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Windigo Ways: Eating and Excess in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*

JULIE THARP

The cautionary figure of windigo has lurked at the edges of Louise Erdrich's writing since her first collection of poems in 1984. In *The Antelope Wife* it finally emerges into full view. A windigo is defined as a cannibalistic monster set loose by human greed, envy, and jealousy.¹ Traditional Ojibwe windigo stories usually focus on the starving time of winter when food is in short supply and anyone taking more than their share effectively eats into the bodies of those around them. These cautionary tales strive to impress upon their listeners the absolute need for balance and self-restraint in human relations, as in human interaction with the natural world. Once the windigo is set loose, it might devour anyone and everyone, including the one who gave it life. In order to conquer the windigo, the protagonist in the tale frequently must take the form of a windigo in order to do battle with it. Family or friends stand prepared to restore the protagonist to normal, by making him drink boiling hot fat to melt his icy heart. Windigo behavior can become a source of power if used sparingly and with the assistance of those who can restore one's proper self. If not, it is a curse that can affect multiple generations.

Erdrich's use of Ojibwe stories and symbols has attracted critical attention from the first.² Most scholarly work in this area has focused on three main tasks. One task has been to examine the ways in which these stories enrich her novels, providing layers of narrative that ripple outward. Another task has been to look at how Ojibwe culture complicates the lives and identities of Erdrich's characters. Still another has been to unearth the ways in which the stories and symbols orient readers to Ojibwe worldviews. Much of this scholarship seems to focus on tracking the sources of Erdrich's Ojibwe content and on interpreting this content in light of contemporary narrative. Two essays in particular, Jean Strandness' "When the Windigo Swept Across the Plains" and Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak's "When the Grandfather Ate His Own Wife: Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* as a Contemporary Windigo Narrative," establish precedence for looking at the role of windigo. Strandness addresses the

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ways in which Sister Leopolda functions as a kind of windigo and Mermann-Jozwiak examines the added chapters to the second edition of *Love Medicine*, which, she argues, develop Lulu Nanapush as a windigo character.³

This study explores the use of the traditional windigo tale in *The Antelope Wife*, in which Erdrich provides a strong case for the relevance of Ojibwe philosophy to present-day mainstream U.S. culture. The central theme of eating and food, the setting of Gakahbekong or modern-day Minneapolis, and the presence of windigo characters, all contribute to a meditation on the social ills of overconsumption. Eating takes on various permutations within the novel, including ordinary everyday meals, excessive feasting, nursing, binge eating, alcoholism, cannibalism, and a more figurative sexual devouring. Erdrich further implies the eating of Ojibwe culture itself, as embodied in the antelope wife of the title and in her cousins, Mary, Zosie, and Rozin. Eating crosses the line into windigo behavior when it is carried to a selfish excess that literally and figuratively eats into the well-being of family and community members, and ultimately into the well-being of the earth itself.

The antelope wives of the novel descend from the character Blue Prairie Woman, who as a girl becomes one of the deer people by living with them and taking one for a husband.⁴ The tribal protectiveness toward her descendants, Sweetheart Calico and her daughters, the tribal acceptance of the women's relationship to the antelope, and Sweetheart Calico's complete inability to understand or adapt to urban life indicate her and her daughters' connection to traditional Native culture. Along with Zosie and Mary, Rozin, and Cally, they all need to learn to disentangle themselves from the windigo spirits around them. Failing that, they must become part windigo themselves. Although the original windigo denotes only an "ice spirit of awful hunger," the novel most often associates it with male-dominant, urban, material, non-Ojibwe life.⁵ Consistent with the tradition that windigos can even lead to their own demise, these contemporary ice spirits would devour Ojibwe mythology and culture in the form of the antelope wives. As such, the women's survival is crucial not just to themselves, but to the survival of Ojibwe culture as well.

The novel begins with a U.S. cavalry attack on a sleeping village, revealing the windigo roots of modern U.S. history, in which one group of people very nearly destroys the other. According to Kari J. Winter, Erdrich's novels use food, among other things, as a means to affirm life in the face of "colonialist deprivation and denial."⁶ By tracing the origins of her windigo tale to a nineteenth-century military attack, Erdrich frames the past 130 years or so as the time span under consideration. For the Central Plains tribes, this was the period of defeat, containment, and acculturation. In 1862 the federal government's failure to supply starving Dakota Sioux of the Red River Valley with promised rations led to the Dakota Uprising in southern Minnesota.⁷ Subsequent military efforts to contain the Dakota often led to violence against neighboring Ojibwe as well. Greed, fear, and desire for control motivated U.S. attacks on Plains Indians of the era. Although Erdrich bases her scene on the Sand Creek Massacre of the Cheyenne, it could describe any number of military aggressions against Indian people. Erdrich narrows her focus to the interpersonal contact between victim and aggressor when a

female elder heroically protects nearby children by throwing herself into the path of cavalry soldier Scranton Roy's bayonet. Roy is horrified. Looking into her eyes, he suddenly sees his mother and stumbles away from the village, sickened, only to sight a baby that a mother has strapped to a dog and sent running from the camp. Roy follows the dog for days, unaccountably obsessed with saving the child. After finding the baby, Roy offers his breast in a final effort to calm her screaming. In this scene, Erdrich simultaneously depicts the early origins of greed and creates a favorite character type of hers, the nurturing male.⁸ The baby sucks hard for days before being rewarded with milk.⁹

