

"THE HINGE OF BLOODS" – THE FAMILY AS CHARACTER IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S NORTH DAKOTA SEQUENCE

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Despite their emphasis on the value of community in the face of destructive individualism, several "first-generation" Native American novels – the early novels of N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko, for example – focus on the journey of a single protagonist from alienation toward integration. The characterization in Louise Erdrich's fiction, however, is more complex. Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is Abel's story, and Silko's *Ceremony* is Tayo's, but whose story, readers might ask, is Erdrich's *Love Medicine* or *Tracks*? These novels feature a broad array of fully realized, complex characters. And yet, these powerfully real, individualized protagonists draw much of their uniqueness from the traits intrinsic to their families, as well as from their being sites of intersection among the clans. In a sense, the protagonists in Erdrich's North Dakota novel sequence are the families themselves – the Kashpaws, Pillagers, Puyats, and others – and the complex, conflicted community created by the links among them.

In this essay, I explore some of Erdrich's more significant familial protagonists, her intra- and inter-family webs – developed in three novels set primarily on her fictitious North Dakota reservation: *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace*. *Love Medicine* presents three figures central to these family systems – Nector Kashpaw, Marie Lazarre Kashpaw, and Lulu Lamartine – in their adulthood, delineating their relationships with one another and with their children and grandchildren. *Tracks* reaches back in time to fill in the stories of their familial roots, while *The Bingo Palace* carries forward the stories of their descendants, picking up where *Love Medicine* ends.

One of the family patterns that emerges in these novels is the knack for business and politics that connects three generations of Kashpaw men.² In *Love Medicine*, we meet Nector Kashpaw as a tribal chairman, an "astute political dealer" who must "horse-trade" with the federal government to preserve Indian land rights and build needed reservation facilities (LM 17-18).³ He is a political man, moreover, whose efforts to benefit the tribe are inextricably mixed with his own interests. In *Tracks*, we go back in time and learn that this "Kashpaw shrewd-mindedness" (Tr 40) is a trait that Nector has inherited from his father, the original Kashpaw.⁴ It is this inheritance, narrator Nanapush tells us, that enables Nector, even as a boy, to "figure out business, [and] politics" (Tr 39). As a nine- and ten-year old still living on the reservation, Nector is already savvy to the ways of the white world, asking adult questions about allotment fees and understanding before the adults that their own allotments are at risk (Tr 121, 174-75). In *Tracks* we see an inherited "shrewdness" (Tr 209) developing in the child Nector that will later enable him to become the "astute political dealer" of *Love Medicine*.

Erdrich further develops this Kashpaw family character as Nector passes his inherited shrewd-mindedness on to his own son, Lulu's boy Lyman Lamartine. Even as a teenager in the *Love Medicine* story "The Red Convertible," Lyman has a talent for making money (LM 181), but it is toward the end of that novel, in "The Tomahawk Factory," that we see him most clearly as Nector's son, with "a Kashpaw mug, bold and unredeemed, eyes narrowed for the bottom line" (301). Like Nector, Lyman is involved in both tribal politics and federal bureaucracy. In fact, Lyman uses

his position in the Bureau of Indian Affairs to put into operation the same tribal souvenir factory that his father had planned and built, and in doing so, he becomes, like his father, Lulu's "adversary" (LM 309). Just as Nector had evicted Lulu from her land to build the factory (138), Lyman must overcome his mother's traditionalist objections in order to begin production (302-03). The portrait of Lyman's inherited Kashpaw shrewdness is intensified in *he Bingo Palace*, where we see him as a "dark-minded schemer" (BP 5) attempting to draw others into his designs.

One of the most powerful and pervasive of Erdrich's family characterizations is the Pillager heritage. Pillager family traits – boldness, shamanistic powers, wolf grin, and luck - are passed through multiple generations, from Four Soul to her son Pillager and granddaughter Fleur Pillager, then to Fleur's daughter Lulu Nanapush, on down to Lulu's son Gerry Nanapush and grandson Lipsha Morrissey. When we meet Lulu in *the Love Medicine* story "The Island," she tells us that as she matures, she becomes more like her mother – "A Pillager kind of woman with a sudden body, fierce outright wishes, a surprising heart" (LM 71). The brief sketch of Fleur in that novel does, in fact, show her to be, like Lulu, strong, fiercely independent, and unmoved by what people think of her (LM 101). But a fuller portrait of Fleur appears in *Tracks*, which depicts her not only as a passionate, fiercely independent woman, capable any extremity to save her land, but also as an inheritor from her Pillager ancestors of an extraordinary power for healing and destruction and a special relationship with the lake manitou, Misshepesu (Tr 7-9, 31, 114, 175). The most remarkable, and feared, of Fleur's powers is her ability to survive her own death, especially death by drowning, and to send others on death's road in her place (Tr 10-11, 212-13).

