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“WE ANISHINAABEG ARE THE KEEPERS OF THE NAMES OF THE EARTH” LOUISE ERDRICH’S GREAT PLAINS

P. JANE HAFEN

In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history. Unlike most contemporary writers, a traditional storyteller fixes listeners in an unchanging landscape combined of myth and reality. People and place are inseparable.

— Louise Erdrich, “Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place” (1985)¹

With these words, Louise Erdrich sets forth her own manifesto for writing about her place. A Native of the Northern Plains, Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa nation. In a stunning production of seven novels, six with interwoven tales and characters,

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two poetry collections, a memoir, and two co-authored books, Erdrich has created a vision of the Great Plains that spans the horizon of time and space and ontologically defines the people of her heritage.

ERDRICH’S NORTH DAKOTA

The literary impact is remarkable. Louise Erdrich’s North Dakota cycle of novels includes the award-winning *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), and most recently *The Last Report on the Miracle at Little No Horse* (2001).² In an audacious move, Erdrich took the acclaimed *Love Medicine*, edited it, added to it, and reissued it in 1993, thus demonstrating that the vital, living nature of indigenous storytelling exists not only in oral traditions but in fixed print as well.³ Additionally, *The Antelope Wife* (1998) blends Ojibwe traditions with the



FIG. 1. Louise Erdrich. Photograph by Lynda Koolish.

challenges and humor of urban natives in Minneapolis, Erdrich's current residence. Earlier, relocated by career and family obligations, Erdrich describes her memoir of early motherhood, *The Blue Jay's Dance* (1995), as having "some desperation in the writing . . . a longing for my home ground. New Hampshire de-

pleted me—the isolation from family, from other people of Ojibwe mixed background, the absence of sky and horizon."⁴

Karen Louise Erdrich was raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota, "on land that once belonged to the Wahpeton-Sisseton" Dakota and was home to a Bureau of Indians Affairs

boarding school, where her parents taught and her Ojibwe grandfather attended.⁵ She describes Wahpeton as “really half a town, the other half being Breckenridge, Minnesota” and “desperate to be something.”⁶ Although the Red River is a natural geological divider, the political boundaries between the states of North Dakota and Minnesota, of course, meant nothing to Erdrich’s Ojibwe ancestors. The Ojibwe people, historically referring to themselves as Anishinabe, ranged through the Great Lakes region and the Northern Plains. The English speakers of the United States mangled their name into “Chippewa,” and that is the legal designation of the federal government. The Ojibwe trace their origin to Mantoulin Island, Ontario, “the largest island anywhere in fresh water, an expanse of rolling hills and deep azure lakes, suffused with highly differentiated vegetation, animal life, and geological oddities.”⁷ Here the mystical *manitous* coordinated the world into existence. Here on the island, Moses Pillager and Lulu Nanapush in *Love Medicine*, heirs of the Bear clan and the Nanabozho trickster legacy,⁸ give life to a new generation of contemporary Ojibwe survivors, starting with their son, Gerry Nanapush.

Although the Ojibwe consist of about a hundred bands and reservation communities in what is now Canada and the United States, there are commonalities among traditions, histories, and, most importantly, geographical place. Imposition of political divisions after European contact and conflicts with traditional enemies, the Dakotas and the Sac and Fox, forced the Ojibwe into discrete communities and diminished their collective power but did not reduce a general communal sense of identity. Western bands of the Ojibwe settled in the Pembina area and the “Turtle Mountains of present day North Dakota’s border region.”⁹ Consequently, these bands, including Erdrich’s home tribe, adopted Northern Plains traditions into their Woodland cultural way of life.

Erdrich’s tribal identity is inextricable with place. She is Turtle Mountain Chippewa both

in reference to locale and legal definition, according to the federal processes of validating American Indian authenticity. More than the reductionary blood quantum with attendant certificates of degree of Indian blood, Erdrich has a heritage within that community. She is the granddaughter of former Turtle Mountain tribal chair Patrick Gourneau. The German-American ancestry of her father, Ralph Erdrich, is subsumed by the omnipresence of race and traditional Ojibwe heritage. Tribal community is also defined according to its geographic placement. When she and other indigenous peoples write about land, they are speaking of culture and resources, of course, but also acknowledging ontology, the defining concepts of existence. That reality is brought into existence through language.

