojibwe understanding as well. Within the Ojibwe tradition, the water monster, Mishebeshu, is

oftentimes depicted as a great snake. While a Christian reading of Mishebeshu may see him as a devil, this only puts Mishebeshu into a Christian paradigm of good and evil, which is not the paradigm used by the Ojibwe. As Smith explains, within the Ojibwe belief system “Standards of good and evil are better understood...as standards of balance and imbalance, control and chaos” (106). Applying this standard to Mishebeshu, he is understood to be evil only “inasmuch as he is the paradigmatic unbalancer of the world. Mishebeshu is not, however, the source of all evil or even misfortune, merely a person possessed of great power and a malevolent will” (Smith 106). Erdrich provides us with another angle on the Mishebeshu in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse when Nanapush tells Father Damien that the “snake was a deeply intelligent secretive being... And it was the great snake, wrapped around the center of the earth, who kept things from flying apart” (LR 220).

All of this is included in Erdrich’s depiction of her Virgin Mary statues as she strategically manipulates the relationship between the snake and the Virgin in order to redeem the historical narrative of the female, who, through Eve, is negatively regarded as the tempter and thus shamed for her weakness. Erdrich’s first image of the snake and the Virgin is in Tracks where Pauline recounts that the Virgin’s eyes as having “the same lively curious suspension as the snake’s” (T 93). This parallel between the Virgin Mary and the serpent is expanded in Erdrich’s description of the Madonna of the Serpents in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. As she describes, the snake carved beneath the Madonna “not only was too realistic, but did not look at all crushed down by her weight” (LR 226).

By placing the Virgin Mary on a parallel plane as the snake, Erdrich challenges the role that has been historically given to the Virgin Mary as the one able to fulfill Eve's faults through her sexual purity. Instead of showing Mary triumphant over the serpent and thus fulfilling Eve's failure, Erdrich takes the impossible construction of sexual purity out of the image—Erdrich's Virgin Mary does not stand triumphant over the serpent because of her sexual purity. Rather, the Virgin Mary defines her relationship to the snake, taking control of her own image.

This idea is also echoed in Erdrich's poem *Hydra*, which describes the nine-headed serpent slain by Hercules in Greek mythology. The last stanza of the poem reads:

According to God, Your place is low
under Adam's heel, but as for me,
a woman shaped from a secondary bone,
who cares if you wrap my shoulders?
Who cares if you whisper? Who cares
if the fruit is luscious? Your place
is at my ear (BD, 47).

Here Erdrich reinforces the image that she has created in her portrayal of the Virgin Mary. The poem and the novels serve to continue Erdrich's process of providing new meanings to traditional imagery. With the snake placed on equal footing to the Virgin Mary in the text and the poem, Erdrich makes her reader re-think the traditional role of the serpent by moving the serpent imagery—and by extension Eve, who along with the

serpent is implicated by the Genesis curse—from its symbolic place as the bearer of evil to a place of equality with the Virgin Mary and the poet. The description of the snake as not “at all crushed by the weight of the Virgin” and placement of the snake at the poet’s ear as advisor and equal is more in accordance with an Ojibwe traditional understanding of balance rather than a Catholic binary understanding of good versus evil.

Erdrich’s final portrayal of the Virgin Mary completes the trajectory of the Virgin Mary’s image, by portraying the relationship between the Virgin Mary and the snake as a relationship of balance, having the final statue commissioned by Father Damien, and having it reflect the image of an achievable female. In the final portrayal of the Virgin Mary, a balanced, syncretic understanding of both Ojibwe and Catholicism is achieved and an accessible place is carved out for the Native and greater female community. In both senses, the final image of the statue brings the motif to a place of completion. It is important to note that following the Madonna of the Serpents, no additional images of the Virgin Mary statue are found in Erdrich’s work. In that sense, it would seem that she has finally come to a place of acceptance and no longer needs to continue to work on new interpretations of the image.

