

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Indianness of Louise Erdrich's The Beet Queen: Latency as Presence

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wp6r68v>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Authors

Walsh, Dennis M.

Braley, Ann

Publication Date

1994-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The Indianness of Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*: Latency as Presence

DENNIS M. WALSH AND ANN BRALEY

Ojibway (Chippewa/Anishnabeg)¹ myth and ceremony in relation to Louise Erdrich's fiction has been the subject of seminal literary study of her works. James McKenzie's tracking of "the traditional Chippewa trickster hero and powerful spirit, Nanabozho," or Nanapush, in Erdrich's *Love Medicine* was written in evident distress at the lack of comprehension by early reviewers. McKenzie concludes,

The pattern of the novel's development in the June-Gerry-Lipsha stories suggests not only the survival but also a renewal of Chippewa culture "in the wake of the catastrophe," as Erdrich so aptly describes the case The novel knows and celebrates the human wealth of each of its separate characters as well as the collective wealth of the Chippewa nation, a culture still present in the face of several centuries of murderous opposition.²

Ann Braley has documented Ojibway myth and ceremony in *Love Medicine* (1984),³ Ojibway Mother Earth characters, a Weendigo (the insatiable one), Odaemin (the culture's first medicine man), Geezhig (a voyager to the Land of the Dead), Sky Woman, widespread water imagery reflecting Ojibway myth, and turtle and deer myth. Moreover, McKenzie and Lydia Schultz

Ann Braley is a technical and public relations writer in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Dennis Walsh is a professor of English and director of composition at Idaho State University, Pocatello.

have written about Erdrich's use of oral storytelling in *Love Medicine*.⁴

Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) allows open season for those hunting Indian elements. Perhaps the fullest treatment is that of Jennifer Sergi, who finds that "(1) [Erdrich] captures the form and purpose of oral storytelling; (2) she includes the contents of Chippewa myth and legend; (3) and she preserves these cultural traditions in a voice that harks back to the old as it creates anew." Besides the Nanapush storyteller, we find "windigos, manitous, burying the dead in trees, dreamcatchers, a Jeesewinini (medicine man), and 'Anishinabe characters, the old gods,' as Nanapush refers to them."⁵

In *The Beet Queen* (1986), because white, Euro-American characters appear to dominate the novel, the connections to Ojibway culture are not as clear as those in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. However, Susan Perez Castillo contends that, in *The Beet Queen*, "we encounter the Reservation more as absence than presence, more as latency than as statement, in contrast to the arid reality of the small town of Argus, North Dakota."⁶ By taking us off the reservation, perhaps Erdrich intends not to show what is present in Argus but what is missing. In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich shows contemporary Ojibway people surviving in and around a dominant white culture. In *Tracks*, she shows the Ojibway's initial loss of land and culture to an increasingly present white culture and the Indians' subsequent struggle to hold on to tradition. But *The Beet Queen*, a darkly comic, ironic, and sometimes fantastic depiction of the off-reservation town of Argus, shows the dominant culture in a way that reflects Ojibway worldview, which is "impossibly everywhere and nowhere all at once" (p. 41).⁷ Erdrich achieves this depiction in several ways: through humor, through an exploration of the significance of "land" and kinship/community, and through Indian characters.

Paula Gunn Allen writes that "[h]umor is widely used by Indians to deal with life. Indian gatherings are marked by laughter and jokes, many directed at the horrors of history, at the continuing impact of colonization, and the biting knowledge that living as an exile in one's own land necessitates."⁸ Erdrich uses humor to criticize a white world encroaching upon an Indian world that (as Castillo suggests) is purposely kept quiet.

Erdrich's use of comic scenes in *The Beet Queen*—many dry and dark, some bawdy, and some slapstick—illustrates the idea of "survival humor," which she delineates in an interview: "Indian

people really have a great sense of humor, and when it's survival humor, you learn to laugh at things . . . It's just a personal way of responding to the world, very different from the stereotype, the stoic, unflinching Indian."⁹ Close readers of both *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* will connect the comedy there with that in *The Beet Queen*. Recall the escapes and sudden appearances of the three-hundred-pound rabbit-trickster, Gerry Nanapush; or recall how his son Lipsha substitutes frozen turkey hearts for wild goose hearts to create the "love medicine" of the title, resulting in the death of Nector Kashpaw, instead of renewal of his love for his wife. In *Tracks*, consider the sexual feats Nanapush instructs Eli to perform with Fleur. Consider Pauline, the novice nun, who wears her shoes on the wrong feet to mortify the flesh, consequently walking like a duck. The same kind of humor is apparent in *The Beet Queen*: the "miracle" Christ face in the ice, Sita's corpse propped up in the meat locker truck during the beet parade, Russell's appearing to die in the parade with the whole town saluting him. Whites are satirized in relation to Indian values, and Indian values and characters are sufficiently present to offer the only other distinctly different set of values.

