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Reconstructing Native American Female Identity: The Relationships between Women in Louise Erdrich's "Love Medicine"

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Introduction

In recent decades, the scholarly exploration of Native American literature has shed light on the rich variety of voices and experiences that historically have been overlooked or marginalized within mainstream Western narratives. Central to this discourse is the examination of Native American women's identity, which is deeply connected with the complex influence of the prevailing narrative of colonialism and the imposition of patriarchy in Native American communities. This master's thesis, titled "Reconstructing Native American Female Identity: The Relationships between Women in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*" seeks to contribute to this ongoing academic dialogue by investigating relationships among women portrayed in Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine*. The foundation of this research lies in my education at the University of Padua, where my academic journey was significantly shaped by three pivotal courses: Anglo-American Literature, Cultural Anthropology, and History of the United States. These courses provided a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and literary dimensions of minority groups' experiences, offering insights into the complexities of gender and race discrimination within the experience of Native Americans, which I tried to investigate through their literature. By focusing on Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*, this thesis explores how Native American women negotiate their identities within a white patriarchal society while maintaining strong ties to their cultural heritage. Erdrich, an acclaimed Ojibwa author, weaves together the stories of multiple generations of Native American women, highlighting the complexities of their lives, their relationships with one another, and their struggles for finding their own Native identity. Drawing upon a range of theoretical frameworks, including cultural anthropology, gender studies, and ethnic literature theory, this study aims to analyze the intricate web of connections and tensions between the female characters in *Love Medicine*. By examining the dynamics of sisterhood, motherhood, friendship, and love within the novel, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of Native American female identity and its transformative potential in the face of adversity. Through a close reading of Erdrich's prose and a critical analysis of the female characters' experiences, this thesis explores how the relationships between women in *Love Medicine* contribute to the reclamation and reconstruction of Native American female identity. By examining the cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts within which American Indians live, I aimed to illuminate how Native

American women navigate and resist the gendered power dynamics and discriminatory practices that have shaped their lives. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to make a significant contribution to the fields of Native American literature, by shedding light on the complexities of Native American female identity and the transformative potential of community relationships. Through a literary criticism approach, I hope this research will deepen the understanding of both historical and present experiences of American Indian women in American society, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding gender discrimination, cultural identity, and the importance of Native American literature in reclaiming truthful representations of Native American peoples.

The first chapter of my thesis offers an overview of Native American literature, providing an examination of three main areas: the concept of Native American literature entering the American canon, American Indian identities in American society, and the representation of Native American women in literature. The chapter begins by exploring the inclusion of Native American literature in the American canon; it highlights the historical marginalization and underrepresentation of Native American voices within the broader canon of American literature. However, in the 1960s during the Native American Renaissance, there has been a notable shift as Native American literature gained recognition and appreciation. This change can be attributed to the efforts of Native American writers, scholars, and activists who have worked to challenge dominant narratives and bring attention to the unique experiences and perspectives of Native peoples. Moving on, the chapter examines the multifaceted nature of American Indian identities within American society; it discusses the historical context of colonization, forced assimilation, and cultural suppression that Native American communities have endured and the influence of American media in creating stereotyped images of American Indians. It also examines the consequences of these experiences on Native American identity construction and the ongoing struggles faced by Native peoples in claiming their cultural heritage and reasserting their narratives within the larger American society. Furthermore, the chapter examines the representation of American Indian women writers in literature, emphasizing their pivotal role in reshaping Native American literary traditions; women writers have actively challenged gender and cultural stereotypes, bringing to light the complex realities and unique perspectives of Native American women. Their contributions have expanded the understanding of American Indian

identity and disrupted the one-dimensional narratives that have often dominated mainstream American literature. The chapter then focuses specifically on Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* as a significant literary work in ethnic literature. Through vivid character portrayals and intertwined relationships between women, Erdrich explores the struggles, pain, and healing process toward a reconstruction of the identity of American Indian women; her novel reports the diverse experiences and complexities of Native American women's lives, emphasizing the significance of their relationships and the bonds that connect them in navigating societal challenges.

The second chapter, titled "Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*" delves into the various aspects of the novel, including its genre, reception, plot, and characters. This chapter provides an analysis of *Love Medicine*, exploring its unique qualities and the impact it has had on readers and critics. The chapter begins by discussing the genre of *Love Medicine*. Erdrich's novel defies easy categorization, revising the Western definition of autobiographical fiction; by employing a range of narrative techniques and incorporating elements of traditional Native American storytelling, Erdrich creates a distinct and multi-layered narrative that captures the complexity of American Indian experiences resulting in a genre that has been classified as "stories cycle". Moving on, the chapter explores the reception of *Love Medicine*, it examines the critical and popular response to the novel, highlighting its significance within the literary landscape and the complex question of the modification and additions made by the author from the first edition of 1984 to the second of 1993. *Love Medicine* received widespread acclaim for its compelling storytelling, complex character development, and exploration of themes such as identity, family, and cultural heritage, but some scholars moved criticism mainly toward the lack of a clear political stance of the first edition. Nevertheless, the novel's ability to challenge prevailing narratives and offer a realistic portrayal of Native American life establishes Erdrich as a prominent voice in contemporary literature. The chapter then provides an overview of the plot of *Love Medicine*; the novel follows the lives of multiple interconnected characters from the Ojibwa community on a North Dakota reservation, spanning several generations. Erdrich employs a non-linear narrative structure, moving back and forth in time, which adds depth and complexity to the storytelling, and weaves together the characters' experiences, relationships, and struggles, exploring themes of love, loss, resilience, and the complexities of identity. Furthermore, the chapter

summarizes the characterization of *Love Medicine*, analyzing the diverse cast of characters that populate the novel by providing a summary of each chapter's story. Each character is presented with a unique set of motivations, conflicts, and aspirations that move them in a self-discovery journey toward "home", back to their Native American heritage, while their experiences intertwined with other components of their community, contributing to the intricate structure of the narrative. Through their perspectives and interactions, Erdrich explores the multifaceted aspects of Native American identity and the complexity of the journey to the rediscovery of heritage to find oneself as part of the Native American community.

The third chapter, "Reconstructing of female identity in *Love Medicine* through a women's web", explores two key aspects: how Native American women's identity is perceived through the Western male gaze and the concept of reconstruction of female identity through community, motherhood, and sisterhood in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. The chapter begins by examining the Native American women's identity construction through the Western gaze, it discusses the historical context of colonialism and its impact on the representation and perception of Native American women: Native American women have often been subject to stereotypical and exoticized depictions in Western literature and media, perpetuating a distorted and limited understanding of their experiences and identities. The chapter explores how these representations have influenced and shaped societal perceptions of Native American women, highlighting the need to challenge and reconstruct these narratives that narrow their definition into a discriminating princess-squaw dichotomy. Moving forward, the chapter focuses on the exploration of female identity and community in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. The novel provides a multifaceted and realistic portrayal of Native American women, investigating their agency, resilience, and complex relationships within the communities. In particular, this research delves into the lives of three female characters, June Kashpaw, Marie Kashpaw, and Lulu Lamartine, depicting their struggles to find themselves in the intricate dynamics they navigate within the context of their families, relationships with mothers, and tribal communities. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes how these characters in *Love Medicine* challenge and reconstruct traditional notions of female identity, by finding their Native identity through the solidarity of the Native American female community, especially with the elder women figures, defying and subverting societal

expectations and breaking free from the limited roles of princess-squaw that Western society historically assigned to them. The novel presents women who are independent, assertive, and determined to shape their destinies: through their experiences, Erdrich explores themes of self-discovery through the rediscovery of Native American cultural heritage, and the importance of female bonds and support networks. To conclude, the chapter analyzes the concept of the female community in *Love Medicine*, exploring how the female characters find strength, support, and a sense of belonging within their communities, starting from their relationship with the mother figures of the novel. *Love Medicine* portrays the significance of communal support and the interconnectedness of individuals within Native American culture for claiming a transpersonal self-identity. Through their interactions and shared experiences, the characters in the novel build and nurture a transpersonal identity, emphasizing the importance of female relationships and the power of community in reconstructing truthful Native American female identities.

In conclusion, this thesis has explored the intricate theme of reconstructing Native American female identity by focusing on the relationships between women depicted in Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*. Through an in-depth analysis of Native American literature's inclusion in the American canon, the contributions of Native American women writers, and the portrayal of Native American identity in American society, this thesis has shed light on the significance of *Love Medicine* as a novel that challenges and reconstructs prevailing narratives. In synthesizing the findings from the three chapters, it is evident that *Love Medicine* is an important literary work for the reconstruction of Native American female identity; the novel disrupts racial and gender stereotypes imposed by Euro-American media, challenges dominant discriminating narratives, and provides a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of Native American women, by reclaiming their important role in the Native American community. Through the exploration of relationships between women, Erdrich presents a differentiated and realistic portrayal of female identity, emphasizing the resilience, agency, strength, and communal solidarity of Native American women. This research contributes to the broader field of Native American literature and gender studies by highlighting the significance of Native American women's voices in reshaping literary canons and challenging the white patriarchal society's perceptions. It underscores the

importance of a multifaced female representation, the power of storytelling, and the value of community and tribal culture in reconstructing Native American female identity.

Chapter I: Native American literature: an overview

Native American literature in the American canon

Native American literature occupied the margins of the canon until the late 1960s, when the fights of the civil rights movements increased and Native Americans came together in organizations of pan-tribal nature, constituting a general movement for Native rights that would be known as Red Power. As a matter of fact, Miriam Hahn claims that being pan-tribal helped the effectiveness of the movements in the 1960s, as compared to the smaller Native rights movements of the 1950s led by single tribes (Hahn 2014:161-62). Therefore, Indigenous peoples together with other minorities lively participated in the fight to obtain civil rights: the first pan-Indian movement to unite all American Indians of the United States in 1968 was the United Native Americans (UNA), whose principle "to face white America as a united people" (Hahn 2014:162) inspired the American Indian Movement (AIM), an organization concerned with the conditions of Native Americans who were marginalized and impoverished by the U.S. government policy of removal from a century earlier. The public manifestations of the AIM and its claim for the inclusion of Native American literature in the educational program of the country contributed to a rise of interest in Indigenous cultures in American society. Overall, this season of protests for civil rights started a movement towards cultural pluralism and away from the monocultural purism that characterized the culture and the literature of the United States; efforts were made to include authors from different origins, gender, and sexual preferences in order to overcome the Western hierarchies of race and gender (Krupat 1983:164).

The introduction of Native American literature in the canon has been a long and difficult journey, that knew its first successes only at the end of the 1960s despite the ancient origins of Native American cultures, which date back long before the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. The main feature of Native American literature is that it was exclusively oral at the beginning, and for this reason, it was ignored for centuries by the Euro-Americans whose alleged superiority made them assume that American Indians were people without culture. As Arnold Krupat explains, Euro-Americans considered the culture of letters exclusively the one modelled on Western thought and modes, thus they excluded Indigenous peoples from the canon of the New World literature, elevating

themselves to the role of the only men of culture. As a result, they credited themselves as part of the "new" society of the United States, attending policies that aimed to cancel Indigenous cultures by exterminating most of the Native American tribes (Krupat 1983:145-47). However, a part of the American Indians' cultures had been collected in texts by Euro-Americans during the 16th century as historical testimonies of their customs and economy. These were texts destined exclusively for the white public, such as the *History of the Things of New Spain* (1577) written by the priest Bernardino de Sahagùn on Aztecs' oral literature (Wiget 1985:2). Later, in the 18th century, the colonies' need to attract European investors led to a revaluation of Native Americans' cultures, but only in the form of public speeches, as demonstrated by the publication in 1771 of one of the first English texts written by an American Indian author, *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian* (1772) by Samson Occom. Hence, for two centuries the oral tradition of Native Americans was either ignored, cancelled, translated, or forced into a written form by Euro-Americans, with the only purpose to collect information about the very first inhabitants of the New World (Krupat 1982 in Wiget 1985:128-29).

The texts about Native Americans continued to be labelled as historical writings in the form of autobiography in the 18th century during the time of President Jackson's Indian Removal policy which relocated Eastern tribes to the West of Mississippi, and of the foundation of the American Ethnological Society in 1842, whose purpose was to preserve Native American cultures after the increase of interest in their lands (Sweet Wong 2005:125-27). Along with the realization of removal policies, Native Americans became a popular literary subject, especially in the genre of captivity narratives where Natives were pictured either as "red devils" or as "noble-but-doomed" red men, as in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841) (Brown Ruoff 1984 in Wiget 1985:192). The historical and cultural interest in America's first peoples reached its peak at the end of the American Revolution when Americans started to look for their roots relying on Native Americans' cultural heritage: this led to an appreciation for their languages and cultures and to new research conducted to provide the basis for the creation of America's myth of origins, such as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Algic Researches* (1839) (Krupat 1983:150).

The first efforts to introduce American Indian literature to the public were made by anthropologists in the 20th century, including Alice Fletcher, Francis Densmore, and

Natalie Curtis, whose studies focused on Native American poetry; for instance, the latter published one of the first books about music, poems, and short narratives of Indigenous peoples, titled *The Indian Book* (1907). The contribution of anthropological studies on Native Americans persisted after War World I when the end of the conflict revealed the need for a profound cultural change in North American society; therefore, in the 1930s, with the official abandonment of the General Allotment Act, American anthropology stopped being a branch of the U.S. government and entered universities, where the study of anthropology demonstrated the importance of American Indian cultures for the United States, ultimately offering the occasion to open and enlarge the canon of American literature (Krupat 1983:153-64).

As discussed above, America's call for cultural pluralism continued over the years and had its crucial phase in 1968, when a few Native American literary authors eventually knew their first public successes. A well-known literary success for the Native American community of the late 1960s was the winning of the Pulitzer Prize by N. Scott Momaday with the novel *House Made of Dawn* in 1969, which marked the beginning of the Native American Renaissance, a period that saw an increase in the printing of works written by Native Americans (Lincoln 1985:7-9). The causes of the rise in the production of literary works by Native authors during the Native American Renaissance were multiple and can be grouped into three categories. The first cause is the counterculture brought by the civil rights movement together with the protests of the American Indian Movement (AIM) at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington and at Wounded Knee in 1973, which encouraged the readers to explore the works of minorities that were marginalized by the mainstream American society; the second reason is essentially economical: in the 1960s the National Endowment for the Arts started a program to support small presses and literary magazines which helped the publication of works written by minority groups; the last cause is the birth of a pan-tribal community composed by Native American writers that began to be published and to read each other's work (Ruppert 2005:173-74).

Moving on to the end of the Native American Renaissance, James Ruppert in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* reports that "the lack of interest in Native experience during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s did not exactly parallel the sustained interest in Native American literature during the 1980s and 1990s" (Ruppert 2005:174), in fact with the end of the financial support from the U.S. government, the printing of

Native American novels decreased together with the enthusiasm of the white readers' audience; despite this, American Indian writers continued to write successful novels, especially fiction, and eventually, the 1980s saw the publication of works by important authors, such as Leslie M. Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). One of the most considerable changes brought by the Native American Renaissance was in fact the rise of the genre of fiction. As indicated previously, American Indian authors were known mostly for the genre of autobiography, especially from the late 1800s when the genre rose as a consequence of removal policies and some Native Americans used the medium of literature to sensibilize the white audience about the loss of their lands, cultures, and rights. As Paula Gunn Allen describes, the history of the genre of Native American fiction can be summarized in three waves: the 1870-1970 wave, when Native Americans started to write their own books (with or without the mediation of a white author, that sometimes translated or transcribed the words of an American Indian) as a reaction to the loss of their land and culture; Zitkála-Šá, Mourning Dove, Sarah Winnemucca were among the first authors to gain recognition in the United States for writing their novels. The second wave goes from 1974 to the 1990s, which according to Allen are the years of "renewal and hope, deeply angry Native identity" (quoted in Ruppert 2005:186) that led to a rather large production of fiction with American Indian protagonists set in the plains and/or in urban contexts, such as Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984) and James Welch's *Fools Crow* (1986). The last wave of Native American fiction is the contemporary one, which aims at a more authentic picture of the Native American experience in the modern United States, and whose main topics are alienation from the modern world, from self, and struggle with trauma (Ruppert 2005:186).

Indian identities in American society

The history of Native American peoples parallels a long process of construction of a white conception of American Indian identity, including years of wars and policies to remove Native Americans and appropriate their lands, and later efforts to culturally assimilate Natives in American society. However, the mainstream idea of the American Indians was also created by novels, films, and advertisements featuring Native

Americans, which contributed to producing an exoticized image that is still present in Western minds nowadays, despite the efforts on the part of American Indians to debunk it through more realistic, varied, and objective depictions. Thus, the stereotypes about Native American people changed over time both in history books and in popular imagination, as Vine Deloria comments in the Indian Manifesto *Custer Died For Your Sins* (1969): "People can just tell by looking at us […] what we done, what should be done to help us, how we feel, and what a 'real' Indian is really like" (quoted in Davies and Iverson 1995:15-16).

Starting from the Europeans of the 16th century, they did not have a wide knowledge of the world outside Europe, consequently, the New World was turned into a land of myths, which became the subjects of an ample literary production. Hence, the "discovery" of the New World enlarged the imagination of Europeans with writings that depicted the inhabitants of the "new" land as monsters, women warriors, and giants, revealing a European dream that ended up being profoundly different from the American reality that would be imposed on the territory of the New World (Lavaggi 2021:19-25). Moving on to the 18th century, the influence of the Enlightenment from Europe, especially the work of John Locke *An Essay Concerning Human Mind* (1690), changed the attitude towards Native American peoples: according to Locke people's minds at birth are a *tabula rasa* that could be shaped by the environment, thereby Europeans could civilize Native Americans, considered an infant society, through education and religion. In those years European images of the peoples of the New World oscillated between the "noble savage", the innocent pure Native uncorrupted by the life of the Old World, and the "bloodthirsty devil", the violent American Indian that rebelled against Europeans (Dippie 1982:4-6). Regarding the first half of the 19th century, the perception of the Native Americans was connected to America's national goals, and it is generally described by the term "vanishing Indian". The historical changes in the American society of the 19th century, such as the winning by Americans of the War of 1812, the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1823, and the Indian Removal Act in 1830, brought to a new consideration of American Indians, as emerges in the statement of the speaker of the White House Henry Clay in 1819: when the colonies were established "we were weak and [the Indians] were comparatively strong; they were the lords of the soil, and we were seeking asylum among them […] now we are powerful and they are weak" (cited in

Dippie 1982:7). According to Susan Scheckel, Clay's utterance is significant of the American Indian question of the time, because his language passes a message of regret and resignation towards Native American peoples while reinforcing the idea of inevitability of their fate and assuming lower status, as child-like peoples living in the forest (Scheckel 1998:4). Thus, to 19th-century white ideology the American Indians were destined to "vanish" from the U.S. territory, leaving the stage to the superior, modern white race, even though their image was still useful in the creation of a national identity during the 1820s and 1850s, when the American society tried to build a national literature and art to celebrate American history in order to achieve true independence from Europe. Therefore, Native American characters were often employed in fiction during the 19th century. As Anne Norton argues, however, "in literature, drama, and art focusing on Indian subjects, 19th-century Americans reified 'the Indians' into an object of contemplation, that both reflected and provided imaginative space for reflection on the meaning of national identity" (cited in Scheckel 1998:9). As a result, white Americans also appropriated the myths of American Indian cultures to provide some "primitive" origins to the new nation of the United States; according to George Forgie the urge to find a founding myth was due to the fact that "as long as the founding fathers lived on, American national identity could be embodied by the founders themselves; so, Americans of the post-Revolutionary generation attempted to find new means of affirming sense of national identity" (cited in Scheckel 1998:7). Therefore, a series of novels picturing American characters set in the Revolution time were published with success during the 19th century; in these novels Native Americans appeared as secondary romantic characters in stories about great American people, often representing a distant past, an origin of the American land, but also a dying race that had to leave space to the new inhabitants of the land (Scheckel 1998:7-16).

A notable example of a literary genre concerning American Indian characters is the captivity narrative, which had success in reinforcing the values of 19th-century American culture: the genre's target was the white reader for its narration usually pictures a white female captive representative of the community or the nation, as in *The Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison* (1826), an account of the life of Mary Jemison, a woman who was captured and adopted by the Seneca tribe in 1755, which James E. Seaver edited after interviewing Jemison. The book's success is related to an overall sentiment of reassurance

that is transmitted through the words of Jemison: her attitude reflects the typical position of the inevitability of the American Indians' fate assumed by 19th-century white Americans, presuming the futility of any type of integration of the Natives within the American society. In her account Jemison finds space also to defend Native American peoples and to stand against white American society's operations to destroy their culture, claiming that "the attempts which have been made to civilize and Christianize them by the white people, have constantly made them worse and worse; increased their vices, and robbed them of many of their virtues; and will ultimately produce their extermination" (Scheckel 1988: 84). Nevertheless, *The Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison* influenced American popular opinion for its general message of the impossibility of integration of Native American peoples in the U.S. society; it contributed to lower the American Indian figure to a domestic role, deprived of any power to rebel and threat American society and thus destined to become a "vanishing Indian" (Dippie 1982 in Scheckel 1998:84).