The opening chapter provides several of the major threads running through the novel. We learn of the human urge to conquer and subdue the "other," balanced by the equally human urge to sacrifice one's self for the life of another. Both urges can be depicted through the trope of eating or being eaten. The grandmother offers up her body in exchange for those of the children. The mother and the adopted father become direct sources of food for the child. The land, whether used for hunting, gathering, or farming, translates into food supply for the competing groups, Indian and white. When the baby goes missing for many years, her mother, Blue Prairie Woman, even takes to eating clay, soil, and leaves in her grief. The puppy she nurses, to take away the pain of her full breasts, later becomes food for the discovered daughter. The notion of balance plays an important role in these early scenes. Balance remains a significant Ojibwe value, which helps to explain why windigo behavior is so objectionable.¹⁰ It upsets the balanced whole of the family, the community, and the creation. As the grandmother dies, she groans the word "*Daashkikaa*" (4). Translated as "cracked apart" at the end of the novel when Cally has a sudden vision of the word, it signals the state of the world, a state that might only be starting to heal more than one hundred years and four generations later.

Before visiting the specific scenes of windigo stories and characters, we can look at the scenes of ordinary, everyday eating. The references to food in the novel are so many and so rich that it would be difficult to discuss them all. One commonality, however, is that they already border on excess. A large portion of the novel takes place, after all, in an urban bakery with its "Jacuzzi-sized deep fryer full of boiling fat" (119). Cally muses:

All day people stagger in from the kung fu studio next door, exhausted from Cecille's workouts, craving butterfat icing and reflex-slowing caramel-fudge fritters. They have to touch the cases where these things are displayed on doilies. They press close to the delectables, breathe, smudge, cough the air full of predatory microorganisms. I can see their instant relief, too, after they have paid. Opening the crinkly white bag, exposing sweet deep-fried dough, biting into the spot on the powdered bismark that holds the squirt of cherry jelly, they sometimes give out a small involuntary moan of intense pleasure. (119)

The bakery offers an antidote to contemporary workout culture, which literally eats away at the body. The bakery provides a place where various characters come for shelter, for warm, sweet food, and simply for connection to others in the community. The pastries are comfort food, but they are also fattening and indulgent—the city version of reservation frybread—and a steady diet of either plays a significant role in problems with obesity.¹¹ More important, the bakery has the potential for neutralizing the windigo. Victor Barnouw reported that in traditional windigo stories, to return a windigo to human form, he “must drink great quantities of piping hot tallow” (120). A “Jacuzzi-sized deep fryer of boiling fat” might be just the thing. For those suffering only a little, surely “deep-fried dough” would suffice.

The Indian families of the novel have rapidly progressed in their ready access to adequate food. This relative progress has, however, created substantial changes within their cultures, as they shift their eating patterns and choices. Early in the novel, we are given a basis for comparison in the descriptions of Scranton Roy’s efforts to feed his small family. After building shelter in the form of a sod hut, he managed “to bring down a buffalo bull fat-loaded with the summer grass. He fleshed the hide, dried the meat, seared the brains, stored the pounded fat and berries in the gut, made use of every bone and scrap of flesh, even carving the horns into spoons and tossing the eyeballs to the dog. The tongue, cooked tender and mashed in his own mouth, he coaxed the baby to accept” (7). As *Blue Prairie Woman* does, Roy must take meticulous care to kill a large animal and go through the often-gruesome process of turning it into serviceable household goods and edible dishes. Nothing goes to waste. As a girl, Matilda has to hunt for the eggs laid by their sly guinea fowl. She and Roy eat “fried strips of late squash, dried sand-dune morels, inky caps, field and oyster mushrooms, crushed acorns, the guinea eggs . . . sweet bannock, dribbled on it wild aster honey” (9). All of the foods are grown or gathered wild from the surrounding woods and prairie. All must be shelled, peeled, cleaned, ground, pounded, or clarified. Patience, work, and cleverness go into the process before the items ever achieve food status. The satisfaction gained from this fare derives partly from the effort that goes into it, but also from the consumer’s connection to the authentic foodstuff of nature. Erdrich does not appear to be romanticizing the hard work and scarcity of earlier times, but rather emphasizing a holistic approach to food: “We are people of simple food straight from the earthen earth and from the lakes and from the woods” (138).

With the challenges of similarly grueling food production, the community of a young *Blue Prairie Woman* forces her out on her own because she has a “tremendous appetite. . . . *I’ve been watching this girl*. Maybe she’s a windigo” (9). In the woods, she hunts, gathers, cooks, and eats, eventually living with the deer and learning their language. Self-discipline is expected of community members. Those unwilling to control their appetites are driven out.

Many years later, food production and consumption have drastically shifted on the reservation where Almost Soup gets his name. Forced to live largely on government rations and the limited local game, the tribe undergoes yet another shift in culinary habits with the introduction of other cultures.