One way Erdrich creates comedy is to depict a white world devoid of spirituality, meaningful tradition, and ceremony. Missing from *The Beet Queen*, or present only in fractured form, are references to mythical figures and ceremonies that are an essential part of *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. One example is the naming of Dot. Basil Johnston, a linguist and ethnologist, and an Ojibway himself, has shown how the naming ceremony, usually performed by a medicine man, is central in traditional tribal life because "[u]ntil named, a child was without identity."¹⁰ The naming ceremony in *The Beet Queen* is served by Celestine's attempt to maintain this tradition. When she delivers her baby daughter during an Argus blizzard, she feels obligated to name the child Wallacette Darlene, after Wallace Horst Pfef, the man who has helped her. However, Mary gives the baby the colorless white name Dot, further rendering meaningless the naming ceremony.

Other references to traditional religion and ceremonies are missing from *The Beet Queen*. Instead, a parody of religion appears. In *Love Medicine*, Lipsha Morrissey struggles to continue the role of Ojibway medicine man; in *Tracks*, old Nanapush sings the songs, tells the stories, and partakes in ceremony with deliberation and honor. But in *The Beet Queen*, a comic scene describing

the “miracle” in the ice pokes fun at credulous nuns, at the Catholic church, at miracles themselves. What the nuns see as a vision of Christ “as surely as on Veronica’s veil” (p. 40), Mary can only see as resembling her brother Karl, the no-good. To worship the miracle image, “farmers drove for miles to kneel by the cyclone fence outside of Saint Catherine’s school” (p. 40), but Celestine can see only a “smashed spot” (p. 45).

The Ceremony for the Dead appears in disturbed form in *The Beet Queen* as well. Erdrich uses a comical scene to depict the dominant-culture alternative. In *Love Medicine*, the dead June is brought “home” in spirit by her son Lipsha, and in *Tracks*, Nanapush speaks of the importance of the death ceremony. *The Beet Queen*, in contrast, shows Sita’s body propped up first against the bushes by her house, then in the air conditioned meat truck while Celestine and Mary watch the beauty pageant, so they can later get her to the dominant culture viewing “ceremony” at the local funeral home. Russell’s near death, on the other hand, recalls a traditional ceremony. Basil Johnston explains the importance of the Ceremony of the Dead for a fallen warrior: when a warrior dies, “he would enter the Path of Souls, and as a warrior, he would abide with his people and with his kind.”¹¹ Russell starts to die in the middle of a parade as a soldier in the American way, a decorated veteran with medals and scars, somewhat like a warrior in the Ojibway way as well. He finds himself on the Path of Souls, but he is tripping and falling—not making the easy entrance of the Ojibway warrior. His laughing at the circumstances shakes him off the Path, so that, from evidence in *The Bingo Palace* (1994), he does not die at all but becomes a tattoo artist.

Russell enters the Path of Souls in a dreamlike sequence near the novel’s end, calling to mind the importance of dreaming in the Ojibway culture, where dreams are as real as, or more real than, waking life.¹² In *The Beet Queen*, Indian characters embrace this notion. Russell “dreams” as he enters the Path of Souls. Celestine dreams vivid dreams and, in the end, has a vision concerning Sita’s illness. Mary, on the other hand, plays with tarot cards and reads palms but never predicts anything right; her spiritualism is not spirituality but a comically inept parody of it. However, her dreaming of Dot’s birth and naming of Dot can be interpreted as a sign of power.

