The Stories We Tell: Louise Erdrich's Identity Narratives
Author(s): E. Shelley Reid
Published by: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/468237
Accessed: 23/05/2008 14:17

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=melus.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
The Stories We Tell: 
Louise Erdrich’s Identity Narratives

E. Shelley Reid  
Oklahoma State University

In their study of American individualism, Robert N. Bellah and his associates report that the mostly white and middle class Americans to whom they spoke “have difficulty articulating the richness of their commitments [to other people]. In the language they use, their lives sound more isolated and arbitrary than they really are” (21). The researchers conclude with concern that “the language of individualism, the primary American language of self-understanding, limits the ways in which people think” (290, my emphasis). Carol Tavris, writing in The Mismeasure of Woman, puts it even more succinctly: “We must be careful about the explanations and narratives we choose to account for our lives because... we live by the stories we tell” (312). While both studies note a crucial issue in contemporary American cultural studies, how we identify ourselves as individuals and as Americans, they focus primarily on Euro-American representations of identity, and, perhaps as a result, leave their readers with more cautions than recommendations. Modern American literature in fact offers us access to a wide variety of viable alternative self-concepts and narrations of identity; broadening Bellah’s “people” and Tavris’s “we” to include and recognize the significance of American stories not strictly descended from European origins may reveal that there is less cause for concern than they imply—and more cause for celebration.1

To be sure, in contemporary America our stories are still predominantly influenced by the autobiographical narrative styles created over two centuries ago in Europe. The mythical American success story—whether told by Cooper, Twain, Hemingway and Hammett, or by John Wayne, Phil Donahue, and Dan Rather—still examines primarily “our deepest identity” as individuals, using the narrative paradigms developed by late eighteenth-century writers.
such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Benjamin Franklin. In these narratives, the self-made, self-reliant man explains how he has progressed beyond the naïveté of youth, has overcome the obstacles placed in his way by society, and has put the past behind him to become a confident, productive individual. He assumes all the authority of the author’s position, assuring us that he alone can and will tell the true story about himself; we are invited to believe the facts of his story as he presents them. Despite literary innovations which have given us other stories from which to choose, such as stories of chaotic times and antiheroes, of absurdity and inaction, the earlier paradigm has retained popularity and cultural currency.

Though limited in scope, these traditional autobiographical paradigms offer powerful opportunities, even for Americans of non-European ancestry. For minority Americans, writing (or co-writing) their life stories has from the start produced both acceptance by the reading public and a chance to claim and (re)tell their own stories. Slave narratives, “as-told-to” Indian autobiographies, and exoticized stories of Asian immigrants helped open doors for other minority writers to create and publish poetry, fiction, and other genres. Yet the impulse to focus on stories of identity has not weakened. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim notes, “For many ethnic writers, writing is frequently a writing of ‘the story of my life’ (or ‘of my people’s lives’), whether it takes the form of poetry, fiction, or autobiography” (27). Such “identity narratives,” a term meant to be more inclusive than “autobiography,” are thus at the heart of much ethnic and minority American writing.

Of course, some writers with little or no cultural connection to eighteenth-century France would probably wish to revise the forms of these narratives, and have frequently done so; Jade Snow Wong’s third-person narration of her autobiography and N. Scott Momaday’s multiperspectival construction of his life story are but two examples. However, the genre and the reading public have resisted such revisions. Harriet Jacobs’s claim that Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl was a self-written, true, identity narrative was discounted for over a century, while contemporary booksellers still often have trouble deciding in which section Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior belongs. Each book breaks just enough “rules” to make audiences wary. Expanding the range of stories we
ERDRICH’S IDENTITY NARRATIVES

tell about ourselves, and, importantly, those in which we recognize our selves, is a mammoth task.

Enter Louise Erdrich. Like many other Native American authors, Erdrich faces a textual and cultural challenge: to reclaim a Native American identity from the Coopers and Disneys of Euro-American culture, and then to find a way to share it with an audience that suspects that she and her culture are on the brink of extinction. Autobiography would seem a useful tool to accomplish this task, yet there are several complications. For instance, Arnold Krupat argues that Euro-American culture’s most widely accepted form of identity narrative is entirely alien to Native American cultures: “[N]one of the conditions of production for autobiography—here I would isolate post-Napoleonic historicism, egocentric individualism and writing as foremost—was typical of Native American cultures” (in Vizenor 55). Indeed, Paula Gunn Allen argues that the very idea of individual self-representation is fundamentally at odds with many Native American world-views (55). To create a textual identity that both faithfully represents Native American concepts and strikes non-Native readers as convincing, Erdrich has had to find a middle ground. Her astounding professional success over the past decade suggests that she has found just such a meeting place. Thus, while much has been written about her debts to American modernist narratives, I’d like to draw a different line of connection, tracing Erdrich’s re-visions and re-presentations of more familiar Euro-American identity narratives and the selves they celebrate.

