Love Medicine is Louise Erdrich’s first and most popular novel that won several prizes and has also been a commercial success. Love Medicine is set in North-Dakota in a Chippewa reservation and it develops through the life-narratives of the members of the Kashpaw kinship. Together with The Beet Queen, Tracks and The Bingo Place, Love Medicine is one of the four novels that embrace the history of the same kinship. Love Medicine it gives a special insight into sometimes quite hidden lives of Native Americans. In this novel Erdrich effectively uses, and successfully revives, the narrative forms of the Native American oral tradition combined with significant elements of Native American culture. Erdrich’s maternal grandfather was the Tribal Chairman of the Turtle Mountain Reservation and the writer herself is the member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Accordingly, the theme and the characters of Love Medicine have contributed to the reception of Erdrich as one of the authentic Native American writers of our time or a true representative of Native American culture.

Erdrich, however, emphasizes her hybrid cultural identity. As she points out in an interview, the concept of a Native American writer is an ideological construction. According to her, this is an academic distinction. It’s made to attract people to courses where you can lump authors together. There’s a mixture of people and characters in native fiction. I’m mixed. There’s no other way I would have the artistic truth and veracity to write about all those characters. Labels make a good headline. I don’t dislike it, but I find it tedious (Spilman 1996).

In a biographical reading, we could easily argue that Erdrich insists on her hybrid origin as well as on the hybridity of her characters and her fiction because she is a Native American on her maternal side but her father is a German-American. Consequently, Erdrich occupies an in-between cultural position, she is both Native American and German-American, or she is neither purely Native American nor purely German-American. However, as Owens demonstrates in Mixedblood Messages, the insistence on hybrid identity in fact is a constitutive element, and a strategic articulation of the theoretically informed and political-conscious self-definition of contemporary Native American writers and intellectuals, who are mixed blood otherwise. The Native American artists and intellectuals’ celebration of hybridity is a reaction to the Anglo-American postcolonial racial differentiation and the essentialist conception of otherness. As Mary A. McCay points out, in the context of Cooper’s Indian novels, “bloodmixing” or
“Racemixing” emerge as an issue because of the Euro-American anxiety about the loss of superiority by mixing with inferior, non-white races (157-58). In the contemporary context, as Louis Owens delineates, this issue returns in the form of a guilt-ridden Anglo-American fascination with the oppressed ‘minorities’ and their assumed radical otherness which originates from their racial difference (57-83).

My article revisits Erdrich’s _Love Medicine_ in order to explore the novel’s hybrid character and Erdrich’s construction of the specificity of the Native American experience. Although _Love Medicine_ is generally considered in terms of the relationship between the categories of post-modern and Native American, I will argue that Erdrich emphasizes the postcolonial aspect of the Native American experience in this novel. Firstly, the characters in the novel are most concerned with identity-formation and self-representation. As I will suggest, the notion of identity emerging from Erdrich’s fiction partly rehearses Stuart Hall’s reconsideration of the concept of identity in terms of the relationship between identity and identification and as a strategic and positional construction process (2-4). Secondly, Erdrich’s characters make sense of their Native American roots and themselves as Native Americans through the identity politics of colonial subjects as theorized by Homi Bhabha in “Interrogating Identity” (40-65).

Here I limit my argument to the exploration of Erdrich’s postcolonial reflections on the Euro-American stereotypical constructions of the Indian in _Love Medicine_ and her engagement in cross-cultural writing, shaping the hybrid character of her Native American fiction. I will examine how in the first generation of the novel’s Kashpaw kinship, Nector and Marie Kashpaw attempt to authorize their distinct Native American belonging by reflecting on the Euro-American constructions of their cultural identity. My claim is that, on the one hand, Erdrich’s _Love Medicine_ is arguably a Native American novel proper as well as exemplary postcolonial literature. On the other hand, my contention is that with her Native American novel Erdrich calls our attention to the ways in which the Native American, like the Indian, operates as an ideological and narrative construction in the public sphere. In doing so she challenges the essentialist concepts of identity and difference.