The portraits of Lulu, Gerry, and Lipsha in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* reveal that they have inherited these Pillager powers. Lulu, for example, has an unsettling capacity for reading minds, knowing her neighbors' secrets without being told, as if, Lipsha tells us, "she had some kind of power" (LM 333). Of all of Lulu's sons, Gerry most fully inherits her Pillager gifts, seen particularly in his uncanny ability to escape from prison (LM 172, 199-200, 285, 341). Descriptions of Gerry as "eellike" or "like a fat rabbit disappearing down a hole" (LM 200, 209) suggest an almost magical ability to change shape, like that of his namesake, the traditional Ojibwe trickster, Nanabozho. Pillager power descends, in turn, to Gerry's son, Lipsha Morrissey, in the form of Lipsha's healing "touch" (LM 230-33). Symbolic of this family's feared power is their wolf-like grin-the-grin with which Fleur sends men on death's road (Tr 213) and Gerry bests his enemy in a game of five-card stud (LM 353-55).

Another family character that Erdrich develops in some detail, a particularly complex pattern, is the heritage of socio-religious ambition, combined with a tendency to control others, that is passed down from Pauline Puyat (alias Sister Leopolda) to her daughter Marie Lazarre and granddaughter Zelda Kashpaw.⁵ The portrait of the teenaged Pauline in *Tracks* reveals traits remarkably similar to those of the young Marie in *Love Medicine*, despite the fact that Marie grows up not knowing her mother's identity. Both women are members of less respected – or in Marie's case, despised – reservation families, and both hope to rise socially through contact with the white world, specifically through the church, elevating themselves by becoming ultra-pious nuns.

In *Tracks*, we meet the young Pauline Puyat as a member of a mixed-blood family that lives on the North Dakota Ojibwe reservation, but has no particular standing among old full-blood families like the Kashpaws and Pillagers. As a member of this family of "skinnners' from a clan whose name has been lost, Pauline rejects her Indian heritage and longs to be like her "pure Canadian" grandfather and her light-skinned mother. She refuses to learn the traditional Indian craft of beading or to speak her native language; and, at age fourteen, she begs her father to send

her to the nearby white-populated town of Argus (Tr 14).

Over time, Pauline increasingly comes to see the church as the most accessible route to higher status. Not only does she take vows by the novel's end, but as novice she also flagellates herself with extreme penances in order to be a "martyr" elevated above the ordinary nuns (Tr 192; see also 143-52). Through the course of the novel, Pauline's obsession with her power and preeminent position as an emerging saint grows increasingly aberrant. Believing that she has seen and spoken with both Christ and Satan, she becomes convinced that the meek, lamb-like Christ needs her help: "strengthened [by] tests and privations, it was I who was armored and armed.... It was I with the cunning of serpents. . . . I would be His champion, His savior too" (Tr 195). When she goes out to Matchimanito Lake to confront Satan on Christ's behalf, she strips off her clothes and sees her naked body as being "on fire." Believing herself to be "strong as a young man," she challenges the lake creature with no shield or weapon" other than her rosary (Tr 198).

A decade and a half later, Pauline's daughter Marie also has aspirations of elevating herself through a position in the church. If Pauline's family of origin is marginalized by reservation society, Marie's Lazarre family is pointedly despised. Young Nector Kashpaw refers to Marie as a "dirty Lazarre" and her family as "a family of horse-thieving drunks" (LM 64, 62). Thus, in the *Love Medicine* story "Saint Marie," when Marie, "near age fourteen," ascends the convent hill to become a novice, she is sure that "the dark fish must rise. . . . I was going up there on the hill with the black robe women" to become "a saint they'd have to kneel to" (LM 43). Marie's vision of herself as saint carries overtones of her mother's mentally unbalanced visions of grandeur. Marie predicts, "I'd be carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toenails would be little pink ocean shells, which they would have to stoop down off their high horse to kiss"(LM 43). Later the same day, Marie has a violent confrontation with her sponsoring nun, Sister Leopolda, who is, unbeknown to Marie, her mother. During this confrontation, Marie's "blazing" vision rises again in her mind, described in language that particularly echoes the young Pauline's vision of her own glowing, naked power:

I was rippling gold. My breasts were bare and my nipples flashed and winked....I could walk through panes of glass.... She [Leopolda] was at my feet, swallowing the glass after each step I took. (LM 54)

In addition to their extreme socio-religious ambition, another trait this mother and daughter share is their penchant for controlling other people. Sister Leopolda's desire to gain absolute control over Marie is obvious in *Love Medicine*, as she uses torture to mold her daughter into her own image. But this desire to control others' lives and destinies is already present in the young Pauline of Tracks. Pauline sees herself as savior of the Indian people, the one who will release them from the old "pagan" religion represented by Fleur Pillager (Tr 139-41), but her evangelism takes an extreme form. In her role as caretaker for the dying, Pauline becomes a virtual midwife to death: she "entered each house where death was about to come, and then made death welcome" (Tr 69). Her narration indicates that this welcoming of death includes playing a role, at least passive if not active, in the death of certain individuals, including the girl Mary Pepewas and Fleur Pillager's second-born (Tr 68,156-58). Pauline sees "death as a form of grace" (Tr 68) and believes that the many people whose bodies she has wrapped, and even certain unborn children, have taken "a different road" because of her, not the old Indian three-day road to the land of the dead, but a "new road" to the Christian heaven. When Christ appears to her, she tells him, "I've brought You so many souls" and hears him reply, "Fetch more" (Tr 140).

Although not in such an extreme manner, Marie, too, is a controller. Nector Kashpaw's narratives indicate that he considers his marriage to Marie not entirely a free choice on his part. At

their first encounter, she seems to have some power over him that he doesn't understand, and he blames her for the encounter's turning sexual (LM 66). Seventeen years later, he depicts their marriage as something he tries to "escape" by drinking, but because he "caught holy hell from Marie" for it, he learns to "put my nose against the wheel" (LM 126). Although Nector's narration is biased and takes the form of a whining excuse for his subsequent affair, Marie's own narratives support the idea that she has sought to shape Nector into the image she has chosen. "I had plans," Marie tells us:

I had decided I was going to make him into something big on this reservation. I didn't know what, not yet; I only knew when he got there they would not whisper "dirty Lazzare" when I walked down from church. They would wish they were the woman I was. Marie Kashpaw. (LM 89)

Marie's plan for controlling Nector has thus replaced her earlier vision of becoming a saint as a mode of social advancement.

This mother and daughter bequeath their ambition and their instinct to control others to Marie's oldest daughter, Zelda. Zelda's social ambitions are reflected first in her desire, like that of her mother and grandmother, to become a nun (LM 10) and then in her rejection of an Indian suitor in favor of successive white husbands (BP 46-48; LM 10, 12). The most obvious trait that Zelda inherits from her mother and grandmother is her instinct to control others. In the opening story of *Love Medicine*, Zelda's controlling nature is evident in her relationships with her sister and daughter. *But The Bingo Palace* most fully develops the portrait of Zelda as an inheritor of her grandmother's obsessive desire to control others "for [their] own good" (BP 118). What Lipsha Morrissey says about Zelda in this novel – "I remember to fear her pity, her helping ways" (BP 13) – Marie might easily have said of Leopolda, who "helps" her daughter by scalding and stabbing her.

Nevertheless, pervasive though this inherited family character may be, the complexity of Erdrich's familial characterization is evidenced in the fact that such family legacies are not absolute fate. Individual characters have the freedom to *vary* inherited family patterns. The similarities between Marie and her at-times psychotic mother serve, in fact, to highlight their differences. Marie's diseased family heritage makes it all the more remarkable that she develops into the nurturing mother-figure we see in the *later Love Medicine* stories, a woman who provides for both her own children and countless "took-ins" (LM 253) the stability she herself had lacked as a child.

In "The Beads," the same *Love Medicine* story that shows her controlling Nectar for her own benefit, we also begin to see Marie cast into this new role of compassionate mother, a role that increasingly defines her character, both in this novel and in the subsequent *Bingo Palace*. When her orphaned nine-year-old niece, June Morrissey, is brought to her door, Marie cannot turn her away, even though she is struggling to feed and shelter the children she already has. Marie takes in June both out of compassion for this collection of "starved bones," as she characterizes the child, and to assuage her own grief over the deaths of two of her own children, including a girl who would have been June's age if she had lived (LM 86). Although Marie's help comes too late for June, years later she also adopts June's son Lipsha and becomes, as we shall see, one of the factors enabling him to rewrite his and June's destructive family story.