For the sake of time and space, this study focuses primarily on Love Medicine and Tracks, though Erdrich has continued to refine her mediation in subsequent texts. Specifically, I concentrate on how Erdrich modifies normative autobiographical narration, and the self/selves that can be represented within them, to broaden our storytelling space. Drawing on both Native American oral traditions and conventional Euro-American narrative forms, Erdrich creates a new set of textual gestures that can more faithfully capture the multiple voices and extended family networks of Native American “individuals.” Her narratives also allow the representation of a larger community identity and weave her audience into the fabric of this extended family and its stories of survival. Understanding Erdrich’s reliance on and revisions of
familiar personal narrative strategies can make it easier to see her emphasis on “stories of contemporary survivors” (“Where I Ought to Be” 23). Such a reading can also make us more sensitive to similar endeavors by other contemporary writers and give us the tools to begin to include and create new “explanations and narratives” to represent our American lives.

Before discussing the alterations that Erdrich’s texts make, we need to be aware of how our own familiarity with traditional Western tropes may inform our reading of Erdrich’s narratives. Even without reading through the rush of autobiography criticism from the 1970s and 1980s, many readers would generally agree with one or more of the following generic definitions: Roy Pascal’s insistence that “The autobiography claims to be a true story, and it must qualify in respect to truth if it is to qualify at all” (60); Georges Gusdorf’s assertion that autobiography comprises the “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” (29) and “recomposes and interprets a life in its totality” (38); and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s founding promise:

I must remain incessantly beneath [the reader’s] gaze, so that he may follow me in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life. Indeed, he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for if he finds the slightest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth. (65)

Erdrich’s “deviations” from these paradigms have left some critics struggling to appreciate her efforts. For example, after describing the fragmentary forces operating on colonized Native American cultures, David Mitchell argues that the resulting cultural disarray is a literary albatross: Erdrich’s “overriding concern” in Love Medicine, he writes, is “that something useful must be made out of the chaos and desolation that sits at the heart of the Native American experience today” (164). Using similar arguments, Pauline Woodward writes that Erdrich

offers a new rendering of community to convey the remnants of Chippewa culture and the fragmented lives of contemporary people
who endure despite the devastating loss of their tradition and the discontinuity of their existence. (11)

It is thus not only the text that seems fragmented and disorganized, but also the people it represents. Such readings emerge from Western beliefs that identity, and thus identity narrative, are supposed to be whole, uniform, and seamless, that fragmentation and ambiguity connote chaos and the failure of self-actualization. Furthermore, in the more familiar paradigm, “wholeness” of narrative and viewpoint signify truth, while we are encouraged to be suspicious of gaps or hesitations.

Recognizing the cultural specificity of this judgment is the first crucial step to reading contemporary minority American texts as identity narratives within the tradition that gave us Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, and Henry Adams. In the cultural setting of Erdrich’s texts, for instance, “wholeness” is indeed a central tenet, though it is represented quite differently. As Lydia Schultz explains, while the multivocal, fragmented narrative of Western modernist and postmodernist prose is usually a signal of the destructive fragmentation and isolation experienced by modern (Western) people, it becomes something else in Erdrich’s texts. In Love Medicine, writes Schultz, “Multiperspectivity does not serve as the sign of uncertain, individual solutions that it is in dominant American culture. Instead, the multiple narrators are part of the hooplike repetition and variation of Chippewa storytelling” (91). In this cultural situation, “wholeness” is quite often represented as in flux; as Allen points out, the oral tradition that forms the foundation of Native American storytelling “is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past” (45). Moreover, David Brumble observes that most early Native American autobiographical narratives comprise several shorter narratives of separate events, with very little connecting narrative to link them together (22 ff).

“Truth” is also a culturally defined category; in an oral performance, as scholars like Dennis Tedlock and Arnold Krupat explain, any story that is told is always a version of the story, altered as the storyteller sees fit to keep the audience interested, make a specific point, or add a personal interpretation. Finally, the
relationship between storyteller and audience in Native American narratives is less oppositional than the one Rousseau delineates. Brumble notes that stories were often told at communal gatherings or social events (told, often, as social events), with several members of the community participating in the performance. He quotes George Bird Grinnell’s description of one such session:

At formal gatherings a man might tell a story and when it was finished might say: “The story is ended. Can anyone tie another to it?” Another man might then relate one, ending with the same words, and so stories might be told all about the lodge. (in Brumble 32)