In her contrastive reading of the representations of indigenous American people in James Fenimore Cooper’s and Erdrich’s novels, McCay makes a distinction between the colonial Euro-American construction of Native American identity and its postcolonial-multicultural conception (153). While the former manifests itself in the word, “Indian” expressing a homogeneous mythic idea of various Native American “nations” in terms of their otherness, the latter in the words, “Native American” allows indigenous American people to formulate their own cultural identities in historical terms. According to McCay, the Euro-American cultural narratives, being “hierarchical and monolithic myths,” “by their very structure exclude multicultural dimensions” (153, 152). On the contrary, Erdrich’s “patterns look for the possibility of the acceptance of all cultures” (153). In McCay’s view, Native American writers like Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday or Leslie Marmon Silko re-assess the Euro-American cultural myths from a Native American perspective. They deploy Native American myths and points of view in order to reconstitute and revitalise Native American cultural traditions and identity-formations, suppressed by, or eliminated from, the Euro-American-centred narratives of North American history (153).

More or less the same assumption structures Barbara L. Pittman’s and Catherine Rainwater’s readings of Erdrich’s fiction. According to Pittman Native American literature, like that of Erdrich’s, is a challenge for Euro-American readers because it mediates between literary patterns familiar from the Euro-American literary tradition and unfamiliar structures characteristic of Native American narratives. The mixing of different traditions produces alternative cultural meanings (777). In Pittman’s view, in doing this, Erdrich intends “to record the persistence of the Native American community and its resistance to appropriation by the monolithic discourses of the dominant culture” (789). Like Pittman, Rainwater emphasises Erdrich’s cultural hybridity and argues that “Erdrich’s concern with liminality and marginality pervades all levels of her texts” (406). Rainwater conceives _Love Medicine_ as a performance of the conflict between mutually exclusive cultural code-systems either “originate within Western-
European society” or “within Native American culture” (406). As Rainwater argues, “the reader must respond” to this conflict of cultural codes since it is a challenge to our efforts to establish an “unambiguous, epistemologically consistent interpretative framework” (407).

These contrastive readings draw on a (re-)conception of North American literature and culture that we might define as the dominant postcolonial one even though the authors do not associate their points of view with any postcolonial position. Nevertheless, we could argue that, implicitly, they define the “Native Americanness” of Erdrich’s narrative fictions in line with the Euro-centric model of postcolonial literature proposed by the authors of _The Empire Writes Back_. As Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge rightly point out, _The Empire Writes Back_ constructs a unified and homogeneous model of post-colonial literature as the “english literatures” of the indigenous “other” of the periphery on the basis of some structural and stylistic sameness (278). This representation of the “colonised people outside Britain” eliminates the complexity of the colonised people’s histories, the differences between post-colonial societies and cultures, and the particularities of the various geographical and cultural identities (278-81). Erdrich is arguably using the aesthetic strategies that we consensually identify with postcolonial writing such as the re-working of the Western European literary classics from the perspective of a non-Western subjectivity, the indigenous re-appropriations of Western constructions of indigenous identities, various concerns about the relationship between inside and outside, passing borders, or a preference for parody, satire or the grotesque as potentially subversive narrative modes.

Jeffrey D. Mason offers a clear-cut summary of the received postcolonial notion of the Euro-American stereotyping of indigenous Americans, a notion that also underlines McCoy’s contrastive reading of Cooper and Erdrich. As Mason puts it,

> [i]n the eyes of the colonists, the natives […] had and became […] either a band of savages or the fabulous inhabitants of the Western terrestrial paradise that Old World legend had promised. So constructed, the natives consequently became an obscure mystery to the interlopers, who, because they seldom sought to understand them on their own terms, failed to find a sensible manner of coexistence. The American Indian is a myth, therefore, not only in the sense of representing a people’s attempt to express […] the nature of their experience, but also in being more a product of white imagination than a metaphor for an actual culture – being a fiction (92-3).