PLACE NAMES

In an endnote to *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich has Nanapush explain about naming and place in an indigenous cosmos:

White people usually name places for men—presidents and generals and entrepreneurs. Ojibwe name places for what grows there or what is found. . . . If we call ourselves and all we see around us by the original names, will we not continue to be Anishinaabeg? Instead of reconstituted white men, instead of Indian ghosts? Do the rocks here know us, do the trees, do the waters of the lakes? Not unless they are addressed by the names they themselves told us to call them in our dreams. Every feature of the land around us spoke its name to an ancestor. Perhaps, in the end, that is all that we are. We Anishinaabeg are the keepers of the names of the earth. And unless the earth is called by the names it gave us humans, won’t it cease to love us? And isn’t it true that [if] the earth stops loving us, everyone, not just the Anishinaabeg, will cease to exist?¹⁰

The imperative is clear. The earth and tribal peoples have a symbiotic relationship; they are mutually self-defining. Forgetting reciprocal dependence leads to destruction. Survival as indigenous peoples is predicated on the land. Erdrich is refuting assimilation and the Vanishing American through adherence to the earth. The consequences affect all human beings.

Just as Erdrich exists in a context of geographical locale, many of her characters are indelibly connected with portraits of place, most often with Great Plains descriptors. In *Love Medicine*, the long-legged Chippewa woman, June Morrissey Kashpaw, walks toward home in an Easter blizzard. The compulsion to return to homeland, what William Bevis calls "homing in"¹¹ and which we see in other Erdrich works, drives June to risk her life to the natural elements and capricious spring weather of the Plains:

The wind was mild and wet. A Chinook wind, she told herself. She made a right turn off the road, walked up a drift frozen over a snow fence, and began to pick her way through the swirls of dead grass and icy crust of open ranchland. Her boots were thin. So she stepped on dry ground where she could and avoided the slush and rotten gray banks. . . . She crossed the wide fields swinging her purse, stepping carefully to keep her feet dry.

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

The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home.¹²

In a breathtaking narrative twist in a later novel, *Tales of Burning Love*, Erdrich switches point of view to experience the discovery of

June's body by her husband, Jack Mauser. The language of each passage is similar but not identical:

He turned away, and still the shadows rode across the icy crust of open ranch land, the pastures, pure and roadless, the fields, the open spaces. . . . The storm had blown over with the speed of all spring lapses. . . . [June'd] gotten tired of walking in those thin shoes, and sat down against a fence post. To wait for the bus, he thought. She was looking to the east, her hair loaded with melting stars. No one had touched her yet. Her face was complex in its expectations. A fist of air punched Jack to earth and he knelt before her with his hands outstretched. But then the officer reached past him, thumbed her eyelids down, took her purse from her lap, knocked off her blanket of snow.¹³

More than altering the perspective, Erdrich keeps consistent the images associated with the character, June. The reader never encounters her without some sort of geographical signifier. This style of character shorthand might not be so unusual if June were not indigenous. The land of her ancestors reclaims her; the elements that her ancestors survived overwhelm her. June's demise contrasts and contradicts the survival of other Ojibwe characters in the novels.

Although June freezes in the snow in early pages, her spirit inhabits the rest of *Love Medicine*. The final gesture of the novel occurs when her son, Lipsha, comes to a reconciliation of his relationship with her and with other members of the tribal community. Standing on a bridge, Lipsha observes:

The sun flared. I'd heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside [June's car]. The morning

was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home.¹⁴

June's subsequent appearances in *The Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love* are part of Erdrich's cyclical storytelling, and each vision resurrects those initial representations of the Plains. In each novel, in the same incident but told from differing points of view, Lipsha and Gerry Nanapush and Jack Mauser, each see June driving through a blizzard. They each follow her to safety. The temperamental ravages of the Plains that take June's life also allow her to become a factor in rescuing her son, lover, and husband. "June Morrissey still walks through that sudden Easter snow."¹⁵