Traditional Native American audiences are thus likely to be accustomed to stories that are linked, but not necessarily connected in the ways that Western audiences would expect, and that are told by a series of voices in different versions.3

Erdrich’s novels are not, of course, traditional oral performances. They are written texts that owe much to a long tradition of Euro-American novelists and autobiographers. Yet she depends on some of the narrative gestures of oral performance because her characters, too, live by the stories they tell. Going back to the novels, we can see how the identity narrative gestures most familiar to Euro-American readers—a single unified narrator, linear presentation of narrative and character development, and chronological consistency (telling the whole story)—can be rewritten and yet still represent a complete identity. Erdrich’s novels, in fact, demonstrate how the use of multiple narrators helps alleviate the alienation of individual characters; how stories which are half-told, re-told, and left un-told suggest a common base of knowledge that ties characters together and helps individuals and communities adapt to changing times; and how achronological, non-linear narrative structures recall the security of a web of stories, all tied to one another in a representation of personal stability and cultural survival.

The first chapter of Love Medicine provides a crash course in these revised identity narratives. It opens with a lyrical description of the events leading up to June Morrissey’s sudden and inexplicable death in an Easter snowstorm, shifts to a first-person narrative by June’s niece Albertine, and then slides into a series of
The kitchen-table conversations as more and more relatives arrive to reminisce about people and events familiar to the characters but entirely unfamiliar to the reader. These family stories seem to appear almost at random, skipping back and forth in time, relating events that happened both on and off the reservation to Indians, whites, and mixed-bloods. But by the end of the chapter, we discover that we have been introduced to nearly all the people who were important in June’s life: her adoptive parents Marie and Eli, her cousins Aurelia and Zelda, her husband Gordie, and her sons King and Lipsha. By “tying another one to it,” the family members explain who June was (a loner like Eli), why she left (angry and frightened like King), and why she set off across the prairie in a snowstorm to walk home to them (like Albertine, drawn almost against her will to rejoin the family), all without mentioning more than a couple of specific facts about June herself. The exercise in the kitchen, then, is less a piecing together of remnants and fragments to form a seamless whole than a celebration of the many pieces that together made up June. The multiple storytellers in the chapter do more than (as a reader trained in Faulkner or James might expect) provide a number of points of view from which to regard June Morrissey; they help give us the whole complexity of June within her community, perhaps more fully than she could have told us herself in a monovocal narrative.

In *Tracks*, the relationship between the two narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, is more antagonistic; although they tell stories that overlap and complement one another, Pauline and Nanapush speak from vantage points that differ in gender, generation, religion, and community standing. The two storytellers are often at odds in their hopes and plans for the citizens of the Matchimanito community, and each scoffs gently at the insight and credibility of the other: “She was worse than a Nanapush,” the old man says of the girl, “for while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving the truth” (39). But they share a high tolerance for ambiguity and do not directly contradict each other’s stories. Pauline, for example, is unconcerned that no one can decide who Lulu’s father is; as she notes, the story that old men tell “comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong, too” (31). The multivoiced narration in *Tracks* thus strikes a balance between seeking the truth through the accretion of
different community viewpoints and binding the community together through repetition and reinforcement of even the most dubious stories. As with *Love Medicine*, its multivocality can be read as an approximation of the Native American collaborative storytelling that helps ensure community survival. Thus both novels do indeed move toward the completeness of revelation and continuity of lives lived for which Rousseau strove, and may in fact be more successful at such representations.

The novels also depend heavily on multiple versions of key stories, a revision of the once-through, birth-to-maturity chronology that has served American writers from Henry Adams to Norman Schwarzkopf. Erdrich’s use of story versions in which the details of what “really happened” change or are artfully rearranged can seem to compromise the truth-telling. For instance, having read “The Red Convertible,” the chapter that Lyman Lamartine narrates about his brother Henry’s suicide, a reader might dismiss Marie’s version of it, (described for us by her grandson Lipsha later in the book), as a false account:

One time [says Lipsha] she told Gordie never to ride with a crazy Lamartine boy. She had seen something in the polished-up tin of her bread toaster. So he didn’t. Sure enough, the time came we heard how Lyman and Henry went out of control in their car, ending up in the river. Lyman swam to the top, but Henry never made it. (240)

But the third version of the story, part of a chapter narrated by Henry’s mother Lulu, offers a better clue about how to read these discrepancies. When Lyman returns from the river looking “almost half gone himself” and announces that there has been “an accident,” Lulu tells him, “Don’t say nothing.” She knew, she tells the reader, “that no accident would have taken Henry Junior’s life, not after he had the fortune to get through a war and a prison camp alive. But . . . I said nothing. I knew what people needed to believe” (288).

