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The interrogative stance taken by a postcolonial work has much to do with the political purpose of the work, and in the resistance literature of the classical phase of Native American Renaissance, as represented in the works of Leslie Marmon Silko, one finds the writer employing an aesthetics and narrative which give voice to anti-imperialist critique and postcolonial protest. This form of protest writing has an explicit, political agenda of cultural nationalism and social change. However, in the next conceptual phase of ethnic writing in the U.S., which Mary Louise Pratt describes as “autoethnographic,” as distinct from the “autochthonous” forms of the initial stage, one discerns a subtle change of approach (34). In this stage, ethnic writing, while retaining the element of resistance, moves beyond the confines of the “national” to “postnational.” There is a conscious attempt to move away from nationalist paradigms and reclamation models, for there is, perhaps, the realization that ethnic identity has been subordinated to an over-arching nationalist mythology. In fact, this change of perspective is reflected in recent postcolonial criticism, which tends to underplay the self/other paradigm. The change is also seen in cultural studies and border studies which demand a reconsideration of rigid cultural boundaries.

Contemporary ethnic literature, it is argued, reveals a world where geopolitical, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and economic “borders” give way to dialogics of cultural exchange—sites where exchanges may occur from both sides. Avoiding the cultural rhetoric of ethnocentrism, Native American writers of the postnostalgic phase reconfigure dichotomies of representation, attempting to forge postnative identity in terms of mediation and transformative syncretism.
It is in this postnational context that the notion of hybridity becomes relevant. Currently, within the frame of postcolonial studies, “hybridity” is used to describe a cultural phenomenon, where one finds the coexistence of diverse cultural elements that, through historical stages, have undergone a process of long and close contact, thus creating a new, mixed, social environment. This mixture does not sort out contradictions nor does it imply successful fusion. Contrary to the notion of “tradition,” mostly represented as a coherent whole inherited from past experience, cultural “hybridity” exposes the ambiguities and diversity within cultural references, turning the process of individual and cultural self-definition into a more difficult and, possibly, a more liberating one. The liberating potential of cultural hybridity is that, while it is already subversive (because it is not bound to any previous norm or model), it also makes space for something new. Thus, the gradual evolution of the concept of hybridity points to shifts in perspective regarding the understanding of race. Liberated from the confines of biological discourse, literary and anthropological views on native hybridity or mestizo identity have taken on a more fluid form since the last decades of the twentieth century.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha attributes the term “hybridity” to the dialogical situation of colonialism. For Bhabha, hybridity marks the moment when the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning, and finds itself open to the “trace” of the language of the “other.” Borrowing from Jacques Lacan’s concept of identity as negation, Bhabha contends that the colonizer’s identity is derived from, and exists, in an uneasy, if not contradictory, symbiosis with that of the colonized. As he explains in the essays, “The Other Question” and “Remembering Fanon,” the colonizer is locked into the fractious position of constant disavowal and rejection of the “other,” while at the same time acknowledging it. Thus, unlike the
monolithic edifice of Said’s Orientalism (founded on the self/other binary opposition),
colonial discourses and texts, as well as identities are, for Bhabha, shot through with a
destabilizing ambivalence. Because of this ambivalence, even the apparently
established stereotypes of the “other” are far from fixed. An important implication of
this psychically fractured situation is that the colonized, too, discovers possibilities to
retort or challenge (psychologically, rather than physically), as they exploit the
fissures in the system, to make their own intentions and desires known. As Bhabha
observes in “Of Mimicry and Man,” the colonial system required that the colonized
aspire to remake themselves in the image of the European, to become at once
secondary to the colonizer and also “other” to what they were before. Yet, as they
were not, in fact, European or white, there is always a slippage, however subtle, in the
meanings that they thus worked to reiterate. Hence, this “not-quite sameness” brings
about a severe instability within the colonial consciousness, because the colonizer,
who requires the colonized to reflect a “pure” native image back at him, encounters
only a disturbing distortion—an almost-sameness, a not-quite otherness—which
becomes pronounced in the case of the mestizo or the mixed-breed. In “Signs Taken
for Wonders,” Bhabha defines hybridity as “a problematic of colonial representation
… that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal so that other denied
knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority”
(162). The hybridity of colonial discourse reverses the structure of domination in the
colonial situation. It is to be noted that, while hybridity has generally denoted a fusion
in the cultural context, the “hybrid moment” envisioned by Bhabha points to a
different form of syncretism altogether—one that aims at a dialectic articulation.

What is new and interesting in Bhabha is the way in which he translates this
moment into a “hybrid displacing space,” which develops in the interaction between
indigenous and colonial culture (“The Commitment” 55). In his more recent work, Bhabha has shifted his attention from the ambivalent colonial space to exploring the creative but unstable and ambivalent interstices and interfaces of metropolitan cultures. As pointed out by A. Rutherford, et al., for Bhabha, “the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity… is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge” (211). Bhabha describes the creation of this “Third Space” in the “hybrid moment” of political change: “Here the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation of elements that are neither the One … nor the Other … but something else which contests the terms and territories of both” (“Signs Taken for Wonders” 164). To him, it is the intervention of the “Third Space of enunciation” that makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process. Such an intervention challenges our conventional idea of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by an “originary past,” and kept alive in the national tradition of the people (“The Commitment” 53, 54). He goes on to say that it is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or purity of culture are untenable. To quote Bhabha, “It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same sign can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (55).

This notion of hybridity marks a significant development in contemporary cultural discourse for, wherever it emerges, it suggests the impossibility of essentialism. Robert J. C. Young acknowledges that there can never be a single or
“correct” concept of hybridity, but the concept is certainly useful to overcome the fixities of racial categories of the past. He also argues that, while hybridity operates within the same conflicting structures as the racial theories of the past, its own antithetical structure empowers it to deconstruct essentialist notions of race:

Hybridity thus makes difference in sameness, sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different. In that sense, it operates according to the form of logic that Derrida isolates in the term ‘brisure,’ a breaking and a joining at the same time, in the same place: difference and sameness in an apparently impossible simultaneity. Hybridity thus consists of a bizarre binate operation, in which each impulse is qualified against the other, forcing momentary forms of dislocation and displacement into complex economies of agonistic reticulation. This double logic, which goes against the convention of rational either/or choices … could be said to be as characteristic of twentieth century as oppositional dialectical thinking was of the nineteenth. (Colonial Desire 24-25)

The new, hyphenated state of existence envisioned in these critical discourses is what one finds in the work of Native American writers, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and Louis Owens. Erdrich’s North Dakota novels create a world where the modern mixed-blood Indian struggles to reconcile the past and the present. Compared to the reclamatory phase, however, these narratives offer a more mediational and fluid model of ethnicity, aiming at a process of cultural negotiation rather than reclamation. They violate and blur racial, linguistic, religious, and gender boundaries, thereby challenging essentialist models.
Louise Erdrich’s works mark a clear shift from the Nativist and ethnocentric models employed by Native American novelists and writers like James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, Vine Deloria Jr., Leslie Marmon Silko, Craig S. Womack, and Jace Weaver. Unlike Silko, who preferred to assert the native side of her mixed heritage, thus making reclamation the explicit political project in her literary works, Erdrich thinks of herself as “a citizen of two nations,” forging an in-between space in her fiction, where cultural negotiations are possible (Bruchac 75). Rather than viewing liminality as a vulnerable position, one finds Erdrich employing her mixed-blood characters’ mediational status to articulate the cultural reality of contemporary native lives. Louise Erdrich’s fiction reflects the “Third Space” from where the mixed-blood writer perceives and understands her dual cultural heritage, and navigates multiple worlds. She does not hesitate to acknowledge her obligation to western literary tradition either. The impact of William Faulkner, for example, a writer whom Erdrich refers to as that “wonderful storyteller,” is dramatic and obvious in her multiple narratives.

Mediation, the central generative principle of Erdrich’s texts, down plays the mechanically plotted linear narrative structure. In this process, the voices and ideas of a variety of culturally linked positions compete for the readers’ ears and their allegiance. This “struggle going on within the discourse,” as Bakhtin calls it, emphasizes its essentially dialogic nature. A “mediational” text, in James Ruppert’s terminology, or a “hybrid” narrative, in Bhabha’s usage, organizes social languages and ideologies in such a way as to allow the reader new ways of seeing and understanding multiple realities. For Erdrich, this new perspective is a dynamic one, through which the implied western reader can understand the cultural spectrum of the tribal world.
One important aspect of the author’s mediational strategy is the way she uses oral discourse in a written format. Language and orality, in Erdrich’s fiction, as different from Silko’s, is not merely a cultural legacy that is made part of a reclamatory agenda, but also part of linguistic hybridity that seeks to undermine the authority of master discourse. It is through hybridization of language, in the manner of the second stage of postcolonial African writing, that Native American writers like Erdrich attempt to preserve and continue their tribal tradition. They weld the elements of the oral with western forms of narration to produce a syncretic or hybridized form of literature. Helena Grice, et al., commenting on the narrative hybridization techniques followed by indigenous American ethnic writers, note how many of them “intersperse their English with words and phrases from their first language” (8).