Puppies were never afforded the status of family pet in Sioux households, but they would not have been considered a major source of meat if adequate food had been readily available. The grandmother decides to make the puppy "stretch" to feed all of the family. This scene does mark the assertion of traditional food ways, but the young, urban Cally intervenes on the dog's behalf, thus changing the menu. This one attempt to spare an assimilated child's feelings could in fact erase longstanding patterns of traditional consumption.

In contrast to the depiction of traditional food production, Erdrich provides a number of references to corporate food culture in the novel. Characterized by processed goods, high fat content, and loud packaging, contemporary eating is nearly effortless, usually excessive, and ultimately unsatisfying. Rozin works as a checker at the "big discount food warehouse," a veritable shrine to food excess and certainly symbolic of the American tendency to purchase and hoard food in large amounts. Cally and Cecille order Happy Meals from McDonald's. Klaus taunts Richard with the memory of buying Cheeseburger Happy Meals for the now deceased Deanna (who has died due to Richard's own carelessness). Given that the emphasis lies more on "fast" than on "food," McDonald's, too, verges on greed in its outlook, exemplifying the instant gratification mentality of contemporary mainstream culture. The speed and the toy inside provide any fleeting happiness. Snow cones, an insubstantial concoction of ice and sugar water, are sold at the powwows. Erdrich even manages to work in such mundane items as Cheezit crackers and "thirstbuster cup holders" to reinforce the availability, excess, and artificiality of commercial food culture. These "foods" are widely divorced from any traditional Native American diet, contribute to many health problems, including a high rate of diabetes, and emphasize quick hunger fixes that lack the holistic nourishment of the body and soul available to those who produce what they eat.

All of these corporate examples share a distance from the process of growing and preparing food. Winter notes, "Capitalism mystifies the labor of food, while patriarchy relegates it to women and renders 'women's work' invisible."¹² Once characters have become aloof from the real, elemental experience of food, it begins to take on identities and connotations increasingly separate from any authentic need.¹³ The horrific contrast between a "happy meal" and a dead child provides one example of distancing. On a less dramatic level, however, snow cones, the thirstbuster cup, and the Cheezit crackers hype a world of food fun that is less and less capable of feeding the characters in any meaningful way. Like Klaus and Richard, the contemporary characters exhibit a hunger that cannot be fed by contemporary mainstream American means. Efforts to feed that hunger with more of the same only result in excess, not in genuine satiety. Little more need be done in order to create an entire culture of windigos, desperate to appease their hunger but completely ignorant of the means to do it.

In the last third of the novel, Erdrich includes scenes from three family/community gatherings that stand in contrast to the corporate vision of food, but still maintain the notion of excess. These feasts still run the risk of producing windigo behavior, may even function as sanctified windigo events.

The feast prepared for Frank and Rozin's wedding is chaotic and immoderate, with moose in the cooking pit, fish dunked in beer batter and fried, deer sausages, ambrosia, wild rice and onion, wild rice with shredded ham, macaroni, exotic fruits, six types of potato salad, frybread, Marshmallow Krispy bars, fudge, and the blitzkuchen (170–171). Here such traditional Ojibwe foods as wild rice, frybread, fish, and deer meat join with commercialized Krispy bars and the German blitzkuchen, resulting in a multiethnic blend that reflects the changing faces of the families and of tribal culture.¹⁴ This blend is generally depicted in a matter-of-fact manner, as when the original Klaus is adopted into the tribe. The ability to adopt outside influences selectively, however, could help retain the principles behind the original choices.

The second feast is the Christmas dinner that Cally helps to prepare. Like many holiday meals, it far exceeds actual need in its inclusion of casseroles, two kinds of stuffing, rhubarb desert, mashed potatoes, cranberries, turkey, pies, coffee, and hot cider. The scene portrays the traditional U.S. holiday dinner, suggesting a more assimilationist perspective than that of the wedding feast. The large family also exceeds the space in the tiny apartment where the meal takes place. Finally, we have the surprise anniversary party where Rozin presents her nearly naked self as a delectable dish while Frank concentrates on providing music, dancing, Kool-aid, pastries, cake and barbecue. In all three examples, the individuals have adapted mainstream culture to their own visions, but have also maintained the notion of food as interconnection, a means of cementing relationships within the community, the family, and even between spouses.

All of these scenes also reinforce how food provides a sense of event: a celebration of the holiday and of one another. The very excess that exists on these occasions marks them, as they do in perhaps every culture on earth. In a world with giant discount food warehouse, bakeries and happy meals, however, excess already exists every day. We can see the family's consciousness of this fact in passages like the one at Christmas when Chook turns "windigo boy" and threatens to eat Elena. The underlying discomfort with such excess suggests an awareness that within mainstream culture we are all in imminent danger of becoming windigos, if we have not already become one. The only exception might lie within the act of cooking, often communally, for these events. For instance, all of the characters at the Christmas feast have contributed dishes of their own, made from scratch, thus coming closer to an ideally satisfying experience. Everyone has contributed, using their ingenuity, time, and hands to create the best dish they know how to make, thus balancing somewhat the act of stuffing themselves.