Turning now to another example of a novel depicting American and Native American characters: *Black Hawk: An Autobiography* (1833) was published three years after the Jacksonian Removal Act and it tells the story of Black Hawk, the Indigenous Sauk War leader who led several hundred American Indians across the Mississippi River to obtain their ancestral territory in Illinois during 1832. It is claimed to be one of the first attempts to represent the reality and authenticity of the Native American figure on the part of an American Indian writer; however, the novel does not challenge the 19th-century ideology of the "vanishing Indian" but rather confirms it. Scheckel in *The Insistence of the Indian* (1998) comments about Black Hawk's own description of a Native American that it stands firmly in that tradition:

> Black Hawk's mere identification as representative of a "once powerful" but now "fast-fading" people inscribes him in an existing historical narrative to which every American already knows the conclusion. The more serious threat posed by Indians at this point in American history was moral rather than physical, a threat to the nation's self-image rather than its survival. (Scheckel 1998:109)

To continue, the 19th-century representation of the American Indian in literature concerned also national drama, which had an important role in imposing a biased image of the Native Americans, posing once again the "Indian problem" at its moral center. The history of American theatre had a moment of rise in the 19th century: with the end of the stream of Antitheatricalism of the late 1700s, Americans started to revalue the theatre as a place of national formation, and its supporters started to consider it as "the altar of

national pride” (Scheckel 1998:43-44). The most notable examples are the many dramas about Pocahontas performed during the 19th century; the Indigenous princess first appeared in the account *The Generall Historie of Virginia* (1629) by Captain John Smith, a book that constitutes a foundation myth for the United States, and where Smith tells how Pocahontas saved him from death during a mission in the New World. Many had been the plays about the Indigenous national heroine, especially during the 1820s, when, according to the theatrical critic George Odell, “Indians were everywhere” (cited in Scheckel 1998:44) because of the popularity of plays about the Revolutionary War which naturally brought an increase of the appearances of Native American characters in theatre. According to Scheckel, the first drama inspired by the story of Pocahontas was titled *The Indian Princess; or La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melodrama in Three Acts* by James N. Barker and was published with a preface that celebrated the American origin of the play (Scheckel 1998:12). Hence, the dramas about Pocahontas were a genre still related to the creation of an American national identity: the Indigenous heroine’s role was only to provide a sort of “foster mother” for the “infant” European colonies, which survived thanks to her providing food and protection from the warriors of her tribe; in other words, Pocahontas became the mother that preserved and nurtured the future American nation (Scheckel 1998:43-46). The popularity of the story of Pocahontas survived to our days, primarily because of the romanticization of her life due to the invented love story between the Indigenous princess and Captain Smith, as pictured in Disney’s classic *Pocahontas* (1995). The invention of the love story successfully hid the truth behind the life of Pocahontas, who was a victim of European colonialism just like any other Native American from the 15th century on. Her tale was more a tragedy than a love story, which it never happened in real life because Pocahontas was nine years old when Smith and the settlers arrived in Virginia. The Native American community, in their commitment to remove the veil from many Western Indigenous stories and thus show the reality of colonialism, attacked the Disney film explaining how Pocahontas was kidnapped and exploited by the settlers because of her relation to the tribe chief (she was the daughter of Powhatan chief Wahunsenaca), and became one of the most famous victims of the Europeans’ violence towards Native Americans by dying in England and being buried far from her family once she was converted to Catholicism.

To conclude, Scheckel also adds a relevant comment about the main sentiment invoked by the novels of the 19th century: mourning. Taking *The Pioneers* (1823) by James Fenimore Cooper as an example, the American Indian character Natty represents the typical mourning Native (in a passage of the book Natty explicitly states "I have come to mourn, not to fight" (Cooper, 871). His character is representative of the overall sentiment of defeat that American society attached to Native Americans, because of the "success" of the Jacksonian policies; it is relevant that Cooper's novel came out in the same year of the sentence *Johnson v. McIntosh* with which the U.S. Supreme Court legally determined that private citizens could not purchase lands from Native Americans, hence the American Indian title could be abolished by the government of the nation claiming sovereignty over Native American lands (Scheckel 1998:26-29). Since American Indians stopped being a "menace" for the U.S. government, in 1800s novels they were often depicted as heroes that abandoned a resistance based on violence typical of the past and choose a sentimental kind of resistance, often based on mourning. Scheckel commented on the representation of Native American peoples by Cooper:

> Cooper by manipulating the category of race found a way to bring the prior "owners" of the American land (both the Indians and the English) into a narrative of kinship and inheritance as ancestors; by invoking an attitude of mourning in relation to these historical forebears, Cooper enacted a symbolic affirmation of Americans' claim to the land and to the legacy of nationhood. (Scheckel 1998:19)

Mourning was a response to the 1800s "Indian problem" under the presidency of Jackson when Native Americans were at the center of the public debate because of the removal policies; American Indians became a problem that threatened the building of an American national character, therefore, the government forced Native American peoples to move away from their land with a series of repressive laws to deprive them of their political and property rights (Scheckel 1998:31-32). As a consequence, many Native American tribes objected to the decisions of the U.S. government, but their protests had dramatic conclusions, such as the infamous Trail of Tears to Oklahoma in the 1830s and 1840s, when five tribes were forced to move away from their homelands in a long journey to Oklahoma, where many lost their lives because of the freeze, hunger, and diseases (Dunbar-Ortiz 2020:112-13).

The quest for assimilation of Native Americans into American society continued throughout the 20th century; according to Brian W. Dippie by 1921 the reform movement to change American Indian policy was composed of two schools of thought: the

“romantic” one, which looked at American Indian peoples with a nostalgic sentiment and believed in their “vanishing”, the other more pragmatic and “avant-garde”, that hoped for “the American Indian becoming the Indian American”. A possible explanation for the creation of the “vanishing Indian” could be the polygenesis theory, which affirmed the existence of lower “races” and found in biology the primary cause for the impossibility of Native Americans becoming part of American society; whereas the relevance of cultural relativism during the 1920s explains the spread of a new image of the Native American, namely the “changing Indian”, who indicated how the status of American Indian developed with the changing of government policies (Dippie 1982:273-74). As a result, the American Indians of the plains (Pueblos and Navajos) were attacked the most by the assimilationists, first with a series of policies, such as the Bursum bill (aiming to legally settle non-Native American residents on Pueblo lands in New Mexico), and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1923, and later with the assault and denigration of American Indian traditional religious ceremonies, designated as “superstitious”, “obscene” and “immoral” by the white society. Plains Native Americans were the representations of the “vanishing race” for the white community since their ancient culture risked being disrupted by the Bursum bill; subsequently, Pueblos and Navajos’ strong resistance to assimilation build an image of continuity and survival of American Indians for American society. As a consequence, the “seek of exotic” raised as a trend for white people who started living among American Indians to report testimonies of their experience; this had been the case of Walter S. Campbell who lived with Navajos and claimed that they were not vanishing, instead they “are numerous, they are rich, they are industrious and self-supporting, and they are gaining in numbers and wealth” (Campbell in Dippie 1982:285); similarly, also photographers brought their personal proof of living in the tribes, such as Frederick Monsen’s reportage of the Hopis (Dippie 1982:280-84). As a result, the “seek of exotic” trend changed the prejudices towards American Indians to the point that white Americans began to refer to them in different terms, such as “the noblemen of the plains”, creating yet another subject for this new artistic vogue followed by illustrators, painters, novelists, and also advertisements, as demonstrated by the slogan for the new Santa Fe Railroad which read “Gee! We are going to see Indians!” (Dippie 1982:287-91). *Laughing Boy* (1929) by Oliver La Farge is a good illustration of the vogue of the desert trend of the 1920s: La Farge was an anthropologist who started his career with the study

of Mayan culture, and later, until the 1960s, dedicated his research to the Southwest Native Americans. Erik Trump describes *Laughing Boy* as a precursory novel for anthropology, because of the way La Farge created Native American characters employing the method of subjective participance to the ethnographic survey, an approach that would be employed later in history by 1950s anthropology (Trump 1998:326-7); the Pueblo writer Leslie M. Silko, instead, described the novel as "a lie because La Farge passes off the consciousness and feeling of Laughing Boy as those of Navajo sensibility" (cited in Hobson 2003:211). Moving to the story of *Laughing Boy* is set in the Navajo Reservation (which consists of a part of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado) in 1915, when white settlements were located on the southern boundary and so influenced the Navajo tribe. Therefore, its main theme is the conflict between white and Native American cultures, depicted by the main characters, Laughing Boy and Slim Girl, a married couple that lives on the reservation. In a study by Robert A. Hecht, they are described as representative of the two types of Native Americans from the plains that existed during the 20th century: Laughing Boy is a "pure" Navajo craftsman that has never left the tribe's life, while his wife Slim Girl has studied in a boarding school out of the reservation, where she has learned English and has been "Americanized"; thereby, the marriage is a way to reintroduce Slim Girl to the Navajo life, although at the end she will fail to "forget" about the American white life inculcated by her past in the boarding school. In fact, while Slim Girl tries to resist her "Americanization", she will continue to have an affair with a white male, hide a second job in the city and teach her husband to save money as a white man. Hecht comments that the novel failed in his description of the Navajo plight, which remains marginalized in the story, and in the representation of the collision between white and American Indian cultures that remains rather ambiguous in the story. In conclusion, the narrative of *Laughing Boy* marginalizes Native Americans' true problems of the time and also their real relationship with the white community, demonstrating La Farge's belief in the "vanishing" of the Native American cultures once assimilated in the white society, and excluding the possibility of integration (Hecht 1991:46-51). As Dippie underlines, La Farge's *Laughing Boy* came out the same year of the Great Depression in the U.S. when Native American people became one of the targets of the New Deal. The Great Depression was the event that allowed American Indian peoples to have a choice about the question of segregation or integration for the first time:

with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 Native American communities could choose to remain in the reservation and maintain their tribes' relations or to joining the white world out of reservations (Dippie 1982:271-74).

Moving to the 20th century, the imagery of the American Indian from novels and films continued to have social implications influencing the readers' social attitudes, as happened in the 1950s when the majority of Native Americans had settled in the cities after the promulgation of the Indian Reorganization Act (Jones 1958:5). Although many American Indians moved out of the reservations to live among white people, the prejudices around them did not stop; on the contrary, in the popular imaginary Native American peoples continued to be seen as noble and eroticized savages. According to S. Elizabeth Bird, the Native American imagery in contemporary white culture is the result of a process through which the Native American male and female have been both sexualized and desexualized in their representation in films, television shows, and romance novels. For instance, the denial of their sexual identity on the part of many anthropological reports resulted in an objectification that often described American Indians as stoic people without emotions and sexuality, as Morgan's report on the Iroquois testifies: "Of that passion which originates in a higher development of the power of the human hearts and is founded upon a cultivation of affections between the sexes, they were entirely ignorant. In their temperaments, they were below the passion in its simplest form" (quoted in Bird 1999:64). In an online article from 2021, the journalist Nadra Kareem Nittle comments about the "stoic Indian" stereotypes: "Unsmiling Indigenous peoples who speak few words can be found in classical cinema as well as in cinema of the 21st century. This representation of Indigenous tribal members paints them as one-dimensional people who lack the ability to experience or display a similar range of emotions as other racial groups". Nittle links the stoicism to the alleged incapability to feel emotions, strategically pictured to inculcate an idea of racial inferiority in the popular opinion still in the 21st century.

As claimed above, the objectification of Native Americans in the popular literature of the 19th century also comported an eroticization of both male and female American Indians, often represented in scant by wearing traditional clothes. The constant show of their nudity on the screen contributed to spread racial stereotypes that survived through the art and popular culture of the 1900s, as showed by the film *The Searches* of 1956 and by the

1980s tv show *Son of the Morning Star*, which picture American Indian characters wearing only a few clothes, whereas the white characters are fully clothed with uniforms or elegant costumes. As declared by Bird, the depiction of the Old West in *The Searches* was stereotyped and far from reality, nevertheless, white viewers received it as accurate while Native Americans captured the dehumanizing function of the imagery; same concerns for *Son of the Morning Star*, where Kimberly Norris, the Native American actress starred in it, reported having been told to show less emotion because her tears would falsify the "dignifying stoicism of the Indians" (Bird 1999:62-64).
Regarding the stereotyped stoicism of American Indians, the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s raised a popular fascination for the wise elder American Indian man to the point that the stereotype of the "medicine man" still survives in films in the 21st century. Indeed, the wise elder was again a stereotype dating back to the 19th century, which was revived in the 1960s and 70s because of white people's interest in the notorious wisdom that accompanied this serious, resolute character. As declared by Daniel Francis the inspiration and admiration of white people for the wise Native American man was related not to his words but rather to the fact that his wisdom came from ancient traditions, older than American culture (quoted in Bird 1999:70). Nittle mentions the popularity of the "medicine man" from the 1960s and 1970s as a phenomenon so influential that it still appears in films nowadays: for instance, in a scene of the 1991 film *The Doors* Jim Morrison has a vision of a medicine man that will change his life, confirming that despite the great wisdom related to Native Americans, the purpose of their characters in films was to appear just as helpers to the white characters, showing once again a racial disparity. The emulation of Native American traditions was one of the main features of the hippie movement, a branch of the Beat movement, that together with the New Left was part of the countercultures of the 1960s and 70s: they reunited in movements to go against the restrictions of the government, asking for freedom and peace in Vietnam, and fighting for civil rights. As Deloria claims, in the history of the United States whenever white Americans have encountered a crisis of identity (for instance, during the Revolution with the creation of a national identity and in the modern era when countercultures manifested their dissent against the government) they have made symbolic recourse to Native Americans (Deloria 1998:7). The hippie movement arose in the 1960s as a social phenomenon with the purpose to rebel against the status quo; by appropriating American

Indian style and spiritual tradition, the hippies constructed their own alternative identity that on one side revealed admiration for Native American peoples, but on the other contributed to spreading stereotypes about them. According to Hahn, the appropriation of Native Americans' dress and appearance by the hippies (they used to wear beads and fringed dresses, did not shave or wear makeup, and had long hair) constituted a sort of "imaginary Indian": hippies' style was directed to communicate a willing for freedom, peace, and free love, a sort of return to a natural state of being, that found in the American Indian stereotyped appearance a depiction of the "primitive". Hahn indicates one of the inspirations for the hippie movement in the stereotype of the "noble savage" who transmits a yearning for a simple, free past. The reason for the fortune of this stereotype during the 1960s is linked to a triple attraction for the hippies: the noble savage is oppressed, lives at the margins of society, and has a religious tradition that relies on drug use as a means to access the spiritual realm (Hahn 2014:124-26). The attraction for American Indian mysticism is related to a new counterculture religion that mixed Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Native American religions; a belief that came from a will to reject "official" Western religions, and again, appropriated American Indian traditions, such as the use of drugs, especially peyote, in "dope churches" modeled on Native American churches with the purpose to use peyote legally (Hahn 2014:130-34). As a result, the appropriation of Native American traditional ceremonies contributed to spreading another stereotype, the enlightened Native American who lives in harmony with nature and in tune with his spirituality. The Native American in harmony with nature is a stereotype that spread during the 1970s, because of a new consciousness of ecological and climate issues, where the American Indian was employed as a mascot embodying a sort of "eco-warrior", being the last savior of nature and earth. A relevant example is the campaign *Keep America Beautiful* transmitted in 1971 to raise awareness for climate change: the commercial had the face of Iron Eyes Cody an actor that was famous for his Native American roles in films and used to wear traditional clothes in public as a symbol of his embraced Indianness. However, after his death, his sister revealed that his heritage was Italian-American, for their parents were southern Italians that had moved to the United States (Hahn 2014:131). The "costume" of the eco-warrior fitted Native Americans because of white people's conviction of their profound wisdom, their unmaterialistic way of life, and their living on reservations in tribes, which hippies

perceived as a commune where people shared every goods without having any personal belongings. Hence, hippies tried to emulate American Indian reservation life, by living in communes that followed the principle of sharing typical of tribalism, which was misinterpreted as the antecedent of contemporary communes. As indicated previously, the hippie movement assumed radical behavior to criticize and eventually destroy oppressive social constructions, therefore living in communes was a reaction to governmental restrictions and gave hippies the possibility to exercise total anarchy. In this regard, Hahn claims that "native communities, often unexpectedly socially restrictive, did not mesh well with the aggressive individualism of many communes" (Hahn 2014:143). Countercultures demonstrated to have limited knowledge of true American Indian traditions by raising Native Americans as mascots for both tribalism and anarchism; in reality, the desire to live in communes molded on American Indian reservations, with an anarchical but peaceful way of life, was attractive to hippies because it provided them with an excuse to be far from the government laws, in order to use drugs freely and to live according to their own beliefs. Nevertheless, the reality of the reservation is in fact very different from the one that was set on Western minds after the 1960s, as Nittle (2021) explains:

> According to Washington University in St. Louis, 60% of the Indigenous population lives in cities. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that New York, Los Angeles, and Phoenix boast the largest Indigenous populations. In Hollywood, however, it is rare to see them portrayed living anywhere that's not desolate, rural, or in the wilderness.

Another stereotype that existed together with the peaceful American Indian was its contrary, "the blood-thirsty warrior", who in the 1960s was reinvented, from "an inferior uncivilized man" as the one portrayed in *The Last of Mohicans* novel and film, to a "defender of an egalitarian way of life" (Hahn 2014:152). Nittle attempts to explain the reality behind the American Indian warrior stereotype by citing the words of The Anti-Defamation League's report:

> While warfare and conflict did exist among Native Americans, the majority of tribes were peaceful and only attacked in self-defense. Just like European nations, American Indian tribes had complex histories and relationships with one another that sometimes involved combat, but also included alliances, trade, intermarriage and the full spectrum of human ventures.

Therefore, the stereotypes for American Indians were still pointing to their "primitive" and "natural" identity; even though the hippie movement had an honest interest in Native American cultures and positively acclaimed American Indian ways, it failed in raising

awareness for Native Americans' true life conditions, spreading harmful stereotypes about them instead. According to Hahn, countercultural misappropriations were the consequence of a scarce engagement in the study of American Indian culture, which led hippies to have a superficial interest that put an end to the notorious stereotypes based on the same myths from the past (Hahn 2014:134). Therefore, this cultural insensitivity resulted in picturing Native Americans as people who lived under an ideal condition of peace and love, while in reality they were struggling to obtain civil rights and living in poverty because of a diffuse prejudice in society (Hahn 2014:157).

Native American women in literature

In the popular imagination, the American Indian stereotype is usually a male; as explained earlier the imaginary Native American could be a stoic older Native man, living in peace following ancient Native American traditions, smoking peyote from a pipe (notably the Peace-pipe or Calumet), or a savage blood-thirsty warrior with no fear of killing and cutting the scalp of his enemies (Albers and James 1987 in Bird 1999:72). For what concerns American Indian women, they have also been objectified by white society, following the bifurcation theory identified by Bird, according to which Native American women in the 19th century were categorized only as princesses or squaws. The Native American woman of the 19th century is usually nameless, on the contrary, American Indian men had individual names, such as Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo, whereas the only women known by name were Pocahontas and Sacajawea. The reason is related to the already mentioned use of Native Americans in the construction of a national identity during the 1800s: in fact, both Pocahontas and Sacajawea were employed in novels, history books, plays, and films to represent the noble American Indian maiden, who helped the Europeans in the conquest of the American land. As declared by Bird in regard to the princess myth: "The American Indian princess became a nonthreatening symbol of White Americans' right to be here because she was always willing to sacrifice her happiness, cultural identity and even her life for the good of the new nation" (Bird 1999:72). To continue with the analysis of Bird, in this vision Native American women represented the exoticism of early America, being both objectified and sexualized as princesses, representative of the virgin land that will be possessed by white men. Hence,

the exotic and desirable noble princess or maiden was a constructed, unrealistic character, who rather dehumanized women, together with the squaw stereotype, that is the lazy, violent, drunk, filthy American Indian woman incapable of the same emotions as white women. It is clear that the squaw, like the male American Indian stereotypes mentioned above, became a character in popular songs and tales of the 19th century only to justify white supremacy, as also happened to other non-white women (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988 in Bird 1999:74). Moving on to the 20th century, the popularity of the myth of the frontier amplified the stereotypes around American Indian women. In fact, during the golden age of Western films in the 1930s and 1950s directors were still sourcing their figures for American Indian women from the past, showing exclusively squaws and sacrificing princesses (Bird 1999:74-75). The stereotypes around Native American women led to serious consequences in their life; Nittle reports the words of Sherman Alexie to explain that many American Indian women experience abuse, sexual harassment, and violence from non-Native men as a result of years of objectification and misinterpretations of their roles: "Representations of Indigenous women as universally promiscuous beings or objects of sexual desire for White men have serious real-world consequences. In fact, Indigenous women suffer from high rates of sexual assaults, often perpetrated by non-Indigenous men". To continue, Nittle cites a passage from the book *Feminisms and Womanisms: A Women's Studies Reader* (2004) by Kim Anderson, to bring yet another proof of the dangerous situation of many American Indian women: "Whether princess or squaw, Native femininity is sexualized. This understanding finds its way into our lives and our communities. Sometimes, it means constantly having to fend off the advances of people with an appetite for the 'Other.' It may involve a continual struggle to resist crass, sexualized interpretations of one's being".

