

LOUISE ERDRICH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: SPACES OF
IDENTITY (RE)CONSTRUCTION AND STORYTELLING
AS UTOPIA IN *LOVE MEDICINE*

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Abstract:

Although some critics do not even accept that *Love Medicine* is a novel at all, but a collection of short stories with the same characters telling the stories of their lives, it is clearly an identity narrative. This paper will focus on spaces of identity (re)construction in *Love Medicine* that reflect the tension between the mainstream white American culture and the Native American traditional one. The church, the pub, the car, the road, the bridge, or the reservation itself thus function as heterotopias, while the space of the autobiographical story functions as a utopia. The paper will discuss these spaces and their roles in the characters' quest for identity.

Keywords: *autobiography, Native American, identity, heterotopia*

Since autobiography is a genre invented in Western culture, when discussing autobiography by an indigenous author, a Native American, or rather, a hyphenated Native American in Louise Erdrich's case, it seems important to me to start with a question such as what the proposed model of subjectivity is. In Arnold Krupat's terms, the problem is "the nature of the self presented" in the autobiographical text. (1992, 201) In traditional Western autobiography, as many authors note, the intention is to tell a life story, the autobiographer advancing along a linear road toward final individual realization. The most familiar genre in traditional Euro-American autobiography is the picaresque, where the plot develops in progressive time, from past to present and into predictable future. Multiperspectivism in fiction brings the "convention" of presenting the world as de-centered, "fragmentary, disrupted, and chaotic" (Schultz, 80) from the point of view of the individualistic, Western self.

"[T]he centrality of the self in Western autobiography finds no close parallel in Native American autobiography", which doesn't mean that the

“understanding of the self is not valorized by Native Americans.” (Krupat, 1992, 201) On the contrary, the Native American autobiographer is a “reflective, conscious subject of experience, a subject that is not identical with any set of its experiences, memories and traits, but which *has* all of them.” (Amelie Rorty in Krupat, 1992, 201) The problem about this statement is that *have* is “culture specific”, determined by “particular cultural codes” (Krupat, 1992, 201). Theorists of women’s autobiographies (or autobiographies by women authors) defined the difference between men’s and women’s life narratives “through the framework of relationality and individuality”, where women’s subjectivity is “posited as relational” (Wong, 168), whereas men’s as universal. Indigenous difference in autobiography has similarly been marked through the “relational vs. individual grid” (Wong, 168), since the indigenous – the Indian in our case – was seen, in the colonial encounter, as *the Other* in the mind/ body opposition, and therefore denied “theoretical refinement.” Paul Eakin remarks that there were practically no Native American autobiographies until the 1830’s “for the breathtakingly simple reason that the Indian was not recognized as a person with a culture in the white construction of the term.” Perceived by the whites as wholly other, the antithesis of culture, its zero degree, the Indian possessed “nothing worthy of textualization” (Eakin, 7).

To return to the question of the definition of the *have* mentioned above, in the cultural experience of colonialism, Native Americans tend to feel “under control”, rather than “in control” (Krupat, 1992, 204). Also, while Western autobiography has been “essentially metonymic”, that is, “concerned with part-part relations”, such as man-to-man or man-to-God, Native Americans show a persistent preference for the “synecdochic model” (Krupat, 1992, 216), whereby the “I-am-Me experience” (Krupat, 1992, 209) does not function unless performed publicly, in community. Community itself, in Indian tradition, means, as a “fellowship of relations and feelings” (Wong, 172), “a network of all,” as Paula Gunn Allen would have called it, extending beyond the human realm to include vegetable and animal life, and actually the whole cosmos, the earth, the four worlds above, as well as the four below.

Paula Gunn Allen observes that the “very idea of individual self-representation is fundamentally at odds with many Native American world views” (Allen, 55), while Krupat explains:

In Native American autobiography the self typically is not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation with the many voices without which it could not exist.” (Krupat, 1989, 133)

For the colonized, authenticity is legitimated by dominant society, which results in a commodification of the “authentic” Indian, who will find himself

transformed into a “museum artifact” (S. Daly in Wong, 170), someone living, according to the Romantic model, in an “uncontaminated”, pre-encounter, world, away from the corrupting influence of Western civilization. This is yet colonial narrative, “that allowed non-Natives to pity and condemn the supposedly “vanishing” Indian” (Wong, 170) for the simple reason that he cannot make himself successful as an individual, that is, reach achievement by Euro-American standards.

Reclaiming history and culture (since autobiography has much to do with history, as well as with cultural codes) is, for the Indian author,

(...) not a Romantic retreat to a lost past, but a political strategy for national and cultural survival and personal identity. A Native autobiographer [...] often implies, if not announces, the first person plural – we – even when speaking in the first person singular. We often invoke *a* (sometimes *the*) Native American community (Wong, 171).