Furthermore, a later *Love Medicine* story, "Flesh and Blood," reveals another side to Marie's relationship with Nector. While the notion of Marie's desire for respectability is repeated in this story, it also reveals her love for her husband. After reading his letter saying that he is leaving her, Marie knows that she will be all right – she will not revert to being a "dirty Lazzare"

in his absence. It is true that his leaving would hurt her, but "now I hurt for love and not because the old hens would squawk" (LM 165). This new aspect of her character, her love for her spouse, becomes yet another motif carried forward into later *Love Medicine* and *Bingo Palace* stories. Thus, in her enactment of the Puyat family character, Marie has fundamentally altered the pattern, for there is in Pauline/ Leopolda no hint of empathy, attachment to child, or unselfish love for anyone.

Ultimately, Marie takes a route to sainthood opposite that of her mother, nurturing rather than annihilating her humanity. Near the end of *Love Medicine*, Lyman Lamartine, Nector's son by his lover Lulu Lamartine, Marie's rival, has an epiphany of Marie as both mother figure and saint. All of his life, Lyman has been grasping for a father; but now, recognizing in Marie a kind of "ally," he realizes that "maybe what I needed . . . was a mother." Studying Marie's face, Lyman suddenly sees the depth reflected there: "Her eyes went through me like the eyes of a saint carved into the wood of a broad wall." The shadow on Marie's forehead is blue, color of the Virgin Mary, and her hair stands out on each side of her head, "white and winged" (LM 322).

Furthermore, it is not Marie alone who varies the Puyat family character. Even the iron-hearted Zelda ultimately finds the power to alter her grandmother's destructive bequest of obsessive ambition and control. One night, near the end of *The Bingo Palace*, Zelda is stricken with what she assumes to be a heart attack. As she prepares to die, she thinks back over her life, searching for sins she should repent. To her surprise, she discovers that she most regrets not the evils she has done (including particularly despicable maneuvers to control people), but what she has not done -her failure to open her heart to love. Zelda survives this attack of the heart and the next morning makes a visit of reconciliation to the lover she had, in her cold ambition, denied thirty years earlier (BP 241-46).

The complexity of Erdrich's family characterizations is especially evident in her rendering of Lipsha Morrissey, who represents a blending of multiple family characters and who, like Marie, is able to alter what at first appears to be his familial fate. His blended familial character and his freedom are, in fact, connected. One of the factors enabling Erdrich's characters to alter received family patterns is the fact that they are points of intersection among conflicting family stories, and Lipsha is, more than any other character, just such a "hinge of bloods," as Lyman calls him (LM 318). From his mother June Morrissey's side of the family, Lipsha has inherited the blood of the "dirty" Lazarres and the "no-good" Morrisseys (LM 64, 86) - a heritage that has destroyed June. In his initial narration in *Love Medicine*, Lipsha represents himself as a typical Morrissey, a no-account, and Marie at times concurs, calling him "the biggest waste on the reservation" (230). Yet Lipsha's character is redeemed from his mother's MorrisseyLazarre fate by his inheritance from two other families. One is his connection with the Kashpaw clan as adopted grandchild of Marie and Nector's old age. As *Love Medicine* closes, Lipsha realizes that he is "lucky" that June had relinquished him to Marie, since he turned out far better than the son she had acknowledged (366-67). In addition to this Kashpaw connection, Lipsha's Pillager-Nanapush inheritance also serves to mitigate the curse of his Lazarre-Morrissey blood. As his father Gerry tells him in "Crossing the Water," Lipsha is "a Nanapush man" (LM 366). This Pillager-Nanapush heritage of energy, spirit, and renewal empowers Lipsha to escape the MorrisseyLazarre curse and even to bring the wandering spirit of his mother home at the novel's end.

Lipsha's portrait as a "hinge of bloods" is further developed in *The Bingo Palace*, a novel that accentuates all sides of his multi-family heritage. Both the reservation gossips and Lipsha himself emphasize his "no-good" Morrissey-Lazarre roots (BP 7, 73). At the same time, the novel deepens Erdrich's portrait of Lipsha as beloved Kashpaw grandchild, a heritage embodied in

Nector's ceremonial pipe, which Marie gives to Lipsha rather than to one of her blood children (see BP 28, 29, 39, 35, and LM260).