In reality, Native American cultures do not see women in these limited terms, on the contrary, traditionally tribal women embodied important decisional roles within the community. An analysis by Rayna Green explains the evolution of the Native American woman's image from the 18th century to the 1970s. According to this analysis, European patriarchies accepted the image of the noble American Indian woman princess because they were incapable to understand the reality of matriarchal, matrifocal, and matrilinear tribal societies; their misunderstanding of Native American community's organization also led to a self-sabotage of their treaties, that were made exclusively with the men of

the tribes, who did not have the role to make political decisions. A change was made in the 20th century, when scholars started debating over the historicity of Pocahontas and Sacajawea, which added new important historical figures to the list of Native American women, such as Winnemucca, Molly Brant, Nancy Ward, Mary Musgrove and Milly Francis among others (Green 1980:250). The raised interest in Native American women during the first decades of the 20th century is related to a number of studies by anthropologists and journalists that investigated the roles and customs of women in tribes, and contributed to integrating American Indian women into the literature; some examples are Truman Michelson's *Narrative of a Southern Cheyenne Woman* (1932), and Frank Bird Linderman's biography of a Crow woman *Pretty-Shield, Medicine Woman of the Crows* (1932) (Green 1980:252). Moving on, the 1960s and 1970s were the years of a rise in consciousness about American Indian women: scholars became interested in their problems and concerns, recognizing that Native American women were facing the same experiences as other women. Thus, a significant change was made during the 1960s: following the call for women's liberation Native American women were finally recognized in the specificity of their gender. This awareness resulted in an increase in the number of American Indian women writers during the 1960s and 1970s, who wrote about their life, aiming to free themselves from the stereotypes of the princess and the squaw, and rather show how these images affected their personal life (Green 1980:256-62).

Therefore, the 1960s marked an important time for American Indian women in literature: because of a new wave of changes in American society brought about by the countercultures and the second wave of feminism, American literature opened its canon to a wider and diverse group of authors with different origin, gender, and sexuality; as a result, publications by Native American women poets and writers increased during the 1960s and 1970s. Jane B. Katz finds another cause that sparked interest in American Indian women's literature, which is the popularity of the phenomenon of tribalism in mid 20th century; because a large part of the ancient tribal culture consisted of songs composed to bond the community, traditionally women of the tribe were used to making songs to achieve status or win protection and power. Hence, traditional Native American oral cultures were sustained in large part by women whose role in the tribe was also to assure the stability of the community through the composition of songs while men were occupied in battle or hunting. Even though both genders fulfilled various tasks within the

community, and it was normal in tribal culture to have a blending of roles in the creative process, most American Indian societies agreed on the woman's vital role in the creative process, to the point that Native American oral cultures can be considered a mirror of the popular view of Native American women (Katz 1977:xv-xix). The American Indian poet Joy Harjo, a celebrated voice in American literature, during a lecture dedicated to Native American women writers in 1985, emphasized the traditional connection of these women to the creative process, explaining the inseparability of Native American writers to their tribe to the point that their works could be considered products of a collective responsibility where the readers could find traces of a common tribal memory[1]. A notable example is the written testimonies of Native American women about their survival experience in boarding schools at the end of the 19th century: their memoirs and biographies were written in collaboration with white authors, such as journalists, anthropologists, or writers influenced by the popular concern about the conditions of Native Americans during the 1960s; Polingaysi Qoyawayma's *No Turning Back* (1964), Helen Sekaquaptewa's *Me and Mine* (1969), Kay Bennett's *Kaibah: Recollection of a Navajo Girlhood* (1964) are some examples. However, there had been also testimonies in the form of novels and autobiographies written directly by Native American women about their boarding schools experiences, as was the case of Zitkála-Šá who wrote about her days as a student and later as a teacher in a boarding school in her memoir *The School Days of an Indian Girl, and an Indian Teacher* (1900). To continue, after the 1960s other American Indian women writers started to publish their own novels and poems, often inspired by the storytelling tradition of their families or tribes, as Paula Gunn Allen, Wendy Rose, Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, the already mentioned Joy Harjo, and Louise Erdrich; these authors also continued the activism begun by their female predecessors of the 19th century, who wrote or told their stories to raise awareness about the abuses and discriminations suffered in boarding schools, and spread knowledge about the cultures and customs of their tribe in order to end the prejudices about Native Americans' life.

As previously stated, the use of the term Native American Renaissance by scholars originally came from the anthology of Kenneth Lincoln *Native American Renaissance*

[1] The audio of the lecture has been taken from Internet Archive at the link [https://archive.org/details/Joy_Harjo_lecture_Native_American_women_writers_August_1985_85P092] Accessed 23 January 2023.

(1983), where the author indicates the period that approximately went from the 1960s to 1995 as crucial for Native American writers because of the high numbers of publications of books written by them. Within this period two events marked the history of Native American literature, that can be identified in two separated waves: the first, as said above, begins in 1968 with the works of Momaday, Welch, and Silko, while the second wave starts in 1984 with the publication of *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich (Rainwater 2005:272). Hence, *Love Medicine* constituted an important novel for Native American literature: according to Lincoln the first novel of Erdrich "garnered more literary awards [...] than any other book in printing history" (quoted in Stookey 1999:6). Its success could be related to the storytelling of the author that took inspiration from her own life experiences: *Love Medicine* is in fact the story of a mixed-blood Native American family as Erdrich's family was. Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, and grew up in North Dakota in a family with a strong community sense, as is typical for many Native American people in the United States; her mother came from a mixed Ojibwa and French family that lived in the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, while her father had German parents. Erdrich took great inspiration from her family of storytellers: her parents were both teachers in a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and they encouraged Erdrich to tell her own stories while growing up; her closeness to her family can also be pointed in the details of her stories where she recalls certain memories from her childhood, for example, the mention of the 1930s Great Depression in *Love Medicine* can be a remembrance of her grandfather's stories as a wobbly (a member of The International Workers of the World during the 1930s), that she used to be told as a child (Stookey 1999:1-2). Being her family and her personal life a great inspiration for *Love Medicine*, one of the novel's main themes is the sense of community and closeness to family, which also influences her style. In fact, *Love Medicine*'s main feature is that it is built on a series of stories told by each member of the family: relying on oral storytelling some of the stories cross each other and certain events intertwine offering the readers different perspectives (Schneider 1992 in Bloom 1998:25-26). The interconnection of the stories in the novel is also part of a larger design where five of Erdrich's novels are linked with one another, enlarging the sense of community into a bigger picture and thus confirming Lincoln's description of Louise Erdrich's novels as literature of homing, because a sense of home and place is central to the narration, and

focuses on using characters that continuously expresses a quest to return to the place they belong to (Lincoln 1984 in Stookey 1999:8). To continue with the parallels from Erdrich's fictional stories and her life, the community that constitutes the protagonist in the novels is often set in the mid-western plains states where the author grew up, to reinforce again the reality of her narration in order to offer the readers a true sense of life in a large American Indian community.

Lorena L. Stookey identifies Louise Erdrich's literary roots in two different traditions: the Euro-American literature that Erdrich encountered during her college years as a student of English at Dartmouth College, and the Native American narrative traditions from other contemporary writers, such as Momaday, McNickle, Silko, and Welch (Stookey 1999:13). One of the inspirations behind Erdrich's writing from Euro-American literature is William Faulkner, with whom she shares the already mentioned choice of multiple narrators and also the setting in a mythic regional community; like Faulkner, Erdrich makes use of her characters' voice to construct a narration that unfolds not in chronological order, but rather progresses with the voices of the characters who tell their stories in different years, going back and forth in the timeline of the plot. According to Stookey Erdrich's use of a mixture of tragic and comic is also a feature inspired by Faulkner: her characters make humorous political statements that produce grotesque effects. One more inspiration for Erdrich is Flannery O'Connor, another American author that makes use of the grotesque in relation to Catholicism in her stories: Erdrich produces the same effect in her depiction of the Catholic tradition together with American Indian mysticism, trying to give another hint of her life as a mixed-blood Native American. Following the analysis of Stookey, another American inspiration for Erdrich is Toni Morrison, who finds the same sensibility of portraying women's experiences in the story (for instance childbirth, motherhood, and domestic activity) and the same use of a style inspired by an oral tradition rich in myths. As mentioned above, Erdrich shares some characteristics with other contemporary Native American writers; for instance, the theme of homecoming, particularly the troubled homecoming, is a returning feature in authors with American Indian origins. The difference claimed by Stookey is that Erdrich depicts the return home of both male and female characters, while novels from her contemporaries usually portray male characters' difficulties to return, as in *Ceremony* by

Silko, where the protagonist is Tajo a Vietnam veteran that deals with mental issues once he comes back home from war (Stookey 1999:15-21).

To conclude, *Love Medicine* can be classified as a novel that contributed to opening the genre of Native American literature to a wider public, and for that, it can be considered an important publication during the Native American Renaissance period. Its story was appreciated by Native Americans for Erdrich's realistic portrait of their struggles and community life on the reservation, and it also succeeded to enlarge its audience to non-Native American readers. The reason for such a great success (*Love Medicine* won the National Book Critics Circle Award the year of its publication) can be pointed in its blending of style and themes: taking inspiration from the oral tradition, the stories unfold in an unchronological order, which challenges the readers and leave them with multiple possibilities for a conclusion; Erdrich demands creativity to her audience, as Geoffrey Stokes claims "Erdrich constantly thrusts responsibility on the reader, saying, as poets effectively do, 'Here it is. Here it *all* is. I've done my best now it's your turn'" (cited in Stookey 1999:48). The audience of her novels comes from two different cultures, as Erdrich does, so the author is capable to challenge readers that came from both Native American and Euro-American backgrounds. The results are numerous interesting interpretations of the plot that had been studied and analyzed by scholars: Hertha D. Wong notes that for *Love Medicine* "there is no monolithic readership. Some reviewers and students have seen the characters overall as poverty-stricken, alcohol-addicted Indians who are 'durable', but desperately and ultimately 'doomed'" (cited in Stookey 1998:47); some other interpretations have seen the Native Americans in the novel as "complex and resilient humans" (cited in Stookey 1998:48).

Chapter II: Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine

Genre of the novel

J. Gerald Kennedy described Erdrich's writing as "at the edge" of the novel (quoted in Stookey 1999:33), a definition that was probably inspired by an interview where Erdrich claimed to be someone who has "always been on edge" (quoted in Stookey 1999:31). The reason of Kennedy's definition of *Love Medicine*'s genre is also to be found in the novel's belonging to a tradition of ethnic women writers, whose authors share a style inspired by the oral storytelling which gives shape to new narrative structures. As stated in the previous chapter, storytelling is a major influence for American Indian writers, thus Erdrich's works are composed employing narrative strategies inspired by the oral tradition of her Native American heritage. The result is that *Love Medicine*, being inspired by oral storytelling, can possibly appear unconventional and unusual in relation to the modernist and postmodernist tradition of fiction, for in "its more experimental aspect […] the novel has for about seventy-five years been veering toward the story sequence as a decentred mode of narrative representation" (quoted in Stookey 1999:33). This form is the result of the author's objective to build the narrative around the multiperspectivity of different narrators, that can be described as a "stories cycle" for it is composed by multiple stories linked to each other as in the oral storytelling of Native American tribal tradition.

Consequently, scholars have interrogated how Erdrich's fictions can be classified, for they do not subscribe to the traditional definitions of the novel. In fact, in all her novels each chapter has a coherence and a disclosure that make them function as a singular short story, to the point that most of her chapters (except the ones from the 1998 novel *The Antelope Wife*) have been published separately before the novels came out (Stookey 1999:31-32). Karen Castellucci Cox delineated *Love Medicine*'s genre as "novel-in-stories", giving emphasis to the fragmentation of the novel in short stories that continuously move forward and backward in time, resulting in an erratic sequence of events. According to Cox, the intricated narration is composed of a sequence of recurring patterns inserted to be recognized and to "guide the reader to read anew" (cited in Stookey 1999:35), in order to collect them and find the unifying action in the final scene. These recurring patterns in *Love Medicine* are identified by Allan Chavkin in *The Chippewa*

Landscape of Louise Erdrich (1999), where the author claims that the interrelated stories of the novel are unified by the inclusion of a common regional setting, the repetition of events from the different perspectives of the characters and their humour, and the repeated images and themes (Chavkin 1999:85). For instance, the return of the images of the road and the water, and the repetition of the hunting and homecoming scenes are the recurrent motifs with which the reader becomes familiar passing from a story to another. These narrative strategies work to enlarge the reader's experience of fiction: as Hertha D. Wong explains, the reader is able to see the novel's structure as representative of a community "rather than a hierarchical, organization of society and literature" when her/his "expectations" do not encounter "an autonomous protagonist, a dominant narrative voice, and a consistently chronological linear narrative" (quoted in Stookey 1999:34). Erdrich herself provided an explanation of her "novel-in-stories" technique, confirming that is to be found in her Native American heritage since it "reflects a traditional Chippewa motif in storytelling" in which an incident usually "leads to another incidents that leads to another", ending up in a cycle of intertwined tales (cited in Stookey 1999:33). Another term related to *Love Medicine*'s genre comes from Forrest L. Ingram's 1971 study on the "stories cycle". Ingram's study employs the term "stories cycle", which was used to designate a collection of stories in Western literary history (it is a genre employed by authors like Ovid, Homer, and Chaucer), to describe the works of 20th-century writers, like Louise Erdrich. A cycle, in the definition of Ingram, is "a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessity of the larger unit" (cited in Stookey 1999:32); in other words, each story of the collection must have a coherence both on its own and within the novel as an essential part of the larger structure. In Erdrich's case, the "stories cycle" can be referred not only to the singular narrative structure of her novel but can also be expanded to define the whole saga of five novels. To continue the analysis of the "stories cycle", Susan Garland Mann observed that "there is much less emphasis on a protagonist in short stories cycle that is generally the case in other fiction" (quoted in Stookey 1999:34), which applies to *Love Medicine* for its main objective to offer the experience of a community storytelling, to the point that "if we insist on isolating a protagonist in *Love Medicine*, it would most likely be the community itself", as Wong claimed (cited in Stookey 1999:34). The focus on multiple characters' points of view is a feature related to

the achronological sequence of the tales in *Love Medicine*, where the temporal aspect in the novel appears to be less important than the spatial one. The year designations are indicated only at the beginning of every short story, under each title, and operate as impositions of a mechanical temporal structure to achieve a balance between time and space (Pittman in Bloom 1998:34). Moving on to another definition regarding the novel's genre, Robert M. Luscher expanded the two previous analyses by focusing on the importance of the tales' sequence, defining Erdrich's novel as "short stories sequence" (Stookey 1999:33). Luscher's analysis added to Cox's and Ingram's studies (which focused on repeated themes and motifs as the main features to guide the reader to the unifying action on the final scene) the importance of the repetition of the story sequence to develop the narrative patterns, claiming that "the story sequence repeats and progressively develops the themes and motifs over the course of the work; its [the novel's] unity derives from a perception of both the successive ordering and recurrent patterns, which together provide the continuity of the reading experience" (cited in Stookey 1999:33).

Other scholars have focused on the effects triggered by the reading of *Love Medicine* and compared them to the satire and grotesque of carnivalesque fiction and picaresque novel. Barbara L. Pittman claimed that reading *Love Medicine* as a picaresque novel, a genre that in the Western literary tradition arose as "a reaction against Renaissance humanism, in its more classicizing and idealizing modes" (Reed in Bloom 1998:34), can help to understand the satire related to the romanticization of Native Americans, which emerges especially in the scenes of the depiction of alcoholism and physical abuse. Pittman continues the comparison between *Love Medicine* and the picaresque novel by stating that both make use of the chronotope[2] of the road, for "in the picaresque novel, a long winding road determines the plot" (quoted in Bloom 1998:34). Once the reader approaches *Love Medicine* as a picaresque novel, she/he is able to recognize the disconnected road scenes as changes of trajectory and deviations "away from a linear continuity, toward a postmodern, antilineal discontinuity" (cited in Pittman in Bloom 1998:34). In addition,

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[2] In literary theory and philosophy of language, the chronotope refers to how configurations of time and space are represented in language and discourse. The term was taken up by Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin who used it as a central element in his theory of meaning in language and literature. (Wikipedia, accessed on March 7th 2023).

the chronotope of the disconnected road can also symbolize the history of assimilation and marginalization of Native American tribal community in its living in and out the Euro-American culture (Pittman in Bloom 1998:34).

Returning now to the use of satire and humor in Erdrich's novel, Allen stated that in Native American literature carnivalizing techniques are usually employed to emphasize the equalitarian values of American Indian traditional culture and thus offer an alternative to Euro-American hierarchical culture (Morace 1999:36). Therefore, Robert A. Morace analyzed *Love Medicine* using Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque[3], and found three parallelisms with carnivalesque fiction: first, the language used in *Love Medicine* is composed of different inserted forms and modes of address (like American Indian jokes, "red English", Lipsha's vernacular idioms and slapstick comedy) which give rise to a mixed language of spoken and written English, characterized by an alternative use of the first and third persons, repetitions, and shifts to past and present tenses; the second parallelism is the chronotope of the novel that moves out against "white time" and "white space", as discussed above; the third is the use of Rabelaisian grotesque realism[4] and humor, given by the continuing references to food in sexual scenes (for instance in the description of Lulu and Nector's bodies covered in butter during a sex scene). Morace interpreted the carnival and the grotesque realism in *Love Medicine* as demonstrations of Allen's thesis mentioned above:

> Encyclopedic, multi-styled and multi-form, carnival, as well as carnivalization ("the transposition of carnival into the language of literature"), is one such point of intersection. During carnival the "hierarchical structure" of monologic authority gives way to "organic unity", "joyful relativity", and "free and familiar contact among people". (Morace 1999:38)

To sum up, *Love Medicine* is the result of a revision of the Western literary tradition, that connects the multiperspectivity typical of modernist writers with the oral tradition culture

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[3] Carnivalesque is a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos. […] For Bakhtin, "carnival" (the totality of popular festivities, rituals and other carnival forms) is deeply rooted in the human psyche on both the collective and individual level. Bakhtin's term *the carnivalization of literature* refers to the transposition of the essential qualities of the carnival sense of the world into a literary language and a literary *genre*. (Wikipedia, accessed on March 7th 2023).

[4] The grotesque body is a concept, or literary trope, put forward by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of François Rabelais' work. The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, noble, and ideal to the material level. Through the use of the grotesque body in his novels, Rabelais related political conflicts to human anatomy. (Wikipedia, accessed on March 7th 2023).

of the Native American literary tradition. Erdrich's employ of the modernist multiperspectivity earned the novel numerous criticisms which misunderstood the revised form and narrative. For instance, Gene Lyons's review of the novel interpreted the use of multiple narrators as a sign of the inexperience of the writer claiming that "*Love Medicine* has as many as a half dozen first-person narrators, and several stories are told in the third person. No central action unifies the narrative" (quoted in Shultz 1991:80), whereas Robert Silberman declared "*Love Medicine* has no sustaining central consciousness or protagonist" (quoted in Shultz 1991:81). As Lydia A. Shultz claims, the criticisms were due to a narrative form that conventionally belongs to a modernist tradition only to a surface level since Erdrich's goals were to subvert the traditional multiperspectivity. The author actually creates a narrative that guides the readers to a personal path into the story where they are continually challenged in their attitude toward Native Americans by using multiperspectivity as a narrative method to offer the readers hints to unify her text. Shultz explains the process of reading *Love Medicine* as a continuing challenge for the readers, which are invited to follow different stories told by numerous narrators, resulting in a narrative form inspired by Erdrich's multicultural background, which fused both Euro-American and Native American oral literary traditions:

> Her "fragments" draw on both Euro-American and Native American oral narrative techniques such as first-person narration, direct addresses to "you", and the use of the present tense; as a result, she encourages readers to look at her various narratives as oral stories. Although Silberman claims that "Indian ritual has no place in Love Medicine except in the 'touch' of Lipsha", a look into Native American culture, and specifically Ojibwe culture, clearly reveals that Erdrich has modified the dominant form of multisperspectivity by bringing to it the oral traditions and communal beliefs of her marginalized culture. (Shultz 1991:81)

To conclude, with *Love Medicine,* Erdrich succeeded in creating a novel that recounts Native Americans in a form close to the Western modernist tradition but clearly influenced by the oral storytelling of her tribal heritage. As Erdrich recalls in an interview: "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" (quoted in Shultz 1991:81).

Reception of the novel

Despite the initial immediate success of *Love Medicine*, which earned the National Book Critics Circle Award, Erdrich revised and published a new version of the novel in 1993. *Love Medicine: New and Expanded Version* has four new chapters, a section added as the second part of *The Beads* chapter, and a different sequence of the chapters (Chavkin 1999:84). The new version, however, did not encounter the same success of the first one, but it was rather ignored by critics and reviewers who continued to refer to the original publication more often than to the revised version. In most cases the reason for choosing one version over the other was not clarified by scholars, who have usually limited the question to the little difference brought by the additions of the 1993 version (Chavkin 1999:89). Nevertheless, the analysis of the expanded version of *Love Medicine* is a difficult question, firstly because it depends on how scholars have interpreted the genre of the novel. For instance, scholars like Gene Lyons considered *Love Medicine* as a collection of stories, claiming that in this case, the analysis of a new edition appeared to be less problematical. According to Lyons, the structure of a book of short stories does not change much if the author decides to add some more tales, whereas adding new parts to an already complete novel can lead to critical problems since they can change the reading of the entire book (Chavkin 1999:84). Wong has supported the same thesis, considering *Love Medicine* as a "short story sequence", but when she interviewed Erdrich and her collaborator, her husband Michael Dorris, they have claimed that *Love Medicine* is, in fact, a novel: "we wove in all the changes and resolutions and threads to tie them [the stories] all together. By the time readers get halfway through the book, it should be clear to them that this is not an unrelated or even a related, set of short stories, but parts of a large scheme" (Dorris in Chavkin 1999:85). Since Erdrich herself admitted that when she was writing her objective was to experiment with the form and thus deviate from the traditional novel, Chavkin considered *Love Medicine* as an "experimental novel unified by a variety of methods" (Chavkin 1999:85), which made the analysis of the two versions a more crucial question.