The three versions of this story are more than mishandled rumors or the denial that comes from extreme grief. Using the same “facts,” the three narrators relate very different stories, each in a way that serves the narrator’s purpose and represents his/her self. Lyman’s “original” story is a memorial for his dead brother.
Marie's version, part of Lipsha's tribute to his all-knowing grandmother, is not a story about Henry Lamartine at all; for Marie it is a story about Gordie, and for Lipsha it is a story about his powerful grandmother. Finally, Lulu sees Henry's death as part of a larger pattern enveloping all of her "boys," her dead husband Henry Senior, and her childhood encounter with a dead body in the woods. For her, Henry Junior's death is only a small part of the story of the Lamartines who "stuck together" through good times and bad (289). Accepting the notion that individuals and their community need more than one "truth" opens up a wide field for new stories about ourselves. Indeed, the shifting lens of truth is perhaps more useful and representative of diverse American identities, Native and non-Native, than the stories we have gotten used to telling.  

Lastly, in addition to rewriting the Euro-American identity narrative paradigm of a single narrator presenting the one true story of his life, Erdrich also modifies the linear chronology so important to Rousseau and to many critical definitions of the genre. Thus the "accretive and achronological narrative" that Louis Owens describes as central to Native American storytelling (172) is the dominant mode of both Tracks and Love Medicine, despite the orderly lists of dates in their tables of contents. In Tracks, events from each year listed are described from at least two points of view, often within chapters headed by earlier or later dates. Just as frequently, single narrators slide easily through verb tenses, presenting the story as both immediate encounter and remembered history. In the case of Love Medicine, one senses that the dates at the top of each chapter (which do, excepting the first chapter, proceed chronologically) are landmarks added after the fact as a gesture of Western cohesiveness. They neither limit the events discussed within a chapter nor allow the direct comparisons between chapters that similar or sequential dates might imply.  

Thus "Lulu's Boys," though dated 1957, ranges back through the events of nearly two decades, tying one story about the "boys" to another, building up a picture of a woman who by her own description is best represented by an accretive narrative: "I am a woman of detachable parts," she tells Beverly Lamartine (115). At one point in the chapter the narrative whips through time as though chronological distinctions never existed:
“Some men react in that situation [the strip poker game Lulu played with Beverly and his brother Henry twenty years earlier] and some don’t,” she told him. “It was reaction I looked for, if you know what I mean.” [past events]

Beverly was silent.

Lulu winked at him. . . . At the time [present], her hair was still dark and thickly curled. Later [future] she would burn it off when her house caught fire, and it would never [far future] grow back. Because her face was soft and yet alert [present], . . . Beverly had always [past] felt exposed, preyed on, undressed around her, even before the game in which she’d stripped him naked [past] and now [present], as he found, appraised him in his shame. (116)

In the chapter that follows, “The Plunge of the Brave,” also dated 1957, Nector Kashpaw shifts from past to present tense, and then after several pages shifts back to past tense without changing the date or the story he is relating, almost, in fact, without any interruption in the narrative at all. The night he spends with Lulu in 1952 is reenacted for us as a present-time event, as vivid in the narrative as it is in Nector’s memory: despite the passage of time suggested by the date at the top of the chapter, use of a linear chronology would actually disrupt the wholeness of the story and the web of connections that surrounds it.

As Tavris suggests, the link between narrative style and self-concept is a strong one: Rousseau prepares his readers to appreciate a certain kind of (represented) self by announcing repeatedly that he is telling the whole truth, leaving no gaps and proceeding in a logical (by Western standards) order from the beginning of his life straight through to the end. Similarly, Erdrich uses elements of a narrative style strongly reminiscent of Native American oral traditions to provide a foundation for her revision of Western ideas of identity. The ability to avoid seeing “coherent” and “fragmented” (or “whole” and “multiple”) as mutually exclusive descriptions of an identity-focused narrative can transfer directly to an appreciation of the Native American concepts of identity that are at the heart of the novels. Thus Erdrich’s revisions extend from the narrative gestures into the very selves being represented; the selves in her texts, like the stories
themselves, are interdependent, inclusive, and adaptable while still being whole and healthy.