Significantly enough, in an interview with Laura Coltelli, Louise Erdrich says about her novel *Love Medicine*:

There is a whole rich mine of Pan-Indian culture people circulate, and I am sure literature is certainly one of those things (...) The book does touch some universals, which is what we're talking about, Pan-Indianism. We wanted the reservation in *Love Medicine* to kind of ring true to people from lots of different tribes (Coltelli, 47).

In *Love Medicine*, as well as elsewhere, Erdrich relies on Western literary conventions of autobiography to make her narrative recognizable, so to say, by the non-Indian, Western reader; however, her understanding of self-identification is fully Indian. Several chapters are narrated by different “autobiographers”, and several others are in the third person. This multi-voiced narrative is what aligns her text with both the postmodern conventions and with the Indian oral tradition of storytelling. In fact, the story is largely the same, but narrated from multiple perspectives, which add details, clarifications, and even contradictions, but remains consistent with the principle of performing in the community. Each chapter is “dated”, but the story starts in 1981, goes back to the '30s, the '50s, only to return to the '80s: this is consistent with the idea of life cycle, return, re-enactment in community – a characteristic of Indian oral tradition.

This concern with history in the form of histories that make a single story of a cultural community reminds of Foucault's statement that: “A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers (both of these terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat...” (1980, 149)

In the colonial “order of things”, to borrow Foucault’s term, the dominant discourse reserved for the Indian what the same author defines as “spaces of emplacement” in the hierarchy. The colonized subject transforms the “space of emplacement” into a site of resistance, in a process that Foucault deems inevitable to any exercise of power. This is what Erdrich’s “autobiographers”, the several characters who narrate their intersecting life stories, do in *Love Medicine*. Since for the Native American memory and relationship to place are the “subjects of loss” (Wong, 172), it follows that “[m]ore than genetic inheritance or cultural practice, for Native American autobiographers identity demands an act of will and creativity, of reinterpretation and reclamation of a lost or threatened, but felt relationality” (Wong, 172).

In my article, I intend to demonstrate that, in *Love Medicine*, the “spaces of emplacement” are reclaimed and transformed into sites of empowerment. I am going to adopt a Foucauldian perspective, although Foucault was criticized for leaving little ground for invention and for being “not finally as contestatory, or as oppositional as on the surface it seems to be” (Said, 152). Kendall Phillips contends that Foucault’s theory leaves room for a “space of invention” (329) and quotes Barbara Biesecker as arguing that, in Foucault’s system, “resistant practices are gestures that defy translation, throw sense off track and thus short-circuit the system through which sense is made” (Biesecker in Phillips, 331). Foucault himself shows that “when an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement (...) we are facing what can be called a state of domination” (Foucault in Phillips, 336). However, he states:

a contradiction, far from being an appearance or accident of discourse, far from being that from which it must be freed if its truth is at last to be revealed, constitutes the very law of its existence: it is on the basis of such a contradiction that discourse emerges, and it is in order both to translate it and to overcome it that discourse begins to speak; it is in order to escape that contradiction, whereas contradiction is ceaselessly reborn through discourse, that discourse endlessly pursues itself and endlessly begins again, it is because contradiction is always anterior to the discourse, and because it can never therefore entirely escape it, that discourse changes, undergoes transformation, and escapes itself from its own continuity. Contradiction, then, functions throughout discourse, as the principle of its historicity” (Foucault, 2002, 168)

In other words, the encounter of an *Other* challenges the continuity of the discourse, causes contradiction to be born and allows for empowerment as “denial of reversibility” (Phillips, 336).

This Foucauldian articulation of empowerment is, to my mind, in line with the Native American trickster discourse, as it exists in pan-Indian oral tradition and as it is identifiable in Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. Gerald Vizenor

describes the tribal trickster as “the shape-changer” and “limit challenger”, “a liberator and a healer” (187), therefore trickster discourse would be a space of invention, where liberation can be imagined.