Chavkin investigated the problems behind the question of *Love Medicine*'s revision since it appears unusual to make changes after the first version had a great success. An explanation for the revision has been given by Erdrich herself, who claimed to see *Love Medicine* as "an ongoing work, not a discrete untouchable piece of writing" (quoted in Chavkin 1999:90), therefore, when she found new stories for the novel, she naturally

added them to it. However, as stated by Chavkin, the causes of the revisions and additions are more complex, for the version of 1993 was revised to convey a political message that the first publication was accused of lacking. A criticism concerning the lacking of political commitment was moved by the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko, who accused Erdrich of ambivalence about her Native American origins. Silko suggested that Erdrich's background as a "half-Indian" resulted in a "self-referential writing" that "reflects the isolation and alienation of the individual who shares nothing in common with other human beings but language and its hygienic grammatical mechanisms" and it is "light-years away from shared or communal experience that underlines oral narrative and modern fiction" (quoted in Parker and Kaiser 2017:151-52); when other reviewers associated with Silko's accusations, Erdrich proceeded to revise her work to avoid further misreadings that could potentially lead to a wrong interpretation of her characters as negative stereotypes of American Indians. In fact, some of the reviews have been critical of the characters' depiction; for instance, in the *New York Review of Books* Robert Towers claimed that "from the medley of individual faces and voices a few generic, or tribal, features gradually emerge. The men get drunk as often as possible, and when drunk they are likely to be violent or to do wildly irresponsible or self-destructive things. [...] Meanwhile the women [...] are likely to take up with any man who comes along" (cited in Chavkin 1999:91).

Chavkin in his analysis reported also the criticisms moved to *Love Medicine*'s scene of the encounter between Marie and Nector in the "Wild Geese" chapter; referring to Marco Portales' review, Chavkin claimed that this scene was "simplified and misread" (Chavkin 1999:91) as a rape scene, since in the chapter "Marie deliberately snares Nector" (Chavkin 1999:91). However, it could be that Portales' review pushed Erdrich to change the scene in "Wild Geese" to clarify that any sexual violence did not occur. Therefore, Chavkin's analysis ascribes the revision of "Wild Geese" chapter to the fear of further misinterpretations in contrast with Erdrich's actual will to portray the reality of a Native American community, stating that "Erdrich's dramatic revision of this scene suggests that after the publication of the 1984 *Love Medicine* she was concerned about misreadings, especially those where the Ojibwa people are simplified and reduced to whores, rapists, drunks, and other traditional stereotypes of Indians" (Chavkin 1999:92). Erdrich's initial goal with the 1984 version was not to be overtly political, since she argued that in their

literary works writers do not have to express their political sentiment explicitly, for "any human history is a political story" (quoted in Chavkin 1999:90). However, when many of the critics revealed to have misinterpreted her story Erdrich felt the need to clarify her political ideology and defend her Native American community, which meant to alter some parts of the novel and publish more truthful version to her political ideals. Erdrich's husband Michael Dorris stated that the modifications to the 1984 version did not set aside Erdrich's goal to depict the reality of Native Americans, for they kept the focus on the reservation community and did not turn *Love Medicine* into a completely political novel, like other Native American fictions. Dorris affirmed that the novel did not want to tell another story of a conflict "between Indians and non-Indians", since "in the daily lives of contemporary Indian people, the important thing is relationships, and family and history, as it is in everybody's life, and not these sort of larger political questions, although they do impinge" (quoted in Chavkin 1999:93). Despite the political charges, Louis Owen explained the immediate success of 1984 *Love Medicine* among non-Native readers with the ability of Erdrich to depict characters with which they could identify "much more easily" (cited in Chavkin 1999:93) than in other Native American novels. However, Chavkin sustained that *Love Medicine*'s accessibility faded after the revision, making it "more Indian" (Chavkin 1999:93).

The existence of two versions arises problems related to the question of whether the 1993 *Love Medicine* must be considered the authoritative text. The assumption that the latest version is the correct and definite one comes from the 20th-century criticism tradition, that, however, has been challenged over time since the 1960s. Jack Stillinger has been among the scholars who rejected the traditional theory of the last version as the best; as Chavkin reported, Stillinger moved forward in the analysis and also rejected the idea that the earliest version must be the official one. Therefore, Stillinger in his study *Coleridge and Textual Instability* (1994) coined the terms "textual pluralism" or "textual instability" to offer a definition for the nonexistence of an official, definite, or authoritative version of a literary work, stating that "the newest theory, which I shall here call textual pluralism, is based on the idea that each version of a work embodies a separate authorial intention that is not necessarily the same as the authorial intention in any other version of the same work" (quoted in Chavkin 1999:88). Thus, Chavkin reported Stillinger's theory not only to find a resolution to the question of which is to be considered the official text but also

to explain the necessity to regard both versions of *Love Medicine* to have a better comprehension of the text, since the modifications made in the process of revision added the author's intentions to the novel (Chavkin 1999:88).

Returning to the modifications apported to the novel, as explained earlier they added to *Love Medicine* of 1993 a political vision that was missing in the first version. Therefore, Erdrich's objective for her revision has been to give the same story with a clearer and more truthful focus on Native Americans' social and economic problems. The additions and modifications can be grouped into four interrelated objectives: the importance of the preservation of American Indian culture and its resistance toward the white dominant culture, the elimination of any stereotypes about Native Americans, the promotion of Native American feminism (with special attention to motherhood and independent women's activism for American Indian rights), the presentation of a more affirmative depiction of American Indians' situations suggesting solutions for their problems (Chavkin 1999:94). In order to give a precise understanding of Erdrich's revision, Chavkin analyzed the five major additions that gave a political vision to *Love Medicine* 1993. The first is the inclusion of the chapter "The Island" which recounts Lulu's coming back to the reservation after years passed in a boarding school. The political view regarding this chapter is related to the rejection of assimilationism, since Lulu, guilty of having betrayed her mother Fleur to go to the government school, leaves for a self-discovery journey to the island where her mother was born. Erdrich narrates Lulu's return to her heritage describing her life on the island with Moses Pillager, where she gets to know her Native American culture, especially with the rediscovery of the Ojibwa language, whose words are one of the major addition in the novel. Lulu ends up creating a special bond with Moses to the point that they will have a child together; their son Gerry is another demonstration of a political stand since he will become an activist for American Indian rights. The next addition investigated by Chavkin is the second part of the chapter "The Beads", which has been added to give an explanation to "Saint Marie"'s depiction of Marie's shame about her Native American heritage. As in "The Island", the quest for the appreciation and acceptance of Native American culture passes through the theme of motherhood, seen in the traditional Ojibwa belief of mothers as bearers of traditions and customs. Marie's search for a mother in "Saint Marie" ends up negatively in the re-encounter with Sister Leopolda, a catholic nun whose disregard for Native Americans

will influence Marie to the point that she will refuse her heritage. In the second part of "The Beads" Erdrich shows Marie in another quest for a mother, who she will eventually find in her mother-in-law Rushes Bear, an old-time traditional medicine woman. Moving on to the addition of the "Resurrection" chapter, it has been inserted in the new version of *Love Medicine* to give a clearer depiction of Gordie's character, who in the first version appeared to be too stereotypical. Erdrich added a new story of Gordie to explain his addiction to alcohol which in the 1984 version was given without a reason: the new story in "Resurrection" conveys the horrors of alcoholism on reservations as a social problem and as a consequence of colonialism. The chapter "Tomahawk Factory" has been added to give a more realistic image of the social and economic life in reservations, through the theme of assimilation versus allegiance to one's heritage. The chapter shows the bond between Lulu and Marie as an ambivalent but functional alliance to preserve Native American traditions on the reservation. To conclude, the last addition of Chavkin's analysis is the chapter "Lyman's Luck", which was added as a sort of epilogue of the "Tomahawk Factory", since it conveys the economic and community problems of reservations (Chavkin 1999:94-111).

Love Medicine's plot and characters

As Lorena L. Stookey declares in her work *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion* (1999) Erdrich's writing career started after she received the Nelson Algren Fiction Award with *Love Medicine*'s opening chapter "The World's Greatest Fisherman" in 1982; Erdrich dedicated the following two years to write the continuation of that story and published her first novel in 1984 with the title of *Love Medicine* (Stookey 1999:6). The plan of the author, starting from that chapter in 1982, enlarged over time and ended up comprehending a completed saga composed of five novels: *Love Medicine*, even though it was the first to be published, it is the third part of the saga, after the first, *Tracks* (1988) and the second, *The Beet Queen* (1986), and it is followed by *The Bingo Palace* (1994) and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996). The narration of the saga follows the lives of twenty characters of five related families, which appear and reappear in each novel at different times of their life, following a fifty years span of life of three generations (Stookey 1999:29-31). According to Nora Barry and Mary Prescott, *Love Medicine*

“really celebrates Native American survival” (Barry and Prescott in Bloom 1998:26), therefore the story of the saga aims to show how the conditions of people of Native American origin have changed over one generation to another in fifty years (Stookey 1999:46).

Love Medicine, being the first to be written, is relevant to be analysed since most of the characters and themes of Erdrich’s saga appear first in this novel. Starting from the plot, it is set in the mythical town of Angus in North Dakota, which serves as a place of departure and return for the characters on a quest to find their own home. Erdrich employs the theme of homecoming, like other contemporary Native American writers who make use of the “troubled homecoming” (quoted in Stookey 1999:14) in their works, such as D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded*, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*. However, Erdrich apports a novelty in *Love Medicine*, where the homecoming theme is given by the rediscovery and return to the Native American tradition of both male and female characters, whereas other contemporary American Indian authors usually depict the coming home exclusively of male characters (Stookey 1999:15). The characters’ search for their home in *Love Medicine* moves through a cultural landscape composed both of Native and non-Native traditions, which confronts the experience of Native Americans’ “dual citizenship” (Bruchac in Stookey 1999:35). Erdrich herself explained in a published interview that the American Indian is both an American citizen and “a member of another nation” (Bruchac in Stookey 1999:35), therefore in *Love Medicine* each characters’ search for a home will bring them to the place where they belong, in a quest for their identity. The question of identity is central in the novel to the point that *Love Medicine* can be designated as an identity narrative. However, the novel differs from the Western ideas of identity employed in the autobiographical genre, since it belongs to the tradition of Native American women’s literature, which is highly inspired by oral storytelling. As E. Shelley Reid claimed, the sense of identity narrative is given since the first chapter, when June is shown having a selfless appearance and thus needs to return to “the wholeness of a culturally tuned sense of self” (Reid 2000:77), as we saw happening in other Native American narratives, for instance in Silko’s *Ceremony* whose story revolves around Tayo’s sense of loss. Louis Owens claimed that the reader must expect to be in front of an identity narrative from the opening scene, since the description

of June's fragile sense of self, can "crack wide open" or "fall apart at the slightest touch" (quoted in Reid 2000:77), is an image familiar to both Western readers and the ones who are accustomed to Native American literature, who see June's "personal identity [as] entirely dependent upon a coherent cultural identity" (quoted in Reid 2000:77). Thus, Erdrich has been able to create a textual identity inspired by the Native American tradition that is still convincing to non-Native readers, a conciliation that is probably a result of her multicultural background (her mother is an Ojibwa, and her father comes from German descendants). As mentioned above, Erdrich's identity narrative deviates from the West's traditional autobiographical narration and thus reinterprets the main features of autobiography, as Reid explained:

> Erdrich modifies normative autobiographical narration, and the self/selves that can be represented within them, to broaden our storytelling space. Drawing on both Native American oral traditions and conventional Euro-American narrative forms, Erdrich creates a new set of textual gestures that can more faithfully capture the multiple voices and extended family networks of Native American "individuals". (Reid 2000:67)

The main reason behind such a reinterpretation of the autobiographical genre is related to Erdrich's will to "reclaim a Native American identity from Cooper and Disney" (cited in Stein 2000:67). Also, a necessary revision of the autobiography is due to her Native American culture, because as Krupat claimed "none of the conditions of production for autobiography [...] was typical of Native American cultures" (cited in Reid 2000:67) since American Indians' traditional sense of self is not related to their individuality, but it is rather communal. Therefore, Erdrich based the novel on the identity of an entire Native American community, not on the life of a single protagonist as in Western autobiography (Allen in Reid 2000:67). To do so she relied upon the narration of a coral voice, which offers a multivocal fragmented narrative, which does not result in an isolated experience as happens in the fragmented narrative of the West but becomes something else. The coral voice is a feature often employed in ethnic literature for it reproduces the oral storytelling, and in the case of Erdrich is a trace of her Ojibwa cultural belonging, as Lydia Shultz stated: "Multiperspectivity does not serve as the sign of uncertain, individual solutions that is in dominant American culture. Instead, the multiple narrators are part of the hooplike repetition and variation of Chippewa storytelling" (cited in Reid 2000:69). However, as claimed in the first chapter, among Erdrich's inspirations there are also modernist authors, like Faulkner, in which we find the same fragmentation of the story

given by multiperspectivity. Like Faulkner's novels, the story of *Love Medicine* is a multi-layered narrative that offers a hint of each character's story within the community, and it involves the reader to collect the overall community life at the end of the novel (Purdy in Bloom 1998:35). Following Reid's analysis, in *Love Medicine*'s identity narrative the self/selves represented are multifaced and interdependent, and thus they represent the model of identity that Erdrich aimed to communicate, where "characters' lives and selves are as mutable and inextricably woven together as their stories, and as gently bounded by the larger circles of tribal, historical, and geographical identification" (Reid 2000:76). Together with the wholeness of the self/selves, another feature of the Western autobiographical genre that Erdrich's identity narrative has changed is the concept of truth. In the history of literary criticism scholars' definitions often emphasized the importance of being truthful to the facts in an autobiographical text; for instance, Roy Pascal stated that "the autobiography claims to be a true story, and it must qualify in respect to truth if it is to qualify at all" (cited in Reid 2000:68), and Jean Jacques Rousseau asserted:

> I must remain incessantly beneath [the reader's] gaze, so that he may follow me in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life. Indeed, he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for if he finds the slightest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth. (Rousseau in Reid 2000:68)

The relevance of truth seems to be an essential quality for an autobiography, but Erdrich's identity narrative differs once again from the Western canon. Her storytelling not only fragments the story and the characters but also threatens the truth of the narration. A possible explanation is that the relationship between the storyteller and the audience is fundamental in Native American narratives, and it is less conflictual than how Rousseau described it. In this regard Reid reported the experience of George Bird Grinnell, who witnessed a traditional storytelling session in a Native American community and noticed how when the designated narrator ended a story, she/he would say "The story is ended. Can anyone tie another to it?" (cited in Reid 2000:70), to leave the stage to the next storyteller. Thus, Erdrich's narrative in *Love Medicine*, even though is not an oral performance, makes use of the same method of linking stories told by different voices and so relies on the truth of traditional storytelling, where "[…] any story that is told is always a version of the story, altered as the storyteller sees fit to keep the audience interested, make a specific point, or add a personal interpretation" (Reid 2000:69-70).

The last alteration of Erdrich's identity narrative is about the linear chronology of the story. In the Western idea of an autobiographical account, which usually shows "the self-made, self-reliant man" who progresses from youth "to become a confident, productive individual" (Reid 2000:66), a linear chronology from past to present is clearly important. As discussed earlier, *Love Medicine*'s narration does not follow the chronology timeline but continuously proceeds forward and backward according to who is telling the story.
Moving on now to the plot, the opening chapter "The World's Greatest Fisherman" is composed of two sections that represent two scenes of return: the first one is the story of June Kashpaw's final journey home told by a third-person narrative voice, which describes June's death in a snowstorm on the Easter Sunday of 1981 after having come back from a travel around the city of Williston; in the second section the reader learns about June and the other characters of the novel on the occasion of a family reunion after her death, during which the narration is entrusted to Albertine Johnson, June's niece, whose voice introduces also June's son, King. The second chapter "Saint Marie" and the third "Wild Geese" respectively tell of the departure of Marie Lazarre (later Marie Kashpaw) to join the cloistered life and become a nun, and her return to the reservation after having met Nector Kashpaw whom she marries after having left her vows. In the fourth chapter "The Island", we are told the story of another character, Lulu Nanapush, Nector's lover, who recounts her own journey to discover her roots after having been left behind by Nector; at this point of the novel the reader gets the idea of the "web-like" architecture of the plot where the characters' accounts of their own journeys of coming and going create a network of connections between them (Wong and Cox in Stookey 1999:38). The next chapter is "The Beads": the first part narrates the story of how June has been adopted by Marie Kashpaw and starts living with her, Nector, and her many other children in 1948 and the second part reports Marie's childbirth assisted by Rushes Bear and Fleur Pillager after Nector leaves her; together with the sixth chapter, "Lulu's Boys", which is a depiction of Lulu's family life with her children and eight brothers from several other fathers, these two chapters aim to give a realistic portrayal of two Native American families. In the chapter "The Plunge of the Brave" and the following "Flesh and Blood" we find the account of Nector's journey: he recounts his leaving Marie and his choice to live with Lulu after having had an affair with her for years; in the next chapter, his wife Marie tells about Nector's coming back home to her and their children.

The two following chapters are dedicated to the characters' movements during the 1970s: some members of the younger generation start their journey away from home. For instance, in "A Bridge" the story of the two brothers Lyman and Henry Junior Lamartine (Lulu's sons), who start on a long journey to Alaska in their red convertible, intertwines with Albertine's: when she leaves home on a journey to Fargo she meets Henry Junior who has just returned from Vietnam and ends up spending the night with him; in "The Red Convertible", a year later Lyman recounts how his brother Henry has changed after coming back from the war in Vietnam, and consequently figures that their road trip to Alaska was the last carefree moment of their life before Henry joined the army. "Scales" is the chapter that dates before June's death and is dedicated to Albertine's account of her friendship with Dot Adare and their complicity in hiding Dot's husband Gerry Nanapush (another of Lulu's sons) from the police. In the twelfth chapter "Crown of Thorns", the cycle of the narration is brought back to the first chapter: June is dead, and her husband Gordie Kashpaw dies of his alcohol addiction; the reason for his addiction is explained in the fourteenth chapter "Resurrection", where Gordie starts to use alcohol to cope with his grieving for June. Between these two chapters dedicated to the story of Gordie, there is the chapter "Love Medicine" which recounts the death of Nector by accidentally choking after eating a dish prepared by Marie and Lipsha as an act to show their forgiveness for having left them for Lulu. The fifteenth chapter "The Good Tears" shows the connection between Marie and Lulu in mourning Nector; the alliance of the two women is described by Lyman in the following chapter "The Tomahawk Factory", in which Marie and Lulu join the political life of the reservation. In "Lyman's Luck", the story told by Lyman continues with the account of his venture to make money after the factory has exploded: he decides to take advantage of the regulation on American Indian gaming passed by Congress to try opening a casino. The closing chapter, "Crossing the Water" is a long one, full of events to bring the reader to the end, especially through the symbolism behind Lipsha's adventure: compared to the other characters of the novel who all made their journeys to find a source of love, happiness or meaning, Lipsha's one seems to set forth and explain the other characters' quest; the closure of the chapter is also made explicit by the title, referring to the water metaphor which permeates the whole novel, and by the final scene where Lipsha comes back home on his mother's car, crossing the bridge over the river that constitutes the borders of the reservation (Stookey 1999:35-41).

Turning now to the characters of *Love Medicine*, they are twenty Native Americans and mixed-blood Native Americans, who appear in the other novels of the saga. As previously mentioned, Erdrich has been criticized by scholars and some Native American writers for her ambiguous depiction of American Indian peoples in *Love Medicine* and in her other novels as well. Sarah Parker and Wilson Kaiser's analysis of Erdrich's works focus on her moving away from the universalizing identity-oriented approach typically employed in Native American literature in the past. They mention the criticism moved by the Laguna Pueblo author Silko, who suggested that Erdrich's "half Indian" heritage is to blame for her "postmodern tendencies toward an aggressive, masculine and colonial logic" (cited in Parker and Kaiser 2017:152), and thus Erdrich's writing contrasts with the tradition of oral narrative and community typical of Native American literature. According to Parker and Kaiser, Silko criticized a feature of Erdrich's novels which is an interesting new trait of her literature. In fact, according to the scholars, Erdrich brought a new perspective to Native American literature, still engaging in the same themes of identity, patriarchal power, and normative sexuality which are often found in contemporary Native American writings, but by "locating the oppression in the specific bodies and experiences of her characters, [rather] than in drawing universalizing conclusions that risk using the same homogenizing logic that characterized the Western colonization of Native American people and their experiences" (cited in Parker and Kaiser 2017:154). Therefore, the author is able to show a diversity of experiences of colonial oppression through her characters, offering new and different perspectives of Native American communities from the scholarship of Paula Gunn Allen and others. Parker and Kaiser report the criticism of Sean Kikummah Teuton towards the "restrictive view of tribal awareness" of scholars such as Allen, who argues for "a single worldview held by 'all' Native people" that "cannot be revoked, for it is an 'internal' and 'ineradicable' essence" (quoted in Parker and Kaiser 2017:154). In addition, the already mentioned coral voice of the characters from *Love Medicine* provides yet another difference from traditional ethnic literature, since it comprehends a variety of characters, in contrast to other Native American novels which preferably revolve around a male character; Erdrich's chorus of characters is a shared narrative of both women and men, where everyone takes the stage to tell her/his part of their community's tale.