The Ojibway view of the land is only hinted at in *The Beet Queen*, in the way Eli and Fleur live in the last part of the novel—apparently by hunting, fishing, gathering, and trading. The con-

nections between land and culture are clear in Erdrich's other novels. In *Love Medicine*, Lulu Nanapush Lamartine stands proud on her land, not giving in to dominant-culture intrusion because "[t]he Lamartines lived all their life on that land The Lamartine family deserves to stay" (p. 223). From evidence in *Tracks*, Lulu's mother, Fleur Pillager, and Lulu's namesake, old Nanapush, gave everything to keep the land but lost it anyway. Eli and Nector continue to live on the land of their mother, Margaret Rushes Bear Kashpaw. In *Tracks*, Nanapush expresses a reverence for the land: "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life" (p. 33). Much of the novel is about how the land (and traditional culture) was being lost. *The Bingo Palace* is likewise centrally concerned with the land: We learn from "Fleur's Luck" how Fleur got her land back. Should a bingo palace be built on the shores of Matchimanito Lake? In the final chapter in the book, entitled "Pillager Bones," and in the tetralogy of novels, we follow Fleur to Moses Pillager's island on the lake to lay her bones with those of her ancestors in a cave in the magical center of the land. But this outspoken reverence and genuine concern for the land as spiritual entity is nearly missing from *The Beet Queen*.

The coming of the sugar beet—a "low crop of thick, abrasive leaves" (p. 165)—represents an agribusiness comedown from when the land was wild forest, lakes, meadows, and treeless prairie and plains of the Ojibway. (We allude here to the fictionalized Turtle Mountain and Argus settings as they are represented in the entire tetralogy). Further, it is different from a later stage—rich in its own way—of variegated farming, when the land was plotted and pieced into sections for grains, corn, hay, pasture. Sugar beets represent a single-crop economy that is devoid of any value but a financial one. Although sugar beets can be eaten when small, these are not. They are virtually inedible, producing only sugar, which itself is not sustenance, and plenty of "stinking smoke" (p. 110) in the refining process. In the white American view, the beets produce money, construction, and thus success. The contrasting notions in *The Beet Queen* epitomize the conflict in concepts of the land that Gerald Hausman has noted:

The Indian concept of the nurturing sources of all good comes from within not from without, the fecundity of maternal earth. This is a spiritual rather than a material relationship to the land. The idea is far removed from the white European notion of land being something to give tenure to, something to own, something from which to reap benefit.¹³

Wallace Pfef, who represents the opposing, dominant culture view of the land, claims that the beets are “the perfect marriage between nature and technology” (p. 161). He brings the sugar beet to Argus, which, in turn, brings financial gain, as well as more buildings, people, and highways. The simple dignity of Fleur’s and Eli’s subsistence existence stands in contrast to the tawdriness of the entire beet festival and parade. Celestine is joined to that small community of Fleur and Eli by her half-brother Russell. She carries those community, subsistence values to Argus with her.

The traditional culture’s and the dominant culture’s views of man, nature, and the land are at constant odds in *The Beet Queen*. Perhaps we should note here that *The Beet Queen* is Erdrich’s exploration of the European side of her heritage—and that Erdrich views the older, ethnic Euro-American generation more positively than the new generation. The Irish-, German-, and French-American clergy or farmers in the entire Turtle Mountain tetralogy are often well-motivated, if mistaken, and have a strong sense of community and land. Indeed they are more interesting as characters than the new generation. The goodwill and kindness of Pete and Fritzie Kozka are inherited by the next generation in the person of Mary. Although Mary and Celestine do not live in the calm and dignified peace of Fleur, Eli, and Russell, their everyday life together at the butcher shop seems to suggest values similar to those of the reservation Ojibway, and they certainly form a family unit that includes Karl and Wallace as dysfunctional members. They work long hours in the old way, quietly tending shop. For them, the “land” brings contentment and sustenance but never the financial gain or “success” Wallace Pfef achieves. In the same way that variegated and wheat farming were replaced by the sugar beet, their old-time butcher business—changed little from the 1913 butcher shop of Pete and Fritzie Kozka in *Tracks*—is being replaced by supermarkets. An important example of Celestine’s calm closeness to physical nature occurs when she notices a spider in baby Dot’s hair:

It was a delicate thing, close to transparent, with long sheer legs. It moved so quickly that it seemed to vibrate, throwing out the invisible strings and catching them, weaving its own tensile strand. Celestine watched as it began to happen. A web was forming, a complicated house, that Celestine could not bring herself to destroy” (p. 176).

Celestine's positive response to the power of nature contrasts sharply with the unresponsiveness of the dominant-culture characters (especially Wallace, Sita, and Adelaide). They see nature always from behind a glass window, in the comfort of enclosed places, in nonindigenous gardens or the Birdorama.