THE POWER OF LAND

Lipsha is another character whose identity is inextricable with geographic details, especially in *The Bingo Palace*. Through the intervention of his dead mother, June, Lipsha wins the grand-prize bingo van. Immediately he runs into a group of guys from Montana he had previously insulted. Their plan is to tattoo an image of Montana on Lipsha's derriere. Lipsha develops a plan of defense:

[I] ask Marty in a polite kind of way, to beat me up instead. If that fails, I will tell him that there are many states I would not mind so much, like Minnesota with its womanly hourglass for instance, or Rhode Island which is small, or even Hawaii, a soft bunch of circles. I think of Idaho. The panhandle. That has character.

"Are any of you guys from any other state?" I ask, anxious to trade.

"Kansas."

"South Dakota."

It isn't that I really have a thing against those places, understand, it's just that the straight-edged shape is not a Chippewa preference. You look around, and everything you see is round, everything in nature. There are no perfect boundaries, no natural bor-

ders except winding rivers. Only human-made things tend toward cubes and squares—the van, for instance. That is an example. Suddenly I realize that I am driving a four-wheeled version of North Dakota.¹⁶

Lipsha, in essence, temporarily loses his soul to the sharp angles and materialism of the bingo van.

Later Lipsha attempts a ritual reconciliation through a vision quest, but like his thwarted application of love medicine to his grandfather Nector, this ceremony does not go as planned. After spending time in the wilderness, his animal helper and spiritual guide appears as "the mother of all skunks." The voice that follows proclaims: "*This ain't real estate.*" Lipsha ponders, "This ain't real estate, I think, and then I am surrounded and inhabited by a thing so powerful I don't even recognize it as a smell."¹⁷ This "skunk dream" speaks to Lipsha in a discourse he understands, colloquial and profound in its absurdity, and indeed it helps steer Lipsha back toward a tribal path. The cultural mediator is the land, the place that defines him; it is not mere "real estate" but a life-giving force.

Nowhere is this power of the land and its devastating loss more clear than in *Tracks*. Published third in sequence, *Tracks* (along with *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*) is where Erdrich chronologically begins the North Dakota saga. Among the geographic signifiers are the Matchimanito Lake, the border town of Argus, and individual allotments.

In 1887 the federal government enacted the Dawes Severalty Act, a law intended to disrupt tribal communities by authorizing the disbursement of commonly held lands to Indian individuals as part of a general campaign to assimilate indigenous peoples into an agrarian American society. Not only did this policy succeed in reducing tribal landholdings, it placed Native Americans in a vulnerable position where they could lose their individual lands to tax claims and fraud.¹⁸

This is the situation in *Tracks*. The native Ojibwe are in transition from a subsistence society to the economic realities of modernism. Facing disease and starvation, they must find the means to pay taxes in order to keep their lands. Add the greed of lumber companies eagerly waiting to claim the lands, and the stage is set for not necessarily a literal history but a common story of land loss and identity transformation.

The same year as the publication of *Tracks*, Erdrich co-authored an essay with her husband, Michael Dorris, for the *New York Times Magazine*, titled "Who Owns the Land?" In this essay, they outline the specific land swindle on the White Earth Chippewa Reservation:

Not content with the General Allotment Act's provision that Indians had to wait 25 years before they could be deprived of their parcels, [Moses E.] Clapp [a lumber baron and lawyer who became a Minnesota senator] pushed through a rider to the Indian Appropriations Bill of 1906 which declared that mixed-blood adults on White Earth were "competent" to dispose of them immediately.

What followed was a land-grab orgy so outrageous that to this day local people, regardless of ethnic heritage, speak of it with a sense of bewildered shame. Threatened, duped or plied with drink, many Chippewa signed away their deeds with an X or a thumb print. . . . The effect on the band was devastating. While lumber companies clear-cut millions of dollars' worth of pine from forests located within White Earth, dispirited and broken Indian families clustered ten or more to single-room cabins on the allotment left to them.¹⁹

This description fits the scene of *Tracks*. Although the particularities are consistent with the history at the White Earth Chippewa Reservation, the scenario could have and has happened dozens of places.