Erdrich's ability to create her characters is linked with the objective to provide the reader with *exempla* of Native American resilience, as the author herself expressed the importance for Native American writers to offer stories of survival, for "in the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of a catastrophe" (quoted in Stookey 1999:45-46). The question of survival is strictly related to the land and history of American Indians, therefore Erdrich portrays Native American resilience by showing the different conditions of survival that characters have experienced in fifty years' time, and how the survivors' connection to their land and community has helped them to resist. For instance, Eli, Moses, and Fleur being the elder characters of *Love Medicine*, embody the core of the tradition and represent the deep connection with the land as an essential part of their identity; Fleur is an example of determination in the novel, as having lost her land twice she succeeds in gaining it back. Together with other elder characters, such as Rushes Bear and Old Nanapush, they survived some of the hardest events of Native American history, such as the imposition of institutions, like boarding schools and U.S. government acts to take their lands, and epidemics. Turning to Lulu, Nector, and Marie, represent a second generation of survivors, who, however, faces similar events to their predecessors: they survived oppressive institutions as well since they have experienced government schools and poverty in reservation; in fact, at the end of the novel Marie and Lulu embody their survivals by becoming the representatives of the celebration and preservation of Native American traditions. The younger generation of *Love Medicine*, composed of Gerry, Albertine, Lipsha, and Lyman, is portrayed with a will to survive which can indicate an overall hope for the future of American Indian peoples: Gerry is involved in political activism to improve Native American peoples' status, Albertine is described by her mother Zelda as a born and raised Indian, Lipsha gains his mother's car as heritage and decides to come back to live on the reservation, and Lyman tries to recover the economy of the reservation after the closing of the factory by building a casino. The characters' power of survival, being related to the preservation of their American Indian identity, is also connected to the homecoming theme of the novel: the land is seen as a place the characters belong to, where they come back to find their home, family, and community.

Chapter III: Reconstructing of the female identity in *Love Medicine* through a women's web

Native American women's identity through the Western gaze

Among the accomplishments of ethnic literature's writers, there is a will to offer a different and truthful version of their traditions and peoples from the Euro-American one that dominated for centuries. Ethnic writers' engagement to show a real depiction of minority groups also passes through a reconstruction of the female identity, that in the case of Native Americans raises as a consequence of a long process of stereotyping American Indian women into the dichotomy of princesses or squaws. As Mumtaz Ahmad and Kaneez Fatima summarized, "the stereotypical discursive construction of the Native and Afro-American women by the dominant Euro-American discourses bracketed them into essentialist categories glossing over the medley of vital differences that these women reveal in their social, cultural, anthropological and sexual strictures" (Ahmad and Fatima 2017:109). As mentioned previously, one of the most popular images of a Native American woman created by the Euro-Americans is Pocahontas, whose story has been reinterpreted by Western literature to exploit the powerful princess as a symbol of the "New World". Rayna Green in her essay *The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture* (1975) states that the character of Pocahontas was established around the 16th century when the "Indian princess" became a symbol of the "earthly frightening and beautiful paradise" (Green 1975:701) of the "New World". In her analysis Green picked Pocahontas as the most famous example of Native American women's image exploitation, who had a crucial role in the everlasting dichotomy of the princess-squaw, the "good" and "bad Indian", that still haunts American Indian women nowadays. Pocahontas and other Native American women characters had an undeniable role in the national understanding of Native women, as explained in *The Pocahontas Perplex*: "The misnamed Indian was the native dweller who fit conveniently into the various traditional folkloric, philosophical and literary patterns characteristic of European thought at the time", and for that, the American Indian became instantly the "iconographic representation of the Americas" (Green 1975:701).

The first iconographic appearance of a Native woman was a paired symbol with a man which represented America in an illustration of the four continents, which was later replaced by the much more appealing image of the "Indian Queen". This "Mother-

Goddess", often pictured bare-breasted, wearing ornaments such as heavy jewelry, feathers, and animal skins, and armed with arrows and spears, was the symbol of the "opulence and peril" of the "New World" (Green 1975:702). Being a mother, the Indian Queen had a daughter, the Princess, that was later picked as the colonies' symbol after their independence; the Princess was depicted as less barbarous and "more American" than her mother, to the point that she metamorphosized into a Caucasian Miss Liberty and became one of the North American symbols still known nowadays. The Native mother's image was a popular one to exploit as a symbol of the continent, mainly because her essence represented the "good Indian" who would help the colonizers and could die for the safety of white men. The ever-present feature of the exploitation process of Native women's images is the fact that they were always defined by their relationship with men, as Green claims:

> Both her nobility as a Princess and her savagery as a Squaw is defined in terms of her relationships with male figures. If she wishes to be called Princess, she must save or give aid to white men. The only good Indian – male or female, Squanto, Pocahontas, Sacagewa, Cochise, the Little Mohee, or the Indian Doctor – rescues and helps white men. But the Indian woman is even more burdened by this narrow definition of a "good Indian", for it is she, not the males, whom white men desire sexually. (Green 1975:703)

Thus, the Native American to be considered a "real female" in the Euro-American definition "must be a partner and a lover of Indian men, a mother to Indian children, and an object of lust for white men" (Green 1975:703). Her image became necessarily ambivalent: she is a mother, a queen, and a lover, but her lust transforms her into a squaw, the "anti-Pocahontas" (Green 1975:701), her darker negative sister. The princess, such as Pocahontas, and the squaw both emerged as "controlling metaphors in the American experience", both representing the New World in their "rude native nobility", and thus were labeled as savages by white men (Green 1975:703). The Princess is a savage American Indian, but due to her sacrifice for the colonizers she deserves to stay on the positive side of the dichotomy: she is "sacrosanct", a symbol of power for the American continent, and thus cannot be a sexual partner, even though her sexuality can still be hinted at in illustrations. Her darker twin, the squaw, constitutes a secondary character introduced to degrade American Indian women, which are sexualized and desexualized through the white male gaze; the squaw is often compared to the fantasy of the symbolic princess, lacking all her most appealing imaginary features: "Where the princess was beautiful, the squaw was ugly, even deformed. Where the princess was virtuous, the

squaw was debased, immoral, a sexual convenience. Where the princess was proud, the squaw lived a squalid life of servile toil, mistreated by her men - and openly available to non-Native men" (Francis cited in Merskin 2010:353). Therefore, the squaw turns the Native woman's image negative, mainly because she is "real" and not a symbol: she lives in shacks and not in a natural paradise, and she has vices that make her a "bad Indian" (since they are the same of the "bad Indian" man: drunkenness, stupidity, thievery, venality…), her body is not conventionally sexually attractive unlike the princess's (the squaw is usually portrayed overweight), and her overt and realized sexuality makes her the depersonalized sexual object of men. In other words, the squaw's depiction is the representation of a "real" American Indian woman viewed through the Euro-American male gaze, whereas the princess is more an idealized, imaginary Native woman exploited to communicate the American values of power and sacrifice. The princess-squaw became the dichotomy with which Native women were pictured in history books, novels, advertisements, films, and newspapers, gaining such popularity that they are still a common stereotype. As a result, it is impossible for Native women to be perceived as real since they are limited to a narrow definition of a good-bad, princess-squaw, that has not any concrete relatedness to reality:

> She [the Native American woman] does not have the power to evoke feeling as a real mother figure, like the black woman, even though that image has a burdensome negative side. American children play with no red mammy dolls. She cannot even evoke the terror the "castrating (white) bitch" inspires. Only the male, with an upraised tomahawk, does that. The many expressions which treat of her image remove her from consideration as more than an image. […] As the Squaw, her physical removal or destruction can be understood as necessary to the progress of civilization even though her abstracted sister, the Princess, stands for that very civilization. […] As symbol and reality, the Indian woman suffers from our needs, and by both race and sex stands damned. (Green 1975:713-14)

To conclude Green argued for the necessity of a truthful representation of Native American women, "that stands apart from that of males, red or white" and must be defined in "Indian terms" (Green 1975:714).

Referring to a "real", existing, and not symbolic American Indian woman, the term squaw was used by the first explorers and made its way to the present day. From the first encounters with the Euro-Americans, the slur started to indicate American Indian women in general, to the point that nowadays the word squaw appeared 4.8 billion times in a Google research, mostly linked to names of casinos, resorts, or landforms (Merskin 2010:348). The word squaw first appeared in literature and historical documents in 1634 in the Eastern U.S. as an Eastern Algonquian word appropriated by the French and

English explorers. Its etymology is complex and confused: some sources reported the meaning of "young woman" (Massachusett in Merskin 2010:348), "woman" or "an Indian woman or wife" (Jonas in Merskin 2010:348), whereas The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) says the squaw is "a North American Indian woman or wife" (Merskin 2010:348). As reported by Eli Sanders the term squaw "turned into a slur on the tongues of white settlers, who used it to refer derisively to Indian women in general or a part of their anatomy in particular" (cited in Merskin 2010:348); according to Jerry D. Stubben and Gary Sokolow, squaw "is a synonym for prostitute, harlot, hussy, and floozy" (cited in Merskin 2010:348), while Devon A. Mihesuah claims that ''the 'squaw' is the dirty, subservient, and abused tribal female who is also haggard, violent, and eager to torture tribal captives" (cited in Merskin 2010:348). Thus, despite its original meaning, the word squaw became a disrespectful slur toward American Indian women only with Euro-Americans, as explained by Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek:

> That curious concept of 'squaw,' the enslaved, demeaned, voiceless child bearer, existed and exists only in the mind of the non-Native American and is probably a French corruption of the Iroquois word *otsiskwa* meaning 'female sexual parts', a word almost clinical both denotatively and connotatively. The corruption suggests nothing about the Native American's attitude toward women; it does indicate the *wasichu*'s [the white person's] view of Native American women in particular if not all women in general (cited in Merskin 2010:348)

Even though its ancient original meaning did not have any negative or disrespectful intentions, referring to women's genitalia or to women in general, the connotation of squaw that reached our days is still the one that white Euro-Americans made popular as a racist and misogynistic slur designating Native American women.

It is clear that the use of the word squaw together with the stereotyped representations in media discriminate against American Indian women and have serious consequences on how they are perceived by non-Native people and on how these women perceived themselves in American society. Debra Merskin considers the use of the word squaw as part of the colonization process of naming and re-naming. Since "language embodies social practices", and thus it is "loaded with political and emotional motivation", a discourse can carry an "ideological racialization" with which "language is imbued with racialized meanings" (Merskin 2010:349). Therefore, the use of language carries out the will to colonize minorities, for the colonizer can make use of words to regulate relations of power and to subdue certain individuals or minority groups. In the case of Native American peoples, colonization was so totalizing to the point that it also affected their

own language, whose words have been replaced by English, or they have been changed in their original meaning by being reused with different meanings by the colonizers. Thus, for its imposition over the Native American language, the colonizing language ended up pervading geography, literature, media, and overall education:

> In Christian mythology, at the moment God gave Adam the power to name the animals, the animals no longer belonged to themselves and, once categorized, as members of groups were no longer individuals. Similarly, labels are drawn from the colonizer's worldview named Indians as Indians. Anglo names were applied to tribes, and decisions about what words were or were not offensive came from the European perspective. […] Stereotypes about people operate in the same way. (Merskin 2010:349)

Regarding the term squaw, it fits perfectly into the dynamics of the colonizing language, being ''the most offensive term used to address Native American women" according to the Navaho Times publisher and editor Tom Arviso (cited in Merskin 2010:346); calling an American Indian woman a squaw means to frame her into the historical colonial stereotypes that consider Native American peoples in general as "animalistic, savages and sub-humans" (Merskin 2010:346). Its primal function is to dehumanize and limit the views of Native American women's capabilities to themselves and to non-American Indians, resulting in ''structural exclusions and cultural imagining [that] leave[s] minority members vulnerable to a system of violence'' (Perry in Merskin 2010:347). Merskin sums up three different categories in which the squaw can still be found nowadays: as a label in novels, histories, television programs, and films, as an assigned name for roads, creeks, buttes, and peaks, and as an iconic image in photographs, art, and advertising. In her opinion,

> Together these cultural expressions, presented through images and words of White society, reinforce public impressions of what constitutes female Indianness and the place of indigenous women in a simultaneously romanticized and demonized past. These media-generated and sustained stereotypes support Perry's (2002) description of ''faces of oppression'' (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence) as applied to Native Americans. (Merskin 2010:347)

As a result, the consistent use of this racial and sexual slur through more than 400 years in the history of the United States has affected Native American women, which are forced to live under the weight of "ethnostress", an "internalized oppression resulting from a negative verbal and visual discourse that results in poor self-image, low self-esteem, and dissociation which have very real health consequences" (Merskin 2010:347). Nonetheless, Native American peoples' continuous commitment to reclaiming their identity as an act of decolonization, resulted in a great effort to raise awareness toward

the discriminatory slur, by reporting and substituting the term as well as the stereotyped images of squaws. An example of an initiative coming directly from Native American peoples concerned the "carto-controversy" (Silvern in Merskin 2010:346): a request to change the offensive term squaw appearing in the names of certain lands in North America. For instance, the state of Oregon has more sites named with the word squaw than anywhere else in North America, thus in 2001, the legislators passed the Senate Bill 488, a law against the use of the word squaw in places' names. Senate Bill 488 has been the first attempt from a state in the United States to provide legislation against the word squaw, since the U.S. federal government does not provide any laws against it. After the promulgation of Senate Bill 488, on January 1 of 2005 the Squaw Valley Road in Curry County, Oregon, became Cedar Valley Road. Following the example of Oregon, in 2007 the U.S. Board of Geographic Names ratified the removal of the word squaw in Northern Idaho, appearing in eight places in the Coeur d'Alene reservation and outside of the tribe's traditional lands (Merskin 2010:346). As reported by Merskin, the problem with racist names of landforms was first raised in the 1990s when it came to the government and public attention thanks to the activism of Native American peoples, which asked for a banning of the word for it is as an offensive and discriminating slur toward American Indian women (Merskin 2010:350-51). The situation of Native Americans in terms of discrimination in North America is different from other ethnic minorities, such as Afro-Americans who, being more numerous, were able to change some racial stereotypes earlier in time. Native Americans can be said to still be behind other minorities in terms of changes in fictional representations and language, hence today they are still seen in a one-dimensional form in North America; as claimed by Buffalo: "We've been degraded for 500 years, and to the general public they're walking around thinking that they did something great by naming a creek or a river Squaw. It stings a little. It'd be like if a shopping mall were called Holocaust Mall. We're not angry, we know what it means. But we have to educate the general public first" (quoted in Merskin 2010:351).

Examples of evident misrepresentations of American Indian women as squaws can be easily found in media, such as films, television programs, advertisements, and the press, whose stereotypes became a sort of "visual truth", "an authentic knowledge derived by seeing" (Newton in Merskin 2010:352), instead of representational conventions created to define Native Americans as people different and alien to white society:

> These representational practices ‘‘affect some people’s morally significant perceptions of and interactions with people, and if they contribute to those perceptions or interactions going seriously wrong, these activities have a bearing on fundamental ethical questions’’ (Walker 1998). Thus, if media representations cater to the interests of dominant society in maintaining suppression of a group for the gain of the other, they are unethical. (Merskin 2010:352)

Thus, the racial and misogynistic representations of American Indian peoples were created with the primal intent to transmit a racial difference between them and the white colonizers. The “white Indian” is an individual with standardized qualities, experiences, and histories, a stereotype created by white men provided with a Pan-Indian identity based on a unilateral conception of “Indianness” (Merskin 2010:352). The creation of a racial stereotype not only produces false beliefs about the reality of American Indians but also ignores the differences in their traditions, and in the wide range of tribes and languages, as well as their customs. According to the analysis of Merskin the creation of American Indian stereotypes based on racial differences can be originally placed in three types of encounters, respectively of economic, social, and political nature. The first major encounter has been between the European traders and the explorers during the 15th century, which was followed by a dislocation of American Indian people in North America; the second one happened with the colonization on the part of Europeans who divided the territories of America to establish markets and traders; the last one was produced by the pre-and post-Civil War migrations from East to West of the United States (Merskin 2010:352).

As concerns the stereotyped terms, scholars have focused primarily on American Indians as a group and/or on the males, creating a “literary lore” in which ‘‘there is no sense of the part that women have played in tribal life either in the past or today’’ as stated by Allen (cited in Merskin 2010:353). The earliest literary versions of the squaw can be found in histories, captivity narratives, and sermons, and they are usually of two kinds: the “sexual punching bag” or the “drudge” squaw (Merskin 2010:353). The two versions of the squaw relate to the white supremacist conception of the American Indian woman as inferior, both as a woman and as a Native American. The euro-Americans’ misconceptions were based on ethnocentrism and thus were spread to rationalize colonization; the first explorers created the squaw, a racially inferior woman who is used to suffering violence, physical and sexual, and to endure the heavy tedious drudgery under the rule of the tribesmen. As Merskin claims, Native women were among the victims of the re-interpretation of tribal customs, thus the squaw also became the example of the

savage and pagan American Indian who deserved colonization for her salvation. In the Euro-Americans' conception "even if the Indian woman was not sexually loose by choice, she was victimized by polygyny, or her sexual favors could be bought, sold, or given away by male relatives. Such assumptions then reinforced a widespread perception that only Christianity raised women to a position of honor and respect" (Merskin 2010:353). The drudgery of Native American women and the consequent idleness of their men were taken as proof of savageness since the 17th century when the European explorers started to spread this racial stereotype and persisted to disseminating it for over three centuries (Merskin 2010:354). The stereotypical savage squaw became part of the Western cultural world, appearing in paintings, sculptures, music, advertisements, novels, and school textbooks. As a result of cultural imperialism, "by the 19th century, Indian women and men had been transformed into negative reference groups representing exact counter images of Euro-Americans' ideal sexual statuses and roles'' (Smith in Merskin 2010:354). The squaw also figured as a testimonial of labor and hard work on product labels of fruit and vegetables, such as the "Squaw" sifted peas and the "Siwah Squaw" apples (Merskin 2010:354).

The first appearances of the squaw in the literature of the "New World" came in Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* (1504-1505), a text written to offer people in Europe an idea of the "newly discovered" land of America. In its intent of informational text, *Mundus Novus* started the stereotype around the American Indian woman and imprisoned her "in a white-Christian-male biased ideological paradigm" forever (Acoose 1995:42). The descriptions of the encounters with Native women are examples of the ethnocentric Christian ideology of European explorers. Vespucci's words do not hide the negative criticism and feelings of superiority towards the women of the "New World", who are observed and judged in Christian terms. Not only Vespucci pointed to physical differences with white women, claiming that he could not distinguish the "virgins" from the ones who gave birth "by the shape and shrinking of the womb; [or] in the other parts of the body" (cited in Acoose 1995:42), but he also interpreted American Indian women's free sexuality as a lack of Christian purity and decency, stating that when they "had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves" (cited in Acoose 1995:42). According to Janice Acoose, Vespucci's statements suggest a physical attraction for American Indian women that

conflicted with his Christian morality, therefore he described their bodies as "barely tolerably beautiful and clean" and perpetuates the promiscuous "easy squaw" stereotype (Acoose 1995:42). Hence, the squaw entered histories and novels as a character whose appearance and attitude are proofs of an inferior race and gender. In novels between 1899 and 1911, most of the American Indian characters were men, and women feature only as static secondary players, absent of any positive features. They were lacking any good qualities in a double comparison with Native American men - who in the inferiority of their race were still praised for their "iron constitution, superior physique, proficiency in wilderness skills, stoicism, and a special way of speaking" (Sundquist in Merskin 2010:355) - and with the white women's virtues and goodness. As mentioned in the first chapter, the most popular literary genre featuring American Indian characters was the captivity narrative, whose stories pictured squaws condemned to a life of slavery to their families and husbands, in yet another attempt to show examples of racial and gender inferiority. Native American women were stereotyped also to exaggerate the uses of their "savage culture", pictured as the victim of their own savage condition, and exploited as beasts of burden "that could never comprehend the elevated treatment females deserve" (Kessler in Merskin 2010:355). Thus, the squaw, "as the perpetrator of heathen viciousness" (Kessler in Merskin 2010:355), unable to assimilate the white Christian patriarchal culture, occurred to justify the elimination not only of American Indian males but also of the females to complete the purposes of colonialism. The representations of the squaw persisted in time and were "complicated through her gender and sexuality" which make her "a target for rape, while her death ensures the end of a generation" (Marubbio in Merskin 2010:355). Another popular squaw's declination is the drudge mother; again, she is absent of any good motherhood qualities, raising an often-numerous offspring alone in the woods without the help of her lazy husband. Therefore, motherhood is yet another burden to the squaw, providing another proof of the inferiority of American Indian culture, where the woman must bear many children and survive several husbands. Stereotypes of Native Americans landed them a prominent role in Hollywood's large cinematic enterprise. The popularity of some of their characters, such as the "stoic wise Indian" and the "bloodthirsty warrior", has been explained in the first chapter as famous American Indian men stereotypes that were appreciated in films, especially of the Western genre. Native American (and also non-Native) actors were paid to take these

parts, thus contributing to showing American Indian culture in a negative light, serving a specific purpose in American culture by relieving the conscience of the white audience; as Maryan Oshana claimed:

> Westerns have helped to create a myth of Euro-American culture and its relationship to Native American culture during a specific period of history. From an ethnographic viewpoint, however, Westerners are grossly inadequate in their descriptions of Native American culture. But the Native American stereotype that they have created is very successful in portraying the culture as violent, backward, and uncivilized. […] Westerns have been very effective in creating a "Hollywood Indian", so much so that many people fail to recognize real Native Americans unless they fit in the Hollywood stereotype. (Oshana 1981:47)