The kind of narrative hybridization employed in Erdrich’s cultural discourse cuts across both narrative form and linguistic expression. As with Silko, narrative form gets hybridized through the mixing of genres in her multiple narratives, while linguistic mode gets hybridized through the use of dialect, mythical allusions, narrative intrusions, non-linear narration, vernacular expressions, and code switching. Like Salman Rushdie, Erdrich is seen employing hybridity as a narratological posture, countering colonial, national, and fundamentalist interpretations. Her positionality is also similar to that of Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom hybridization is a process that involves both linguistic and cultural aspects, emerging when different linguistic and cultural codes meet each other. Here, it is useful to note critic Andreas Ackermann’s analysis of Bakhtin’s distinguishing between two forms of hybridization: organic (unconscious) and aesthetic (intentional) hybridity (13). Unlike the natural borrowing or absorption of cultural elements from the other language or culture in unconscious hybridity, intentional hybridity is meant to “shock, change, challenge, revitalize or
disrupt through deliberate intended fusions,” and in so doing, “create an ironic double consciousness” (Werbner 5). Erdrich’s hybridized texts, which reveal cultural heterogeneity and undefinability seem to fit into the pattern of aesthetic or intentional hybridity envisioned in Bakhtin. Her hybrid exercises exhibit a double-voicedness, where “there is a mixture of the authorial language with traces or influences of the other language/voice with which it has dialogized” (5).

Erdrich draws on traditional Chippewa materials and devices as well as postmodern techniques to create what critic Caroline Rosenthal labels “narrative tricksterism”–a shifting back and forth between cultural contexts (107). Her trickster narratives break down the conventions of storytelling by denying the master narrative its power to define and limit. According to Vizenor, in a typical “trickster discourse,” trickster becomes a wandering sign in language game, where the author, narrator, characters, and readers become interlocutors (Narrative Chance 191). Trickster discourse relies on dialogism; on the relation between diverse utterances within and beyond the text. The intratextual correspondences among the four novels in Erdrich’s tetralogy open up a space for the convergence of contradictory voices. In her novels, trickster is used both as a mythological figure and a textual strategy that denies fixture, challenges oppositions, and draws its force from paradox. They infuse the narrative structure with energy, humour, and polyvalence, producing a politically radical subtext in the narrative form itself. Just as tricksters redefine culture, they reinvent narrative form. A parodist, joker, liar, con artist, and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words, and thus creates a politically radical narrative form. Erdrich’s use of the trickster as a rhetorical principle demands trickster readings to make sense of the breaks, disruptions, loose ends, and multiple voices and perspectives of her interconnected novels. In Erdrich’s multiple narratives,
the trickster is a fluid sign that deconstructs western notions of time and space, gender and racial stereotypes.

Trickster aesthetic also serves to challenge both ethnocentric and phallocentric traditions. Trickster novels challenge ethnocentrism in a manner similar to Bakhtin’s conception of the novel as a “dialogized heteroglossia” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 366). As various social languages interact through the characters’ speeches, through changing narratorial voices and shifts in point of view, the novel form itself decentralizes any single world view, presenting a potential challenge to ethnocentricity. Tricksters parody languages and world views because of their liminal cultural position. In Erdrich’s novels, the ever-wandering trickster embodies a “linguistic homelessness” that results in “a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world” (366).

Erdrich’s North Dakota tetralogy weaves a crisscrossing web of characters and stories, requiring the reader to go back and forth between the novels. The reader, like the characters, has to incorporate new information into the knowledge gained earlier. Gradually, more and more is revealed about a character, and the new knowledge often challenges the insights gained earlier. Like the characters, the reader is also caught in-between, never knowing which voice or story to believe, for there is no ultimate authority in the text. Only by listening to all of them, and by questioning their versions, interests, and positions within the community can the reader piece together a picture, albeit a blurred one. The narrative structure of Erdrich’s novels mirrors her understanding of individual as well as collective identity of natives as something that has to be constantly re-created in the third space of cultural interaction.

The four novels, *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace*, combine to form a series of narrative sequences, telling the multi-voiced story
of several generations of Chippewa, mixed-blood, and European Americans in North Dakota. *Love Medicine* tells the story of Chippewa and mixed-blood families on the reservation in North Dakota. Polyphonic community voices in the novel narrate the events that span a period of fifty years, 1934-84. A cluster of narrators in *The Beet Queen* tells somewhat parallel series of personal stories from 1932-72. However, the locale shifts from the reservation to the small town of Argus, North Dakota, mostly depicting stories of Americans of German and Scandinavian descent and mixed-blood Indians. *Tracks*, unlike *Love Medicine*, which depicts the postcontact period, deals with the clash of two cultures, and narrates Chippewa history from 1912-24. *The Bingo Palace* picks up the narrative from where it left off in *Tracks*, simultaneously presenting the readers with native and Euro-American perspectives.

The hybridized narrative form of these novels is characterized by some common features: breaks, disruptions, loose ends, multiple voices or perspectives, and contradictory plots. Weaving a multiple narrative in a hybridized form, each novel builds delicate links between characters and events. The reactions of the characters to their cultural situation vary according to their individual perception of their native heritage.

One important means of hybridizing the narrative is achieved through the disruption of western concept of linear time. In Erdrich’s novels, the order of composition and narrative sequences are unusual in that they do not follow a linear causal pattern. As a result, characters and situations overlap in the novels. In *Love Medicine*, the first novel of the series, for instance, a chapter revolves around the events that happen to Dot Adare and her lover Gerry Nanapush in 1980. *The Beet Queen*, written later, is set in 1972, and traces Dot Adare’s life from childhood to adolescence. *Tracks*, published after *The Beet Queen*, goes further back in time to
1914, to tell the childhood stories of Lulu Lamartine, who is depicted as a young woman and then a grandmother in *Love Medicine*. This hybridized sequencing of events is derived from the traditional Native American view of space as spherical and time as cyclical, which is totally different from western teleological view.

Besides the cyclical narrative structure among novels, the nonlinear time sequence has also been applied in the narrative structure within each novel. Erdrich’s constant switching from past to present tense, her shifts from omniscient to first person narration, her use of episodic structure, dialect, foreshadowing and flashbacks, all contribute to an evocative rendition of a traditional storyteller’s art. For example, in *Tracks*, events from the same year are described from two different points of view, under chapter titles showing earlier or later dates. The narrators slide easily through the past and the present, rendering the story both as a recent episode and as remembered history. Similarly, in *Love Medicine*, in the chapter titled “The Plunge of the Brave,” dated 1957, Nector Kashpaw shifts from past to present tense, and then after some pages, shifts back to the past, and the chapter does not indicate the date or the shift in story that is being related. His rendezvous with Lulu in 1952 is re-enacted as though it is an event that happens in the present; the experience is as vividly presented in the narrative as it is etched in Nector’s memory. In spite of the passage of time suggested by the date at the top of the chapter, the events narrated do not follow a chronological time sequence. This is a conscious move on the part of Erdrich, for the use of a linear, chronological narration would not have served to depict the web of connections woven by her stories.

The storytelling mode adopted in the novels is modelled after the western genre of the short story. However, Erdrich hybridizes the storytelling mode by infusing it with the oral ambience of tribal storytelling. This is achieved through the
introduction of storytellers in each of her stories. In contemporary Native American
texts, the narrator-storyteller assumes a role as vital as the role of the traditional
storyteller within tribal communities. By including storytellers in her short story
cycles, Erdrich, like Silko, is attempting to protect the tribal tradition of oral
storytelling which preserves native myths, legends, and tales. Unlike Silko, however,
storytelling in Erdrich’s trickster narratives becomes a means of creating a different
reality, a place of belonging in-between, since the same event is narrated from
different perspectives. Erdrich’s stories, as Nanpush says, are intertwined, and defy
closure: “They are all attached, and once I start there is no end to the telling because
they’re hooked from one side to the other, mouth to tail” (T 46).

Different storytellers emerge within these texts, and weave new stories into the
fabric of the earlier versions. These first-person narrators talk directly to the reader as
if he/she were chatting over a kitchen table. They speculate, remember, complain, and
come to conclusions. Of the various conventions of the oral used in Erdrich’s hybrid
texts, the use of a dramatic present tense and the occasional references to the second-
person pronoun, “you,” in particular, adds to the immediacy of an oral conversation.
The storytellers’ voices are heard, their presence felt, making them indispensable to
the narrative.