The best image for perfect satisfaction, however, is in the face of the infant Matilda who, after suckling Roy for days, finally fills with milk. He wakes to "a huge burp from the baby, whose lips curled back from her dark gums in bliss, whose tiny fists were unclenched in sleep for the first time, who looked, impossibly, well fed" (7). Erdrich, who has four children, is no doubt familiar with this image. She invites us here to consider the source of genuine satisfaction in the infant as being not just the milk, but also the physical connection between the two: the fact that the baby has had to work for her food, and

the eating from or partaking of the loved object, in a way that does not harm him. In fact Roy feels a "pleasurable burning" when the milk lets down (7). A nursing parent is relieved of building pressure in feeding the child. It might also be the natural, needed eating of the loved object that provides individuals with an ideal for nourishment, both physical and emotional. The inability to achieve the ideal might be at the base of many excessive endeavors to feed one's hungers.¹⁵ Erdrich reminds us of the primal connection between love and food. The actual eating from the loved one is natural and central to our first experiences.¹⁶

Erdrich also envisions food as a powerful means of connecting diverse people. Examples abound in the novel. If the need to eat can create such a strong connection between Matilda and Scranton Roy, two very dissimilar people, we know from the beginning of the novel that food will play a crucial role in bridging differences. The wedding feast provides another example in which the large and varied Ojibwe clans are brought together with "at least one sub-Saharan African and an exchange student from Brazil," bridging global differences (167). The eating of the blitzkuchen (under the right circumstances) can even bridge the gulf between the living and the dead as "the ones who had gone on before, the dead, even they came back for a little taste" (179). The living can see "shadows of loved ones who went before."¹⁷

Although Frank Shawano is most often cast in the role of the one who brings people together through food, women in Ojibwe culture (as in most cultures) usually occupy this role. Erdrich's insight into the way that food bridges gulfs comes more from the realm of female, especially motherly, experience. Many cooks inhabit the pages of *The Antelope Wife*. Blue Prairie Woman cooks her faithful dog to save her daughter. Rozin cooks for the dead spirits of Deanna and Richard. Cally, Cecille, Zosie, Mary, and Rozin all contribute dishes to the Christmas dinner. Even the young twins, Cally and Deanna, feed imaginary "seaweed marshmallows" to their mother. In fact, Scranton Roy, Klaus (the German baker), and Frank stand out precisely because they defy the stereotype of female nurturance.

Characters are not only feeders and eaters. Erdrich insists that we see the ways in which people, not only the lactating, are themselves eaten. She frequently describes characters in the language of food. For example, Miss Peace McKnight is "full-breasted as a pouter pigeon, and dusted all over like an egg with freckles" (8). Lest we miss the implication, on the facing page we have Matilda chasing fowls for their eggs. Klaus Shawano acquires his "antelope wife" by learning "to hunt" her in "an open spot," bribing her daughters with food, and slipping her "a sleep tea, a love tea" (27-29). Erdrich also asks us to consider humans in the larger scheme of things when Klaus considers Richard, now a slovenly, self-pitying alcoholic: "It made me think of the food chain and wonder why this guy deserved to be at the top of it? Theoretically, he could devour whatever grazed, pecked, crawled, rooted over earth, or swam in the sea. And what had he ever done to earn such status?" (155). In fact, the only sustained threats to the contemporary human position in the food chain come from other humans and microorganisms. Frank Shawano has suffered and survived cancer: being eaten at the cellular level. The proof

that part of him has been devoured lies in the loss of his sense of humor. Cally describes her twin grandmas as survivors of the flu epidemic, “unconquered, too, by tuberculosis, fleas, dogbites, wormy rabbit meat, and the bitter cold of the winters of their childhood,” the more common predators on Ojibwes of their generation (197).

In this world of excessive consumption, of struggle to remain on top of the food chain, two characters find themselves at a new twist in the road of Indian life. Klaus and Richard work as sanitation engineers. Klaus remarks: “Used to be us Indians had nothing to throw away—we used it all up to the last scrap. Now we have a lot of casino trash of course, and used diapers, disposable and yet eternal, like the rest of the country. . . . We’re now the first Native-owned waste disposal company in the whole U.S. and proud of it” (44). Erdrich draws attention here to the shift in Indian fortunes, both for good and bad, and deals a deathblow to the environmentalist romantic fantasy about Native Americans. They now have excess: more than enough stuff to throw away. Both casinos and disposable diapers, and the affluence that accompanies them, are relatively new developments that mark a departure from the traditional values of living in balance with the earth. The irony of this material excess is that it is both “disposable and yet eternal.” Only sanitation workers and those concerned with the environmental crisis recognize the lie in “disposable” and might become cynical because of it.