Alongside men there were also women who embodied those stereotypes. Again, Native American women's representations in films narrowed them to the simplistic division of princess-squaw, good warrior women, or bad ugly savage, ignoring the ethnographic sources which reported them in a variety and richness of roles in the American Indian societies. The simplistic representation of Native American women in films did not progress from the 17th-century first literary appearances; even when the fortune of Western films raised between the 1940s to 1960s, during the golden age of Western, Native women's roles in films remained the same. As stated by Oshana, even after the intervention of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s that urged for a truthful representation of American Indians in films, a real breakthrough in American Indian roles in films never actually occurred. On the contrary, the stereotypes did not end, and the women's roles continued to be static: "If they are not being raped or murdered, they are usually shown as slaves, household drudges, or bodies en masse in camps and caravans. Women are most often portrayed as victims, convenient objects for men to rape, murder, avenge, or ridicule" (Oshana 1981:48). The action of the Civil Rights Movement was directed against the false and racial representations in media, as an effective way to end the discrimination of minority groups in the United States. An example of racial stereotypes in cinema is *The Squaw Man* series of films, which had a success lasting for seventeen years, from 1911 to 1930; according to M. Elise Marubbio the films "promoted classist and nationalist themes of supremacy and anti-miscegenation mingled with an imperialist nostalgia for the Native American and the frontier American West" (cited in Merskin 2010:356). In *The Squaw Man* series, the squaw features as the American Indian bride to the white male hero, to stage the notorious theme of interracial marriage to reflect the danger of miscegenation, interracial families, and cultural differences for the white public. To summarize, the Native American woman figured in films as just an object to

vehicle values of white supremacy; she was continuously objectified featuring the same static roles for a century, playing the kidnapped raped, and murdered bride of a revengeful American Indian warrior, the temporary love interest of a white man only to make him return to his white roots, or the victim sacrificed for the safeness of the white hero. In all these roles the squaw could have a part in the cinema industry and continued to be engaged in such racial and misogynistic roles not only in the distant past but also in more recent films, such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales* of 1976 and *Mountain Man* of 1981. Oshana explored the most common themes of the golden age of Westerns; for what concerns the theme of rape and murder of the American Indian woman, it is utilized solely to trigger the male revenge:

> These films are not at all concerned with the actual brutalization of the woman involved (in fact, she is often not shown at all), but rather with the effect which the rape/murder has on the man in her life – often a white man. […] The rape of Native American women is culturally significant because is done by white men, they can be mountain men, lawmen, cavalry, or just plain evil men, but they all have one thing in common: they embody the attitude that they are entitled to the bodies of Indian women. […] Indian women are portrayed as not quite human: they are savages, so it is perfectly acceptable to ravage their bodies. The women are the victims of a conquered culture, and therefore their bodies are conquerable. (Oshana 1981:48)

The Native American woman in films featuring such a theme could be a mother avenged by her son, as in *Nevada Smith* (1966), a sister as in *The Half-Breed* (1952), or a wife as happens in *Last Train from Gun Hill* (1959). Oshana also explores the theme of interracial love and marriage, where the women always ended up being the victim of prohibited relationships, as happens in films such as *Far Horizons* (1955) and *The Oklahoman Man* (1957) where:

> The couples are happy and secure; they live among their Indian tribes or in the mountains. During the course of the film, however, either the cavalry, evil whites, or vengeful Indians descend and kill the woman. It is almost always the woman who is killed and the man who is left to face the world alone […]. We can conclude from such examples that racial prejudice is stronger than love and the woman bears this burden. She alone is punished because of her relationship with a white man, even when they are living among the Indians. (Oshana 1981:48)

In all the major themes featuring American Indian women (such as the ones that show the Native American captive brought to Europe into "civilization", or the half-breed woman living in the white society), the women are always abused and sometimes also ridiculed for their unattractive overweight body. The persistence of these misrepresentations demonstrates the insensibility of Hollywood to tribal and cultural differences, by showing almost exclusively stories of glorification of men, both Native and non-Native, and leaving Native American women to invisibility (Oshana 1981:49-50).

In recent years, many of the attempts made by Native American communities to clean much of the media from "the most blatant stereotypical terms" (Alaimo 2014:1) have had positive results. However, the image of the "degraded Indian" is still implied in the mainstream press, in news spread by renowned newspapers in the United States, such as *The New York Times* (Alaimo 2014:1). According to Kaitlyn Nicole Sullivan there is a link between the phenomena of misrepresentation and underrepresentation[5] in media of Native American and their self-esteem:

> If mainstream media gave more positive and frequent portrayals of Native Americans, Native American youth would have more positive Native role models, allowing them to develop a more positive view of their culture and their fellow Native Americans. The misrepresentation of Native Americans within mainstream media directly affects many Native Americans' self-esteem. In turn, Native Americans have a more negative self-perception overall. (Sullivan 2022:5-6)

Regarding American Indian women, their invisibility in films and literature has been pursued also in the news which give less or no coverage of their missing and murder cases in comparison to white women; as said by the president of Guilford Native American Association Jennifer Revels Baxter: "People look at our communities and think, 'Who's going to miss them?' Scholars refer to us as the 'invisible people.' That, to me, is the real issue. If we're not on your news in the evening, you're not going to know about us" (Ahearn 2022). According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the lack of coverage of cases concerning the missing of Native American women produced a severe rate of violence toward Native women. As cited in a 2022 article by Lorrain Ahearn, "the National Crime Information Center reported 5,712 missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls and identified murder as the third leading cause of death for Native women". Lack of an accurate media representation and a tendency to ignore the cases in the national conversation led to the creation of the acronym "MMIW", which stands for "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women", to indicate the serial disappearance and killing of Native women from both rural and urban Native American communities in Canada and in the United States. The disappearance and murder of American Indian women are the harshest consequence of the long process of racial and misogynistic discrimination. Native Americans, being less than 3% of the U.S. population, are more likely to have a lack of

[5] To be clear, with "misrepresentation" Sullivan intends the course of falsely portraying Native Americans in media, whereas "underrepresentation" means that they are represented but in a disproportionately low amount respect to the overall U.S. population (Sullivan 2022:4).

representation in media, to the point that they are not discussed, not even in negative ways, in both media and academic research, unlike people of Latin or Black culture. American Indian women occupy 0.7% of the North American population and they face the highest rate of abuse: a study conducted in 2016 by the National Institute of Justice states that 84.3% of Native American women had been victims of violence in their lifetime and that the 55.5% of the abuses came from an intimate partner while the percentage for white women is of 25% (Sullivan 2022:5). Living in a patriarchal society where women of all backgrounds are victims of violence and sexism, American Indian women being also part of a minority group are at higher risk to suffer from racial and gender abuses. A reported estimate from Sullivan shows the dramatic numbers of Native American women victims of violence:

> Native women over 12 years of age are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than all other women regardless of ethnicity or race (Perry, 2004). Physical assault rates are also higher within Native American communities, and Native American women are more likely to sustain a greater injury during rapes and sexual assaults; 50% of Native American women will experience serious injury in situations of rapes and sexual assaults (Amnesty International, 2007). These statistics rise dramatically when a person of Native descent is a two-spirit - a phrase commonly used for someone who is transgender in Native American communities. Two-spirited people are considered at high risk for physical and sexual abuse. Over 78% of two-spirited women have been physically assaulted, and 85% sexually assaulted, meaning that most transgender Native American women have faced some kind of assault in their lives (Lehavot et al., 2010). (Sullivan 2022:16)

In conclusion, an appropriate media representation could contribute to raising empathy and awareness for women and girls of Native American origins, rather than showing mostly negative examples of beaten and raped squaws. As suggested by Merskin "representations of Native women in the media and the everyday effects of stereotypic thinking on the social, legal, cultural, and economic aspects of public policy has received negligible attention from researchers, scholars, and policymakers", having serious consequences on the quality of the lives of Native American communities, which continue to "lack of the same level and quality of health care, political access, legal equity, and power that the dominant culture enjoys" (Merskin 2010:358).

As was pointed out in the first chapter, the colonization of the "New World" resulted in a series of cruel and violent actions toward the indigenous population, that aimed to eliminate any traces of Native American cultures and traditions in their land. Centuries of white domination also affected the social structures of Native American populations, imposing the Euro-American patriarchal family structure on the gynocratic tribal one, eventually relegating women to an almost invisible position within their own societies. In

The Sacred Hoop (1992) Allen explained that tribal lifestyles were never patriarchal, but most of them were rather tribal gynocratic (or gynocentric) systems based on “ritual, spirit-centered, woman-focused worldviews” (Allen 1992:2). Living in a society that has never known patriarchal imposition offers a variety of different roles that are not relegated to those of the nuclear family in the western sense. These roles make tribal society into a dynamic social construct in which diversity is accepted by the entire tribal community. Being exposed to a community of diverse people with interchangeable and non-fixed roles, the new generations can aspire to social positions that the patriarchal society would not approve of:

> In many tribes, the nurturing male constitutes the ideal adult model for boys while the decisive, self-directing female is the ideal model to which girls aspire. The organization of individuals into a wide-ranging field of allowable styles creates the greatest possible social stability because it includes and encourages a variety of personal expression for the good of the group. (Allen 1992:2)

Thus, the transformation of equalitarian tribal gynocratic systems into hierarchical patriarchal societies excluded most of the roles that were based on social responsibility rather than on privilege, substituting its fundamental institutions. For instance, the tribal governing was destroyed on their spiritual-philosophical side by the imposition of Western philosophies and by the replacement of female goddesses with male-gendered gods (like the Great Spirit), and on their economic side, by displacing Native American peoples from their lands and making them depend on the modern European economy (Allen 1992:41). Overthrowing the gynocratic nature of the tribal systems declassed Native American women from their primary roles in the tribal decision-making, as a result of the imposition of a patriarchal nuclear family organization. Therefore, Native women’s perception of their own identity changed accordingly to the devaluation of their social position, as Allen claimed:

> In no tribal definition, she [the Native American woman] is perceived in the same way as are women in Western industrial and postindustrial cultures. In the West, few images of women form part of the cultural mythos, and these are largely sexually charged. Among Christians, the Madonna is the female prototype, and she is portrayed as essentially passive: her contribution is simply that of birthing. […] The tribes see women variously, but they do not question the power of femininity. Sometimes they see women as fearful, sometimes peaceful, sometimes omnipotent and omniscient, but they never portray women as mindless, helpless, simple, or oppressed. And while the women on a given tribe, clan, or band may be all these things, the individual woman is provided with a variety of images of women from the interconnected supernatural, natural, and social worlds she lives in. (Allen 1992:43-44)

A reaction to the process of degynocraticization has been implemented by Native American women writers who have taken action toward the cultural and spiritual

genocide of their peoples by taking control of the image-making and information-disseminating process through their poetry and prose. As already mentioned, the primary importance of orality in Native American works has persisted since the 15th century, when the coming of Euro-Americans weakened and tore the identity of tribal peoples. For this reason, the contemporary literary works of American Indian authors engage to carry on the oral tradition, relying on Native forms, themes, and symbols instead of the colonial and exploitative ones. As a result, the preservation of the oral tradition in contemporary Native American literature is a major form of American Indian resistance. Thanks to its great adaptability orality is capable to remain present while maintaining its connection to the past, thus it has been employed as a literary tool for maintaining the consciousness of tribal identity and spiritual traditions since the contact with white people. As stated by Allen: "Since Mourning Dove, American Indian novelists have increasingly opted to focus on tribal consciousness in their work, a choice that resulted in a more positive (because more actual) image of Indians" (Allen 1992:82).

Female identity and community in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

Relying primarily on oral tradition, works of Native American literature are inspired by shared storytelling. As already explained in the previous chapter, the same characteristics can be found in Erdrich's novels, which place her work fully within the Native American canon. In fact, unlike contemporary American novels, a shared sense of community permeates the entire narrative of *Love Medicine*, creating a story cycle structure made up by the multiple narrators' intertwined tales. Although the technique of the multiple narrators is a feature present also in modernist and post-modernist authors (as already mentioned Faulkner is part of Erdrich's American inspirations), in the case of Native authors they rely on a different oral tradition from that of the West. Allen explains how Native American literature, being an expression of its culture, is based on different conceptions than the Euro-American one, all of which lead back to the strong sense of community that forms the basis of the Native tradition. The sense of individuality and self-expression is never expressed by Native American literature, which mimics the experience of the tribal storytelling's sharing of experiences and emotions within the community:

> The tribes seek – through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales – to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality […] To a large extent, ceremonial literature serves to redirect private emotion and integrate the energy generated by emotion within a cosmic framework. The artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for through language one can share one's singular being with that of the community and know within oneself the communal knowledge of the tribe. In this art, the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a balanced whole, and in this way the concept of being that is the fundamental and sacred spring of life is given voice and being for all. (Allen 1992:55)

Thus, American Indian thought lacks any sense of the private, separateness, isolation, and uniqueness which constitute the basis of Western thought. The result is that contemporary Native American literature, being rooted in the tribal tradition, is based on the same community principles; the purpose is to claim a truthful sense of American Indian identity consistent with the tribal reality, in which each character defines her/his identity in connection to their community. Centuries of Euro-American domination with its imposition of a self-identity based on uniqueness and individuality, led to the destruction of community and family identities. The objective of Native American fiction is to illustrate the continuity of Native culture, by formulating new concepts of self and family in line with the American Indian tradition (Tanrisal 1997:71). The reformulation of a Native American identity must pass through the reconstruction of the female identity since the imposition of the patriarchal society has declassed American Indian women from their important decision roles in Native communities. The recovery of Native American female identity, therefore, becomes important for the reconstruction of a general Native American identity based on the concept of a matrilineal community connected with oral culture, in which everyone contributes to the construction of a communal family history; it is clear that this implies also a more realistic definition of the identity of Native women in modern society, no longer based on sexist and racist stereotypes. The importance for Native American women to deconstruct stereotypical images and resist an identity narrative imposed by external definitions is pointed out by Allen, who states that "image casting and image control constitute the central process that American Indian women must come to terms with, for on that control rests our sense of self, our claim to a past and to a future that we define and we build" (cited in Gallego 1999:134).

The narrative of *Love Medicine* is in line with the feminist theories of oppression in which strategies of resistance are employed through language to re-theorize oppression, specifically against narrative stories in which Native Americans figure as the object and

Anglo-Americans as the subject. The importance of language as an act of resistance can be traced back again to the primary role of orality in Native American cultures, whose language becomes a "way of life" closely connected to the creation of reality, as the Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz explains: "[through language] we create knowledge. Our language is the way we create the world […] Consciousness comes about through language. Life – language. Language is life then" (cited in Shaddock 1994:107). Thus, active resistance through storytelling is a relevant feature of *Love Medicine*, in which language becomes a powerful tool to reconstruct the identity of the women in the novel. Erdrich's narrative has a double purpose: rejecting completely any misconception of femininity while attempting to re-assert a self-defined and self-constructed, truthful concept of American Indian female identity (Gallego 1999:131). In the novel, the female characters take turns in the cycle of storytelling: they add their tales to the long cycle of stories and by reporting their own version of the story they are able to break conventional images of Native American women and expose the sexist and racist stereotypes. Women from all generations of the large *Love Medicine*'s family redefine their position and identity as American Indian women, resulting in an act of resistance that persists over the years, a sign of the importance for Erdrich to include a critique of gender and racial stereotypes in her narrative. The stories that are told are intimate and personal and have a crucial role in the general history of the family; they are powerful stories which have permanently influenced the life of the narrators, contributing to constructing their personal identity. Therefore, *Love Medicine* reports tales of women characters with the intention to redefine their role and identity in their family and in the overall community of Native Americans, aiming to deconstruct the Western patriarchal notions of inferiority of the female roles and the secular racial stereotype of the squaw. In the novel, the act of reconstructing American Indian female identity passes through the transpersonal connections with their community and culture, through family, landscapes, and myths, grounding the characters' identities in their Ojibwa (Chippewa) heritage (Smith 1991:13). Erdrich concentrates the plot on "tracing the connective threads between the cultural past and its expression in the present" (Sergi in Tanrisal 1997:68), by centering the novel around the strong matrilinear nature of Native American culture and storytelling. Part of the author's message is that there is a mythological and cultural continuity supplied both by the Native American tradition of storytelling and retelling of the events in the history

of people, and by the matrilinear nature of American Indian structure (Tanrisal 1997:70). In the Ojibwa mindset "there's no original and absolute 'self'; a person freshly born is 'empty' of characteristics and of identity" (cited in Sanders 1998:132), their identity is connected to women, to the figure of the mother in particular, not in the biological western sense, but in the Chippewa traditional identification of mothers as the ones truly connected to earth, bearers of all relations in the community. Mothers represent tradition and become key elements in the survival of the community and identity of their people; since many traditions have been destroyed Native Americans have become motherless children and need to retell their stories to recollect their past and identities (Tanrisal 1997:71). The result is that in *Love Medicine* selfhood is depicted as transpersonal, extended beyond the singular individual, and thus determined within a larger context that implies culture, language, community, family, and land, in what Jeanne Smith described as a "homing" plot typical of contemporary Native American novelists:

> Like many contemporary Native American novelists, Erdrich uses a "homing" plot, which emphasizes family, community and culture, rather than the classic American "leaving" plot, which emphasizes individual freedom (Bevis 618). This homing structure supports a transpersonal view of identity, which "includes a society, a past, and a place. To be separated from transpersonal time and space is to lose identity" (Bevis 585). (Smith 1991:13)

In this definition of self-identity, a detachment from the community implied by modern Western society means cutting off the transpersonal connections and thus losing control over personal boundaries and self-perception; in the novel the consequences of a separation from the reservation are shown in the very first chapter, with the story of June Kashpaw. According to Karla Sanders in *Love Medicine* the character of June represents the absent mother, for her story of disappearance opens the novel and begins the cycle of stories that will revolve around her figure; as stated by Robert Silberman, "June's presence, that is, her absence, haunts the book" (cited in Sanders 1998:146). Thus, symbolically June is the origin of the family storytelling, the mother of the cycle of stories, "whose connection to nature symbolizes and literalizes Native Americans' attempts to retain their own heritage and still be a part of American culture" (Sanders 1998:146). June's absence is due to her departure from the reservation: she leaves to find a new identity isolated from her community, but the detachment from her family's ties costs her the loss of her identity of mother and wife and eventually will lead June to death, alone and far from home:

Marie tells us that as a girl June "has sucked on pine sap and grazed grass and nipped buds like a deer" (87) in order to survive in the woods when her mother dies and she flees her mother's abusive boy (depicted in *The Bingo Palace*). After being so determined and unyielding as a child, June becomes a woman who drifts through life denying responsibilities, rejecting family ties, never achieving and never articulating what she seeks. June loses a sense of herself and seems to float and dissolve because of her lost connection to community; she is a soul desperately in need of healing connections. (Sanders 1998:146-47)

The first chapter, "The World's Greatest Fisherman", opens on "the morning before Easter Sunday" (Erdrich, 1), when June is far from the reservation in the city of Williston, waiting for the bus to take her home. In the few pages of her story, June is likened to an egg. When she enters a bar, she first notices that "there were cartons of colored eggs" (2), and a man who was peeling one; her persona is initially associated with an Easter egg, the Christian symbol of rebirth for the resurrection of Christ:

He ordered a beer for her, a Blue Ribbon, saying she deserved a prize for being the best thing he'd seen for days. He peeled an egg for her, a pink one, saying it matched her turtleneck. She told him it was no turtleneck. You called these things shells. He said he would peel that for her, too, if she wanted, then he grinned at the bartender and handed her the naked egg. (2)

As suggested by Sanders, the egg is not only a religious symbol, but it also has a significance of death and rebirth in the Ojibwa culture, and it is normally associated with something fragile and easy to destroy. Erdrich shows the contrast between June's outer experience and her inner monologue, in which she is vulnerable and dissociated from reality (Sanders 1998:147). While she is fed eggs by the man she has just encountered, June starts thinking about her life on the reservation where apparently nobody, not even her divorced husband Gordie, is expecting her to come back; then, when she briefly reconnects with reality she catches that the man in the bar is a mud engineer, a notion that makes her fall again into her inner thought, continuing the egg metaphor now associated to death, where the human body becomes an empty shell: "the thought of that death […] always put a panicky, dry lump in her throat. […] It was in that moment, that one moment, of realizing you were totally empty. […] Sometimes, alone in her room in the dark, she thought she knew what it might be like" (3). Erdrich follows June walking toward the toilettes of the bar when she returns to reality and perceives her body as one of the dyed eggs she has just eaten:

It was later still that she felt so fragile. Walking toward the Ladies' she was afraid to bump against anything because her skin felt hard and brittle, and she knew it was possible, in this condition, to fall apart at the slightest touch. She locked herself in the bathroom stall and remembered his hand, thumbling back the transparent skin and crackling blue peel. Her clothing itched. The pink shell was sweaty and hitched up too far under her arms […] as she sat there, something happened. (4)

But her reconnection with herself, with her body, brings June to dissociate again: "All of a sudden she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone. […] She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked – only the skins were stiff and old" (4). Her clothes become unbearable, her body underneath them is "pure", whole, and healthy in the Christian sense, whereas her skin feels "stiff and old", as something she would like to remove, to peel, as the hard-boiled eggs. The act of peeling will come in the next scene, when she will reconnects with reality: undressed she feels on the verge of being devoured during sexual intercourse with the man, like the eggs he was eating in the opening scene:

> She let him wrestle with her clothing, but he worked so clumsily that she had to help him along. She rolled her top carefully, still hiding the rip, and arched her back to let him undo her slacks. […] He knocked his hand against the heater's controls. She felt it open at her shoulder like a pair of jaws, blasting heat, and had the momentary and voluptuous sensation that she was lying stretched out before a great wide mouth. […] Then his vest plunged down against her, so slick and plush that it was like being rubbed by an enormous tongue. (5)