In Love Medicine, almost all the information and significance of characters’
actions are revealed and developed through storytelling. Five of the fourteen stories in
the novel are told in first person by Albertine, Marie, Nector, Lyman, and Lulu. The
rest employ a third-person voice with interpretation limited to the mind of a single
character. The reader witnesses the trauma of contemporary reservation life through
the eyes of the narrators who give individual versions of the same incident(s). By
applying this overlapping interpretative mode, Erdrich lets the truth emerge from
varying perspectives. Telling the same story from several angles exposes various facets of the same person or event, so that the truth of the matter always remains in an in-between terrain. The hybridized form of storytelling also assures equal status to the different voices in the novel. Complementary and independent, their seemingly fragmented form strives to construct an integrated communal entity.

The family history and complex relationship of characters are described in detail in the opening chapters of the novel. The characters continually move back and forth between the present and the past to tell and retell their stories and, in the process, discover themselves. The opening chapter, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” begins as a description of the events leading up to June Morrissey’s death in an Easter snowstorm, given by an omniscient narrator. Then, it becomes a first-person narrative by June’s niece Albertine and, still later, slips into gossip around a kitchen table, as more relatives arrive and reminisce about people and events. These family stories, woven out of memory, appear almost at random, moving back and forth in time, relating events that happened both on and off reservation to Indians, whites, and mixed-bloods. Through the exchange gossip, the reader learns about all those people who were important in June’s life: her foster parents, Marie and Eli; her cousins, Aurelia and Zelda; her husband, Gordie; and her sons, King and Lipsha. The multiple storytellers do more than provide a number of points of view from which the reader may regard June Morrissey. Their hybrid storytelling mode also helps to convey the complex nature of June, perhaps more fully than she herself could have told the reader in a first-person narrative. Another strategy which adds to the flexibility of the narrative technique is Erdrich’s switching between first- and third-person narration within the same story. For instance, in Albertine’s story, for the major part, she speaks
for herself in the first-person. But when she is in the city, alienated from her land and people, her story is told from the third-person point of view, as in “A Bridge.”

Reminiscent of oral storytelling tradition, personal history gradually assumes the proportions of communal history, with the reader partaking in the experiences of these people, ranging from the ludicrous to intensely painful. Reviewer Kathleen M. Sands notes that the orality of Erdrich’s novels is innovative, deriving less from a sacred and ceremonial tradition than from the “secular anecdotal narrative process of communal gossip” (12). The creation of community through these multiple narratives is a trickster-like process. The multivalence and elusiveness of the trickster narrative suggest that no single point of view can be conclusive or reliable and that all points of view, including that of the author, the narrators, the characters, and the reader/listener, together contribute to the meaning of the story. This emphasizes the importance of dialogue and community in the storytelling process. The various voices and perspectives that make up the novel’s chapters emphasize both friction and harmony, and place each individual’s narrative in the context of a collective communal narrative, that weaves the web of contemporary reservation life. Love Medicine’s narrative structure also fulfils the trickster’s function to unsettle or critique the non-native reader’s world view, by forcing him/her to “pause ‘between words’ to discover the arbitrary structural principles of both” (Rainwater, “Reading” 407).

In Tracks, the trickster’s postmodern operation in language signals a cultural critique of the kind noted by academician and writer William Hynes: “… the logic of order and convergence, that is logos-centrism, or logocentrism, is challenged by another path, the random and divergent trail taken by that profane metaplayer, the trickster” (216). In the novel, the tracks of the official documents—the written word—are countered by Nanapush’s oral account of the Chippewa history. More than any
other novel, *Tracks* explores the relationship of oral storytelling and written documents. This is illustrated in the chapter headings, which consist of a date, indicating chronological time, and a Chippewa title (with an English translation) that refers to the seasons, and exhibits a cyclical understanding of time. As official documents and government policy erase the tracks of tribal culture, different traces are retrieved in the oral stories of the community.

*Tracks* delves deep into the history of oppression, dispossession, and extermination that has shaped Native American experience. The novel presents Erdrich’s reflections on the Indian past, especially, the tumultuous decades of the twentieth century, when the North Dakota Chippewa were coping with the after-effects of the General Allotment Act of 1887.

Narrative tricksterism of the novel evolves through the conflicting viewpoints of the two narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, whose contrasting narrative threads weave the story. The textual narrative counterpoints two competing narrative voices, reminiscing the tribal past and trying to make sense of contrary systems of belief: the tragic voice of Old Nanapush, representing the traditional Chippewa, and the edgy voice of Pauline, an assimilated mixed-blood. Reflecting their differing cultural stances, Nanapush and Pauline provide contrary interpretations of the actual historical moments recaptured in the novel. Nanapush’s elegiac narration runs contrapuntally with that of Pauline’s, which is similar to the official, Euramerican version. For instance, Nanapush sees the allotment policy and the drastic changes it wrought on the Anishinaabe community, especially, the transformation of tribespeople from hunters and trappers to farmers, as the reason for their poverty and disintegration. Pauline, on the other hand, justifies the federal policy, and holds that “many old Chippewa did not know how to keep” their allotments, and therefore deserved to lose them (*T* 152).
While Nanapush views the annihilation of tribal nations and native traditions as tragic, Pauline sees it as the desirable outcome of Christian evangelization. Thus, rendition of history gets hybridized in the novel, interweaving native and colonial versions, through the narratives of Nanapush and Pauline, respectively. This hybridization of narrative ultimately serves the purpose of revisionist history. In this, Erdrich’s resistance mode is similar to that of Vine Deloria Jr. who, in his essay, “Revision and Reversion,” argues that true revision seeks a “more precise interpretation of data” and the recognition that “much of what passes for history dealing with Indians and whites is a mythological treatment of policy disguised as history” (Salvino 400).

Nanapush’s narrative provides the native perspective, and reflects strong resistance to the pressures of assimilation. He recounts the past events, and recalls how the epidemics (consumption and “spotted sickness” that wiped out thousands of tribal people), and later, the federal intervention, led to hardship and death for the natives. Beginning with an account of the smallpox epidemic that decimated the Anishinaabe nation in 1912, and proceeding through the Commissioner of Bureau of Indian Affairs Cata Sells’s 1917 Declaration and its aftermath, Nanapush’s narrative dramatizes the implications of land loss for Native Americans. Nanapush’s rendition is not only meant as a counter point to Pauline’s assimilationist version; it is also an excellent illustration of an enduring oral tradition. But Pauline pays no respect to her cultural roots, which eventually leads to alienation and insanity. While Nanapush tells his story to Lulu in the traditional storytelling manner, Pauline’s version does not have an addressee, and the lack of an immediate audience in the latter’s narrative signifies her distancing from the oral culture of her people. Placed against the larger context of land deeds and government papers, Nanapush’s oral narrative shows the deep respect and the implicit trust the Anishinaabe had for oral agreements and the
spoken words, while the white settlers needed written words and documents to validate their promises and treaties. Nanapush is keenly aware that writing, as a mode of representation, poses a threat to their cultural existence. He says, “Once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a correspondence to which there is no end or reason. That’s when I began to see what we were becoming …” (T 225).

The oral tradition becomes a powerful tool of mediation and survival in Tracks, one that keeps people alive, both physically and spiritually. At the beginning of the novel, Erdrich sets up the narrator and the listener in Nanapush’s section. The narrative is thus raised to the level of an oral performance, with Nanapush urging young Lulu to see herself as a bearer of tradition: “Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared…. My girl, listen well” (T 32). Nanapush’s stories contain information for the listener, helping her to understand herself, her culture, and history. Talking also becomes a way to prove one’s existence. Nanapush remembers how words kept him alive during the time of consumption: “I was off and talking … the sound of my own voice convinced me that I was alive” (T 6). Talking is Nanapush’s tool to survive; to keep himself and others going. He reminds Lulu of how his words healed her once:

Eventually, my songs overcame the painful burning, and you were suspended, eyes open, looking into mine. Once I had you, I did not dare break the string between us and kept on moving my lips, holding you motionless with talking…. I talked on and on until you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the swell and ebb and did not sink but were sustained. (T 167)
Nanapush feared that something terrible would happen if the talking stopped, and he confesses that it was talking that kept them from becoming “half windigo” (T 25). Nanapush’s songs help Lulu fight her illness and, later, in a ceremony to heal Fleur’s spirit, the old man is again seen employing the power of language.

If Nanapush’s storytelling re-creates Anishinaabe history, and helps to foster a communal sense in the listener, thus ensuring cultural survival, Pauline’s rendition serves only to validate her perspective and superiority. Not only does her narrative break the continuity of Nanapush’s, but she also disintegrates the community by telling “odd tales that create[d] damage” (T 39). Nanapush senses her destructive presence, and his fears come true when Pauline declares herself to be white, and joins the convent. She embraces Catholicism to repudiate her tribal roots, but the perversity of this repression becomes apparent when she begins punishing herself for being unworthy. Pauline’s narrative warns the implied native reader about the dangers of self-centredness in a communally oriented tribe.