The tribal divisions and resentments between those who manage to keep their allotments and those who lose them run deep and angry, even to this day. When Erdrich fictively renders these historical events and the connection between land and people, the destruction becomes even more clear. Looking at a map, the characters of the novel realize the desperation of their situation. Nanapush is speaking:

With her fingernail, Margaret traced the print she could not read, polished first the small yellow Kashpaw square, then tapped the doubled green square of Morrisseys, and gestured at Fleur and Eli to compare.

"They're taking it over."

It was like her to notice only the enemies that she could fight, those that shared her blood however faintly. My concern was the lapping pink, the color of the skin of lumber-jacks and bankers, the land we would never walk or hunt, from which our children would be barred.²⁰

Maps represent the artificial construct of landownership and legal validation. They become the concrete emblem of colonization and loss. As the land changes hands, the social situations deteriorate as well. Alcoholism becomes rampant, children are abandoned, "dressed in nothing but snow."²¹ Nanapush laments: "I am a man, but for years I had known how it was to lose a child of my blood. Now I also knew the uncertainties of facing the world without land to call home."²²

The Ojibwe manage to scrape together the money to pay the fees. They sacrifice all the material goods they value, selling hides, quill boxes, blankets, and treasured items. However, with the late fees, there is only enough money for one tract of land. Nector Kashpaw makes a pragmatic choice and pays the fees on the Kashpaw allotment. Fleur Pillager will lose her land to the Turcot Lumber Company. Against the background sound of falling timbers, Nanapush relates the story that will destroy the immediate family: Fleur and Eli will

separate; daughter Lulu will be sent to a government boarding school.

Fleur exacts her revenge in a precursor to ecoterrorism. Having stolen tools from the lumbermen, she saws through trees at their bases. The wind, which she may have brought through her own power, topples the trees onto the remaining lumber equipment. She flees with emblems of the Matchimanito Lake, from which she survived three drownings: "weed-wrapped stones, from the lake bottom, bundles of roots, a coil of rags" and her family grave markers.²³ The very essence of her existence appears to be lost with the land. However, in a stunning narrative twist, Erdrich provides a way for her to recover her loss in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Fleur seems to disappear in the city, but she entrances and marries John Jacob Mauser, one of the land barons who had acquired the Ojibwe land tracts. Living an urban life of means and prosperity, she sends gifts and supplies home to her friends and family. Eventually she returns to Little No Horse, son in tow, to live once again on her own land. Additionally, her voice will survive to impart her wisdom to her descendants, Lipsha Morrissey and Lyman Lamartine.

In *The Bingo Palace*, Lyman has a vision of Fleur Pillager. He hears "the hot rasp of her bear voice."

*Land is the only thing that lasts life to life.
Money burns like tinder, flows off like water,
and as for the government's promises, the wind
is steadier.*²⁴

Lyman knows he must take his entrepreneurial prowess and use it for "land-based operations."²⁵ The legacy of Fleur's loss becomes the wisdom of the elders that will guide her posterity and empower the Indians to overcome the violation of land and treaty rights.

Some critics have seen Fleur's defeat in *Tracks* as a tragedy. However, the imperative of survival refutes that reading and Erdrich completes that part of the story thirteen years later in *The Last Report on the*

Miracles at Little No Horse. In *Tracks* Nanapush learns how to overcome colonialism. He blesses Fleur's departure, recognizing her inability to remain with the Kashpaws on a land that was not hers by title or natural rights. He runs for tribal chair and wins. He retrieves Lulu from the government school on the premise of his fatherhood, proved by the spurious birth documents. Having learned the power of written language in negotiating survival, he concludes the novel in a complex layering of storytelling, metaphor, and hope. He addresses the continuance of his family, not by blood lineage but by spirit and necessity:

Your grin was bold as your mother's, white with anger that vanished when you saw us waiting. You went up on your toes, and tried to walk, prim as you'd been taught. Halfway across, you could not contain yourself and sprang forward. Lulu. We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind.²⁶

Injustice is mitigated in the grace of love and language. Hope rests in children and transformation and the reality that some, if not all, of the land was saved. The "dry wind" of the prairies brings generations and tribal peoples to each other.