Just as some critics reading *Love Medicine* have found themselves unable simply to ignore or gloss over the text’s narrative fragmentation, readers of Native American literatures have often found themselves struggling to come to terms with the discontinuities and multiplicities of Native American identity. Several scholars, as discussed earlier, find the novels proof that contemporary Native writers face a host of dis-integrating cultural forces. Certainly, Native and non-Native observers alike have noted that the social realities of modern Native American life can be disruptive of a sense of identity. Yet as Brumble explains, readers looking for the highly individualistic self of Rousseau, Franklin, or Adams, even in the earliest Native American identity narratives, are likely to be frustrated in their readings:

Adams and Rousseau are typical of modern autobiographers... in that they are aware of themselves as individuals, and in their complex awareness that they might have been otherwise. On the other hand, an Indian living in the old way had little sense of an individual self apart from the tribe or clan, little sense that he might have been a different self had he been born in a different lodge. (136)

Brumble notes that traditional Euro-American autobiographical gestures were transformed over the last century by this radically relational concept of identity. The identity narratives that emerge from the intersection, he concludes, need to be read “without a culture-bound insistence” on Western concepts of discrete individuality (182).

Once again, the role of the storyteller as mediator is central, to identity as well as to narrative. As Allen explains,

an Indian poetry must develop metaphors that will not only reflect the dual perceptions of Indian/non-Indian but will reconcile them. The ideal metaphor will harmonize the contradictions and balance them so that the internal equilibrium can be achieved, so that each perspective is meaningful, and in their joining psychic unity rather than fragmentation occurs. (161)
It is not, then, the multiplicity of perspectives or the cultural fragmentation itself that is destructive, but an inability to mediate the differences. Readers looking for clues to the psychic health and well-being of an individual in a Native American identity narrative thus need to look past the apparent state of cultural confusion to the way in which the character is harmonizing the multiple perspectives that have influence in her or his life.

From a revised perspective, then, Erdrich’s novels are clearly identity narratives despite their obvious departures from, and mediations of, Western autobiographical conventions of self-representation. The emphasis varies slightly in each text: *Love Medicine*, for example, explores personal and familial identity through its attempt to paint a picture of the absent June, while *Tracks* explores identity in a historical and tribal context. The web-like, “dreamcatcher” narrative form of each novel thus also reflects the model of identity that Erdrich seeks to represent: characters’ lives and selves are as mutable and inextricably woven together as their stories, and as gently bounded by the larger circles of tribal, historical, and geographical identification.

To read *Love Medicine* as June Morrissey’s personal narrative is to begin to understand how Rousseau’s story of “simply myself” (17) can be reorganized without losing the focus on fundamental identities. June’s death in the first chapter brings us immediately into the circle of people who are central to her sense of self. Robert Silberman explains this phenomenon as a “haunting,” and, still leaning on Euro-American relationship patterns, describes the characters’ interdependence as a matter of the responsibility of one discrete individual for another rather than a truly relational identity: *Love Medicine* could have been called “Who Killed June Kashpaw?” or “What Killed Her?” since the responsibility and guilt are shared by many individuals (104). *Love Medicine* is not fundamentally a book about blame or guilt; rather, it is a series of attempts by Kashpaws, Nanapushes, and Lamartines to tell June’s story so that, like Albertine, they finally “felt the right way” about her (10). In doing so, they necessarily tell their own stories and those of other family members, sliding from one thread to another across time and place until their own senses of identity are securely woven back together. Erdrich uses this healing process to explore the ways in which a “stable,” “individual” identity can be repre-
ERDRICH'S IDENTITY NARRATIVES

sented as multifaceted, mutable, and inextricably linked to family and tribe.

As Owens points out, when we first meet June, as she is sharing brightly colored hard-boiled eggs with a nondescript mud engineer in an unremarkable local bar, her description fits a common Western paradigm. June’s sense of herself as fragile, ready to “crack wide open” (6) or “fall apart at the slightest touch,” with nothing solid underneath the white vinyl of her jacket (4), is familiar to many readers, according to Owens: “In a Euramerican context it underscores June’s alienation, approaching schizophrenia, her loss of a centered identity” (195). But he explains that June’s initial appearance is also familiar to readers accustomed to more traditional Native American narratives, readers who are likely to see June’s “personal identity [as] entirely dependent upon a coherent cultural identity” (20):

Fragmentation in Native American mythology is not necessarily a bad thing.... For the traditional culture hero, the necessary annihilation of the self that prefigures healing and wholeness and a return to the tribal community often takes the form of physical fragmentation, bodily, as well as psychic deconstruction. (195)

When read in the Native American literary tradition that has chronicled Abel’s confusion in N. Scott Momaday’s House of Dawn and Tayo’s sense of loss in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony, June’s self-less appearance in the opening of the novel paradoxically signals the reader to expect a text about the return to the wholeness of a culturally tuned sense of self. It signals, as clearly as Rousseau’s “simply myself” or Frederick Douglass’s “I was born in Tuckahoe,” the start of an identity narrative. June’s death prevents her from telling her own story, though she has made the first gesture and is literally “going home” to the reservation when the blizzard overtakes her. Since her self comprises all the selves of her family and tribe, there is nothing unusual about hearing her story in their voices.