Nanapush’s storytelling and songs not only transmit the native heritage to the younger generation, but also strengthen their will to survival and continuance. By representing the long, tumultuous history of the Anishinaabe, Nanapush’s narrative makes a case for historiographic metafiction; it argues for a reconceptualization of tribal history in the U. S. The hybrid text of *Tracks* signifies the need for a new historicity that both refers to the past and makes space for what can never be known of it. Erdrich’s narrative technique in the novel thus serves for a hybridization of history, with contrapuntal versions creating a third space from where the implied readers (native and non-native) can understand the past without any cultural bias. Also, the continuance of orature in Nanapush’s rendition, challenging colonial
history, serves to break down the fixity and stasis of racial stereotypes, especially that of the Vanishing Indian.

Different from the duelling narrators of *Tracks*, or the polyvocal, hybrid narration in *Love Medicine*, the narrative perspective in *The Bingo Palace* is poised between individual perception and communal consciousness. Lipsha Morrissey emerges as the novel’s prominent and only first-person narrator, but his point of view is interspersed with that of eight others, including that of an innovative chorus. Lipsha’s “I” is counterbalanced by the choral “we,” which narrates four chapters, including the book’s opening and closing sections. Partly the voice of gossip, the chorus presents itself as a unified communal voice. A linguistic analysis of *The Bingo Palace* reveals a parallel with the next novel in the North Dakota series, *The Beet Queen*. The representative role of the chorus becomes clear when they say, “We don’t know how it will work out, come to pass, which is why we watch so hard, all of us alike, one arguing voice” (*BP* 6). By keeping the stories going, the chorus keeps the community alive with its “one arguing voice,” a phrase which allows for both agreement and disagreement. The clash of perspectives, between tradition and modernity, is described in the novel through a series of “nots” used in the portrayal of Lipsha. The community is wary of Lipsha who, it is believed, has inherited the “touch” from his Pillager forbears. The chorus expresses its misgivings about Lipsha in the following lines: “He was not a tribal council honcho, not a powwow organizer…. He was not a member of a drum group, not a singer, not a candy-bar seller…. He was not our grandfather, either, with a face like clean old-time chewed leather, who prayed over the microphone, head bowed…” (*BQ* 9). A narrative extension of *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace*’s mix of the private and the public suggests a strong and vital communal bonding. For the first time in her
North Dakota novels, Erdrich’s Chippewa speak through a communal voice, reaffirming the sense of transpersonal selfhood essential to the survival of tribal culture. The presence of the choral voice becomes a means of both resistance and continuance, suggesting that the tribe has a more unified and palpable existence in the present, than it had during the years which saw the passing of The Dawes Act.

Along with shifting narrative perspectives, another form of narrative hybridization employed in Erdrich’s Chippewa novels is the use of linguistic pluralism through code-switching, which becomes a means of direct challenge, questioning not only the linguistic hegemony of the white, but also their cultural domination. As pointed out by academician Liang Chen, linguistic plurality in the Chippewa community dates back to the times of trade with the French settlers, when native Cree, an Algonquian language, accommodated words from French and English, to develop the Michif or Mitchif (Métis Creole/French Creole) language. In their writing, as argued by Chen, Native American writers are seen manipulating the Michif language to challenge the hegemonic assumptions of English language. They use native tongues along with French and Michif, weaving a hybridized linguistic format which, at times, follows an oral narration, and sometimes deviates from it. For example, each chapter of *Tracks* uses an Anishinaabe title, which is followed by the English translation. Nanapush is one among the wise, old Chippewa who sees that the language of the white man is a trap. In his version of the historical facts, he deliberately uses traditional tribal names (Nadouissioux, Anishinaabe) rather than Anglicized ones (Sioux, Chippewa). He frequently refers to “the spotted sickness” that killed thousands of the Anishinaabe, but never refers to small pox or measles (*T 2*). He speaks of “a storm of government papers,” instead of naming the documents or the Indian Acts which affected the tribe (*T 3*). More interestingly, Nanapush comes to
discover that, each time he signs his name, he “disappears.” The tribe also seems to lose its vitality with the signing of the legal papers; they are reduced to “a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single spaced documents, directive, policy. A tribe of pressed trees” (T 225). When Father Damien, the priest assigned to the reservation, tries to convince him to take on a leadership role in the tribe, Nanapush fears becoming a puppet of the white government: “I saw the snare right then, the invisible loop hidden in the priest’s well-meaning words” (T 185). But Nanapush, the trickster, knows how to use language against itself. Later, it is a similar legal document–a loophole–that he uses to bring his granddaughter Lulu back from the government school. He says exultantly, “To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loopholes and draw you home” (T 225). And, in the pattern of oral storytelling, employing native words, Nanapush’s account of Anishinaabe apocalypse ends not on a dismal note but on an affirmative note of cultural continuance. Nanapush’s complex manipulation of various languages lends a linguistic plurality to the text, and also serves as a means of resistance. Postcolonial critic Deborah L. Madsen elaborates on the modes of linguistic subversion employed in native texts:

Techniques of appropriation and subversion are used by native and also Creole writers, based upon a denial of the authority and purity of the discourse of the colonizers. To deny the power of English language is to deny the control of communication that is exerted by the metropolitan center. Dialect, allusions, narrative intrusions, the refusal to translate key words, the strategic use of vernacular expression, the switching between languages or “code switching” – all serve to
undermine the assumption that English is an especially privileged agent of colonial control. (9)

More compelling examples of linguistic manipulation as a means of resistance are found in *Love Medicine*. The central figure in the novel, Nanapush’s great great grandson, Lipsha Morrissey, represents the Michif amalgam. “Lipshe” is a French/Michif blend of *le petit chou*, “my little cabbage,” a term of endearment (Chavkin and Chavkin 21). In the novels, *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, Lipsha represents a cultural amalgam—the meeting of two families as well as two cultures. In keeping with Lipsha’s hybrid status, the syncretic use of the two languages is maintained throughout *Love Medicine*. This technique serves not only the purpose of linguistic and cultural resistance; “the old language” also becomes a means of cultural identification, a cultural marker that mends broken bonds. For instance, Lulu, while speaking of her separation from her people, recalls how, in spite of her hatred for her mother who had abandoned her, childhood memories of the latter talking to her in native tongue and, later, Nanapush’s letters, finally brought her home:

> I missed the old language in my mother’s mouth. Sometimes, I heard her. *N’dawnis, n’dawnis*. My daughter, she consoled me. Her voice came from all directions, mysteriously keeping me from inner harm. Her voice was the struck match. Her voice was the steady flame. But it was my old uncle Nanapush who wrote the letters that brought me home. (*LM* 68-69)

Erdrich’s use of linguistic hybridization thus assumes cultural significance while structurally shaping the in-betweenness of her characters and novels.
To sum up, Erdrich’s use of narrative and linguistic hybridization creates a third space, where the contemporary Chippewa find an area of cultural resistance and cultural mediation. Erdrich’s narrative technique is effective not only in shattering the western stereotypes of the native; her hybrid narratives also expose the multiple realities of postmodern native experience. In reviewer Hans Bak’s opinion, Louise Erdrich’s hybrid exercises, drawing on orature, “conjointly… spin an interrelated network of recurrent characters and events, and exemplify an ongoing process of creation and invention which will eventually encompass a fully articulated saga of twentieth-century Native American experience” (148).

It is possible, in this regard, to see a connection between Native American trickster discourse and postcolonial African American narratives. Henry Louise Gates Jr. locates the vernacular roots of Black English in the African American literary tradition—in the African trickster Esu-Elegbara—whose African American descendent, the signifying monkey, constantly outwits his foes with skilful stories and verbal barrage. The signifying monkey’s power and identity lies in his mastery of verbal technique: “The monkey is not only a master of technique, he *is* technique,” says Gates (54). Gerald Vizenor, similarly, connects the Native American trickster’s linguistic manipulations to cultural politics, emphasizing the trickster’s slipperiness of language: “[T]he trickster is being, nothingness, and liberation; a loose seam in consciousness: that wild space over and between sounds, sentences and narratives” (“Trickster Discourse” 196). Erdrich’s postmodern view of the trickster is similarly politically grounded; her trickster discourse seeks to free tribal literature from the reductive, tragic monologue of western cultural anthropology.

Religious hybridity as a means of resistance also becomes interesting in the analysis of Erdrich’s fiction and poetry. Here again, her approach is different from
that of Silko who, while acknowledging the hybridity that inevitably marks contemporary native spirituality, upholds the possibility and need to return to ancient tribal practices. With Erdrich, there is no exhortation to revive traditional rituals; there no longer exist the tribal clans and kivas to which her characters can return to, nor is there any possible retreat to healing ceremonies. Erdrich’s spiritual perspective is one that acknowledges the realities of the borderlands existence of contemporary mixed-bloods; one that embraces a religious syncretism of a different order.