If, as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn avers, American Indian studies unite indigenous peoples through land, blood, and history, and her agenda is the protection of treaty rights and land protection based on "tribally specific literary traditions,"²⁷ then Erdrich deals with these issues in this episode from *Tracks*. Admittedly, Cook-Lynn has other contentions with Erdrich's mixed-blood narratives, but this example works toward demonstrating and defending the value of land rights.

There are over 300 federally recognized reservations, but 62.3 percent of American Indians live off-reservation. In the 1990 census where this information appears, this statement immediately follows the statistics: "Most off-reservation people maintain contact with their home areas and reservations, rancherias,

villages of Native communities."²⁷ In addition to the tribal lands and reservations of Erdrich's writings, she also depicts spaces where Indians live in contemporary societies, and she constructs a cast of non-Indian characters on the Plains. However, the Ojibwe characters remain at the heart of her writing.

RESERVATION BORDER TOWNS

The small town of Argus, North Dakota, appears prominently in both *The Beet Queen* and *Tracks*. Argus is the quintessential reservation border town, in the words of Laura Tohe (Navajo), "calling the reservation like a whore."²⁸ In *The Beet Queen*, most of the characters are Euro-Americans while Celestine James, her half-brother Russell Kashpaw, and her daughter, Dot Adare, are mixed-blood Ojibwes, trying to survive off-reservation.

The novel begins with a description of the locale:

Long before they planted beets in Argus and built the highways, there was a railroad. Along the track, which crossed the Dakota-Minnesota border and stretched on to Minneapolis, everything that made the town arrived. All that diminished the town departed by that route, too.³⁰

Like its Greek counterpart, Argos, the town contains life-giving elements central to each character and his or her personality. Argos is inextricable from Jason in preindustrial Greek sacred stories. Likewise, Argus is a source of identification and a repository of values that each character seeks or rejects. According to a main character, Mary Adare, the town has its own poetic association and is named for its Indian predecessors.³¹

With cultures, the land transforms in order to survive. The images of adaptability include the implied transfer from historical indigenously to Euro-American and the conversions from railway to highway and from grain production to sugar beets, providing an economic means for people to continue on the land.

The emphasis on transportation metaphors suggests transition and connection between destinations. Because the railroad is fixed by direction, schedules, and routes, while the highway offers more flexibility, these beginning sentences of *The Beet Queen* question basic assumptions about progress. Later, when the central butcher shop suffers because of the infusion of supermarkets, values of personal service are lost in conveniences gained. The larger question becomes one of devaluing traditions, particularly the traditions of the original inhabitants.

Although portrayed with a dark humor common to all characters who explore and break cultural norms, Argus represents colonization. The Ojibwe who reside there must do so out of economic necessity. They interact with non-Indian characters, yet remain at the heart of *The Beet Queen* while playing out some of the absurdities of border towns. The stage is being set for Dot Adare, who in later novels will unite with Gerry Nanapush, to become an emblem of survival.

In an episode that unmasks the institutional racism of border towns, Russell Kashpaw is honored for being the "Most-Decorated Hero." Having been wounded in war and disabled by a stroke, Russell is confined to a wheelchair. He is retrieved from a nursing home to be put on parade in the Beet Festival of Argus. The paradox is that Russell, who has been rendered invisible by mainstream society, is brought out into public view as a paltry gesture of honor to reward his patriotism, only to be ignored once again: "Legionnaires passed him, not feet away. Nobody looked at him. Finally the son of his old boss at Argus National clapped him lightly on the arm and bent over his chair. 'What a day for it,' he said, and that was all."³² Later, Russell sees a vision of his dead sister, but his reverie is snapped back to reality: "'He looks stuffed,' cried a shrill woman from the curb. Russell heard her clearly. At one time her comment would have shamed him, but now he simply opened his eyes to the blurred scene, then shut them down."³³

Rather than taking an easy route and launching into political lecturing about the irony of Indian veterans being ignored, or of Russell's tokenism in the festival, Erdrich characteristically turns the event through the storyteller's voice. Russell follows his sister down the

four-day road, the road of death. . . . I'm dead now, he thought with calm wonder. At first he was sorry that it had happened in public, instead of some private place. Then he was glad, and he was also glad to see he hadn't lost his sense of humor even now. It struck him so funny that the town he'd lived in and the members of the American Legion were solemnly saluting a dead Indian, that he started to shake with laughter.