Significantly, these managers of human excess, Klaus and Richard, serve as cautionary characters, as windigos. They are selfishly obsessed with two women. Klaus more or less imprisons Sweetheart Calico, first drugging and kidnapping her, keeping her tied up in a motel room, and then holding her in his apartment. An antelope woman, she sometimes lopes wildly around the city, but cannot find her own way back to the plains. Klaus’ greed sets loose a windigo spirit. The first signs reside in Sweetheart Calico’s huge appetite:

She starts to eat and eat and puffs up before my eyes. . . . She’s so fantastically plump I can’t bear it all, her breasts round and pointed, and that night I drown, I go down in the depth of her. I’m lost as I never was and next morning, next afternoon, she drags me back into bed. I can’t stop although I’m exhausted. She keeps on and she keeps on. Day after day. Until I know she is trying to kill me. (32)

Erdrich makes an explicit connection between physical and sexual hunger: a devouring force beyond either character’s apparent control. Jimmy Badger also reports that the luck of Sweetheart Calico’s hometown has changed. Her loss has thrown their community out of balance, created hardship. Jimmy begs Klaus to return her, but Klaus answers in a puzzling way, saying that he’s “just a city boy” who doesn’t understand what “you people” do on the plains (35).

Klaus’ response only makes sense if we draw the connection between city living and self-centered behavior. Paradoxically, the material wealth of the city blinds Klaus. When Sweetheart Calico finally speaks at the end of the novel, she says, “I’m drowning in stuff here in Gakahbekong. In so many acres of fruit. In warehouse upon warehouse of tools, Sheetrock nails, air

conditioners, and implements of every type and domestic and imported fabrics, and in the supermarkets and fish from the seven seas and slabs of fat-marbled flesh" (219). As the purest expression of traditional Indian culture, Sweetheart Calico provides a critique of the excess of mainstream material culture. In Indian country, on the plains, Klaus says, "there are no trees, no woods, no place to hide except the distances. You can see too much" (35). In the absence of "stuff," an individual cannot hide from himself or from the morality his culture has taught. Gakahbekong creates a set of illusions, "where you can hide from the great sky" (25). Those illusions do not, however, save Klaus from a judgment more associated with the Plains' circular value system.

Richard is just as greedy in his love of Rozin, who imagines him a bear: "His love was deep clawed, hungry. . . . He kissed her, put his muscular tongue in her mouth, searching for the honey. But then he stung her with his lips, raked at her breasts" (58). "His desperate love" has driven her away nearly from the start of their marriage" (181). Rozin explains that Richard's excessive hunger and drastic mood swings drove her into a relationship with another man—who, significantly, is first depicted feeding Rozin "bits of a cinnamon roll from his bare fingers" (37). Her lover, Frank, nurtures Rozin and simultaneously exposes his fingers to the risk of her teeth. He is the reverse of Richard. Rozin has tried to leave Richard three times. "Twice he had threatened, cajoled, persuaded, and horrified her into staying"; and when she insists that she wants to leave the last time, "He raises his eyes to change her mind, to see for himself another truth, but she's been to therapy, he thinks, and some fucking pseudoshrink has put these cold lines in her mouth" (62). Richard has essentially been holding Rozin against her will through psychological manipulation, while Klaus has been physically detaining Sweetheart Calico. The narrator reveals the ruthlessness and obsessiveness of Richard's thinking when he ponders, "If I get ill . . . deadly ill, will she come back to me? How about when Shawano finally dies? Then?" (64). Richard tries to commit suicide on three occasions, a selfish action calculated to inflict pain and guilt on Rozin: "He is comforted by the thought that once he is gone and later, when Frank dies, she will be lonely" (70). Intending to control Rozin's life in some hurtful way, Richard conducts his later suicide attempt and his final actual suicide in full view of her.

The selfishness of Richard's actions has figuratively loosed the windigo in his life as well. His marriage is one casualty. His friendship with Klaus is another when, through his greed, Richard takes payoffs to dump toxic waste, then lets Klaus take the blame. Deanna dies as an indirect result of his selfish actions, when she crawls into the cab of the pickup truck while it idles in the garage. Eventually Richard becomes a direct victim, as he is reduced to a homeless alcoholic lost in a world of illusions and self-pity. At this point, the windigo dog appears and attaches himself to Richard's side. Richard's self-pity and spite eventually lead to his killing himself on Rozin and Frank's wedding night in the hall outside their hotel room.

The very name he bears places Richard at the center of the struggle between cultures. The beads given by Augustus Roy for the hand of Zosie are "sewn onto a blanket she was making for a woman expecting a child . . . [who]

was named for the decoration it loved, Whiteheart Beads. That name went on until Richard ended up with it" (240). Whiteheart beads are highly valued for traditional beading patterns. The Anglo name of Richard suggests a bicultural identity, but in fact even the beads derive from mainstream U.S. culture.