The spider description says something about relationships and kinship as well. Leftover pieces of broken families litter *The Beet Queen*. Missing from the novel are the strong, extended-family ties found in both *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. Celestine, although close to her half-brother Russell, with whom she was raised, has no parents. Her older half-sister, Isabel, after supporting Russell and Celestine to adulthood, marries a Sioux, moves to South Dakota, and dies violently. Mary's father is unknown (probably Mr. Ober), and her mother has abandoned her. One brother is kidnapped, and her older brother leaves her indefinitely. Karl's whole existence seems a semicomical escape from any human entanglement; he maintains his "freedom" regardless of human cost. Sita's parents have moved away, although she virtually abandoned them earlier anyway. Her life is cold and fruitless despite two marriages. Likewise, Wallace has no one. The closest thing to family he has is a photo of his "poor, dead girlfriend," who, in reality, is a total stranger: The photograph was already in a frame he bought at an auction. In contrast, in *Tracks*, Nanapush calls Fleur "daughter" and Lulu "granddaughter," although they are not related to him by blood. Fleur calls him "Uncle." In *The Beet Queen*, familial references rarely have the same positive connotations, and then only in relation to the Indian characters.

Loss of kinship serves to define the relationships in the dominant white culture. Among those clearly Indian, Fleur, Eli, and Russell hover on the margins of the novel in an apparent kinship group that embraces Celestine and Dot. Mary and Celestine raise Dot, with a little help from Wallace and none at all from Karl, her biological father. Dot increasingly becomes the focus of the novel, and, as she grows, so does a "family" of people. Paula Gunn Allen explains that the Indian concept of "family" is very different from the non-Indian because "a unified household is one in which the relationships among women and their descendants and sisters are ordered."¹⁴ Mary and Celestine develop a "community of sisterhood" (p. 251), and men such as Wallace and Karl take secondary roles, determined by their relationship to the community of women in the novel. Russell Banks has also noticed that the book has no single hero but, instead, creates a community (p. 462):

It's as if [Erdrich] has chosen to eschew a single central consciousness—an individualized sympathetic norm that . . . has found itself set in the center of a world gone wacky—and has instead attempted to make a family, village or tribe, that is, a people into protagonist.¹⁵

The people who hover around this sisterhood or “clan” are Sita, Karl, and Wallace. Sita’s deteriorating mental state seems to represent the white culture’s solipsistic focus on vanity and status and those material things that had considerably less importance in traditional Ojibway culture and in the traditional ethnic culture of her parents, Pete and Fritzie. Wallace’s relationship with Mary, Celestine, and especially Dot lacks depth. His attempts at a long-term relationship with Karl are similarly inept. After their short liaison, Karl leaves Wallace, and Wallace continues to pine for him. Karl also leaves Mary, Celestine, and Dot. He fulfills the American ideal of leaving home but fails to find success and self-realization. Karl’s character remains the same as in the beginning—empty, bitter, unreliable, alienated: “I give nothing, take nothing, mean nothing, hold nothing” (p. 318). Mary, Celestine, and Dot do not come home in the literal sense because they never leave, although Dot’s airplane ride is a kind of escape and return. For them, creating a home is coming home; despite the highways, processing plants, and beet fields, and the new supermarket that cuts into business, they will stay there—home in Argus, North Dakota. In *Love Medicine*, Dot takes that one step further not only by staying in Argus until she and her child meet Gerry Nanapush in Canada, but by choosing to be Ojibway.

As we suggested earlier, the term *latency* or *marginalization* might be more apt than *absence* in speaking of Ojibway characters and values in a mainly non-Indian novel. However, Indian characters are more present than one may think on a first reading. Among these are Fleur Pillager, Eli Kashpaw, Russell Kashpaw, Celestine James, and Dot Adair—especially Dot, because the novel increasingly focuses on her. Of the thirty-five narratives in *The Beet Queen*, five are by Indians (four by Celestine and one by Dot); four of the fifteen omniscient narratives focus almost wholly on Indians (two on Russell, one on Celestine, one on Dot); the longest single narrative is by Celestine (pp. 111–43), “that big Indian woman. That six footer” (p. 332).