In _Love Medicine_, Erdrich reworks both of the stereotypes that Mason refers to in this passage, the Euro-American definitions of indigenous Americans as a “band of savages” and as “fabulous inhabitants” or, to put it differently, the “Indian” as the “wild, evil beast” and as the “glorified, noble savage” (92-3.). Whereas Erdrich’s engagement with the latter has been discussed widely, her treatment of the former has remained almost unnoticed.

Erdrich gives her postcolonial re-assessment in the chapters about Nector and Marie Kashpaw’s life-stories, which tell their adventures outside of the reservation, in the non-Indian, white, Euro-American world. In Marie Kashpaw’s chapter, Erdrich depicts the Native American strategic appropriation of the Euro-American (re-)presentation of the Indian as the Evil Beast while Nector Kashpaw’s part it is devoted to the Romantic reflection of the Native American figure. In these chapters Erdrich (re)uses a typical theme, or even the trademark of, contemporary Native American literature. As Owens sums it up,

> [i]n literature by contemporary Indian authors, we find characters who constantly face this dilemma of an identity constructed within the authoritative discourse of the non-Indian world. In order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world – in order to be seen at all – the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside (12).
In the chapter entitled “The Plunge of the Brave,” Erdrich re-works the Euro-American romantic idea of the (dying) noble savage from an angle which identifies with the Native American point of view. As Pittman rightly points out, this chapter could be seen as a “satire on the romanticization of Indians” (781). Here Erdrich explores the contradictions inherent in the Romantic representations imagining the Indian exclusively in terms of his death, the conception of the Indian as the one who is noble but whose only alternative is to exist as a heroically dying warrior. As D. H. Lawerence points out, here a contradictory desire is at work which wishes to eliminate the Indian but, at the same time, or for this reason, idolizes him (36). As McCay’s discussion of Cooper shows, this specific representation of the Indian is the most elaborate in Cooper’s novels (154-57).

In “The Plunge of the Brave” the narrator-focalizer is Nector Kashpaw, one of the central figures of Love Medicine. He is the heir and carrier of the legacy of the Kashpaw kinship; it is his descendants who inhabit the world of the novel. The title of the chapter cites the title of a painting entitled the Plunge of the Brave. The painting was made by a rich, white woman who employed Nector Kashpaw as a model to pose for this particular painting. The painting shows a naked Indian who is jumping off a cliff, down into a rocky river. When Nector Kashpaw sees the painting he comments on it saying that:

I could not believe it, later, when she showed me the picture. Plunge of the Brave, was the title of it. Later on, that picture would become famous. It would hang in the Bismarck state capitol. There I was, jumping off a cliff, naked of course, down into a rocky river. Certain death. […] When I saw that the greater world was only interested in my doom, I went home on the back of a train. (Erdrich 91)

As Pittman points out, the “painting shows the Western ideal ideal of the naked, noble savage” (781). According to McCay, Nector Kashpaw’s story about the painting is a parody “on the Cooperian death of Uncas who falls to his death off a cliff” (161). Here Erdrich manages to simultaneously depict the construction of the dying Indian in the Euro-American cultural imagination and the Native American ironic reflection on the Euro-American representation. She achieves this by forming Nector’s conception of the relationship between art and reality as the one which confuses fiction and reality. This confusion results in a specific self-perception that conceives the Euro-American received image of the Indian as being identical with his actual self. Erdrich explores this confusion through Nector Kashpaw’s telling of the story of how he made a career as an actor playing the dying Indian in a Hollywood movie. The opening of “The Plunge of the Brave” promises a success story, a Hollywood career for the Native American:

I never wanted much, and I needed even less, but what happened was that I got everything handed to me on a plate. It came from being a Kashpaw, I used to think. Our family was respected as the last hereditary leaders of this tribe. But Kashpaws died out around here, people forgot, and I still kept getting offers. […] Jobs for one. I got out of Flandreau, […], and the first thing they said was “Nector Kashpaw, go West! Hollywood wants you!” They made a lot of westerns in those days (Erdrich 89).