Although Erdrich offers no specific explanation for Richard's behavior, she blames historical greed for triggering the larger scheme of things. As a product of the city and reservation corruption, Richard typifies the larger harm done to Native people through their assimilation into European-American culture. For instance traditional Ojibwe culture treated the dissolution of marriage very casually, demanding, for instance, only that one spouse set the other's belongings on the ground outside the lodge to indicate divorce.¹⁸ It was accepted as natural and normal in the course of life to move on to a new life or identity, just as the people find a new name for Blue Prairie Woman when life's events make her unable to be her old self any longer. Assimilation into a patriarchal, capitalist culture has shifted the social fabric from one of nurturance and flexibility, as depicted in Blue Prairie Woman's fluid relationship with her Shawano husband, to one of ownership and rigidity, as depicted in Rozin and Richard's marriage.¹⁹

Although Richard represents an irredeemable loss in the novel, Erdrich offers the reader a positive role model for recovery. Klaus, helped by a humorous windigo dog who only mocks at devouring him, eventually finds the balance he has lost. When a "powerful stray dog" sacrifices his life to save Klaus from the lawn mower as he sleeps in the park, he awakens renewed with a "neat bloody crease down the exact middle of Klaus's face" (225). His "sacred center stripe" allows him to divide himself into the part that still wants to possess Sweetheart Calico and the part that must return her to her home. He stops drinking and takes her back in spite of the fact that "the idea of it hurt so bad he momentarily wished that the lawn mower had struck him full on, taken off his head, his thoughts" (226). Although he has lost his love, he has his life back, clean and sober. As some consolation, the family brings Klaus back into the fold. When Richard threatens Rozin's peace of mind during the wedding feast, leading her and trailing guests to a supermarket showdown, Klaus grabs a frozen turkey and brings it down on Richard's head. Klaus helps to reassert balance, ironically through the conversion of processed food into a weapon, thus winning a place within the family circle. Rozin allows Klaus to lead her out of the supermarket, comforting her with nonsense words.²⁰ He has found the ability to nurture.

The other demonstrable windigo behavior in the novel emanates from Zosie and Mary, who must become windigos in order to combat their husband, Augustus. Augustus loves one twin but becomes obsessed with the other as well, alternately sleeping with each. Once the twins understand his duplicity, they willfully enter into the act of deception, trying to keep Augustus from knowing which is which. "Augustus had fallen in love with the enigma of his wife's duplication. The confusion of sameness between the twins made him tremble like an animal caught in a field of tension" (209). His confusion leads to his effort to mark the twins to differentiate between them, in order to control the situation in some small way. In his effort to leave a more permanent

mark, he bites off Zosie's earlobe. Years later, Cecille recounts the story at Christmas time, challenging the twins, "He disappeared, foul play, but the body was never discovered. What did you do? Boil him? Eat him? Grind up his bones to sprinkle on your rhubarb plants? What? Who took the first bite?" (212). Mary's whisper into Zosie's ear, "He did," more or less admits their guilt, as they "spoon the dark juices of the pies into their mouths, eat daintily, and smile their slightly windigo smiles" (212). The grandmothers have never fully returned to human form though, as evidenced both by their "slightly windigo smiles" and their mythic status in the community. Even their granddaughter Cally finds it difficult to pin them down by location or identity. While Jonathan Little argues that Zosie and Mary exact revenge on Augustus for the loss of their mother, it seems more plausible that they were simply pulled along by the spirits of control, jealousy, and possession inherent within the situation of a man living with twin sisters, both of whom love him.²¹

The grandmothers are enigmatic throughout most of the novel. Their power seems to belong to an earlier age. The death of Rozin's and Cally's twins in two successive generations has thrown things out of balance for those characters and robbed them of what they need in order to exert the kind of power that Zosie and Mary have together. Rozin and Cally have had to achieve balance alone, in a modern world completely out of balance with traditional values and beliefs. Cally's discovery of her naming ability coincides with Zosie's lecture on Indians as the "bottom-feeders of white culture" (213). She complains that Indians are "Eating all the fake puffed-up flavors and watching all the cranked-up images and out of our mouth no real humor only laugh tracks." But then Erdrich immediately undercuts this complaint by having her eat a "big bite of unhealthy" cake and smile (214). Thus, there is no easy solution. To go back to the old ways would be nearly impossible and not all that desirable anyway—no blitzkuchen, after all. The challenge is to balance Zosie's criticism with the exigencies of modern life.

Rozin's more immediate challenge is to survive the devastating losses of her twin sister, her daughter, and her ex-husband. Embracing life and pleasure requires a difficult journey into herself, first on the reservation after Deanna's death, and then in her house after Richard's suicide. She begins her second quest for balance by making a huge meal and putting out food for the dead Deanna and Richard. She prepares simple, wholesome food: wild rice, stewed turkey, corn, vanilla pudding, and fruit salad. "Eat it, eat it all up now, she thinks vehemently, heartsick, setting another smaller plate for her daughter at the head of the stairs, then go to sleep" (188). Although longing to hear her daughter again and sick at the loss of Richard, she knows she cannot invite them in or she will go mad.

In the course of her dreaming during the next few days a windigo figure appears to Rozin and beckons her to enter into his body, to be swallowed up by her own selfish grief. She understands him to be the original windigo adopted into the Shawano clan. Rather than wear his skin and so die, Rozin chooses instead to live, which is the only way that Richard can be held safe. When Frank appears beside her during this dreaming time, she "straps him on like body armor. Wears him like shields and breastplates. He has given her

the gift of his big, warm, strong body to hide in from now on as she walks forward into the world” (191). Her figurative wearing of Richard’s and Frank’s skins, the one as a burden and the other as armor, represents a reconciliation with the fact that each man has become a part of her; but in the one case it is life threatening and in the other it is strengthening.