In *Love Medicine*, trickster behavior can be identified in most characters. June Kashpaw is described as a “child of the Manitous, invisible ones who live in the woods” (65), she very narrowly escapes death when being hanged during a childhood game and afterwards she claims that she was not afraid, she performs an out-of-skin transformation in the bathroom before going out with white engineer Andy, and when she manages to get off his car, she falls in the snow and has “a shock like being born” (6). Lipsha Morrissey, Lulu Lamartine and Marie Kashpaw have unusual powers: Lipsha has “the touch” (190) – the healing gift, Lulu has her “wild and secret ways” (216), Marie senses things “in the scar of her hand” and “from her household appliances” (198). Gerry Nanapush, Lulu’s son and Lipsha’s father, is described as “light on his feet and powerful”. He becomes, at the same time, “a natural criminal and a hero” (84-85). Although fat, he manages to hide in small places, escaping prison repeatedly. He boasts “that no steel and concrete shitbarn can hold a Chippewa, and he had eel-like properties in spite of his enormous size” (145); his baby daughter does not “register at all” (171) on the weighing scales.

Barbara Pittman notes that [t]he majority of “places” in *Love Medicine* are “institutional – school, church, reservation, prison.” (Pittman, 784) I believe that all these spaces in which the characters in the novel intersect their “autobiographies” can be read as heterotopias, sites that “seem familiar, yet they are unfamiliar in that they simultaneously contradict the premises by which these relationships are sustained” (Manning, 1). While Foucault claims repeatedly, in “Of Other Spaces”, that he is discussing heterotopia in Western culture, he also mentions: “Its first principle is that there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias.”

As a young girl, Marie Kashpaw, one of the autobiographical narrators in *Love Medicine*, goes to convent and wants to become a nun in order to escape the reservation and become “successful” by the standards of dominant white culture. A cross-blood, her skin looks lighter than the Indians’ and she takes pride in that. The nuns “(...) 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. But they’d have me. And I’d be carved in pure gold” (43). The convent displays the features of a heterotopia, “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate [its] location in reality” (“Of Other Spaces”): “It was at the end of the world to some. Where the maps stopped. Where God had only half a hand in the creation. Where the Dark One had put in thick bush, liquor, wild dogs and Indians” (45). It is a “crisis heterotopia”, at the same time a “privileged”, “sacred”, and “forbidden” place (“Of Other Spaces”), where

Marie will live her crisis of identification. She goes there in pursuit of identification with the Holy Virgin, the symbol of redeemed femininity. Her conflict with Sister Leopolda, who is actually her biological mother (as we find out from *Tracks*, another novel concerned with the same families) results in the nun impressing her hand with a fork. Getting the stigmata puts Marie in an ambivalent position: although worshipped by the other nuns as a God's chosen – which, in mainstream culture, should grant her the successful identity for which she had striven – that thing is also a lie. It is not the result of Christian spiritual quest, but of physical confrontation. Marie realizes this and leaves the convent:

“[...] there was no heart in it. [...] Rise up! I thought. Rise up and walk! There is no limit to this dust!” (60) What happens is, as Foucault explains, “I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am” (“Of Other Spaces”); the convent experience functions, for Marie, as a heterotopia of the mirror. The empowerment she searches, however, is not complete, as she returns to the reservation and still seeks individual success similar to a white woman's of her time, that is, through her husband: “I had decided to make him into something big on this reservation” (89). However, Marie is finally able to reconstruct her identity by getting involved in relationships with her fellow community members, mixing her life story with theirs – she takes in and raises abandoned kids – an Indian cultural habit, and intersects intimately with Lulu Lamartine, for whom Marie's husband wants to leave her. In the end, in the senior citizens' home (another heterotopia), she becomes friends with Lulu and they mourn together for Nector, Marie's husband. She has regained a sense of herself: “I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ended up the wife of the chairman of the Chippewa Tribe. I'd still be Marie. Marie. Start of the sea!” (165)

Lulu Lamartine, another “autobiographer” in *Love Medicine*, is “presented as an earth goddess figure”, an Indian truthful to the old ways, not in the sense of authenticity as defined by colonial culture – sticking to a lost past – but in the sense of keeping her balance through relationality with the cosmic community: “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 the waterfalls. Then I'd open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and I'd let everything inside” (276). She intersects her life with other life stories on the reservation by having love affairs with many men and giving birth to many sons. Her exuberant sexuality is in close connection with nature; she confesses that she accepted men “just for being part of the world” (277). As a young girl, Lulu is taken away from the reservation and taken to the government school. The school is a heterotopia of crisis, and it does function as a mirror for Lulu in her encounter with the white culture that seeks to absorb her and instill her with a sense of running her life “on white time” (71). The brutal separation from her mother, one of the most