However, as the novel’s continuation suggests, the story to come will rather be about fall and shame than about rise and fame. Nector Kashpaw “never talk[s] about this often,” that is about what happened to him when, “they were hiring for a scene in South Dakota and this talent scout picked [him] out from the graduating class” (89). Erdrich caricatures the Hollywood use of the Romantic image of the dying Indian through Nector Kashpaw’s reflection on the expectations about him as an actor playing the part of the Indian:

Because of my height, I got hired on for the biggest Indian part. But they didn’t know I was a Kashpaw, because right off I had to die. ‘Clutch your chest. Fall off that horse,’” they
directed. That was it. Death was the extent of Indian acting in the movie theater. So I thought it was quite enough to be killed the once you have to die in this life, and I quit (89-90).

Here Nector Kashpaw fashions his Native American identity in accordance with a differential model of identity formation where the self makes sense out of himself/herself in opposition to the other. Erdrich exposes this model in Nector Kashpaw’s strategic use of the rhetoric of “othering,” his references to the film-makers as “they,” as a faceless and nameless group of “them,” that is in terms of the film-makers’ otherness. Erdrich here (re-)defines the romantic Euro-American representation of Native Americans by representing the film-makers as being ignorant of Nector’s Kashpaw’s identity. Their lack of knowledge about his belonging and personal history culminates in their imposition of a false identity and a mistaken life-narrative through assigning to him, Nector Kashpaw, the role of the dying Indian in the film.

Whereas in “The Plunge of the Brave” Erdrich offers a postcolonial re-reading of the stereotype of the Indian as the noble savage, in the chapter entitled “Saint Marie” she arguably re-interprets the stereotype of the Indian being the evil-beast, although she does it in a less direct form. The “Saint Marie” chapter is Marie Lazarre’s life-narrative; she is Nector Kashpaw’s wife and the mother of the Kashpaw kinship. Her narrative is similar to Nector Kashpaw’s in the sense that she also wants to achieve fame as a Native American in the context of Euro-American culture and in terms of other culturally symbolic values. However, unlike Nector Kashpaw, she manages to legitimise the image she desires for herself in the Euro-American community where she lives.

In *Love Medicine*, several other chapter titles such as “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” “Flesh and Blood,” “Crossing the Water,” or “Saint Marie” evoke Judeo-Christian cultural narratives. As Rainwater points out, in these parts, Erdrich constructs an “intertextual framework of references to the Bible” (407). At the same time, as Rainwater further suggests, Erdrich challenges established religious and cultural values by juxtaposing an “encoded biblical material” with an “encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition” (407). Therefore, the author dramatises a conflict between the Judeo-Christian and the Native American belief-systems, showing them as “epistemologically, experimentally and teleologically different” (407). According to Rainwater, “beliefs about material and spiritual life are not as distinctly separate [in the American Indian tradition] as they are according to Christianity” (408).

Erdrich’s deployment of the received images of the Judeo-Christian tradition is most explicitly achieved in “Saint Marie” where the setting for Marie Lazarre’s life-narrative is a Catholic convent called the Sacred Heart Convent. The fourteen-year-old reservation girl, Marie Lazarre enters the convent because she “want[s] to sit on the altar as a saint” (Erdrich 45). Erdrich here shows an antagonistic relationship between an ambitious Native American pupil who wants to make a career within Catholic religious history and her dogmatic and superstitious white Catholic teacher obsessed with exorcising the evil from her Native student.