The male characters must resist the windigo spirit within themselves and learn to nurture instead. In counterbalance to Richard and the pre-revelation Klaus, Erdrich gives us Scranton Roy, the German baker Klaus, and Frank Shawano. Erdrich describes all three men almost entirely in their functions as providers or nurturers, with an explicit connection to food. When kidnapped in a plan to avenge a family death, the German prisoner of war displays his nurturing, culinary ingenuity and provides what Jonathan Little has called a “moment of profound spiritual unity.”²² Klaus’s creation of the blitzkuchen provides a vision:

They breathed together. They thought like one person. They had for a long unbending moment the same heartbeat, same blood in their veins, the same taste in their mouth. How, when they were all one being, kill the German? How, in sharing this sweet intensity of life, deny its substance in even their enemies. (139)

Certainly any cook would envy such an epiphanic moment. It inspires Frank to devote his life to baking, as one would commit to a sacred quest. Essentially the vision is one of human unity, a celebration of life and of the free giving of self, not the domination or possession of others. Klaus reveres food as something almost sacred. When offered ripe strawberries for his cake, his eyes “spilled over with tears. ‘Erdbeeren,’ he said softly, with mistaken and genuine sincerity” (135). In the spirit of unity, the Shawano clan adopts Klaus, replacing rather than avenging the dead cousin.

Scranton Roy’s role as nurturer has already been discussed, but his image at the end of the novel adds another dimension. Here, in response to a hundred visions of the elderly Ojibwe woman he has killed, he tries to right the balance. In addition to his young grandson, Roy takes “packhorses laden with grain, with strings of trade beads, hatchets, kettles, string, salt, hominy, wool, molasses, and dried mushrooms” to the woman’s village (238). While Augustus is probably not intended as a gift, he chooses to stay and marry Zosie. Thus a child is given in return for the one taken. The balance is shifting back in the right direction. The novel implicitly demands compensation for the lives taken and the goods lost. As we learn in German Klaus’s case, though, compensation need not be an eye for an eye, but rather may follow the tribal tradition of taking a new family member to replace the one killed, providing reparation, rather than revenge.

Erdrich also establishes Frank’s character as a nurturer, but one who seems to have a larger, if quiet, goal in his actions. Frank makes “Fancy sugar cookies cut into the shapes of carrots, trees, dolphins, stars, moons, dogs, and flowers” (57). He has made a miniature universe of sweets. Cally observes that baking is “Frank’s way of making sense of the world” (115). As possessor of the vat of

boiling fat, he also seeks power over the windigo spirit at large in Gakahbekong. His patience with Rozin after Deanna's death, his willingness to leave her in peace in spite of their great love for one another, and his refusal to leave her when she's haunted by Richard's spite and rage, bespeaks a generosity of spirit and sensitivity not readily apparent in any of the other characters.

Bell hooks' now oft-reprinted essay, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," warns about the eradication of culture through mainstream culture's commodification and consumption of the other.²³ In *The Antelope Wife*, Louise Erdrich alerts us to another potential source of eradication, that of the other, him or herself. In the decontextualization of urban living, her Ojibwe characters often lose their own sense of significance and participate in cannibalizing their own culture and their own people. Hooks concludes that one must not take desire at face value but consider it critically in the way that it can transform people and things into commodities for consumption. In Erdrich's taxonomy, a critical consideration of desire relies on the Ojibwe notion of balance, embodied in the characters who give as well as receive. The eating not just of the other but of one's loved ones and even of one's self denote a failure to achieve balance between desire and self-control. For Erdrich's Ojibwe characters, urban living in mainstream America seriously complicates this task.

In *The Antelope Wife*, the residents of Gakahbekong (modern-day Minneapolis) must find or recreate balance in a place far from home and the traditions that had sustained them. Erdrich's image of the city as a place where the people are scattered "like beads off a necklace and put back together in new patterns, new strings" offers the challenge of making a pattern that can serve people well (220). She invites a more conscious approach to cultural adaptations that will resist the devouring presence of mainstream excess and help people not only to refrain from devouring one another, but to learn to nurture one another as well. While the danger to Native cultures is clear, Erdrich's criticisms apply just as readily to those who loosed the windigo in the first place.

NOTES

1. Sources for the windigo story include *Ojibway Heritage*, by Basil Johnston (New York: Columbia, 1976) and *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales and Their Relation to Chippewa Life*, by Victor Barnouw (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 1993 (reprint).

2. For useful bibliographies of secondary work on Erdrich, see Laura Furlan Szanto, "An Annotated Secondary Bibliography of Louise Erdrich's Recent Fiction: *The Bingo Palace*, *Tales of Burning Love*, and *The Antelope Wife*," *Studies in American Indian Literature* 12, 2 (Summer 2000): 61–90; and Peter Beidler, *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 241–254.