enigmatic shamanic figures in the Native American novel, and the encounter with the colonial culture cause Lulu to “cry all the tears she would ever cry in her life” (280-81). Lulu confesses that “I never grew from the curve of my mother’s arms. I still wanted to anchor myself against her. But she had torn herself away from the run of my life like a riverbank” (68). Lulu’s moment of identity reconstruction takes place on Moses’ island. The island is a heterotopia, a microcosm and a space invested with sacred features, which requires a rite of entering – careful preparation, travel by boat over the lake’s water for purification and offering a gift of nickels and potatoes to the island’s landlord. He himself, her cousin and her closest relation to her mother, which is important, is described as “too handsome to be real, constructed by the Manitous” (spirits of the woods). From this encounter, described in sublimated sexual terms, divested of all corporality, Lulu emerges: “I was not immune, and I would not leave undamaged. To this day, I still hurt. I must have rolled in the beds of wild rose, for the tiny thorns (...) pierced my skin. Their poison is desire and it dissolved in my blood” (82). However, my reading is that this desire has nothing to do with the sexual realm, but is a desire of getting reunited with what Paula Gunn Allen calls the *creatrix*, the cosmic power of rebirth. Indeed, Lulu and her house together constitute such a site of resistance: when her house is burned down, accidentally, but conveniently for those who want to use her land for building a factory to manufacture plastic beads, Lulu refuses to move, and when she finally does, she establishes at the new location what she calls the “Lamartine homesite”, a site of identity reclaiming, in a way consistent with the Indian relationship with land as part of the relational chain. It is in connection with her that Nector Kashpaw, Beverly Lamartine and Lipsha Morrisey have their moments of understanding of their unbalanced identity.

Nector Kashpaw, Marie’s husband and tribal chairman, and also Lulu’s lover, another “autobiographer” in *Love Medicine*, is an Indian who knows “white reading and writing” (17), that is the white cultural code, but he fails to construct an identity and, in the old age, he loses his memory: he remembers “dates with no events to go with them, names without faces, things that happened out of place and time” (18). He fails to have a story, but he is redeemed after death, when his spirit returns to Marie, to participate in the family’s life together.

Two other characters in *Love Medicine* are important: June Kashpaw and her son Lipsha Morrisey. Although June is not one of the narrators, and actually the novel starts with her death, her story is a catalyst for all the others, all somehow in connection with her or with her son Lipsha. While the mother opens the story cycle, the son closes it and makes a new beginning possible. Between them, there’s the winding road, in and out of the reservation, which is itself a

heterotopia. Though the reservation does have a precise location, it is at the same time here, there and nowhere. Its borders grant its quality as a site of inclusion and exclusion at the same time.

The novel opens with June leaving the city, a space where she couldn't achieve individual success and ended up "aged hard" (1), like no rebirth is possible. In the bar at the bus station, another heterotopia, she has a trickster-like out-of-skin transformation: "She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked – only the skins were stiff and old" (4) She decides to return to the reservation traveling off the road, "feeling" the land by instinct, like old-time Indians: "It was exactly as if she were walking back to Uncle Eli's warm (...) kitchen. (...) The snow felt deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home". (6-7) She does not return home in person, as she dies in the snow storm, but she does in spirit, and through her son Lipsha. Like her, Lipsha travels in and out of the reservation trying to find out who his parents are.

Lipsha is another trickster character, he has "the touch", the gift of healing. He loses it temporarily, when he cheats in making the right love medicine for his grandmother Marie to gain her husband back from Lulu: "I took an evil shortcut. (...) I finally convinced myself that the actual power to the love medicine was not the goose heart itself, but the faith in the cure. I didn't believe it, I knew it was wrong..." (245-46). This medicine is, I think, another heterotopia, as healing is important in both cultures, but Lipsha's medicine is at the same time real and not real (superstition), and it also functions as a mirror, forcing him to "come back toward [him]self" ("Of Other Spaces"). Having cheated on the Indian ways when he bought ingredients for the medicine from a supermarket, Lipsha feels compelled to "get down to the bottom of [his] heritage" (342), to find out who his parents are and link together the "threads of power" (341). He finds out from Lulu that Gerry Nanapush, the "criminal and the hero" is his father, and he helps him cross the border to escape into Canada. After that, he gets in the car – June's car – one bought with her life insurance money, and drives over a bridge toward the reservation: "So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home" (367)

All these "transportation sites" – the road, the car, the bridge - are heterotopias. While at the opening of the story cycle they could be understood as sites of disempowerment (the car is something connected to Western civilization par excellence, the road led predominantly out of the reservation, while the bridge, as a kind of border, marked it as a space of exclusion), in the end they become sites of empowerment.

Between these points, and connecting them, the story made of intersecting histories unfolds; histories assemble as the narrating autobiographical selves get

coherence while narrating and performing as subjects. While the story has no place of its own, but allows, in the textual space, for an “imagined community” (Anderson) modeled like a “non-oppressive city” (Young in Pratt, 41), storytelling functions as utopia.

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