The damn thing was that he laughed too hard, fell off the road, opened up his eyes before he'd gone past the point of no return, and found himself only at the end of the parade.³⁴

Erdrich redeems the event through survival humor. The subtlety of the episode, combined with the grace of Erdrich's language, might cause the reader to forget that all discourse is political, that the incident has overtones of place, history, "family."

In *The Beet Queen*, some traditional Ojibwe characters are carried over from *Tracks*, although they have only minor roles, such as when Fleur Pillager helps Russell dress for the Beet Festival parade. Yet in *Tracks*, the border town of Argus reveals its true nature in its treatment of Ojibwe characters. In a chapter narrated somewhat unreliably by Pauline Puyat, Fleur goes to live in Argus in 1913. She has already survived a flu epidemic and two drownings. As she approaches the rural town, the phallic Catholic steeple lures her in. Fleur finds a job at the butcher shop, Kozka's Meats, working with four men in carving the carcasses of steers, pigs, sheep, and game—deer, elk, and bear.³⁵ Fleur also breaks gender boundaries by joining the men's card game. For "one

solid week . . . Fleur won exactly one dollar, no more and no less, too consistent for luck".³⁶ Her winning streak continues. Finally, one day Fleur takes the whole pot, including the men's paychecks. After a comic mud dance with a big sow, the enraged men chase Fleur into the smokehouse. Pauline relates: "I closed my eyes and put my hands on my ears, so there is nothing more to describe but what I couldn't block out: . . . Fleur's hoarse breath, so loud it filled me, her cry in the old language and our names repeated over and over among the words."³⁷

Although Fleur returns to the reservation, Pauline remains and exacts vengeance upon the town and the men who have ravaged Fleur. Hiding in a meat locker, they take refuge from a tornado. Pauline's narration is unclear whether she or her cousin, Russell, locks the men inside. As the building is destroyed by the prairie winds, Pauline describes the scene:

Outside, the wind was stronger, a hand held against us. We struggled forward. The bushes tossed, rain battered, the awning flapped off a storefront, the rails of porches rattled. The odd cloud became a fat snout that nosed along the earth and sniffled, jabbed, picked at things, sucked them up, blew them apart, rooted around as if it was following a certain scent, then stopped behind us at the butcher shop and bored down like a drill.

I pitched head over heels along the dirt drive, kept moving and tumbling in such amazement that I felt no fear, past Russell, who was lodged against a small pine. The sky was cluttered. A herd of cattle flew through the air like giant birds, dropping dung, their mouths opened in stunned bellows. A candle, still lighted, blew past, and tables, napkins, garden tools, a whole school of drifting eyeglasses, jackets on hangers, hams, a checkerboard, a lampshade, and at last the sow from behind the lockers, on the run, her hooves a blur, set free, swooping, diving, screaming as everything in Argus fell apart and got turned upside down, smashed, and thoroughly wrecked.³⁸

Erdrich's vivid description of the Plains tornado is enhanced by the moral context. Retribution against the white men for violating the Indian woman is compounded by Pauline's intervention. Pauline, however, suggests that the tornado is not random, but from Fleur Pillager's strength:

Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person. . . . [The story] comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong, too. They only know they don't know anything.³⁹

Violence against women may occur in many different places. That this violence takes on a racial element bound up in Erdrich's imagery of the Great Plains indicts the border town of Argus. The space where such an act can occur, and with its consequent resolution, typifies the vengeance of the American West. The town of Argus could be anywhere that Indian populations seek survival on land that was once theirs and where they are subject to violence or erasure.