Indeed, the recuperation of June’s identity begins immediately. Albertine’s formal introduction of June restores her to her whole “tribal” self, defined by Kenneth Lincoln as comprising “an extended family that reciprocates among people, places, history,
flora and fauna, spirits and gods” (42). It also places her in relation to everyone else:

June was raised by Great-uncle Eli. . . . He’d taken her in when Grandma’s sister died and June’s no-good Morrissey father ran off to high-time it in the Cities. . . . June decided on my uncle, Gordie Kashpaw, and married him even though they had to run away to do it. They were cousins, but almost like brother and sister. Grandma wouldn’t let them in the house for a year, she was so angry. (8)

Fragile or not, June had a family and a place in their lives, and thus a coherent, stable identity despite the pains and doubts of her daily life. Moreover, she is inextricably woven into the selves of the other characters; by demonstrating this, Erdrich allows readers to imagine the reverse process. That is, as we read all the other stories, we can piece together the self that June would have presented had she told her own (and thereby everyone else’s) life story.

Tracks explores another axis of Native American identity, the connection of an individual with the history of his or her tribe. In the novel, the trickster/patriarch Nanapush narrates to young Lulu the story of the tribe’s struggles to survive in an attempt to give her back the identity she has lost while away at a government boarding school. More than just speaking the personal history of Lulu’s mother Fleur, Nanapush and Pauline tell stories about the connections of family, clan, and tribe. As readers we do not really meet Lulu in this novel (though we may “remember” her adult life from Love Medicine). But Tracks is as much an identity narrative for Lulu as Love Medicine is for June, providing the stories that will let her define herself historically as a product of tribal traditions and pressures from the white community, narrated and embodied by Nanapush and Pauline, respectively. Blood relations are not the crucial element in Tracks; in fact, as Pauline notes, Lulu’s “family” is artificially constructed, “a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new” (70).

In Tracks, rather, Erdrich presents the individual characters as coexistent with tribal history and mythology. It is impossible to separate the inscrutable Fleur from the tribal stories about the
water-god Misshepeshu or to determine whether her strangeness is the cause or is the effect of the stories about her supernatural relationships. Nanapush, too, embodies the whole of tribal history and tradition:

I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years’ growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (2)

His life story is the tribe’s life story; his adaptation to a new bureaucratic identity at the end of the novel literally and figuratively ensures the survival of the tribe, a tribe whose future is clearly tied to young Lulu’s self and story. Mitchell’s observations on the function of memory in Love Medicine are particularly pertinent to the situation of identity in Tracks: “each character’s relationship to the past—particularly an Indian [tribal] past—forms the core of his or her ability to deal effectively with the present, and to develop a coherent sense of self” (166). In many ways, Tracks is indeed “only” a fictional narrative about a historical turning point for a Native American tribe. Yet in a mediated worldview that includes an expanded concept of the self, it is also an equal partner in the interconnected, relational identity narrative begun in Love Medicine.

Finally, in addition to broadening the scope of personal identity to include all the elements of a “tribe” that Lincoln names, both narratives describe an overarching community identity that values diversity and encourages adaptation among its own “detachable parts.” For Erdrich, the community’s ability to adapt is “one of the strengths of Indian culture, that you pick and choose and keep and discard” (“Whatever” 79). Thus Zelda can decide that her mixed-blood daughter Albertine is definitely an Indian, Pauline that she wants to be white like her Canadian grandfather, and Nanapush that he should learn how to function as a white government bureaucrat; none is judged to have made the “wrong” choice or is irrevocably cast out from the community.
Indeed, Erdrich’s most lyrical and explicit description of a communal self suggests that the strongest communities are always multiple and mutable:

Lulu’s boys had grown into a kind of pack. They always hung together. When a shot went true, their gangling legs, encased alike in faded denim, shifted as if a ripple went through them collectively. They moved in dance steps too intricate for the noninitiated eye to imitate or understand. Clearly they were of one soul. Handsome, rangy, wildly various, they were bound in total loyalty, not by oath but by the simple, unquestioning belongingness of one part of one organism. (118)

Similarly, Nanapush emphasizes throughout Tracks that the tribal community comprises a number of individual organisms woven tightly together, in his metaphor, not into a web but into a “coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and new among us were taken” (2). Thus, as Schultz points out, Erdrich “answers our implicit question of ‘What is it like to be Native American?’ by debunking the idea that there is such a thing as a Native American view, by helping us to acknowledge that there is not even a single Chippewa view” (92). In contrast, while Franklin, Adams, and other conventional Euro-American autobiographers frequently associate themselves with the larger groups of community or nation, they are usually more concerned with narrowing the definition of “American” or “modern” than with opening up all its possibilities, thus again placing limits on the stories we live by.