In order to create a third space of spiritual awareness, Erdrich plays with the literary conventions of realism. While some critics have described her writing as a form of magic realism, the author maintains, “Probably, [the word] unpredictable is more accurate…. The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don’t seem unreal to me. Unusual, yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable” (Chavkin and Chavkin 221). Erdrich plays with the reader’s expectations, and mocks at his/her attempts to understand a story or character in any particular religious context. Displaying the qualities of the shape-shifting trickster figure of native mythology, her narratives defy fixture in religious content and form, playing with oppositions.

Erdrich points out that, for the native converts, the experiencing of Christianity was not an easy crossover to a new belief system. Ever since their introduction of Christianity through the Jesuits, the Chippewa were drawn into a severe conflict, for no two cultures could have been more different in terms of world view and cosmology. Even though the natives tried to reject Christianity for many years, they gradually came to accept Catholicism, at least, officially. Commenting on the gradual erosion of traditional beliefs and ways of life, Native American analyst Carl F. Starkloff says, “The Indian culture, save perhaps among a few tribes or
groupings, is a shredded culture, an amalgam of white and Indian living patterns, a precarious perch between two or amid many more troubled traditions” (Mc Kinney 152). This view is endorsed by Erdrich, when she argues that folk religion is not to be seen in terms of syncretism between two forms of religion. Such a view, she says, would not tackle all of its complexity, as it is not simply a mixture of two religions practised by a colonized society. Rather, the hybrid nature of Native American spirituality, as it exists today, is better understood in terms of transformative syncretism with inbuilt resistance. In the essay, “Indianizing Catholicism: Chicana/India/Mexicana Indigenous Spiritual Practices in Our Image,” critic Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez argues that native spiritual syncretism may be viewed “not as a casual or mechanical blending but as a tactic of native resistance” (122). Unlike folklorist Don Yoder’s concept of folk religion as a “naturalizing of Catholicism” (67), in the contemporary Native American cultural matrix, the white man’s religion has been adopted, ironically, “to provide protection,” and to “fortify” tribal culture and practices. Hence, Broyles-Gonzalez would describe the religious experience of Native Americans as “the underground of disimulo (camouflage)” and not as an assimilationist venture (120). In this view, the hybridization of Catholicism and tribal spirituality is not necessarily a natural process, but a conscious move to escape persecution from the “official religion.” This evolved Native American religious culture may be seen as a “third space,” which is best exemplified in the novels of Louise Erdrich. Her texts present a reaffirmation of native beliefs in a new hybrid context; one that empowers and preserves tribal world view, while it allows for change. Native American specialist Kenneth Lincoln speaks of this rather ambiguous religious positioning in his book *Native American Renaissance:*
Indians can be Roman Catholic or Episcopan, Baptist or Mormon, yet still pray with a Lakota medicine pipe in a plains ceremony or take peyote to see Christ in the Native American church (sic). They can ride the Manhattan subway and go to an Iroquois sweat lodge for purification, run a small business in Phoenix and attend a Navajo Beauty way ceremony with medicine people. (186)

Unlike Leslie Marmon Silko, Momaday, or D’Arcy McNickle, who openly discuss the possibility of rejecting Christianity in favour of a tribal religion, the narratives of Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich give portraits of untypical Catholic Indians. As the families in Erdrich’s novels reflect, most of the Ojibwe or Chippewa were of mixed heritage by 1900. They spoke their own mixed language, and introduced many elements of French culture, notably Roman Catholicism, to the tribe. In spite of these cultural and religious borrowings, the Turtle Mountain people have also retained tribal elements and beliefs. Erdrich’s reminiscence of her own grandfather clearly brings out this desperate attempt on the part of Turtle Mountain Chippewa to affirm native beliefs in the face of dogmatic Christianity: “My grandfather has had a real mixture of old time and church religion…. He would do pipe ceremonies for ordinations and things like that. He just had a grasp on both realities ….” In her interviews, Erdrich has frequently stressed her bicultural identity, a “dual citizenship” that allows her to “flourish on the edge” (Erdrich, “Whatever” 76). Talking to Bill Myers in 1989, she said, “Once one is a citizen of both nations, it gives you a look at the world that’s different. There is an edge of irony” (144). Erdrich’s irony employs a hybrid perspective, which helps her to juggle cultural codes. No single cultural code is privileged in her work, for the literary and cultural hybridization of her fiction seeks to deconstruct binary categories. Erdrich’s mediational works do encourage bi- or
multicultural readings but, at the same time, they challenge the epistemological assumptions of both native and western readers.

Both *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* may be read as chronicles of the struggle between tribal and western culture, between Chippewa spirituality and Catholicism, in the Turtle Mountain reservation community during the twentieth century. Erdrich is seen incorporating Christian mythology, symbols, and vocabulary into her narratives, thus suggesting the amalgamation of western religion and tribal life. However, her hybridizing technique also subverts the dominant Christian discourse by reversing biblical patterns, applying them in a native context, even merging them with tribal mythology.

Structurally speaking, the two novels share similarities in terms of the influence of both religions. Christian symbols and images are immediately apparent, as one glances at the chapter titles of *Love Medicine*. The Bible itself provides a structural basis for this novel, whose titles are endowed with particular Christian connotations. For instance, the title “Saint Marie” is named after Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, and “The Beads” can be regarded as another name for the Catholic rosary. Christian allusion becomes clearly evident in other titles such as “Flesh and Blood,” “Crown of Thorns,” “Crossing the Water,” and “Resurrection,” which are to do with the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Neither the content page nor the opening scene in *Tracks* makes such obvious and immediate reference either to native shamanism or to Christianity as *Love Medicine* does. The chapter titles, however, provide more specific information that can be read as a cultural or religious marker. The opening chapter, for instance, is titled “Winter 1912/ Manitou-geezisohns/Little Spirit Sun,” followed by “Summer 1913/Miskomini-geezis/Raspberry Sun,” “Fall 1913-Spring 1914/Onaubin-
geezis/Crust on the Snow Sun,” “Winter 1914-Summer 1917/Meen-geezis/Blueberry Sun,” “Fall 1917-Spring 1918/Manitou-geezis/Strong Spirit Sun,” “Spring 1919-Winter 1919/Payaetonookaedata-geezis/Wood Louse Sun,” “Winter 1918-Spring 1919/PaugukBeboon/Skeleton Winter,” “Spring 1919/Baubaukunaetae-geezis/Patches of Earth Sun,” and “Fall 1919-Spring 1924/Minomini-geezis/Wild Rice Sun.” From the western perspective, the titles move through continuous calendar years that record time on a linear scale. Viewed thus, these dated chapter titles point to the pervasive influence of European culture, and its need to impose linear time measurement and order on native storytelling. As if to combat this western incursion contrapuntally, Erdrich attaches Anishinaabe subtitles, which signify the traditional and ritual way of measuring and ordering time, through the cyclical seasons and sun names that recognize the “manitous.” The “manitous,” according to native belief, are spiritual presences, which are ever present and regenerative with nature. Thus, the chapter titles, with their multiple parts, indicate the clashing spiritual realities of the two cultures depicted in the novel. The two narrative strands in the novel, of Nanapush and Pauline, also take it to a higher level of cultural and religious confrontation.

While Nanapush is named after the traditional trickster, and emerges as an old-time Chippewa, Pauline has an Americanized name, is light-skinned enough to pass for white, and is passionate about winning souls for Christ.

For the tribespeople, their exposure to the colonizer’s religion led to ambivalence and tension, especially when they tried to incorporate Roman Catholic religious beliefs and rituals into their own world view. Knowledge of the white man’s religion was in some ways an advantage, but generally it had an enervating effect, coming as it did from a contradictory system. In “Reading between Worlds:
Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” Catherine Rainwater comments on the spiritual dilemma experienced by the characters:

In Tracks, Erdrich’s two narrators struggle with liminality in their efforts to leave behind early lives in favor of others they have chosen. Nanapush grows up Christian in a Jesuit boarding school, but later chooses to live in the woods and Chippewa tradition; the other narrator, Pauline, is a mixed-blood raised in the Native American tradition, but she wishes to be white...[and] constantly at war with the “pagans” who had once been her relatives. (405)

In Tracks, antithetical codes navigate the text, and the cross-coded cosmologies are epistemologically and teleologically different. The novel begins with Chippewa code, through the words of Nanapush addressed to his granddaughter, Lulu, who is described as “the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared when, along with the first bitter punishments of early winter, a new sickness swept down” (T 2). When Nanapush finds the child in a cabin full of dead people, he is afraid to enter it, “fearing the unburied Pillager spirits might seize him by the throat and turn him windigo.” Hence, Nanapush says, he “touched each ... and wished each spirit a good journey on the three-day road, the old-time road” (T 3).