Yet, *The Bingo Palace* depicts Lipsha primarily as a Pillager, inheritor of the family's medicine powers and its talent for survival. As an infant, Lipsha, like Fleur, survived death by drowning, a survival in both cases growing out of their special relationship with the lake manitou. Zelda's puzzled question, "So why weren't you drowned" (BP 51), is answered by Lipsha's vision in which he relives his ordeal. In this memory-vision, he recalls a presence with him in the slough, a "lion-jawed" creature with "fins and horns" that rocks, cradles, and saves him (BP 218) – apparently the same being who had been Fleur's spirit helper. The connection between Lipsha and Fleur is made explicit when the two meet in the chapter "Mindemoya." Lipsha introduces himself as her great-grandson, and Fleur teaches him about love and the value of land (BP 131-45, 151). Although the ending of *The Bingo Palace* is ambiguous, it seems to suggest that Fleur's final legacy to Lipsha is a second survival of death, this time death by freezing, the very element that took the life of Lipsha's Morrissey-Lazarre mother.⁶

Furthermore, Lipsha's dual Kashpaw-Pillager heritage saves him not only from a watery childhood death and a later death by freezing, but also from the fate of becoming a no-good Morrissey. In his *Bingo Palace* vision, Lipsha comes to understand his mother's deadly legacy. Just as June had been abandoned repeatedly, left to freeze, left to starve (BP 27-28, LM 86-87), she herself abandons Lipsha as an infant (BP 217). And yet, as Lipsha's narration in *The Bingo Palace* comes to a close, he seems to find within himself both the "staying power" of his Kashpaw grandmother (123-24) and an enduring Pillager strength, as he determines not to repeat the Morrissey-Lazarre family pattern. Curling himself around the baby in the snowbound car, Lipsha muses:

I know it will be a long night that maybe will not end. But at least I can say . . . here is one child who was never left behind. . . . At least he always had someone, even if it was just a no-account like me, a waste, a reservation load. (BP 259)

Although Erdrich's characterization of her multiple protagonists is highly individualized, much of this individuation itself grows out of the traits-the character of the families to which these individuals belong. And yet, despite the power of such family systems, her characters are not absolutely trapped within them but are able to vary the inherited patterns. Through her strongly realized individual characterizations

Erdrich defies the dominant culture's stereotype of Indian people as doomed and dying, while at the same time her powerful depiction of family systems illustrates how fully her fictional world is grounded in the familial and communal ethos of traditional tribal life.

Notes

¹ For genealogical charts showing the complex connections within and among Erdrich's North Dakota families, see the frontispiece and pages 13-29 of Peter G. Beidler and Gay Barton's *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*.

² My readers will also want to consult Chapter 4 of *The Novels of Louise Erdrich: Stories of Her People* by Connie A. Jacobs. This chapter, "The Power of Love as Medicine: Louise Erdrich's Family Stories," deals with characteristics and "touchstone" stories of the Kashpaws and other Erdrich families.

³ In citing passages from Erdrich's novels I use the following abbreviations: *LM* for *Love Medicine*, *Tr* for *Tracks*, *BP* for *The Bingo Palace*, *TBL* for *Tales of Burning Love*, and *LR* for *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*.

⁴ A later North Dakota novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, gives a fuller description of this Kashpaw ancestor. Its portrait of Kashpaw both further supports the link of "shrewd-mindedness" between this father and son and suggests ways in which Nector's shrewdness takes a different form from that of his father, for the original Kashpaw is far more traditional than his youngest son. For the original Kashpaw's shrewdness, see especially LR 63, 64, 93, 96. For his traditionalism, see 6364,100-01.

⁵ My discussion here in no way exhausts the parallels and variations among this family of women. In addition to the chapter by Connie Jacobs, cited above, readers interested in pursuing this and other family lines should also refer to articles by Kristan Sarve-Gorham ("Power Lines: The Motif of Twins and the Medicine Women of *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*") and Annette Van Dyke ("Questions of the Spirit: Bloodlines in Louise Erdrich's Chippewa Landscape"), both of which compare the link between Pauline and Marie with that other mother-daughter pair so important to *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, Pauline's and Marie's rivals, Fleur and Lulu.

⁶ In fact, Erdrich's next novel, *Tales of Burning Love*, resolves the enigma with which *The Bingo Palace* closes, since the later novel's protagonist, Jack Mauser, rescues Lipsha (and the baby with him) from his snowbound car (TBL 386).

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