While Erdrich goes a long way in presenting an image of the Virgin as a viable female role model, a certain allowance must be made for the medium in which she is working. The Madonna of the Serpents does not completely move away from the constraints of external representation as she is still commissioned by a sculptor and subject to the external judgments of all who view her. However, that is the function of a sculpture and cannot be solved if we are to remain within the medium. What Erdrich does

achieve, however, is to change the traditional perception of the Virgin Mary and in the process, make a statement about the unfair historical perceptions that have been placed on the Native American female. The Madonna of the Serpents moves the image of the Virgin Mary out of the realm of the impossible or the exotic and brings her to the realm of reality.

III. FATHER DAMIEN

...although he appeared to be lying inert in one body...Father Damien was, in truth, wandering mightily through worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic. And had Mary Kashpaw not kept that beacon going, he might, in his long and rambling journey, have become confused or even got lost. For the countries of the spirit, to which he was admitted, were accessible only via many dim and tangled trails.

—Louise Erdrich, The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

In her descriptions of both baptism and the statue of the Virgin Mary, Erdrich brings the symbols to a sense of unity through the involvement of Father Damien. As both male and female as well as Catholic and Ojibwe, Father Damien guides the conflicted symbols to resolution, and also functions as Erdrich's unique symbol of religious syncretism. Father Damien's tale is Erdrich's version of a hagiography. In his book Making Saints, Kenneth Woodward¹⁰ writes, "A saint is always someone through whom we catch a glimpse of what God is like—and of what we are called to be" (13). As a character, Father Damien embodies Erdrich's understanding of God and serves as an example of the religious values that she desires to convey.

The inspiration for Erdrich's portrayal of Father Damien seems to be drawn from her descriptions of her grandfather, whom she often refers to in interviews as her

¹⁰ Woodward's work is particularly relevant to use in relation to The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse as Erdrich acknowledges the importance of his work in her endnotes.

religious role model¹¹. She describes him as someone who “had a real mixture of old time and church religion... He would do pipe ceremonies for ordinations and things like that. He just had a grasp on both religions” (Bruchac 99).

In addition to functioning as a saint, Father Damien in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, also functions as a case study for Erdrich’s exploration of the relationship between the two religions. He is able to bring together the two because he is, in many ways, himself an example of reconciliation and forgiveness between Catholicism and Ojibwe religion. In an interview with Alden Mudge about her process of writing The Last Report, Erdrich recounts that “most of my books are about revenge, so it’s interesting to write forgiveness into a book. I think forgiveness is a lot tougher than I’ve had the grace to understand” (par. 12). Erdrich’s exploration of forgiveness through the character of Father Damien is the main reason that Father Damien is able to function in her role as “completer” of historical religious symbols.

The power of Father Damien’s forgiveness is illustrated in one of the most poignant scenes of the novel—her second encounter with the black dog. Throughout Erdrich’s novels, the black dog functions as a “manifestation of death and the devil” (Beilder and Barton 103). In the dog’s first visit to Father Damien, he “explained that he was sent for the girl, Lulu, who was marked for the taking” (LR 190). When Father Damien hears this, he offers to trade his life for Lulu’s, and the dog accepts his offer. As the dog is leaving, he forewarns Father Damien that he is sending him a temptation, which comes in the form of Father Damien’s lover, Father Wekkle. In the visit and the

¹¹ See the Erdrich’s Lannan Interview with Gail Caldwell, the book Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, and Erdrich’s interview with Katie Bacon for examples.

temptation, the black dog challenges Father Damien to choose love over Catholic rules. By trading places with Lulu, Father Damien illustrates that he more strongly values his love for the Ojibwe than his Christian salvation. In the same way, he chooses his love for Father Wekkle over Catholic standards regulating sexuality.