In spite of this opening invocation of Chippewa cosmological scheme, as the novel unfolds, the narrative is marked by conflicting religious codes. No character in the novel illustrates this conflict better than Pauline, later to become Sister Leopolda in Love Medicine. Nanapush refers to her as “an unknown mixture of ingredients” (T 39). Erdrich presents the characters of Nanapush and Fleur at the other end of religious polarization, representing them as traditional Anishinaabe. The conflicting
versions of Anishinaabe history in the narratives of Nanapush and Pauline also reflect the conflicting codes of Catholicism and native shamanism.

A mixed-blood white Indian girl, Pauline is ashamed of her native identity. Erdrich describes her as “every aspect of Catholicism taken to extremes” (Owens, *Other* 205). The novel portrays the religious conflict in Pauline’s life, and the danger of denying one’s heritage through blind assimilation. Early in the novel, she pesters her father to send her to Argus, a border town, where she intends to live as a white. She refuses to speak her native language, and identifies herself solely with the white half of her maternal folk, who are pure French Canadian. She refuses to bead, or work with quills, and begs to be sent to the convent to learn lace-making from the nuns. She chooses to ignore her father’s warning, “[Y]ou’ll fade out there…. You won’t be an Indian once you return” (*T* 14). Pauline’s assimilation is almost complete with her decision to join the convent. But, despite her scorn for her Native American upbringing, she cannot quite escape old ways of thinking. As an individual, she comes to embody code conflict herself; part of her notion of good and evil, for example, derives from a non-Christian frame of reference she has internalized. Such values, removed from their Chippewa cultural matrix and grafted on to non-native cosmology, provides for a marginal spiritual vision. For instance, even after she becomes a nun, she believes in the lake man Misshepeshu who, according to Chippewa belief, is a frightening water monster. The difference is that, after she joins the convent, she starts calling him “Satan.” Pauline herself knows that her amalgam of religious views is unprecedented, and she sees herself as a unique sort of martyr. Recounting Christian narratives about the sufferings of St. John of the Cross, St. Cecilia, and St. Blaise, she says, “Predictable shapes, these martyrdoms. Mine took a different shape” (*T* 52).
The tension between Pauline and Fleur is one of the main plots of the novel which has, to some extent, been endowed with religious connotations. In the opening lines of her narrative itself, Pauline discloses her love-hate relationship with Fleur, who is believed to have inherited the shamanistic powers of the Pillager clan. In fact, Pauline’s life is so inextricably interwoven with, and overshadowed by that of Fleur’s that, she feels compelled to destroy the latter spiritually to achieve a sense of selfhood. She describes Fleur as a witch who sucks the life from those who would save her. In her later descriptions, Fleur is aligned with Misshepeshu, the water god, who is believed to be in love with her. However, her ambivalent attitude to Fleur is revealed when she depicts herself as Fleur’s shadow, for she believes she is invisible to men because of her plainness.

After the traumatic incidents that follow—Fleur’s rape by the white men in Argus, whom she defeated in a card game; Pauline’s seduction of Fleur’s lover, Eli Kashpaw; the death of Fleur’s baby and Fleur’s curing ceremony; and Pauline’s death-battle with Fleur’s manitous, Misshepeshu—Pauline intensifies her invisibility by linking herself with the dead. From this point until her own death, Pauline herself, and other characters in the novel, associate her with images of death, dust, Kokoto the owl, and the scavengers who feed on death. Pauline sits with the dying, prepares their bodies after death, and cooks for the dead. But her involvement with the dying springs less from charitable reasons than predatory motives. “She was the crow of the reservation,” Nanapush recalls. “She lived off our scraps, and she knew us best because the scraps told our story” (T 54). However, with the land disappearing, and people succumbing to influenza, tuberculosis, and alcohol, Pauline decides on the only path to salvation for the Chippewa: religious conversion and total assimilation. She decides that she, rather than Fleur, will be the new spiritual leader for her people.
Thus, while she views Fleur as the “hinge” to old ways, Pauline envisions herself as opening a new door, leading her tribe on to a new road to salvation: “They traveled, lame and bent … taking a different road. I saw their urban children hanging limp … or pushed along in front, hoping to get the best place when the great shining doors, beaten of air and gold, swing open on soundless oil fretwork to admit them all” (T 140).

Pauline’s craziness is only worsened by Catholicism; after joining the convent, she becomes compulsive about self-mortification. In this character, religious assimilation takes a negative direction; she grows more and more frustrated and destructive. Pauline’s brief return to the reservation as part of her proselytizing mission takes a disastrous turn. Her liaison with Napoleon Morrissey results in an unwanted pregnancy. She gives away her child, and returns to the recluse of her convent, cutting herself off the reservation completely. Surrendering to the Christian faith, Pauline disconnects herself from her traditional upbringing completely: “‘The Indians,’ I said now, ‘them.’ Never neenawind or us’” (sic) (T 138). No longer content to challenge Fleur with covert methods, she takes active measures to destroy her.

When Nanapush, with the assistance of Moses Pillager, undertakes to cure Fleur from depression after the loss of her child with traditional chants and prayers, Pauline tries to thwart the healing ceremony, but fails. It is in this scene that the clash between the two opposing spiritual forces is most dramatic.

The novel explores various aspects of religious assimilation and the extent to which it affects the identities of the tribespeople. In fact, in Tracks, it is in the context of religious choices that the fates of characters such as Pauline are shaped. Pauline’s distorted, sadomasochistic version of Catholicism, Erdrich seems to argue, is the result of forced and failed Christianization and assimilation. Through the plight of
Pauline, Erdrich portrays the aftermath of acculturation and religious assimilation for the entire Chippewa: the weakening of communal ties, the disruption of families, and the degradation of one’s own culture and religion. In contrast, the more successful characters of *Tracks* like Nanapush are able to resist and negotiate at the same time; they sift values and customs, rejecting some and embracing some. This ability to keep and discard, and decide for oneself, according to Erdrich, is one of the strengths of Indian cultures.

In *Love Medicine*, the chapter titles carry specific references to Easter and resurrection and, hence, the reader expects a Judeo-Christian, specifically, Roman Catholic frame of reference, in the delineation of characters. The syntagmatic chain of references to Christianity that describe June’s life and death seems to indicate a western interpretive framework. The opening story, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” presents June Kashpaw’s tragedy as a case of failed assimilation. Having been wilful and unyielding as a child, June continues to drift through life, denying responsibilities and rejecting family ties. She loses her sense of self, and seems to float and dissolve, because of her lost connections with community. The opening scene of the novel depicts the last hours of June’s life on Easter weekend. During this time, she goes through a series of “rebirths” that implicitly point to the Christian notion of resurrection.

As the chapter opens, it is Easter Sunday, and June is desperately looking for a new beginning. Stranded in the border town, she thinks that Andy, the white man whom she meets at the bar, could be “different.” The detailed description of their meeting at the bar builds up an image of June, which is endowed with abundant religious connotations, particularly, Christian symbolism. June is compared to an Easter egg, a symbol that is obviously connected to the Christian belief in
resurrection. Then, she is seen comparing herself to an egg, whose shell is in danger of cracking. As a Chippewa woman, June’s fragility is, at the moment, both cultured and gendered, because she is desperately looking up to a white man. As she emerges from his truck, “she thought to pull herself back together…. It was a shock like being born” (LM 6). While this “rebirth” temporarily infuses her with a renewed sense of self, June’s misplaced confidence in her ability to reach home leads her to death. As she walks through the snow storm, which she mistakes for a light wind, it is the thought of homecoming that sustains her: “Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn’t matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on” (LM 7).

Erdrich’s appropriation of the biblical miracle of Christ walking on water is seen in her depiction of a drunken Native American woman journeying homeward: “The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home” (LM 7). The chapter title, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” as well as the phrase, “walked over it like water,” further imply that June is associated with Christ. In keeping with Christian belief, June’s transcendence is suggested through the line, “the pure and naked part of her went on,” which also points to the separation of body and spirit. Critic John Purdy observes, “Given all the obvious Christian references, one might feel the urge to consider June as a ‘Christ like’ figure, one who has been sacrificed to the sins of history” (87).

But it is gradually revealed that, in talking “two languages,” Erdrich’s Chippewa medicine code would be more appropriate as the interpretive frame of reference to analyze June. Events take on a different meaning within a framework of Chippewa beliefs about life, death, and mystical experience. Clashing with the syntagmatic chain of references to Christianity is a paradigmatic counter chain of
references to Chippewa world view, which does not see things as distinctly separate. Being a native woman, June inhabits an animistic universe in which everything, including inanimate things, is believed to be endowed with spirit. The imagery employed in June’s portrayal hence takes on new proportions when placed in the native context.