In *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*, Peter G. Beidler and Gay Barton attempt geographically to locate the town of Argus. They painstakingly extract clues from *Tracks*, *The Beet Queen*, and *Tales of Burning Love* to situate the town just north of Fargo and "modeled roughly after the real town of Argusville."⁴⁰ The location of Argus is key to placing the site of the imaginary reservation of Erdrich's novels. Finally, though, Beidler and Barton admit:

Readers should not be upset by the indeterminate location of the reservation and Argus. It may well be that Erdrich did not want us to identify the reservation in her

novels with the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation and thus purposefully worked in some inconsistencies. The world she creates is, after all[,] a fiction world. Like Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon*, it need not be expected to coincide exactly with real locations in real states.⁴¹

In their quest to determine the precise geographical locations of both the border town and reservation, Beidler and Barton, in a manner that exemplifies their general approach, fail to recognize the luminous fluidity of Erdrich's writing. With characters as well as locations, they impose a rubric that represents a desire for linear order and finite and fixed interpretation. They attempt to straighten the crooked and entangled complexities of the novels.

The precise location of Argus is less significant than its implications. Even the many critics who tend to focus on Erdrich's exquisite writing overlook her subtle representations of political issues. Through critics' too-frequent attention to structure, language, aesthetics, and narrative strategies, tribal foundations become colonized. Erdrich writes because she is a survivor, as are her tribal peoples. In an endnote to *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich comments: "[T]he reservation depicted in this and in all of my novels is an imagined place consisting of landscapes and features similar to many Ojibwe reservations. It is an emotional collection of places dear to me, as is the town called Argus."⁴² Rather than seeking the literalism of Erdrich's images, readers and critics should listen to the larger story.

STORY AND PLACE

Erdrich explains that it is the story that drives her writing: "Primarily, though, I am just a storyteller, and I take them where I find them."⁴³ She finds the stories among the complicated and interwoven families on reservations, the urban-Indian mediators, the Euro-American colonizers, the devout in con-

vents and churches, and even the survivor dog, Almost Soup, none of whom will let the reader forget the Great Plains landscape. Almost Soup says:

There is a little of a coyote in me, just a touch here in my paws, bigger than a dog's paws. My jaw, too, strong to snap rabbit bones. Prairie-dog bones as well. That's right. Prairie. I don't mind saying to you that I'm not a full-blood Ojibwa reservation dog. I'm part Dakota, born out in Bwaanekeeng, transported here. I still remember all that sky, all that pure space, all that blowing dirt of land where I got my name which has since become legendary.⁴⁴

Almost Soup is a survivor, as are many of Erdrich's characters. For American Indians to survive is a political act. As she notes: "Every Native American is a survivor, an anomaly, a surprise on earth. We were all slated for extinction before the march of progress. But surprise, we *are* progress."⁴⁵

The politicism of her writing is subtle, and even when political discourse is most overt, as in the December 2000 *New York Times* editorial, published on the anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 and arguing for the release of Leonard Peltier,⁴⁶ it is still bound up in narrative and place. In the recounting of her experience at Peltier's trial and their subsequent correspondence, Erdrich defaults to what she does best, a story about place:

Last summer, I walked my grandfather's Turtle Mountain land, side-stepping wild prairie roses, flicking off wood ticks, snapping the dry tall stems of sage into a bundle I would wrap and keep through the winters. As I walked, the evening sun blazed beneath a low cloud and lighted all I saw with a shivering golden fire. I felt in that moment the vast blessing of my own freedom, and took out a letter I'd recently received from Leonard. Words are the soul to me, so

I neatly folded the letter and buried it, there, in his home ground.⁴⁷

Louise Erdrich's home ground is Turtle Mountain, North Dakota. That place is inseparable from who she is. Her writing presents a "tribal view" of complicated human interactions and histories. As a master storyteller, she renders language and art gracefully across the Great Plains. Like the antelope, she pursues the elusive horizon, the infinity of the world's edge and its brand of light through narratives of indigenous survival.

NOTES

1. Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," *New York Times Book Review* (28 July 1985), pp. 1, 24-25.