Father Damien's second encounter with the black dog occurs late in the priest's life when the dog comes to collect on his bargain of Father Damien's life in exchange for Lulu's. As the black dog is on top of her trying to convince her to die, Agnes/Father Damien "drew strength from the massive amounts of forgiveness her priest had dispensed in his life" which allowed her to "shut the dog out" (LR 309) and eventually defeat him. In the realization of the power of forgiveness, she comes to understand that the key to her relationship with Nanapush has been Nanapush's forgiveness of her "for stealing so many souls" through Father Damien's conversion attempts (LR 310). The defeat of the black dog symbolizes the defeat of its paradigm, and represents the rejection of Catholic attitudes of conversion and conceptions of sexual love that are antagonistic to Ojibwe tradition. Father Damien rejects the framework that the black dog offers as he decides to convert to Nanapush's concept of the afterlife.

While the concept of forgiveness is central to Father Damien's ability to provide religious syncretism, his conversion to the Ojibwe religion as a means of escaping the black dog presents some interpretive challenges. If Father Damien's conversion is read according to a Christian understanding of conversion, than Erdrich returns again to the power structure that she has been trying to escape. Instead of presenting the two religions in terms of their similar basis in love and understanding, she provides a conception of the

two where one must be dominant. Father Damien's conversion to Ojibwe traditional religion indicates that the Ojibwe religion is superior. This furthers a dialogue of domination and superiority, which mitigates all of the movement towards syncretism that Erdrich has incorporated into her novels.

On the other hand, if Father Damien's conversion is read as a means of escaping the harmful practices of the Catholic Church, and not necessarily Catholicism itself, Erdrich is presenting us with a new understanding of the term "conversion." This possibility seems more likely as Erdrich indicates that his conversion does not result in him leaving the Catholic priesthood. Rather, Father Damien continues to hear confessions, dispense forgiveness, and write to the Pope for guidance. In this sense, the foundation of Father Damien's conversion is his belief in the existence of a great love and a rejection of the power structure of the Catholic religion. In her interview with Mudge, Erdrich states,

I didn't want [Last Report] just to be about this revelation that this priest was a woman, that really wasn't the point of it. That's why from the first chapter, this is not a secret from the reader. I don't want the book to be about gender politics or even about church politics. That's in there, of course. It's implicit in choosing what the book would be about. But I most wanted it to be about this very human choice that she made and how that choice shaped a life. I also wanted it to be about a priest who is in many ways converted by those who he/she has come to convert (par. 8).

Erdrich's arrival at a version of religious syncretism through the character of Father Damien is not an attempt to create a new type of Christian or Ojibwe theology. Nor does it reflect a desire to prioritize one culture's religious system over another. Rather, Erdrich's portrayal of these symbols over time is a reflection of two things. First, her attempt to understand and reconcile the painful history of actions that were undertaken in the name of religion among the Ojibwe community, and second, as a quest to explore the great love that she feels exists in both religions.

In a 2005 interview with Gail Caldwell, Erdrich relates that while Catholicism,

...has been both a very destructive force, but also, undeniably, there has been love and it's taken me a long time to realize that...I've never been able to get to the bottom of that dichotomy and I think that is what a lot of the work is about.

The progression that I have discussed is a manifestation of Erdrich's process of working out this dichotomy. While I don't think that her novels provide us with a solution to the relationship between the belief systems, they do provide us with an acknowledgement of the powerful forces that dictate the actions of those involved in both systems of belief. They also provide us with an understanding of the fundamental role that forgiveness plays in arriving at a place of reconciliation. Father Damien is able to stand in the gap between the two religions because, "whatever his belief, Father Damien had acted on the

fundamental dictates of a great love. Sacrifice had been his rule. He'd put others above himself and lived in the abyss of doubt rather than forsake those in need" (LR 239).

While Father Damien does succeed in creating a dialogue for religious syncretism through her understanding of love and forgiveness, she fails in creating a viable place for the female within either religion. Though she does commission the Madonna of the Serpents, which gives us an image of the viable female, Father Damien herself cannot succeed as a living representation of the viable character she has created. As a female masquerading as male, Father Damien cannot reveal her true identity because it would mean that she would lose the key element of her religious syncretism, the authority to dispense forgiveness "in the spirit of the ridiculous and wise Nanabozho" (LR 276). When Pauline threatens to expose her as a female, Father Damien realizes that "as a priest, as a man...she was at ease" and without the priestly authority to dispense forgiveness, "all would be lost" (LR 275-276). Forgiveness is the key for her to practice a religious syncretism, and it is also keeps her in disguise. Father Damien may be able to change the external perception of the female via her creation of a new statue of the Virgin, but her forgiveness does not have the power to change the tradition of a male-only priesthood.