The egg imagery, for instance, assumes different connotations altogether, when placed in the Chippewa context. In the Christian frame of reference, it represents resurrection, but in Ojibwe culture, the egg symbolizes both death and rebirth, an idea which is clearly presented in June’s internal monologue. Her lively conversation with the man presents an acute contrast to her melancholy thoughts, which describe the human body as an empty shell: “The thought of death … always put a panicky, dry lump in her throat…. It was that moment, that one moment, of realizing you were empty” (LM 3). June’s thoughts connect the egg imagery to death, pointing to her realization of the fragility of life. But there is more to this imagery as, later, Erdrich connects the image to June’s vulnerability both as a woman and a Native American. In the presence of Andy, June feels herself frail. The passage records her thoughts: “… [she] felt herself getting frail again. Her skin felt smooth and strange. And then she knew that if she lay there any longer, she would crack open not in one place but in many places …” (LM 6). Cracking open the shell of cultural expectations and prohibitions, June’s spirit wanders in search of home—a theme that runs through the interconnected stories of Love Medicine. The story of Christ, in the new representation of June, gets merged with ancient Chippewa myths and beliefs, thus representing a spiritual syncretism that points to both similarities and differences.

Erdrich is also seen reversing Christian motifs in the tribal context. It is significant that June’s death occurs on Easter Sunday, just as she is about to go
“home” to the reservation. In Christian mythology, Easter unites life, death, and transcendence. But transposed onto Native American cultures, Christianity comes as an overlay on a tribal religion that is closely associated with the processes of nature. The imagery in the scene of June’s homecoming is emblematic of a dual religious matrix, with references to Easter merging with June’s feeling that she is going “underwater;” an allusion to the historic Chippewa legend of the water deity who brings death. Even as June stumbles in the snow, freezing to death in the storm, the description continues to evoke the idea of homecoming rather than the Christian idea of transcendence through death. The phrase, “the pure and naked part of her went on,” read in the tribal context, points to the native belief that her spirit has mingled with the living, and would continue to carry out unfinished business. Here, Erdrich is seen counter balancing the Christian notion of death and transfiguration with Native American notions of immortality and life cycles. Thus, June’s posthumous “home” need not necessarily be the Christian heaven, but the reservation, where her spirit (not quite the same as the Christian concept of the soul) would continue to mingle with the living. Her death is certainly not an end, for she does not disappear after the opening story, but is frequently invoked in the following stories, so that she becomes a haunting presence. Through June’s lingering presence, in spite of her physical death, Erdrich debunks the western notion of the drunken prostitute and the doomed Indian.

In her interview with Joseph Bruchac, Erdrich discusses the water imagery in *Love Medicine*, and claims that it serves as a hybrid symbol. Water gains specific symbolic value in Christian faith through sacraments such as baptism and the miracles performed by Jesus Christ. Water contains religious significance for the Anishinaabe, too, as with most other human cultures, but with different symbolic orientations. While water is evoked in Christianity for its symbolic function of uniting the believers
with a supernatural god, who is outside of creation, in Chippewa spirituality, it
connects people and sacred places, carrying the transformative powers of nature itself.
Water imagery connects the chapter titles in *Love Medicine*, many of which imply the
presence of water: “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” “The Island,” “The Plunge of
the Brave,” “A Bridge,” “Scales,” “The Good Tears,” and “Crossing the Water.”

The hybridization of the Christian religious image of water with the daily lives
of the natives makes the metaphor simultaneously a bridging device, conjoining
Ojibwe and Euro-American Christian cultures, and a marker of cultural difference.
Thus, in these novels, the Pillagers do not apply religious symbolism to water
generally, though they do attribute magical powers to the spirit haunting Lake
Matchimanito. In *Tracks*, the lake is said to haunt Fleur, for the water monster
Misshepeshu is obsessed with her. Fleur’s actions corroborate this belief; for instance,
towards the end of *Tracks*, when she prepares to leave, having lost her land to the
loggers, she packs her cart with “weed-wrapped stones from the lake-bottom,” as if to
retain her bond with this sacred place (*LM* 224). But, other Chippewa, like the
Morrisseys, who have deviated from the old culture, attribute to the lake mere
material gain for, with its trees felled by lumber companies, the place would make an
ideal fishing resort for tourists. The first-person narrators in both novels, with the
exception of Pauline, allude to water’s physical qualities as they pertain to earthly life
rather than to its Christian symbolic associations with transcendental union.
Nanapush, for instance, both respects and fears the lake’s natural powers as he
recognizes that “… water could be deceptive, set snares for the careless young or for
withered-up and eager fools” (*T* 50)

Louis Owens, in *Other Destinies*, attributes the importance of water in
Erdrich’s storytelling to her native heritage, for the Chippewa were “a people whose
traditional homeland was once the region of the Great Lakes” (197). Owens stresses
Erdrich’s mixed-blood identity, which allows for insights into both American
mainstream and tribal worlds, frequently setting up, in her fiction, a dialogic
hybridized discourse that can be read in two different ways. Thus, Owens, reading
June’s homecoming in the context of ironic cultural exchange, describes her as “a
feminine Christ-figure resurrected as trickster” (196). The water imagery, similarly,
fuses Christian symbolism and Anishinaabe legends related to water, showing how
the two cultures collide, interpenetrate and, at times, ironize each other. For example,
an over determined Christian reading would equate June’s walking over water as a
Christ-like miracle. However, such a simplistic reading is undermined by the native
allusions that precede it, in which water is associated with desperation and
obliteration. Thus, while June desperately looks through the “watery glass” of the
Rigger Bar at her “savior,” he turns out to be a “mud engineer,” who later slips into a
drunken stupor in his pickup (LM 13). Inside the bar, the “murky air” makes June feel
as if she is “going under water” (LM 2). Also, the opening of the novel links death and
water, associating death more with emptiness and annihilation than with a Christian
heaven. Water, ultimately, is an ambivalent element that can deceive, like the
supposedly “mild and wet” Chinook wind that June chooses to deceive herself with,
which turns out to be a freezing wind that kills her.

The trope of fishing, hinted in the title, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,”
likewise, when placed within a network of biblical references, recalls Christ and his
apostles as “fishermen” of human souls. But a closer reading shows how Erdrich has
subverted these biblical allusions. It is gradually revealed that the title refers to a
scribbling on June’s son King’s hat, and ironically refers to the latter’s belief that he
has inherited the hunting skills of the “old time Indian” (LM 32). In traditional
Chippewa context, it also becomes a trope for the lake monster who “fishes” for the fishermen on Lake Matchimanito (LM 236). In the opinion of Rainwater, by double-coding the trope of fishing, Erdrich calls attention to “the spatio-temporal barriers that separate spiritual and material worlds of Christians which deprives it of powerful spiritual presences in the here and now as they await judgment in eternity” (Dreams 109).

Erdrich’s use of overt Christian symbolism in her “Christian-oriented” prose, as in Love Medicine, has prompted Native American poet and critic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn to criticize her for her supposed lack of loyalty to aboriginal causes (“The American Indian Fiction Writers” 35). However there are also critics who read Erdrich’s use of Christian symbolism as ironic or, as Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz puts it, “they [Western cultural/religious materials] are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them” (8). A similar kind of religious hybridization is what Erdrich attempts in the figure of Marie Lazarre. She endures an emotionally starved childhood similar to Pauline’s, and wishes to become a saint for comparable reasons. Thus, in “Saint Marie,” we see a fourteen-year-old Marie who determines that she will be a saint for the fame and glory she associates with sainthood.

The chapter continues the author’s ironic exploitation of Christian symbolism associated with water and fishing. The name, “Saint Marie,” obviously alludes to the mother of Christ, and the character herself dreams of becoming an iconized saint: “I’d be carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toe nails would be little pink ocean shells” (LM 43). The reference to ocean and shells is taken up later, when she is called “Marie, Star of the Sea” by one of the nuns. Marie, however, is a hypocrite like Sister Leopolda, who disguises her real identity, passes for a white woman, and enters an
institution for “nuns that don’t get along elsewhere” (LM 45). Marie’s deceiving the nuns is suggested through the fishing motif at the outset, with its Christian reading of “fishing for souls.” Marie offers herself as bait, fairly confident that the nuns would fall for it. She asks, “You ever see a walleye strike so bad that the lure is practically out its back end before you reel it in? That is what they done with me” (LM 44).