2. Louise Erdrich's North Dakota cycle of novels in publishing chronological order includes: *Love Medicine* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984); *The Beet Queen* (New York: Holt, 1986); *Tracks* (New York: Holt, 1988); *The Bingo Palace* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); *Tales of Burning Love* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

3. The two editions include the original, *Love Medicine* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), and the revised and expanded second edition, *Love Medicine* (New York: Holt, 1993).

4. Katie Bacon, interview, *Atlantic Unbound* (17 January 2001), online interview accessed 15 March 2001, <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2001-01-17>.

5. Erdrich, "Where I Ought" (note 1 above), p. 24.

6. Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, *Route 2* (Northridge, Calif.: Lord John Press, 1991), p. 22.

7. *Ibid.*, p.24.

8. The Chippewa trickster is Nanabozho, a version of the main character's name, "Nanapush." A trickster serves many functions, primarily the teaching of morals through humorous and outrageous behaviors. As Gerald Vizenor explains, the function of the trickster is essential to narrative:

Freedom is a sign, and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sigh; comic freedom is a 'doing,' not an essence, not a museum being, not an aesthetic presence. The trickster as a semiotic sign is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious which is comic liberation.

("A Postmodern introduction," *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 13). See also Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara, "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11.3 (1975): 147-86; Catt, Catherine M., "Ancient Myth in Modern America: The Trickster in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," *Platte Valley Review* 19 (winter 1991): 71-81.

9. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, "Ojibwa," in *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, ed. Frederick Hoxie (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), pp. 438-40.

10. Erdrich, *The Last Report* (note 2 above), pp. 359-61.

11. William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*, ed. Richard F. Fleck (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1993), pp. 15-45.

12. Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (note 2 above), pp. 6-7.

13. *Ibid.*, *Tales of Burning Love* (note 2 above), p. 13.

14. *Ibid.*, *Love Medicine* (note 2 above), p. 367.

15. *Ibid.*, *The Bingo Palace* (note 2 above), p. 5.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

18. The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, also known as the General Allotment Act, was designed to break up reservations. Heads of Indian families received 160 acres and other individuals were given 80 acres. Once a reservation was allotted, the remaining lands were sold to non-Indians. This disastrous federal policy was repealed in 1934, but during the period of its application Native Americans lands decreased from 138 million acres to 48 million acres. For the law, see *US, Statutes at Large* 24 (8 February 1887): 338-91. For a discussion of the history of the Dawes Severalty Act, see *Felix S. Cohen's Handbook of Federal Indian Law*, ed. Rennard Strickland and Charles F. Wilkinson (Charlottesville, VA: Michie Bobbs-Merrill, 1982), pp. 78-79.

19. Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, "Who Owns the Land?" *New York Times Magazine* (4 September 1988), p. 35.

20. Erdrich, *Tracks* (note 2 above), pp. 173-74.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

24. *Ibid.*, *The Bingo Palace* (note 2 above), p. 148.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

26. *Ibid.*, *Tracks* (note 2 above), p. 226.

27. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 137.

28. *Native American Voices: A Reader*, ed. Susan Lobo and Steve Talbot (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Education Publishers, 1998), p. 39.

29. Laura Tohe, "At Mexican Waters," in *No Parole Today* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991) p. 47.

30. Erdrich, *Beet Queen* (note 2 above), p. 1.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

35. *Ibid.*, *Tracks* (note 2 above), p. 13.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

40. Peter G. Beidler and Gay Barton, *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), p. 12.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

42. Erdrich, *Last Report* (note 2 above), p. 357.

43. Bacon, interview (note 4 above).

44. Louise Erdrich, *The Antelope Wife* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 75-76.

45. Louise Erdrich, "Foreword," *First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates Tell Their Life Stories*, ed. Andrew Garrod and Colleen Larimore (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. ix.

46. Leonard Peltier was convicted in 1977 of the 1973 murder of two FBI agents. Many believe he was falsely convicted. See *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* by Peter Matthiessen (New York: Viking Press, 1991).

47. Louise Erdrich, "A Time for Human Rights on Native Ground," *New York Times* (29 December 2000); www.nytimes.com/2000/12/29/opinion/29/opinion/29Erd.html.