Ironically, here Erdrich brings into the scope of her fictional discourse the white European literary tradition rather than a Native American cultural heritage. In the first place, as Botting points out, the monastery or the convent often appears as a common setting of mysterious stories of evil, torture and suffering characteristic of the Gothic Novel (107-8). In fact, “Saint Marie” can be best summed up as a story of evil, torture and suffering indeed, taking place in a religious setting. Besides the location of the story and the specificity of the characters, we could argue that Erdrich draws heavily on the elements of the romantic Gothic tradition. For instance, her representation of Marie Lazarre’s relation to books, fairy tales and stories cites Charlotte Bronte’s characterisation of the ten-year-old Jane in *Jane Eyre*.

However, as Owens convincingly delineates, there is nothing surprising or unexpected in Erdrich’s use of the elements and patterns of the Anglo-American literary tradition, given the fact that Native American writers acquire Anglo-American aesthetic conventions and write for a public that has essentially a
conservative taste. Consequently, publishers prefer those Native American novels which comply with the already familiar forms and styles of the Anglo-American literary tradition (57-82).

Marie Lazarre’s life-narrative unfolds through the presentation of the conflict between the Native American girl and her Catholic teacher, Sister Leopolda. The nun considers the girl as being possessed by evil. She thinks that her mission is to save her young spirit by exorcising the evil from her at all costs (and by all and any means). Accordingly, in Sister Leopolda’s character – and in the representation of her mind-set – Erdrich introduces the white colonial construction of indigenous Americans as the manifestations of evil. On the whole, this chapter can be regarded as Erdrich’s exploration of the conflict between the different conceptions of evil. Here she contests issues of Euro-American dogma, superstitious understanding and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. With Marie Lazarre’s story, Erdrich sheds light on the contradictory values of the European missions and its educational schemes.

Generally, the rhetoric and imagery of “Saint Marie” cites white the colonial discourse in the form of parody:

She [Leopolda] said the Dark One wanted me most of all, and I believed this. I stood out. Evil was a common thing I trusted. Before sleep sometimes he came and whispered conversation in the old language of the bush. I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians. I was privy to both worlds of his knowledge. I listened to him, but I had confidence in Leopolda. She was the only one in the bunch he even noticed (43).

Here the young Marie Lazarre identifies with the negative Euro-American icons and myths (or even superstitions) about the identity of her territory and her personality. The author further parodies the colonial rhetoric by presenting the fourteen-year old Marie Lazarre’s conception of the evil as necessarily Indian and constructs it as a child’s bed-time fantasy and/or fairy tale. In this chapter, Erdrich deploys negative stereotypes for characterising the reservation, which is the place: “where the Dark One had put in thick bush, liquor, wild dogs, and Indians” (42). Her use of hyperboles in Marie Lazarre’s naturalization of the Euro-American negative representation of her place and personality sheds light on the fictitiousness of the Euro-American definition of the nature of the reservation.

The conflict between the Catholic nun and the reservation girl reaches its climax when Sister Leopolda pours boiling water on the girl’s back to exorcise the “evil beast” out of her. The girl decides to take revenge on Sister Leopolda by pushing her into the stove:

The oven was like the gate of a personal hell. Just big enough and hot enough for one person, and that was her. One kick and Leopolda would fly in headfirst. And that would be one-millionth of the heat she would feel when she finally collapsed in his hellish embrace (53).

Curiously enough, besides the evocation of the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition in the image of the stove as inferno or purgatory, Erdrich’s intertextual framework is, arguably, a European children’s tale, similar to the story of “Hansel and Gretel.” Consequently, instead of drawing on a Native American tradition, Erdrich depicts the elements of European narratives in order to construct the Native-American subversion of the Euro-American religious-cultural paradigm. In this passage she rehearses that scene from “Hansel and Gretel” in which the children push the evil witch – who entrapped them in her house – into the oven. However, Erdrich introduces an ironic perspective to the tale by emphasising the fictional status of the story of Hansel and Gretel. In “Saint Marie” the Native American girl imagines that her deed will end in accordance with the tale’s (happy) ending. Yet she fails to achieve her goal because she estimates the size of the oven incorrectly. In her rage, Sister Leopolda stabs Marie Lazarre’s hand with a fork and knocks her out with a poker. Although the actual events undermine Marie Lazarre’s belief in
the possibility of performing an imagined reality out of children’s fictional world, surprisingly, with the next event, Erdrich makes Marie Lazarre’s dream come true. When the girl comes around she is “being worshiped” and “somehow [has] gained the altar of a saint” (53). Marie Lazarre’s fantasy thus became reality because Sister Leopolda lies about her wound. She says that she has witnessed a miracle when Marie Lazarre had a holy vision; she fainted and afterwards the stigmata appeared in her palm. Marie Lazarre is ready to embrace Sister Leopolda’s lie and perform the role of the suffering holy Indian:

But I’ll tell you this: it seemed entirely natural. It was me. I lifted up my hand as in my dream. It was completely limp with sacredness. [...] My arm was dried blood from the wrist down to the elbow. And it hurt. Their faces turned like flat flowers of adoration to follow that hand’s movements. I let it swing through the air, imparting a saint’s blessing. I had practiced. I knew exactly how to act. They murmured. I heaved a sigh, and a golden beam of light suddenly broke through the clouded window and flooded down directly on my face. A stroke of perfect luck! They had to be convinced. [...] “Come forward, Sister Leopolda”. I gestured with my heavenly wound. Oh, it hurt. It bled when I reopened the slight heal (54-55).

Unlike Nector Kashpaw, Marie Lazarre enjoys the role she has to play outside the reservation. This is partly so because she manages to impose her ideal on the convent and construct her identity in accordance with her own fiction. In spite of all differences, Nector Kashpaw’s and Mary Lazarre-Kashpaw’s stories are, however, only two sides of the same coin. In a complementary way, both life-stories elaborate the Native American reaction to the Euro-American representations and negative treatments of American indigenous people. Accordingly, while in Nector Kashpaw’s life-story Erdrich exhibits, and to some extent reaffirms, the Euro-American myth of the noble Indian who is doomed to failure and who fails to become an agent of history and narrative, in Marie Kashpaw-Lazarre’s life-story she realizes the possibility of authorizing the Euro-American narratives and acquiring agency through the Native American re-imagination and re-appropriation of the Euro-American myths of American culture.

On the whole, Love Medicine is a postcolonial parody of the colonial racial-cultural stereotypes of the Natives in aesthetic terms. As Owens has suggested, Erdrich depicts “the internalized colonialism and racism that destroy Native people and communities” (73). However, it is open to question whether Erdrich manages to re-politicize any cultural norms in this novel, or whether she wants to do so at all. As Owens convincingly argues, Love Medicine could become a commercial success because Erdrich’s depiction of the reservation and its people reinforces Euro-American stereotypes of the Indian and the reservation life (71-72).

However, as I have argued, Love Medicine draws attention to the issue of identity in many respects. First, Erdrich arguably displays various strategies of identity-formations and self-definitions in her Native American characters’ life-stories. In doing so, Erdrich shows the effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness of essentialist identity politics as well as of self-definitions in terms of racial and cultural differentiation. Second, the mainstream reception of Love Medicine as an “authentic” representative of Native American literature and people rehearses identity issues and the politics of othering, despite the fact that Erdrich’s Native Americans are the products of ideological constructions to the same extent as, for example, James Fenimore Cooper’s Indians. Besides – and Love Medicine’s market success indicates this clearly – Erdrich’s representation of Native American people meets the mainstream (Euro-American) expectations about authentic Native American fiction, a quite abstract and sometimes problematic category. The properties attributed to this general category enable us to identify writers and novels as “Native American” but fail to construct the identity of Native American writers in terms of their class belonging, gender differences, or their different relations to cultural and/or political power. It still remains debatable how and to what extent Native American writers and novels can re(-)present
Native American experience, indigenous identities, or the differences within (Native) American perceptions of contemporary North American reality.

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