In a sense, we are back where we started. Erdrich’s representation of personal identity as a matter subject to change and revision is the natural consequence of the relational, interwoven identity she and other Native American authors and observers have described. If one strand of the web—be it a personal, tribal, or historical condition—alters its position, the others must adapt. Erdrich has found an and to replace the either/or of Euro-American conventions of identity: for her characters, continuity and change, historical and contemporary influences, individuality and interrelation are of equal importance. As Joy Harjo succinctly notes, “All persons are still their own entity, but not separate from everything else” (92).
Debra Holt infers from this conclusion that “value judgments, so easily arrived at in the Western tradition, have no place [in Erdrich’s novels].” and decides that the reader is thus prevented from reaching a “final truth” (151). She is partially correct; the Native American perspectives that Erdrich explores require a kind of deconstructive logic in which each reader comes to a conclusion somewhere between the binary terminal points, and no two readers are likely to come to the same “final truth.” However, Holt overlooks the investment that Erdrich entices readers to make. Far from being prevented from making judgments, Erdrich’s readers play a key role in constructing and arranging the identities and stories of the novels, with Erdrich’s text as a model and guide. Indeed, Kathleen Sands argues that in *Love Medicine*,

[i]t is the reader who is... forced to shift position, turn, ponder, and finally integrate the story into a coherent whole by recognizing the indestructible connections between the characters and events of [Erdrich’s] narrative(s). Hence the novel places the reader in a paradoxically dual stance, simultaneously on the fringe of the story yet at the very center of the process—distant and intimate, passive yet very actively involved in the narrative process. (12)

Erdrich understands that the best way to modify the conventions of the identity narrative is to include the reader in that process: the “gaps” become invitations for the reader to weave himself or herself into the narrative web of identity and to participate in the struggle for cultural survival and continuity.

As Sands comments, in the fragmented (but not, as we have seen, inexplicably so) narrative of a novel like *Love Medicine*, “no individual [is] privy to the whole story,” with the exception, in this case, of the reader (15). As readers, we are given access to numerous pieces of information, some of them, like the thoughts that cross June’s mind the night of her death, revealed only to us. Moreover, in addition to inducting readers into the tribal community, Erdrich’s adaptation of oral narrative techniques—fragmentation and repetition, circularity and interconnectedness—helps teach us how best to construct identities for the characters and communities in her novels. Erdrich thus makes her readers into
the mediators, a process that James Ruppert sees as essential for cross-cultural communication:

[t]he text will effectively need to teach any reader how to read the work, and, thus, how to perceive new evoked realities and new modes of knowledge. A non-Native American reader could be taught to read the text in a synchronistic, nonrational manner. . . . The Native American reader could be encouraged to see not only a mythic dimension, but also a linear dimension including rationalist Western tradition. . . . The reader would be required to reconstruct the discourse of mediation that is the text. He [or she], too, must mediate.

(223)

*Love Medicine* and *Tracks* both demonstrate their intention to be identity narratives—stories are told in the first-person, events are linked to self-discovery, characters reflect on who they are and where they belong—and require the reader to construct identity within the circular, interconnected pattern common to Native American cultures.

And importantly, while a reader who has some knowledge of Native American literary and cultural traditions is more prepared for the gaps in the texts, Erdrich’s novels make appreciable efforts to “teach *any* reader how to read the work,” even those readers who are largely unfamiliar with Native American cultures. Although *Love Medicine* has been criticized for having a narrative line too complex and thus inaccessible (Mengelkoch 135), its complexity proves instructional in several ways. For instance, the very unfamiliarity of the narrative style and self-concept are useful; Allen explains that they can serve to alert the reader to his or her own ignorance, thus preventing any quick cultural generalizations or appropriations, and perhaps even encouraging readers to learn more about the culture.6 Even if readers don’t choose to learn more, Owens notes that there is a subtle switch in cultural roles that can give the reader, now an outsider, a necessary appreciation of a Native American point of view (14).

However, Erdrich’s narratives are more inviting than distancing. As Schultz explains, by not using a narrator to mediate or edit the text, Erdrich “encourages us as readers to find that relational viewpoint, to learn to think as her characters think” (91). Thus if the characters do not find the gaps and disjunctions intolerable, and
ERDRICH’S IDENTITY NARRATIVES

there is no narrator to say otherwise, readers can learn an acceptance of the dreamcatcher narrative approach even without any formal study of it. By enlisting readers’ participation, Erdrich expands our definitions of both identity and identity narrative. She thus takes her place as a literary mediator, teaching us to recognize the validity of other stories about selves as a first step toward rethinking the stories we have told and will tell.