The Fleur Pillager who appears three times in *The Beet Queen* seems entirely consistent with the Fleur of *Tracks*, who is about

seventeen years old in 1912 when Nanapush rescues her. In the passages in *The Beet Queen*, she would be thirty-seven in 1932, sixty-five in 1960, and seventy-seven in 1972 on the day when Sita dies, Russell nearly dies, and Dot comes home. In *Tracks*, she is a woman of power; in *The Beet Queen*, she has become a medicine woman, a healer. Her power likely comes from her close brushes with death—by freezing and starvation and also by drowning, the worst death for an Ojibway. In *Ojibway Ceremonies*, Basil Johnston cites story after story in tribal myth in which a vision quester experiences near-death—even venturing into the land of the dead—and thus gains power and vision, which he or she then selflessly uses for the good of the tribe. Fleur is considered by many in *Tracks* to be a witch, and indeed such evidence is present. Traditionally, such power as hers can take a negative or positive turn, into destruction or healing. At the end of *Tracks*, Fleur has made her oak peddler's wagon and has left Lulu, her daughter, with old Nanapush and Margaret Kashpaw, vowing, "I never will go to Kashpaw land" (p. 214). We find her first in *The Beet Queen* as an itinerant peddler, but her home is on the reservation (p. 53); at some point, she comes to live (at least some of the time) with Eli on Kashpaw land, although there is evidence in *The Bingo Palace* that she reclaims her old land and cabin. We find her with Eli in 1960 and 1972, apparently retired from peddling.

Fleur in *The Beet Queen* is the same physically strong and striking woman she was in her youth, but she is now calmer, more single-minded, comfortable in her role as healer. When she sets Karl's broken feet, cures him of pneumonia, and takes him to the nuns, she does not know him, expects no earthly or heavenly reward, but acts as she does because it is in her vision of self to do so, because she has the power to heal. Karl's description of Fleur is notable, because he has little good to say of anyone. In his mind, she is juxtaposed to his mother, who recently abandoned him. Certainly his self-inflicted injuries are related to self-hatred at being abandoned. Fleur

"... was massive . . . Her head was bound in a white scarf that blazed against her dark skin. Twin silver mirrors dangled from her earlobes, flashed, dizzied me . . . [She] almost never spoke, . . . but I heard her sing and talk to herself . . . [She] proceeded to knead, mold, and tap the floating splinters of my bones back into shape of ankles, feeling her own from time to time to get the shape right . . . Her face was young, broad and dark, but fine around the edges, even delicate. Her

heavy mouth curved at the corners, her nose arched like the nose of a royal princess . . . Fleur's customers were wary and approached her with a hint of fear, as if she were a witch or maybe a saint cast off to wander" (pp. 48–54).

Fleur seems magical to Karl partly because she is.

Fleur appears later through Mary's eyes in 1960, age sixty-five, at Eli's house on the reservation, when she is perceived as Russell's "aunt," much as old Nanapush is Fleur's "uncle." Her matriarchal presence in a novel where mothers are mostly absent or ineffective, is powerful:

The only thing that Celestine had told me about Fleur was that she used to work for Uncle Pete, and that she was unbalanced. But Fleur struck me as balanced, and then some. She stood right next to Russell and dropped her hand on his shoulder, maybe to calm him . . . Fleur was big-boned but lean, very much the build of Celestine, and had a face like Sitting Bull. Her eyes were black and narrow, watchful. Her mouth was broad (p. 199–200).

Russell here is perhaps in his late forties or older, almost young enough to be Fleur's son. Dot is six years old and receives her first comeuppance from the woman who is the grandmother of her future husband, Gerry Nanapush.

Our last view of Fleur in *The Beet Queen* is in 1972. She and Eli are both in their late seventies, living in dignity with Russell. As Russell is being prepared by an orderly for the beet parade, she is "stationed, . . . supervising the orderly with stern attention" (p. 298). She prepares him precisely in the way the Ojibway warrior was prepared for burial, and she is sending him off to near death. The next person to care for him in the same stern way is Dot at the parade.