IV. CONCLUSION

I think that at the heart of all spirituality is one thing... our mutual human search.

—Louise Erdrich¹²

In a 1987 interview with Joseph Bruchac, when asked about the Catholicism in her books, Erdrich responds "...you never change once you're raised a Catholic... You've got that symbolism, that guilt, you've got the whole works and you can't really change that. That's easy to talk about because you have to exorcise it somehow. That's why there's a lot of Catholicism in both books." However, as I have tried to show, over the process of her novels, Erdrich is able to change. She is able to "exorcise" the guilt and recreate the Catholic symbolism in a manner that makes it meaningful to both Catholicism and Ojibwe traditional religion.

Reformatting baptism as a symbol of community and portraying the Virgin Mary as an achievable female radically transforms the traditional Catholic understandings of both symbols and brings them to a place of balance between the two religions. Cementing this place of balance, Erdrich provides us with the hagiography of Father Damien who in a sense, functions as both a Catholic and Ojibwe saint. Yet, not only does Father Damien bring historical Catholic symbols to a place of balance, he also provides for us a model to imitate. He opens up a dialogue that allows us to rethink conventional understandings of both religion and the female experience.

¹² Quoted from Erdrich's 2005 interview with Gail Caldwell.

As a religious symbol of reconciliation, Father Damien's actions model for us a means of approaching one another with an attitude of respect and a desire to recognize the sacred in forms outside of our cultural definition, in a sense, to baptize the bear. Father Damien also provides an example of a religious approach that is grounded and rooted in the power of forgiveness. While love may provide a means for us to understand the divine, forgiveness is the only way that we can approach one another and create reconciliation among ourselves. Father Damien's forgiveness, "in the spirit of the ridiculous and wise Nanabozho" (LR 276) is the key to her ability to find peace among the disparate aspects of her many selves as well as the key to her synthesized religious practice.

Father Damien also opens up the dialogue for us regarding the powerful role that the female plays within both religions. In her creation of the Madonna of the Serpents, she shows us an image modeled on a female whose power is based not in her sexual purity, but rather in her love for her child and her love of others. In the same way, Father Damien comes to understand that the power of Fleur is also based in a great love. At Lulu's baptism, Father Damien mirrors the actions of Fleur by imagining Lulu as her own child which allows Father Damien, for the first time, to feel the power of a mother's love. Later, when Fleur's love for the land leaves her to revenge and forces her to abandon Lulu, Father Damien does not condemn the actions, but rather recognizes the powerful force that is behind her actions. Furthermore, he works to bring the two of them back together again through mutual forgiveness (LR 253). In this act, Father Damien respects

Fleur's power of revenge and tries to help her reconcile it with the power of her love for her child.

In both her approach to Catholic symbolism and female religious power, Erdrich does not try to provide for us a new theological understanding to adhere to or a new theory to follow. She is not creating a new faith to replace the old. In fact, she has admitted that she remains unsure about her religious faith saying in her interview with Katie Bacon:

I accept the Catholicism of many in my family. Ojibwe traditional practices are more meaningful to me, but I am not deeply religious anyway. That is to say, I do not have an assured faith. I am full of doubt. But even those who doubt can practice a faith, and can pray, and can try to act out of a tradition of kindness and love (par. 16).

Instead of prescriptions, Erdrich gives us role models and instead of dogma, she gives us possibilities. She challenges us to think outside of conventional patterns and forces us to “dig down...through the layers of the earth” (LR 355) in an attempt to understand our mutual search and shared experiences. Whether Catholic or Ojibwe, male or female, there is a shared human experience among us and that is what Erdrich challenges us to explore.

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