3. Jean Strandness, "When Windigo Spirit Swept Across the Plains," *Midamerica* (1998): 36–49; and Elisabeth Mermann Jozwiak, "When the Grandfather Ate His Own Wife: Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine as Contemporary Windigo Narrative," *North Dakota Quarterly* 64, 4 (1997): 44–54.

4. Erdrich has a very early poem that answers some questions about the antelope wife character, but might raise many others. Her epigraph by Pretty Shield reads: "The antelope are strange people . . . they are beautiful to look at, and yet they are tricky. We do not trust them. They appear and disappear; they are like shadows on the plains. Because of their great beauty, young men sometimes follow the antelope and are lost forever. Even if those foolish ones find themselves and return, they are never again right in their heads." "The Strange People," *That's What She Said*, ed. Rayna Green (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 89. These words are almost identical to the warning that Jimmy Badger issues to Klaus.

5. Louise Erdrich, *The Antelope Wife* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 190. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as the page number enclosed in parentheses.

6. Kari J. Winter, "The Politics and Erotics of Food in Louise Erdrich," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 12, 4 (Winter 2000): 44–64.

7. Ralph Andrist, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (New York: MacMillan, 1964), 27–37.

8. Earlier characters include Liphsa Morrissey, whose care of his grandparents in *Love Medicine* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) and of Jack Mauser's infant son in *Tales of Burning Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) mark him as a nurturer. Nanapush in *Tracks* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) describes his envy of his wife for her ability to give birth and breastfeed. He brings Lulu back from the edge of death in a scene with birthing overtones, then gives her his surname. Eli Kashpaw of *Love Medicine* raises June and keeps her picture on the refrigerator. In *The Beet Queen* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), Eli cares for Russell, who is bound to a wheelchair.

9. Given sufficient stimulation, a significant proportion of the male population can indeed lactate. Jared Diamond, "Father's Milk," *Discover* 16, 2 (February 1995): 82.

10. A variety of sources can confirm this. For one, see Theresa S. Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life-World* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1995), 122 n2.

11. A number of health studies have determined that "Obesity is a particularly important challenge to the health status of Native Americans." B. A. Broussard, "Toward Comprehensive Obesity Prevention Programs in Native-American Communities," *Obesity Research* (September 1997): 289–297. Several researchers speculate that descendants of PaleoIndians might have "thrifty genes," thus making them even more susceptible to the various health problems associated with junk food. M. C. Carey, "Epidemiology of the American Indians' burden and its Likely Genetic Origins," *Hepatology* (October 2002): 781–91; and M. Wendorf, "Diabetes, the Ice-free Corridor, and the PaleoIndian Settlement of North America," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (August 1989): 503–520.

12. Winter, "Politics and Erotics," 59.

13. For a detailed exposé on the industry, values, and culture of fast food, see Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001). Schlosser argues that "No other industry offers, both literally and figuratively, so much insight into the nature of mass consumption" (10).

14. For a different treatment of the subject of American ethnic literature and food, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 77. Wong argues that "many Asian-American writers

use the motif of eating to symbolize a survival-driven act of *assimilation*, with the word *assimilation* reinterpreted; . . . the experts in 'eating bitterness' *assimilate* even the most unpromising material for their own sustenance" (77) (Wong's italics). Wong is interested in characters who eat to "overstuffing" as signifying Asian-American writers' concern over the limits of one's endurance for assimilation.

15. A variety of writers have explored this topic in recent years, most notably Kim Chernin in *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981) and *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity* (New York: Crown, 1985). Becky W. Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: American Women Speak Out on Eating Problems* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and Sara Sceats, *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) are also worthy feminist critiques.

16. Traditional Ojibwe culture was matricentric, organized around a maternal sensibility. Ojibwe windigo stories might warn against taking this conflation of food and love into adulthood, precisely because of the culture's focus on the centrality of early experience. Erdrich, whether raised on these beliefs or not, is certainly sensitive to them as a mother of seven children.

17. Erdrich, 139. I am indebted for this insight to Lee Sze Hwee Lorraine, a student in my American Ethnic Voices class at the National University of Singapore,

18. Ruth Landes describes this in *The Ojibwa Woman* (New York: AMS Press, 1938), 85–104.

19. Several researchers have noted the negative influence of mainstream culture on Indian family dynamics, most recently Lisa M. Poupart in "Crime and Justice in American Indian Communities" *Social Justice* 29, 1–2 (2002): 144–159. "American Indian communities today struggle to cope with devastating social ills that were practically nonexistent in traditional tribal communities before the European invasion. These include startling rates of alcoholism, family violence, incest, sexual assault, and homicide that are similar to and sometimes exceed the rates in white society" (145).

20. A brief discussion of food as weapon ensues, with an anecdote reminiscent of Roald Dahl's short story, "A Lamb to the Slaughter," from *Skin and Other Stories* (New York: Puffin, 2002) (reprint), 22–34.

21. Jonathan Little, "Beading the Multicultural World: Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife* and the Sacred Metaphysic," *Contemporary Literature* 41, 3 (2000): 715.

22. *Ibid.*, 717.

23. bell hooks, "Eating the Other," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 30.