Although Eli has no certain biological children, he is the only good father in *The Beet Queen*, but he is nearly invisible. Mr. Ober neither publicly recognizes his and Adelaide's children nor provides for them after his death. Omar does nothing for Adelaide's children and does not even encourage her to contact them. Karl escapes fatherhood in all but the most superficial ways, and Wally tries to "father" Dot but is inept. One could make a case for Pete, who, like Fritzie, treats his niece Mary in a kindly way. Eli is the same traditional Ojibway we encounter in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*. Marie, in 1948, comments that "he spoke easy with the

children He had a soft hushed voice, like he was stalking something near Eli would sing his songs. Wild unholy songs. Cree songs that made you lonely. Hunting songs used to attract deer or women" (*Love Medicine*, p. 69). He is intimate with the woods, the sloughs, and streams and lakes. In 1957, Marie says of Eli, "[H]e had gone quieter and hardly came out of the woods anymore He was like a shy animal himself 'He's a man!'" (p. 125). Eli's character reflects Basil Johnston's remarks about Ojibway manhood:

The Anishnabeg were primarily men of peace, visionaries who depended upon hunting for survival. Since the worth of a man was measured by his generosity and by his skill in the hunting grounds, bloodshed was not the final test of manhood How many deer or fish he could find his family, and how frequently he could provide them, were the standards for a man.¹⁶

The afterlife, the Land of Souls, "is a Land of Peace inhabited by men and women of peace . . . only men and women of peace may enter there."¹⁷

Eli appears first in *The Beet Queen* when Russell, scarred again from a second war, finds refuge with him on the reservation. Eli's "fatherhood" is emphasized in *The Beet Queen*—his gentleness, especially with children or with the paralyzed Russell. We see him more directly in 1960 and 1972. In 1960, at Eli's house, Mary notices that he seems to emanate from the forest, "passing soundlessly from a dim tangle of bushes at the edge of the clearing" (p. 199). He watches everything with great care and is mystified at the phenomenon of a spoiled American child, Dot. Eli's fatherhood is underlined by June's drawing, her photograph, and her red velvet rose. He agrees she is "more or less" his daughter. In 1972, we encounter him very briefly, in character, helping Fleur oversee the preparation of Russell for the parade.

Russell Kashpaw is part of a long line of Indian World War II veterans—such as Tayo in *Ceremony* and Abel in *House Made of Dawn*—who come "home" to find an outside world radically out of balance and who achieve balance and community by returning to tribal custom—but in a way that adjusts to new circumstances. Modern technological war is a fitting symbol for a world gone cockeyed, and Indian writers are not the only ones to discover this. However, although Russell is diagnosed as having "war

depression" (p. 113), he does not seem troubled about his wars (World War II and Korea) but about his failure to achieve the American Dream. A high school football hero, a Catholic who is able to see the school-yard image of Christ, he becomes a war hero, trying to prove his patriotism, as did many young Indian men. Home from the wars, he is given a job in the bank, "even though he was an Indian . . . The scars stretched up his cheeks like claw marks" of some great beast (p. 70). Rejected by Sita, Russell comes to realize that being a hero and having a bank job do not constitute social acceptance. This racial rejection is signaled by his appearance in the Indian bar at which Sita is dropped off as a joke. He gradually moves away from Argus and the American Dream by quitting the bank job when Isabel dies and going to work as a mechanic (at the butcher shop where he worked as a child) for Mary and Celestine; then he moves out of his and Celestine's house on the James homestead when Karl moves in. Finally, he lives with Eli on the reservation. His days with Eli as a paralytic are understated—partly because he is "home" with two traditional Ojibway who are the only real "mother" and "father" in the novel. In this scheme, he becomes the good warrior "son," his incapacity and near death eased by tradition and finally by humor.

In *Ojibway Heritage*, Basil Johnston describes, in great detail, the four hills on the Path of Life, how each successive hill is scaled, if at all, with inevitable difficulty and loss. Life leads to the Path of Souls, an afterlife achieved by selflessness, the chief good. "By living through all the stages and living out the visions, men and women know something of human nature and living and life. What they have come to know and abide by is wisdom."¹⁸ The last scenes of Russell's life with Eli and Fleur are marked by wisdom and serenity—in contrast with the life of Karl, Russell's antithesis, who possesses neither of those qualities. Johnston's description of a warrior's burial is pertinent:

To be prepared for the Path of Souls a warrior . . . must be buried in a sitting position facing west. He must wear his battle dress; and he must have his weapons at his side—as if he could be ready in an instant to do battle . . . it was [his] duty, [his] calling, to give [his] life for the tribe . . . The scars that [he] bore and the wounds that [he] felt shall ever remind us of [his] courage and [his] sacrifice . . .¹⁹

Similarly, Fleur and Eli carefully prepare Russell:

The orderly dressed Russell . . . , moving carefully under Fleur's eye. He strained to lift Russell back into his chair. Fleur took Russell's medals from a leather case and pinned the whole bright pattern over his heart. Then she put his rifle, . . . across his lap (p. 298).