After that, June feels "getting frail again", and detaches from her body, for her skin feels "smooth and strange" (5). June's continuous loss of her self-perception is a sign of her looking for an identity she struggles to reconnect with for she has lost all her connections with her community. She is vulnerable ("She knew that if she lay there any longer, she would crack wide open, not in one place but in many pieces", 6), and she is aware of her fragility and powerlessness both as a woman and as Native American because she is at the mercy of a white man. June will regain possession of herself coming out from the man's truck, reclaiming the egg metaphor of birth: "June had wedged herself so tight against the door that when she sprang the latch she fell out. Into the cold. It was a shock like being born" (6). Her rebirth will give her a temporary sense of herself that would lead her to gain a misplaced confidence in her ability to reach home and thus she will find death instead: "Even her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on" (7). Therefore, the only surviving part of June will be her spirit, kept alive in her community's memories through the storytelling that will start from her death; in Sanders' analysis:

> By cracking open the shell of her identity June's spirit breaks through the cultural and gendered expectations and prohibitions (symbolized by the encasing eggshell) that contributed to her lifelong search for a clear identity. Erdrich recalls description of the naked egg and connects it to the spiritual part June that will wander in search of home throughout the novel. June's corporeal body dies, but her spirit lives on to return home through Lipsha. (Sanders 1998:148)

In the last scene of the first part of the chapter, the parallelism of June with the Easter egg also reveals another Christian reference: the personification of the Native American woman with the figure of Christ. Erdrich plays with the Christian symbolism of Christ walking on water by ending June's story with her drunkenly walking on snow seeking home, in an attempt to replace the Christian patriarchal symbol with a matriarchal Native American one (Sanders 1998:148). The repeating images of the snow in the opening chapter are the first hints of the water metaphor that pervades the novel: the snow continues to reflect light in June's story, from the beginning of the chapter until the end (first it is said that "the snow itself reflected such light that she was momentarily blinded. It was like going underwater" (2), then "even in the dark, when he turned his headlights off, the snow reflected enough light to see by" (5), and again "the snow was bright, giving back starlight" (6)), when the metaphor of water reveals the Christ impersonation: "the snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home" (7). In the last chapter of the novel, in which Lipsha makes her emblematic return home in her mother June's car, the image of water returns in the form of a river that demarcates the borders to enter the reservation. Lipsha symbolically takes her mother home, finally completing June's journey of the first chapter: once again Erdrich switches the Christian view of coming home as reaching heaven with the Native American belief of homing as "communal knowledge and well-being" (Sanders 1998:148). The failed attempt of June to come home that opens the novel starts the cycle of stories that will recount how other components of her family made their own journey to find themselves, through the discovery or rediscovery of their culture and community. The cycle starts in the second part of the first chapter, with Albertine Johnson's story, June's niece, and narrates how the characters eventually will come home, rediscovering their Native American identity. As stated by Sanders: "June's attempt to succeed in the dominant culture by becoming successful off the reservation and away from her family fails. June reaches a balance of the contradictory forces at war within her only after she encounters and is claimed by death. Her journey ends, but it sets others, particularly her son Lipsha, on their own journey" (Sanders 1998:148-49). The Native American sense of well-being passes through a healing process that is based on reconnection with a tribal society; such reconnection with society and tradition is made through the relationship with the women of the community, the mothers of traditions, in the sense of bearers of

tribal cultural knowledge. Like Lipsha who finds himself after the discovery of his mother's identity, other characters of the novel undergo a similar journey to find their heritage through their mothers.

Two of the female characters of *Love Medicine*, Marie Lazarre and Lulu Nanapush, engage in two different identity journeys, both of which start from their relationship with their biological mothers, only to eventually join into a new communal identity, established by a sisterhood that sees them regain their natural role as matriarchs in the reservation. The story of Marie's quest for her identity starts in the second chapter, "Saint Marie", which recounts her stay in the Sacred Heart Convent. Her character struggles with her subjectivity throughout the novel, and in "Saint Marie", she recounts her first attempt to find her identity separated from the reservation. Marie, "near age fourteen" (43), is determined to find herself in a convent living among the French nuns, and rejecting her mixed-blood identity as half-American Indian. Her goal is to enter the convent to become a saint, inspired by the white Christian mother Virgin Mary, so she finds herself under the power of the Mother Superior Sister Leopolda. The whole chapter is full of references to contrasts of black and white, which indicate evil and good, but also the separation of the Native American and the Anglo-American blood: Marie calls the Devil the Dark One, who speaks "the old language of the bush" (46), meaning the language of the "bush Indians" (45) Marie is part of. In her path to sanctity Marie needs to gain the love and trust of Sister Leopolda first (described as having a "skin deadly pale", 49); knowing that her skin does not reveal her Native American heritage, Marie is advantaged to become a Virgin Mary, claiming that "I looked good. And I looked white. But I wanted Sister Leopolda's heart" (48). Thus, her white appearance is what convinces her to become a nun, as she states in the first lines of the chapter, where she makes clear her diversity from her Native American peers:

> No reservation girl has ever prayed so hard. There was no use in trying to ignore me any longer. I was going up there on the hill with the black robe women. They were not any lighter than me. I was going up there to pray as good as they could. Because I don't have that much Indian blood. And they never thought they'd have a girl from this reservation as a saint they'd have to kneel to. (43)

Despite her "advantage" of looking white, Marie knows her being part American Indian will make her path to sanctity harder, for she feels that it is the side the Devil is attracted to. So, she puts her confidence in Sister Leopolda because, according to Marie, she is the only nun in the convent with true knowledge of the Dark One:

I had this confidence in Sister Leopolda. She was different. The other Sisters had long ago gone blank and given up to Satan. He slept for them. They never noticed his comings and goings. But Leopolda kept track of him and knew his habits, minds he burrowed in, deep spaces where he hid. She knew as much about him as my grandma, who called him by other names and was not afraid. (45)

The Mother Superior can see the Dark One in Marie, and the reason is that Leopolda is actually Marie's biological mother, as Erdrich explains in the third novel *Tracks*. As stated by Kelly Oliver, the attraction for the Anglo religion is transferred biologically to Marie, since both she and Sister Leopolda (Pauline Puyat in *Tracks*) identify with the Virgin Mary: "An identification with the Virgin is an identification with the mother and the symbolic at the same time. It is an identification with the perfect, immortal, holy Mother. But it is also an identification with the Word that marks and defines her […] By identifying with the Virgin, women can identify with the mother within the Symbolic order" (cited in Sanders 1998:133-34). Therefore, Marie's desire for sanctity in her identification with the Virgin Mary indicates not only her will to identify with an Anglo-religious female figure but also her need to reconnect with Sister Leopolda, her biological maternal figure. In the novel Marie and Leopolda are led to each other to signal their undeniable natural bond: Marie chooses Leopolda as her spiritual mother in the convent for she possesses the same intuition for the Devil that Marie recognized in her grandmother, while Leopolda is driven to Marie for she is aware of her Native American heritage, and the evil that hides in it:

She always said the Dark One wanted me most of all, and I believed this. Before sleep sometimes he came and whispered conversation in the old language of the bush, I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians. I was privy to both worlds of his knowledge. I listened to him, but I had confidence in Leopolda. She was the only one of the bunch he even noticed. (46)

What is implied in the two women's identities is their tight correlation between being American Indian and evil: following the colonizers' narration the Native American must be saved by the Christian religion; Marie continuously reaffirms her close relationship to the Devil ("He wanted me. More than anything he craved me", 47) and how Sister Leopolda has the power to see him ("She had smelled him on me", 46) because being half American Indian herself, she knows him better than the white French sisters. Marie recounts her experience in the convent as a story of Christian martyrdom, that will give her the power of sanctity. From the beginning, she reports the vision of her transformation into a saint: "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" (43).

She envisions herself becoming a saint's statue, in which the gold of the Christian statue is combined with the shells of Native American religions: the fusion of the religious emblems is a signal of the ambivalence of people who have been forced to accept the colonizer's religious belief (Sanders 1998:134). Her vision will remerge after Sister Leopolda uses a kettle to pour boiled water on Marie in an attempt to purify her from the Devil; she says that "to warm [Marie's] cold ash heart" (52) she will need to "boil him from [her] mind" (53). After enduring the violent purification, the vision reappears showing her transformation happening in her consciousness:

> I despaired. I felt I had no inside voice, nothing to direct me, no darkness, no Marie. I was about to throw that cornmeal mush out to the birds and make a run for it, when the vision rose up blazing in my mind. I was rippling gold. My breasts were bare and my nipples flashed and winked. Diamonds tipped them. I could walk through panes of glass. I could walk through windows. She [Sister Leopolda] was at my feet, swallowing the glass after each step I took. […] I closed my eyes. I expected to see blackness. Peace. But instead the vision reared up again. My chest was still tipped with diamonds. I was walking through windows. She was chewing up the broken litter I left behind. (54-55)

As a consequence of the baptism performed with hot water, Sister Leopolda gives Marie a new identity, claiming "Marie. The Star of the Sea [that] will shine […] when we have burned off the dark corrosion" (54). Marie, lacking a personal identity, creates a vision of the Virgin Mary which shows her as a saint capable of usurping Sister Leopolda's role and power. Thus, her vision does not emulate Virgin Mary's admirable traits, but rather reports a vision of herself inspired by the Christian iconography and by the role of Leopolda; as explained by Sanders:

> This identity is problematic not only because it is borrowed from the colonizer's culture and another time, but also because it is ephemeral and hollow; it can offer her no cogent future, no positive identity. The power she envisions comes solely from the conquest of Sister Leopolda. […] Marie's vision of herself as the statue of the Virgin Mary discloses her inculcation in the dominant culture and underscores her disparagement of her own heritage. As a girl Marie is proud that she looks white, and like Pauline [Sister Leopolda] in *Tracks*, she denies her heritage in order to embrace the symbol of Catholic womanhood. For Marie, Mary represents power and glory. (Sanders 1998:135)

Sainthood is reached by Marie through her martyrdom, by gaining the stigmata from the impression given by Leopolda's fork used as a defense when Marie tries to kick her in the oven into "the gate of a personal hell. Just big enough and hot enough for one person, and that was her" (57). Erdrich denies the religiousness of the miracle by revealing Marie's lack of faith in just the Christian God, for she is guided also by the hatred she feels and the love she seeks from Sister Leopolda and by establishing that the stigmata are just wounds from a physical battle and not the gaining of a spiritual quest. Therefore,

Marie's vision is not accomplished, since it lies in a fake miracle, a lie told by Sister Leopolda to protect herself from the censure of the convent: "Leopolda had saved herself with her quick brain. She had witnessed a miracle. She had hidden the fork and told this to the others. And of course, they believed her because they never knew how Satan came and went or where he took refuge" (59). In conclusion, Marie does not find her identity in the convent, for at the end of the chapter she recognizes the falseness of the Virgin's power and thus she abandons her dream of being the saint of the convent: "There would be no one else after me. And I would leave. I saw Leopolda kneeling within the shambles of her love. […] I pitied her. Pity twisted my stomach like that hook-pole was driven through me. I was caught. It was a feeling more terrible than any amount of boiling water and worse than being forked" (60). Just like June, Marie's attempt to find an identity outside of the reservation detaches her from reality, from her body, impersonating the symbolic death of Saint Marie's character, who, in a Christian reference, speaks like Christ and then returns to dust, like in the biblical assertion of death:

> I heard myself speaking gently. "Receive the dispensation of my sacred blood," I whispered. But there was no heart in it. No joy when she [Sister Leopolda] bent to touch the floor. […] Blank dust was whirling through the light shafts. My skin was dust. Dust my lips. Dust the dirty spoon on the ends of my feet. Rise up! I thought. Rise up and walk! There is no limit to this dust! (60)

In the chapter, the water metaphor for life and love is opposed by the dust image that represents both death and Sister Leopolda. In Sanders' analysis, Marie in the final scene realizes that in the convent with Leopolda, she would find only dust, "a living death without love" (Sanders 1998:136), therefore she decides to leave:

> This departure shows her rejection of their worship of the symbolic. As the Virgin Mother, St. Mary represents the symbolic, the abstract ideal of womanhood, not the real person, just as the nuns' symbolic marriage to God, not a real human bond. Her departure shows her rejection of those values and that way of life as she moves on to a new stage in her search for health and identity. (Sanders 1998:136)

In the following chapter, "Wild Geese", Marie rejects the ultimate feature of Saint Marie, by losing her virginity to Nector Kashpaw at the bottom of the hill of the Sacred Heart Convent. Erdrich juxtaposes the scenes to indicate Marie's ultimate rejection of the Christian power of the Virgin Mary and the acceptance of her Native American heritage. "Wild Geese" is narrated by Nector, a change which declasses Marie as the object of the story, in a narrative strategy that suggests Marie's loss of power as related to her loss of virginity and control over the narrative. Her losing power and embracing her Native American heritage provides a new identity for Marie, who becomes Mrs. Kashpaw, the

wife of the tribal chairman. Thus, Marie's new identity is not claimed by herself but rather by her relationship with a man, her husband Nector, a sign that "female power is no longer viable in the Native American culture" (Sanders 1998:137). Nector is the tribe chairman, but Marie is aware she is the power behind him and that she exerts her influence on his life and the tribe:

> I'd known from the beginning I had married a man with brains. But the brains wouldn't matter unless I kept him from the bottle. He would pour them down the drain, where his liquor went, unless I stopped the holes, wore him out, dragged him back each time he drank, and tied him to the bed with strong ropes. I had decided I was going to make him into something big on this reservation. (89)

When Nector decides to leave her for Lulu, Marie finds herself lost again, since her identity is tied to her role of wife. In 1957 she returns to visit Sister Leopolda at the convent and tries to impress the Mother Superior bragging about her position as wife of the tribal chairman, but the unimpressed reaction of Leopolda triggers Marie's sense of identity. At home, she regains a sense of herself as separated from Nector and from her vision of Saint Marie, on finding a letter where her husband confessed his infidelity; Marie states: "I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ends the wife of the chairman of the Chippewa Tribe. I'd still be Marie. Marie. Star of the Sea! I'd shine when they stripped off the wax!" (165). Marie is depicted as seeking and losing power throughout the novel by struggling with her identity, but in each phase of her life, she succeeds in regaining her fundamental connection with nature. She will not remain powerless and will become a powerful survivor achieving a healthy and balanced identity through her relationship with Lulu: the death of Nector, the man they shared, will offer the occasion to bond in a sisterhood that will give them a connection with the community and pride in their Native American heritage (Sanders 1998:137-38). In the novel, the bond between Marie and Lulu finds its prelude in their relationship with two of the ancient women of the tribe, the representatives of the conservation of Native American traditions. Marie and Lulu's sisterhood as powerful matriarchs of the tribe is set forth by the scene of the conjunction between two elderly women, Rushes Bear, Marie's mother-in-law, and Fleur Pillager, Lulu's biological mother when they reunite to assist Marie during childbirth in the chapter "The Beads". Erdrich presents the character of Rushes Bear, in the previous chapter, "The Island", where Lulu explains that Rushes Bear is named Margaret Kashpaw and has remarried her uncle Nanapush after her relationship with a Kashpaw from whom she had her son Nector. In the second part of the chapter "The Beads", the character of Rushes

Bear reappears as Marie’s mother-in-law, who has left her man Nanapush and moved in with Marie and her children. Rushes Bear is described as an elderly woman attached to her family, community, and land, who keeps practicing tribal traditions, like performing blessings and wearing traditional clothes:

> Years ago, she had left her old man, Nanapush, and the devil she called Fleur had come to take her place. Rushes Bear had traveled by train to Montana, got off place to visit her children […] Soon after, lonesome, she got back onto the train in the opposite direction. For one year she had gone to her original home, back to the great islands and pine trees and rocks around Superior, the place she was born. […] One evening when she raised her feather and her braid of sweetgrass and began to bless the house, I took the children and we slipped off to eat some bannock and grease. Her blessings could hold rocks, we knew. (98)

Emblem of Native American tribal traditions and the ancient role of Native women in the community, Rushes Bear moves in with Marie during her pregnancy after her son Nector has left. Their relationship starts with difficulty because Rushes Bear notoriously does not like Marie’s original family, the Lazarres, (Rushes Bear in “The Island” says to Lulu referring to Marie: “My son is marrying one of that lowlife family that insulted me”, 72) and her tribal habits clash with Marie and her children’s western customs. At first, Marie claims to feel “edgy in the presence of Rushes Bear” (97), but then she realizes that they must unite to create a bond and fight their loneliness:

> Brushing her own face with the feather of the eagle, touching the beautiful blue beads on the tip, the white buckskin fringe she had sewed there to honor it […] she said to me, “I have nowhere else to go”. So she tamed down and stayed. She had looked over the bleak edge of her life, saw that I was her last hold, and caught at me. […] She seemed to have noticed the shape of my loneliness. Maybe she found it was the same as hers. (99)

Nector has left Marie pregnant and comes back only on request of their daughter Zelda, but Rushes Bear sends him away, stating “If we need anybody else, we’ll send out get Fleur Pillager” (100). Fleur is Lulu’s biological mother, an elderly woman who comes back to take care of old Nanapush, Lulu’s uncle, after Rushes Bear leaves him. Similarly, to Rushes Bear she is still kin to the tribal traditions, and is known in the reservation for her tenacity in keeping her land and for her great power and knowledge of traditional medicine:

> The Pillager was living back there with no lights, she was living with spirits. Back where the woods were logged off and brush had twisted together, impassable, […] That side of the lake belonged to her. Twice she lost it, twice she got it back. Four times she returned. Now she wore hide slippers, moccasins, let her braids grow long, traveled into town on foot, scorned the nuns as they scorned her, visited the priest. She made no confession, though some said Father Damien Modeste confessed his sins to her. (101)

The breakthrough in the relationship between Rushes Bear and Marie happens when Rushes Bear and Fleur come together to assist in Marie's childbirth, which is described as a crucial moment of existential change for the woman. Marie nearly loses her life to give birth to her daughter but survives thanks to the collaboration of the two elderly women that reunite to help her. During a long and painful labor, due to the extreme fatigue and pain, Marie loses contact with reality and envisions herself in the water floating as a boat: "I began to lose track of where I was, in my absorption, and sometimes I saw myself as from a distance, floating calm, driven by long swells of waves" (102). The only presences that bring her back to reality are the two women, whose voices and touches give comfort and strength to Marie during the contractions: "I put my hand out and Rushes Bear put her hand into it. I turned my face away when the next one came. She did not let go. Then I felt another person's hand come down, on my brow, and it was like the touch of peace, such mercy" (102). Rushes Bear's and Fleur's presence during Marie's most vulnerable moment make allow the traces of her Native American heritage to re-emerge, and Marie finds herself pronouncing words of the old language: "Perhaps because Rushes Bear or because of the thought of Fleur, the words that finally came wasn't English, but out of childhood, out of memory, an old word I had forgotten the use of, *Babaumawaebigowin*. […] "*N'gushi*" I said to her, and knew I'd die" (102). The birth of her daughter almost brings Marie to death; thus her survival is felt as a rebirth that brings Marie to reality with a new awareness of her identity. While she regains consciousness, she hears Rushes Bear in the other room rejecting her son Nector with the words "I only have a daughter" (104), and then she admits embracing her new identity as the daughter of the elder Native American woman, stating:

> I never saw this woman the same way I had before that day. […] I never saw her without knowing that she was my own mother, my own blood. What she did went beyond the frailer connections. More than saving my life, she put the shape of it back in place […] I took care of the old woman every day of her life because we shared the loneliness that was one shape, because I knew that she was in that boat, where I had labored. (104-105)

As indicated previously, the chapter "The Island" precedes the story of Marie's childbirth, and it recounts the return of young Lulu Nanapush to the reservation. Unlike Marie's teenage story, based on her determination to become a Virgin Mary, Lulu is described as a young Native American girl very close to her Native customs and belonging to the community of nature (Sanders 1998:139). Her strong claim for her American Indian

origin is linked to the disappearance of her mother Fleur, the medicine woman, whose missing inspired Lulu to escape the boarding school several times, in an act that reveals her strong rejection of the Anglo-American values and the intention to reconnect with her ancient traditions:

> She [Fleur] had vanished, a great surrounding shore, leaving me to spill out alone. I wanted to fill her tracks, but luck ran out the holes. My wishes were worn soles. I stumbled in those shoes of desire. Following my mother, I ran from the government school. Once, twice, too many times. I ran away so often that my dress was always the hot-orange shame dress and my furious scrubbing thinned sidewalks beneath my hands and knees to cracked slabs. Punished and alone, I slept in a room of echoing creaks. I made and tore down and remade all the dormitory beds. I lived by bells, orders, flat voices, rough English. I missed the old language in my mother's mouth. (68)

A letter from her uncle Nanapush sets her free from the government school and starts Lulu's journey home to reconnect with her American Indian heritage. Already before arriving at her uncle's home Lulu feels free and in awe of the natural vastity of the reservation: "I saw the leaves of the poplars applaud high in wind. I saw the ducks barrel down, reaching the glitter of the slough water. […] I watched my own face float over the grass, traveling alongside me in the dust of the bus window, and I grinned, and showed my teeth. They could not cage me anymore" (69). At home her uncle lives with his wife Margaret Kashpaw, Rushes Bear, who Lulu describes as a severe Native American woman (like Marie would do in the next chapter) very different from her mother:

> [Margaret Nanapush] stood regular by his side. Staring at me, her eyes turned to blue-black metal. Her lips hardened, mean, and her face became a wedge of steel. I wanted to yank that old woman's braids. She had taken the name of Rushes Bear and didn't like me, never had. She was done with raising children and I was the last one in her way. The strict lines down her chin made me hungry for my mother's laughter. (69)

Nevertheless, Lulu recognizes her impression of Rushes Bear was formed when she was still at the beginning of the quest for her Native American identity; as an adult, she comments that Rushes Bear "was a passionate power-hungry woman, and although I have more feeling for the type now that I have become one of myself, I never forgot how hard it was to live beneath the stones of her will. From that moment, I hated her with a dedication and plotted her downfall with a young girl's vigor. Still, it took years" (70). Her gratitude for the woman represents her changed mind after becoming an older American Indian woman of the reservation community herself. As a young girl, Lulu begins her quest for her identity willing to embrace her heritage and is depicted taking care of her uncle by cooking for him, always guided by the missing presence of her mother. She is aware that she is growing into a Native American woman, like her mother:

"I needed my mother the more I became like her – a Pillager kind of woman with a sudden body, fierce outright wishes. A surprising heart" (71). The repeated references to her mother suggest that Lulu is trying to find herself by reconnecting with Fleur. Sanders explains Lulu's promiscuity in the novel as her trying to find her mother through love relationships; that would explain her choice of Moses Pillager as her first lover for he is her distant cousin and thus represents a link to Fleur (Sanders 1998:139). Her will to establish a relationship with Moses brings Lulu to his island, a land that seems part of the ancient world, where they start living together. Lulu's stay on the island brings her back to her origin when she starts feeling her mother's presence more deeply: "his face was closely fit, the angles measured and almost too perfect. My mother's face was like that – too handsome to be real, constructed by the Manitous" (77), "when I said her name [Fleur's], Moses touched the medicine bag at his waist. […] even though I'd gone to the government school I crossed my breast at the sight of it" (78), and "*N'dawnis, n'dawnis*, my mother still spoke to me, sang to me" (83). The relationship with Moses empowers Lulu: "I felt my own power stir" (75), and "I had dusted him [Moses], chilled him in the shape of my shadow when I stood against the sun. I had loosened the air, stolen the strings from his hands and legs, bent him like a stem of grass marking my trail" (80); but once pregnant Lulu realizes the precarious nature of her relationship with Moses, and concludes her story making explicit her need of a female bond in her life: "Women died in their blood. Women snapped green sticks in their mouths. I needed a midwife to guide me, a mother" (84). Eventually, she grows into a woman who resembles an earth goddess at one with the forces of nature, like her mother Fleur (Sanders 1998:139); as an adult, in "The Good Tears" chapter, Lulu claims: "I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms. […] I'd hear the wind rushing, rolling, like the far-off sound of waterfalls. Then I'd open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and I'd let everything inside" (176). To other characters Lulu seems magical, as stated by her son Beverly Lamartine's description: "Lulu was bustling about the kitchen in a calm, automatic frenzy. She seemed to fill pots with food by pointing at them and taking things from the oven that she'd never put in. The table jumped to set itself" (119). Allen claims that Lulu's magical aura comes from her connection to the traditional heritage: "The concept of power among tribal people is related to their understanding of the relationships that occur between the human and nonhuman worlds. They believe that all are linked within one

vast, living sphere, that the linkage is not material but spiritual, and that its essence is the power that enables magical things to happen" (cited in Sanders 1998:139). Lulu's connection to the natural world and her heritage afford her a sense of transpersonal and inclusion that gives her power and identity, as suggested by Clark Smith: "The vibrant, strongly self-aware Lulu is the best illustration that dissolving physical boundaries can strengthen identity... Totally receptive to the natural world, Lulu physically and spiritually opens herself to it all... Lulu's loving, all-inclusive attitude towards life questions even the possibility of imposing boundaries" (cited in Sanders 1998:140).

For both Lulu and Marie, the pivotal turning point of their quest for identity is the unexpected death of Nector, the man the two women shared as a husband and lover. Nector's death offers the occasion for the two women to unite in reciprocal support during mourning, as it is claimed by Lulu in "The Good Tears" chapter: "We mourned him the same way together. That was the point. It was enough. For the first time I saw exactly how another woman felt, and it gave me deep comfort, surprising" (297). The scene shows them exchanging a few words in an attitude of silent understanding, where the reference to motherhood is interpreted by Sanders as a sign of the silent communication that from that scene on is established between the two women, for they will be in touch in a "fundamental feminine way" within a "silent communication [that] recalls the pre-symbolic language used between an infant and her mother" (Sanders 1998:146). Lulu states: "She did not mention Nector's funeral. We did not talk about Nector. He was already there. Too much might start the floodgates flowing and our moment would be lost. It was enough just to sit there without words" (297), and their mutual decision to not talk about Nector becomes a tacit agreement they will maintain in the future (Lyman Lamartine in "The Tomahawk Factory": "the one thing they didn't do, I noticed, the one area they left alone and never made into a joke, was my origin. Nector's fatherhood. That subject remained untouched", 312), to the point that his name will come out again only many years later when the two women are older and work together with Lulu's son Lyman for the reservation. Their silent communication suggests a connection that "obliterates not only the patriarchal language, but also their antagonistic personal past" (Sanders 1998:146) and turns their previous ambivalent relationship into an alliance based on understanding, harmony, and inclusiveness. According to Sanders the question of language portrayed in the women's non-speech conceals the difficulty to communicate

for Native American women, who have been forced to live in a patriarchal world and to speak white men's language:

> The white male power structure, which has subsumed language, religion, and all social institutions has controlled, not only the way white women are perceived and then act, but also the identity and behavior of all Native Americans. The self-consciousness and negativity […] women exhibit can be refigured beyond gender differentiation to disclose cultural difference. […] These deficiencies are exhibited in the textual absences; thus, the dominant culture's influence can be seen in the stories that are told and the language that is privileged. (Sanders 1998:141-42)

The imposition of the language spoken by the Western patriarchal society is also shown by the intermission of Ojibwa words in the novel, pronounced both by Marie and Lulu, which Sanders interprets as a metaphor for the reality experienced by Native Americans: "Because the Ojibwa language has been largely lost, or forgotten, the Native Americans in this novel fall back on communication without words" (Sanders 1998:142). The tears shed by Lulu indicate a will to communicate with Marie, which is another sign of silent communication, to "reestablish what is non-verbal" (Kristeva in Sanders 1998:142). When Lulu finds a dead body as a child she "cried all the tears she would ever cry in her life" (280-81), and when Nector dies she finds herself at ease to cry in front of Marie: "She [Marie] got my eyedrops from the table. […] She wiped my eyes with a warm washcloth. I blinked. The light was cloudy but I could already see. She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just-born child" (297).

Marie's and Lulu's quest for identity starts from their relationship with other Native American women, in their personal research of a biological and spiritual mother figure. Their journey ends with their coming back home to the community, metaphorically by rediscovering their American Indian heritage and physically becoming a sort of modern matriarchs of the reservation. Hence, the reconstruction of their identity is completed by a reconciliation with Native American identity and through female solidarity. Their return home is emblematic of the general condition of Native American women in the act of reconstruction of an identity at odds with gender and racial stereotypes. A clear sign of the reconstruction of a traditional feminine identity is the fact that Marie and Lulu come together in a tribal sisterhood, in which they actively collaborate for the economy of the reservation and celebrate their heritage by wearing traditional dresses. As observed by Lyman Lamartine, Lulu and Nector's son, in "The Tomahawk Factory" chapter, they were "set free by Nector's death, they couldn't get enough of their won differences" and

found a communal plan to sustain the reservation: "It was a proposal to take up where Nector Kashpaw had left off, to set into motion a tribal souvenir factory" (303). Hence, Lulu and Marie refuse to leave the reservation to find themselves outside of it (like June did at the beginning of the novel) and live by the Anglo-American customs, but they choose to work together to keep their traditions alive in the reservation. As a result, Lyman describes the two women's reconciliation as a successful revitalization of traditional customs in the reservation:

> In youth, Marie and Lulu were both terrors, cutting a wide unholy swath. In marriage they fiercely raised their children. It was in age that they came into their own. With Nector Kashpaw gone, the two of them were now free to concentrate their powers, and once they got together they developed strong and hotheaded followings among our local agitating group of hard-eyes, a determined bunch who grew out their hair in braids or ponytails and dressed in ribbon shirts and calico to make their point. Traditional. Back-to-the-buffalo types. (303)

Erdrich portrays Marie and Lulu finding their female identity in their friendship and sisterhood because of their reconciliation with Native American heritage.

In conclusion, *Love Medicine* depicts characters going through pain and suffering as a consequence of their cultural oppression and then finding a way back to contentment and health. As mentioned above, their journey becomes a process of healing that ends with well-being based on the rediscovery of the Native American transpersonal sense of self, a kind of personal selfhood based on "inclusion of others and of nature, openness and acceptance" (Sanders 1998:132). Sanders explains that this personal healing journey encourages the characters' rediscovery of Ojibwa culture's spirituality and supernatural communion through the texts' use of magical characters (such as Rushes Bear and Fleur Pillager), who occasionally function as help to effect the healing process. Therefore, the healing of personal selfhood in *Love Medicine* is achieved through the magical elements of the texts and the act of sharing the characters' stories. In summary, the narrators find forgiveness and transformation through the power of storytelling, that enables the characters toward each other in their discovery of a transpersonal self.

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Riassunto

Il presente lavoro di tesi magistrale, intitolato "Reconstructing Native American Female Identity: The Relationships between Women in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*", si inserisce nel contesto accademico degli ultimi decenni che ha posto l'attenzione sulla letteratura nativo-americana e sulle voci e le esperienze che storicamente sono state trascurate o marginalizzate all'interno delle narrazioni occidentali dominanti. Al centro di questo dibattito si trova l'identità delle donne nativo-americane, strettamente legata all'influenza della narrazione dominante del colonialismo e all'imposizione del patriarcato nelle comunità nativo-americane. Questa ricerca si propone di contribuire a questo dialogo accademico investigando le relazioni tra le donne descritte nel primo romanzo di Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*. La ricerca si basa sulla mia formazione presso l'Università di Padova, dove ho seguito tre corsi fondamentali: Letteratura Anglo-Americana, Antropologia Culturale e Storia degli Stati Uniti. Questi corsi mi hanno fornito una comprensione completa delle dimensioni sociali, culturali e letterarie delle esperienze delle minoranze, offrendo spunti sulle complessità della discriminazione di genere e razziale nell'esperienza dei nativo-americani, che ho cercato di indagare attraverso la loro letteratura.

Concentrandomi sul romanzo *Love Medicine* di Erdrich, questa ricerca esplora come le donne nativo-americane negozino la propria identità all'interno di una società patriarcale bianca, mantenendo al contempo forti legami con la propria eredità culturale. Erdrich, acclamata autrice Ojibwa, intreccia le storie di molte generazioni di donne nativo-americane, evidenziando le complessità delle loro vite, le loro relazioni reciproche e le loro lotte per trovare la propria identità nativa. Utilizzando diversi quadri teorici, tra cui l'antropologia culturale, gli studi di genere e la teoria della letteratura etnica, lo studio si propone di analizzare la complessa rete di connessioni e tensioni tra i personaggi femminili in *Love Medicine*. Attraverso l'esame delle dinamiche di sorellanza, maternità, amicizia e amore all'interno del romanzo, ho cercato di ottenere una comprensione più profonda delle sfumature dell'identità femminile nativo-americana e del suo potenziale trasformativo di fronte all'avversità.

Attraverso una lettura attenta della prosa di Erdrich e un'analisi critica delle esperienze dei personaggi femminili, questa tesi esplora come le relazioni tra le donne in *Love Medicine* contribuiscano alla riconquista e alla ricostruzione dell'identità femminile

nativo-americana. Esaminando i contesti culturali, storici e sociopolitici in cui vivono gli indiani d'America, ho cercato di illustrare come le donne nativo-americane navighino e resistano alle dinamiche di potere di genere e alle pratiche discriminatorie che hanno plasmato le loro vite. In definitiva, questa tesi si propone di apportare un contributo significativo ai campi della letteratura nativo-americana, gettando luce sulle complessità dell'identità femminile nativo-americana e sul potenziale trasformativo delle relazioni comunitarie. Attraverso un approccio critico alla letteratura, spero che questa ricerca approfondisca la comprensione delle esperienze storiche e attuali delle donne native americane nella società americana e contribuisca al dialogo in corso sulla discriminazione di genere, l'identità culturale e l'importanza della letteratura nativo-americana nel reclamare rappresentazioni verosimili dei popoli nativi. La tesi si compone di tre capitoli che esplorano in dettaglio il tema complesso della ricostruzione dell'identità femminile nativo americana, concentrandosi sulle relazioni tra i personaggi femminili rappresentati nel romanzo *Love Medicine* di Louise Erdrich.

Il primo capitolo della mia tesi offre una panoramica della letteratura nativo-americana, fornendo un esame di tre principali aree: il concetto di letteratura nativo-americana all'interno del canone americano, le identità indiane nella società americana e la rappresentazione delle donne nativo-americane nella letteratura. Il capitolo inizia esplorando l'inclusione della letteratura nativo-americana nel canone americano, evidenziando la storica marginalizzazione e sottorappresentazione delle voci nativo-americane all'interno del più ampio canone della letteratura americana. Tuttavia, negli anni '60, durante il Rinascimento nativo-americano, si è verificato un notevole cambiamento, poiché la letteratura nativo-americana ha guadagnato riconoscimento e apprezzamento. Questo cambiamento può essere attribuito agli sforzi di scrittori, studiosi e attivisti nativo-americani che hanno lavorato per sfidare le narrazioni dominanti e attirare l'attenzione sulle esperienze e le prospettive uniche dei popoli nativi. Procedendo, il capitolo esamina la natura sfaccettata delle identità degli indiani d'America all'interno della società americana; discute il contesto storico del colonialismo, dell'assimilazione forzata e della soppressione culturale che le comunità nativo-americane hanno subito, e l'influenza dei media americani nel creare immagini stereotipate degli indiani d'America. Esamina anche le conseguenze di queste esperienze sulla costruzione dell'identità nativo-americana e le lotte in corso affrontate dai popoli nativi nel rivendicare la propria eredità

culturale e riaffermare le proprie narrazioni all'interno della più ampia società americana. Inoltre, il capitolo esamina la rappresentazione delle scrittrici indiane d'America nella letteratura, sottolineando il loro ruolo fondamentale nella riformulazione delle tradizioni letterarie nativo-americane; queste scrittrici hanno attivamente sfidato gli stereotipi di genere e culturali, portando alla luce le realtà complesse e le prospettive uniche delle donne native. I loro contributi hanno ampliato la comprensione dell'identità di persone di origine nativo-americana e interrotto le narrazioni unidimensionali che spesso hanno dominato la letteratura americana. Il capitolo si concentra poi specificamente su *Love Medicine* di Louise Erdrich come opera letteraria significativa nella letteratura etnica. Attraverso la vivida caratterizzazione dei personaggi e le relazioni intrecciate tra le donne, Erdrich esplora le lotte, il dolore e il processo di guarigione verso una ricostruzione dell'identità delle donne native; il suo romanzo narra le esperienze diverse e le complessità della vita delle donne nativo-americane, sottolineando l'importanza delle loro relazioni e dei legami che le uniscono nel superare le sfide della società.

Il secondo capitolo, intitolato "Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*", approfondisce vari aspetti del romanzo, compreso il suo genere, la ricezione, la trama e i personaggi. Questo capitolo fornisce un'analisi di *Love Medicine*, esplorando le sue qualità uniche e l'impatto che ha avuto su lettori e critici. Il capitolo inizia discutendo il genere di *Love Medicine*; il romanzo di Erdrich sfida una categorizzazione facile, rivedendo la definizione occidentale della narrativa autobiografica; mediante l'uso di una gamma di tecniche narrative e l'inclusione di elementi della tradizione narrativa nativo-americana, Erdrich crea una narrazione distintiva e stratificata che cattura la complessità delle esperienze degli indiani d'America, risultando in un genere che è stato classificato come ciclo di storie. Procedendo, il capitolo esplora la ricezione di *Love Medicine*, esaminando la risposta critica e popolare al romanzo, sottolineando la sua importanza all'interno del panorama letterario e la complessa questione delle modifiche e aggiunte apportate dall'autrice dalla prima edizione del 1984 alla seconda del 1993. *Love Medicine* ha ricevuto ampio consenso per la sua narrazione coinvolgente, lo sviluppo complesso dei personaggi e l'esplorazione di temi come l'identità, la famiglia e l'eredità culturale, ma alcuni studiosi hanno mosso critiche al romanzo principalmente per la mancanza di una chiara posizione politica della prima edizione. Tuttavia, la capacità del romanzo di sfidare le narrazioni prevalenti e offrire una rappresentazione realistica della vita degli indiani

d'America colloca Erdrich come una voce prominente nella letteratura contemporanea. Il capitolo fornisce quindi una panoramica della trama di *Love Medicine*; il romanzo segue le vite di diversi personaggi interconnessi della comunità Ojibwa su una riserva nel Nord Dakota, spaziando fra diverse generazioni. Erdrich adotta una struttura narrativa non lineare, muovendosi avanti e indietro nel tempo, il che conferisce profondità e complessità alla narrazione e intreccia le esperienze, le relazioni e le lotte dei personaggi, esplorando temi come l'amore, la perdita, la resilienza e le complessità della definizione d'identità. Inoltre, il capitolo riassume la caratterizzazione di *Love Medicine*, analizzando il variegato cast di personaggi femminili e le relazioni che si sviluppano tra di loro. Erdrich offre una rappresentazione autentica e multidimensionale delle donne nativo-americane, mettendo in luce la loro forza, saggezza e resistenza nelle diverse fasi della vita. I personaggi femminili di *Love Medicine* sono legati da un senso di sorellanza, maternità, amicizia e amore, e attraverso queste relazioni, affrontano le sfide generate dalla loro identità, dal patriarcato e dalle complessità culturali.
Il terzo capitolo, intitolato "Reconstructing of the female identity in *Love Medicine* through a women's web", costituisce la parte centrale della mia tesi, in cui esamino in dettaglio le relazioni tra i personaggi femminili all'interno del romanzo di Erdrich. Attraverso l'applicazione di studi come l'antropologia culturale, gli studi di genere e la teoria della letteratura etnica, analizzo le dinamiche delle relazioni femminili e il loro ruolo nel processo di ricostruzione dell'identità femminile nativo-americana. Il capitolo si concentra sulle varie tipologie di relazioni presenti nel romanzo, tra cui la sorellanza, la maternità, l'amicizia e l'amore. Attraverso l'esplorazione di queste relazioni, cerco di comprendere come le donne nativo-americane riscoprino la loro identità in un contesto patriarcale, mantenendo al contempo un legame profondo con la loro eredità culturale. Il capitolo analizza anche i modelli di resilienza, resistenza e supporto reciproco che emergono da queste relazioni, evidenziando come le donne si sostengano e si aiutino a navigare le complessità della loro realtà. Inoltre, esamino come le relazioni tra le donne siano un veicolo per la riaffermazione e la trasformazione dell'identità femminile nativo-americana, sfidando i ruoli assegnati e le norme culturali preesistenti.

In conclusione, questa tesi ha esplorato in modo approfondito il tema intricato della ricostruzione dell'identità femminile nativo-americana, concentrandosi sulle relazioni tra le donne descritte nel romanzo *Love Medicine* di Louise Erdrich. Attraverso un'analisi

approfondita dell'inclusione della letteratura nativo-americana nel canone letterario americano, dei contributi delle scrittrici nativo-americane e della rappresentazione dell'identità nativo-americana nella società americana, questa tesi ha evidenziato l'importanza di *Love Medicine* come romanzo che sfida e ricostruisce le narrazioni dominanti.

Sintetizzando i risultati dei tre capitoli, è evidente che *Love Medicine* rappresenti un'opera letteraria importante per la ricostruzione dell'identità femminile nativo-americana. Il romanzo rompe gli stereotipi razziali e di genere imposti dai media euro-americani, sfida le narrazioni discriminatorie dominanti, e offre una comprensione sfumata delle diverse esperienze e prospettive delle donne nativo-americane, riprendendo il loro ruolo fondamentale all'interno della comunità nativo-americana. Attraverso l'esplorazione delle relazioni tra le donne, Erdrich presenta una rappresentazione differenziata e realistica dell'identità femminile, mettendo in luce la resilienza, l'agency, la forza e la solidarietà comunitaria delle donne nativo-americane. Questa ricerca vuole contribuire più ampliamente alla ricerca in campo della letteratura nativo-americana e degli studi di genere, sottolineando l'importanza delle voci delle donne nativo-americane nel ridefinire i canoni letterari e sfidare le percezioni della società patriarcale bianca. Essa sottolinea l'importanza di una rappresentazione femminile sfaccettata, del potere della narrazione e del valore della comunità e della cultura tribale nella ricostruzione dell'identità femminile nativo-americana.

In conclusione, questa tesi invita a ulteriori ricerche e discussioni su questo argomento, incoraggiando una maggiore consapevolezza delle voci e delle prospettive delle donne nativo-americane e sottolineando l'importanza di includere tali narrazioni nella nostra comprensione globale della letteratura e della società. Attraverso la letteratura e lo studio delle relazioni femminili, possiamo contribuire alla creazione di un panorama più completo e rispettoso delle esperienze e delle identità delle donne nativo-americane.