Such revision is a very long process. Perhaps the self is such a complicated entity, with each one different from the next, that a series of conventions and signs is necessary to allow us to communicate our selves to each other. Within a single discourse community, this is feasible: once people understand what the signs represent, they come to expect that a certain combination of textual gestures metonymically present an Other self on a printed page. It is necessary, one might argue, to sacrifice some flexibility in presentation for the opportunity to feel that we have communicated at some fundamental level with another human being. In the case of self representation, however, an insistence on a single set of markers and textual conventions can place limits that are too severe, limits that prevent communication, especially between people from different discourse communities and different cultures. Since the stories we tell are so closely linked with the people we become, a strict set of contracts and rules can make it more difficult to imagine becoming or understanding somebody Other. It may be more useful to see identity narratives as part of a negotiation between writer and audience, with possibilities for alterations as each side alters its perspectives and goals.

The implications of such mutability for readers of ethnic and minority American literatures are many. First, it puts us on alert. If the stories we tell about ourselves can be changed, they probably have been changed; we need to be able to recognize the gestures that writers have chosen to adopt from Euro-American traditions, as well as the ways in which they have modified the normative gestures, if we are to be successful readers of their selves/texts. In Erdrich’s case, recognizing the validity of multifaceted narratives and selves helps us see her texts as documenting the survival and cultural successes of contemporary Native Americans, not as mourning the passing of once-great cultures. Such efforts will also
be valuable in reading other contemporary writers, from Toni Morrison and Amy Tan to Sandra Cisneros and Sherman Alexie.

Moreover, seeing the successful working-out of these revised identity narratives may help Americans escape the limitations of an individualistic self-concept that worried Bellah and his associates. None of us, white Americans included, is living in Rousseau’s world. In late twentieth-century America it may thus no longer be as personally, culturally, or nationality necessary to define ourselves as unified, discrete individuals operating on smooth timelines of progress. It may not, in fact, be feasible or even possible to continue to tell or rely on only that kind of story. In working to ensure the survival of contemporary Native American stories and cultures, and in making an alternative set of stories available for our consideration, Erdrich may help a broad cross-section of Americans adapt our concepts and stories of identity—and so survive to tell our whole, complex selves to the generations that follow us.

Notes

I wish to thank Eric Anderson, William Fischer, Joy Reid, and Mark Shechner for their assistance with earlier drafts of this article.

1. For a comprehensive exploration of one facet of this diversity, an emphasis on community rather than individual identity, see TuSmith.

2. While Erdrich often shies away from being labeled a minority writer, she still sees herself as a participant in Native American writers’ special efforts to claim identity and ensure cultural survival: “Contemporary Native American writers have . . . a task quite different from that of other writers I’ve mentioned. In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors, while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe” (“Where I Ought to Be” 23).

3. Vizenor explains that this principle is valid for the Chippewa/Anishinaabeg culture that is part of Erdrich’s heritage and her characters’ lives: “The Anishinaabeg did not have written histories; their world views were not linear narratives that started and stopped in manifest binaries” (24).

4. Another manifestation of Erdrich’s story versions is the publication of a second edition of Love Medicine, described on the title page as a “new and expanded version” of the text. While the publishing blurb on the back cover calls it “equivalent to the presentation of a new and definitive text,” Erdrich’s new version does what her characters’ story versions do: it undermines definitiveness, instead emphasizing the fluidity of an infinite number of context- and narrator-dependent variations.
5. “Identity,” writes Cherokee poet Rayna Green, “is never simply a matter of genetic make-up or natural birthright. Perhaps once, long ago, it was both. But not now. For people out on the edge, out on the road, identity is a matter of will, a matter of choice, a face to be shaped in a ceremonial act” (7).

6. Allen points out that early translator-editors of Native American literature who reworked the material to more closely mirror familiar Western structures did the literature a great disservice by eliding the cultural differences. Explaining the difference between her uncle John Gunn’s revisions of Keres legends and E. C. Parsons’ more literal translations of Laguna and Pueblo stories, she says:

When Uncle John puts the stuff into a structure, immediately the reader looks at the structure and says, “Oh, I recognize this.” And the reader, the Western reader, should not be saying, “I recognize this.”

Believe me, if that’s what readers are saying, they’re making a terrible mistake.

. . . [w]hat Parsons does . . . is she gets so completely confused about what’s going on, it shows. And as a result, you know that you don’t understand and that’s the truth.

You don’t understand. (Coltelli 25)

Works Cited


Holt, Debra C. “Transformation and Continuance: Native American Tradition in