.....

[T]his was the road the old-time Chippewas talked about, the four-day road, the road of death. He'd just started out . . . Then he was glad, and was also glad to see he hadn't lost his sense of humor even now. It struck him as so funny that the town he'd lived in and the members of the American Legion were solemnly saluting a dead Indian, that he started to shake with laughter (p. 300).

Celestine James's story is that of the mixed-blood who, like her brother Russell, tries to capture part of the American Dream but gives up early. Her presence and dry irony pervade the novel: Many of the most darkly humorous passages are in her narrations. Her voice is factual, incredulous, self-mocking at times, sardonic in narrating such occurrences as the miracle Christ face, the love affair with Karl, the baptism of Dot, the Christmas play to which she brings jello with nuts and bolts and at which Dot levels a boy with a sheep maul. Celestine is not taken in by the Christ face, nor is she ever deluded by Russell's wars and "scars and stripes that almost look like the markings of an animal . . . I think it's stupid, that his getting shot apart is what he's lived for all his life" (pp. 111–12). She understands what a charlatan Karl is; she sees the irony of romantic love yet seems to consider it inevitable, somehow part of her pursuit of vision. When she tells Karl to leave, one of her main reasons is that, with him, "I don't have any dreams" (p. 136).

Celestine's roots are Indian and communal, and she looks Indian. Her father, Dutch James, one of the men who raped Fleur in 1913, could not have lived long after that time. She is raised mostly by her older sister Isabel, who is "all we have, and she takes care of us by holding down jobs with farmers, cooking, and sometimes even threshing right along with the men" (p. 43). Celestine is very close to Russell, and they live together—when he is not at war—until Karl (Russell calls him "the Noodle") roosts on

the homestead. She visits Eli several times a year and then Eli and Russell often. She has been to Russell's fishing house on the reservation a number of times before his stroke. As a young woman, she works for the telephone company, wearing tailored suits and carrying a leather purse. It is not long, however, before she becomes a butcher with Mary.

Superficially, it does not seem that Celestine has raised Dot to be Indian. Unlike Celestine, she is not visibly Indian; she is short, square, olive-skinned, and red-haired. She could "pass" as white, but, in *The Beet Queen*, she establishes a tie with her "big Indian" mother that will lead her, in *Love Medicine*, to close with a true Nanapush, who is as quintessentially Ojibway as Eli but very different.

Dot seems at war with the world, at home nowhere. Even as a baby, she is found in "a wrestler's crouch"; when she at last sleeps, "she seemed to have fallen in battle" (p. 180). She bullies everyone, at school and at home. She seems to possess all her "family's worst qualities . . . crowded into her—Mary's stubborn, abrupt ways, Sita's vanity, Celestine's occasional cruelties, Karl's lack of responsibility" (p. 233). The key to Dot's main conflict is found in several scenes when she is ten and another when she is seventeen. When Wallace tries to convince her not to run away to her father, he says of Karl,

He's worse than a bum . . . He got your mother pregnant and ran away. He stole some money from me and then went to Aunt Sita, took a handout, drove her into an asylum, then disappeared. He tries to sell things, but they don't work. He drinks and he lies, can't make a living, cons and fools people. He's a nothing . . . he kicked my dog . . . And . . . he hates children (p. 236).

Dot is entranced by this view of her father. Her face "gleam[s]"; she is "transported" by Wallace's words and wants to "fly off" to find Karl (p. 236). Later, when she, still age ten, and Celestine meet Karl for breakfast in Argus and Karl asks her about "male influence" in her life, Dot responds, "I go up to Uncle Russell's a lot now. Eli's teaching me to fish" (p. 259). Similarly, at age seventeen, when she reveals her fantasies to Wallace, chief among them is her desire to disappear like her Aunt Mary, who told Dot "she'd hitched a boxcar . . . fly off forever like her grandmother Adelaide . . . travel the world and seek knowledge . . . live up north on the reservation with her uncles Russell and Eli" (p. 303). In brief, her

conflict is between the desire to leave "home" in the mindlessly free and irresponsible way of Adelaide and Karl—and her need to "home," to embed herself in family, in the land, in Ojibway values.

The resolution of Dot's conflict is perhaps found all the way back in her babyhood, in the spider passage ("A web was forming, a complicated house" [p. 176]); later, after the school play ("Dot's room . . . smells of Dot, a clean and bitter smell, like new bark" [p. 227]); and later yet as the beet parade is about to begin, when she "scream[s]" to have Russell given a drink. Because she speaks with Fleur's kind of power and concern, people jump ("a Legionnaire comes running with a full canteen . . . the Legionnaire and orderly put Russell gently in place now" [p. 331]). When she leaps to the plane to escape the spurious award of Beet Queen, she is imitating her grandmother Adelaide directly and her father indirectly, but in her return to her mother she gives up that illusion and accepts her Indian heritage. She was sure everyone would "wait forever" for her, "but they have not."

[T]here is someone waiting. It is my mother, and all at once I cannot stop seeing her. Her skin is rough. Her whole face seems magnetized, like ore. Her deep brown eyes are circled with dark skin, but full of eagerness. In her eyes I see the force of her love. It is bulky and hard to carry, like a package that keeps untying. It is like this dress that no excuse accounts for.

.....

I want to lean into her the way wheat leans into the wind, . . . letting myself go forward on a piece of whirling bark . . . the wind comes. It flows through the screen, slams doors, fills the curtains like sails, floods the dark house with the smell of dirt and water, the smell of rain . . . I breathe it in, and I think of her lying in the next room, her covers thrown back too, eyes wide open, waiting (pp. 337–38).

This epiphany is our last view of Dot and the end of the novel. We see her again in *Love Medicine* with Gerry Nanapush, carrying his child. At the end of that novel, Gerry—"both a natural criminal and a hero" (p. 85), grandson of Fleur Pillager, spiritual grandson of old Nanapush of *Tracks*—is being taken to the Canadian border by his son, Lipsha, to meet Dot and their baby, Shawn.

Like *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace* (1994) is indisputably an Indian novel. If the four novels are taken as a tetralogy,

The Beet Queen stands out as, indeed, more about whites than Indians. Leslie Silko has questioned the Indianness of *The Beet Queen* for that reason.²⁰ We contend that, like other novels in the tetralogy, it posits rootedness in the land, in family and community—as well as the primary need to dream and seek vision and then to follow that vision. In *The Beet Queen*, although the Kozka generation of whites is interesting and sometimes admirable, the new generation of Euro-Americans (Mary excepted) is portrayed largely as spiritually bankrupt and downright foolish. Nearly invisible but subtly present and latent, often in the fragmented form left after cultural catastrophe, are Ojibway culture and values. Such as they are, they provide the most coherent meaning in a sugarbeet and supermarket wasteland.

NOTES

1. We employ the Basil Johnston spellings of Ojibway and Anishnabeg, although especially the latter can appear in several variants.
2. James McKenzie, "Lipsha's Good Road Home: The Revival of Chippewa Culture in *Love Medicine*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 10:3 (1986): 63.
3. Braley, "Ojibway Myth and World View in Louise Erdrich's Novels" (Master's thesis, Idaho State University, 1993).
4. Lydia Schultz, "Fragments and Ojibwa Stories: Narrative Strategies in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," *College Literature* 18 (Oct. 1991): 80–95.
5. Jennifer Sergi, "Storytelling: Tradition and Preservation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *World Literature Today* 66 (Spring 1990): 280–82.
6. Susan Perez Castillo, "Post-modernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," *Massachusetts Review* 32 (Summer 1991): 286.
7. Page references to *Love Medicine* (1984) and *The Beet Queen* (1986) are to the Bantam editions; *Tracks* (1988) to the Harper & Row edition; *The Bingo Palace* (1994) to the Harper Collins edition.
8. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 158.
9. Laura Coltelli, "Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris" in Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 41–52.
10. Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 15.
11. *Ibid.*, 132.
12. Thomas Overholt and J. Baird Callicot, *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales: An Introduction to an Ojibwa World View* (New York: University Press of America, 1982), 148.

13. Gerald Hausman, *Turtle Mountain Alphabet: A Lexicon of Native American Symbols and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 81.
14. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 231.
15. Russell Banks, "Border Country" [a review of *The Beet Queen*], *Nation* (1 November 1986), 463.
16. Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies*, 59 and 79.
17. *Ibid.*, 134.
18. Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 118.
19. Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies*, 141, 151.
20. Leslie Marmon Silko, "Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf" [review of *The Beet Queen*], *Impact/Albuquerque Journal* (8 October 1986): 10-11; reprinted in *Studies in American Literature* 10 (1986): 177-84.