Marie believes that she is endowed with the ability to recognize the devil in others, but she finds him most strongly in the black soul of Pauline/Sister Leopolda (who is actually her biological mother, though both mother and daughter do not realize the truth). Both get into a direct confrontation in the kitchen at the convent of The Sacred Heart, each determined to rid the other of Satan. The fight turns dangerous, with each trying to gain control over the other’s body and soul. However, Sister Leopolda emerges the more spirited of the two, and the metaphor of the bait shifts ironically, as Marie becomes the fish rather than the bait. Marie is heard admitting her fears: “I was afraid of Leopolda’s pole…. I felt the cold hook in my heart. How could it crack through the door at any minute and drag me out, like a dead fish on a gaff?” (LM 47). The “black hook” that spears and links them together is a love-hatred that takes the form of a battle for dominance over the other’s soul (LM 48). The battle turns deadly as the elder nun tries to exorcise Marie’s mind of the devil by scalding her with boiling water. In reviewer Mark Shackleton’s opinion, at this point, the story transforms Christian symbolism by rewriting it as a battle between two native women relying on traditional hunting skills to gain spiritual victory over the other. At the end of the fight, Sister Leopolda wounds her daughter’s hand with a fork, and as though stunning a struggling fish, lays her out with a poker. The ironical playing upon Christian symbolism reappears when, in a paradoxical twist, Marie’s wound becomes the saintly sign of the stigmata for the susceptible nuns, thus raising
her spiritually over her mother. But Marie’s triumph does not last for long; her elation soon gives way to pity for the other. Interestingly, the next chapter shows Marie escaping from the convent, rejecting the burden of sainthood, and embracing the world beyond Leopolda’s convent. Marie’s sexual encounter with Nector becomes a symbolic acknowledgement of her refusal of a life of renunciation.

“Flesh and Blood,” yet another story depicting Marie, is also rich with religious symbolism. This story, too, emphasizes Marie’s portrayal as a hybrid saint, fusing Catholic images with Chippewa spirituality. The title obviously refers to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, re-enacted in the Communion. However, with Marie, “flesh” and “blood” are tied to the physical world as well, and the image is first invoked in the scene showing her fierce fight with Sister Leopolda, which leaves both bruised and bleeding. Years later, hearing that the nun is dying, Marie takes her daughter Zelda along with her to the convent. Zelda, like her mother before her, is considering joining the order. Even at this point, Marie does not realize that the old nun, with whom she has struggled mentally and physically, is her own mother. In an ironic twist, three generations of women are united in the tiny room, linked genealogically by “flesh and blood.”

In *Love Medicine*, Marie’s string of Cree prayer beads appears at first to be a cross-coded image—a symbolic bridge between Christian and Native American spirituality. Because she has been raised a Catholic, and been a postulant nun herself, Marie sometimes calls these beads a “rosary.” However, her religious affinities remain ambivalent till the end. As Cree beads, they point to Marie’s mystical nature and, as rosary, they appeal to her somewhat orthodox Christian sensibility. But because she has evolved a hybrid perspective, her spirituality remains liminal; she is
both Catholic and Cree, but fully neither. Touching the beads gives her a different sort of mystical awareness. She says:

I don’t pray, but sometimes I touch the beads…. I never look at them, just let my fingers roam to them when no one is in the house. It’s a rare time when I do this. I touch them, and every time I do I think of small stones. At the bottom of the lake, rolled aimless by the waves. I think of them polished. To many people it would be a kindness. But I see no kindness in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear. (LM 73)

Marie’s thinking of Cree prayer beads/rosary as mere stones points to her liminal spirituality, a third space outside of the two religious references. These frames of reference are brought together but not reconciled in the symbol of the beads. Endowed with the ability to see from both perspectives, Marie has developed a liminal or trickster outlook of the world, which makes “a wistful outsider to both worlds” (Rainwater, Dreams 40).

Religious hybridization in the novel, however, becomes most prominent in the character of Lipsha. Whereas the more traditional Fleur is the “hinge” to the past, and the assimilated Pauline considers herself to be the door to the future, Lyman observes that Lipsha is the “hinge of bloods”–the hinge between the old and new, past and present (LM 87). In her delineation this character, Erdrich brings out the plight of the Chippewa, and Native Americans, in general. Unlike either of his great grandmothers (Fleur and Pauline), Lipsha is better able to adapt and change. He is equally at home with video games and pin ball machines as with dandelions. He neither completely abandons his native faith like Pauline, nor refuses to accept change like Fleur. Symbolized by the Cree rosary beads given to him by Marie, Lipsha’s religious
inclinations remain ambivalent, though this liminality often leaves him bewildered and lost in-between.

Lipsha’s contradictory traits in *Love Medicine* show that he doesn’t ally himself with any one belief system. At times, he is critical of Christianity, and believes that he has seen through its “falseness.” He says that it was his grandfather who stripped him of his “delusions.” Lipsha recalls how he used to like the “cool, greenish inside” of the mission church, until one day he went to Mass with Grandpa Kashpaw, who shouted the prayers at the top of his voice. “God don’t hear me otherwise,” he explained to the boy. Lipsha is left wondering if, like the white government, the white man’s God has also gone deaf. He is prompted to compare the two religions, and comes to the conclusion, “Now there’s your God in the Old Testament and there is Chippewa Gods as well…. Indian Gods, good and bad…. Our Gods aren’t perfect, is what I’m saying, but at least they come around. They’ll do a favor if you ask them right. You don’t have to yell” (*LM* 236). He begins to favour the tribal gods, although he cannot rely on his knowledge of traditional ritual anymore, since “… to ask proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewas once the Catholics gained ground” (*LM* 236).

Though he continues to be ambivalent about his spiritual orientation, Lipsha cannot deny the fact that he has inherited a special gift from his ancestors, which he calls “the touch.” He can relieve physical suffering by laying his hand on people; “[t]he medicine flows out of me,” he says (*LM* 231). Yet, he has his own misgivings when his grandmother asks him to make a love medicine for his Grandpa that will make him fall in love with her all over again. Lipsha knows he has inherited the medicinal powers of his Pillager forbears, but is not sure if he is equipped for such miracles. Lipsha decides to kill a pair of mating wild geese, birds that mate for life,
and feed the heart to his grandparents. But when he fails to catch any geese after a
day’s waiting, he decides to fake the medicine, and gets two turkey hearts from the
grocery store. Lipsha senses that what he is doing is wrong; in fact, he is so worried
about his deception that, he seeks a Catholic blessing for his fake love medicine. He
tries to get the hearts blessed by a nun at the convent. When the nun refuses to oblige,
the pragmatic Lipsha dips his fingers in the holy water, and blesses the love medicine
himself.

Though Lipsha’s behaviour seems contradictory, it is a clear pointer to his
internal conflict. He wants to return to tribal belief system, but his knowledge is so
superficial that, such a return is not easily achieved. He finds it equally difficult to
ignore his Catholic upbringing. Lipsha’s knowledge of both religions freezes him into
inaction; he is caught between the two. Lipsha’s plight allows the readers to re-
evaluate the character’s identity through the conflicting interplay of indigenous
medicinal practices and the images of the dominant religion.

When Grandpa chokes over the turkey heart and dies, a guilt-ridden Lipsha is
convinced that he has lost the “touch.” He realizes that he had tried to use parts of the
white religion in which he has no real faith. Catholicism, for Lipsha, as with most
tribal individuals, consists merely of a set of rituals, that have no bearing on their day-
to-day life. Lipsha’s painful realization that the two cannot be combined is revealed in
his anguished remark, “I knew the fuse had blown between my heart and my mind
and that a terrible understanding was to be given” (LM 209).

In this manner, hybridization, at the level of spirituality, creates a narrative
context in Erdrich’s stories where structure, character, and image combine to serve the
goals of revision, subversion, and transformation. The narrative structure, character
delineation, and imagery in Erdrich’s novels work toward the creation of a new hybrid
religious identity, which is linked to the theme of cultural survival. As the two novels *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* reveal, total assimilation results only in failure and destruction for the mixed-bloods; the characters who survive are the ones who adapt and change. It is equally important to note that through religious hybridization, Erdrich does not argue for reclamation of native spirituality, but negotiates new ways and possibilities, without compromising the self-respect of the natives. In the opinion of reviewer Kimberly M. Blaeser, in accordance with the central idea of forgiveness in *Love Medicine*, “the novel refuses to wholly condemn the Christian [or] the traditional” and, instead, embraces a hybridization of the two religious worlds (55).

The author’s use of religious syncretism points to the newly emergent trend that appeared in the second ideological phase of Native American Renaissance. The numerous Catholic references in the novels show how Ojibwe culture has not only been dominated by, but has incorporated, Christian myths. However, incorporation, in Erdrich’s understanding, not only means acculturation or syncretism, but mutual change. Erdrich shows how cultures inevitably draw on one another, and how a culture can only be established on the interpenetrable border zone of contact. With Erdrich, the hybridized religious process, which she sees as the inevitable aftermath of colonization, lends a third space, where the natives (full-blood and mixed-blood) are able to reconstruct their identities.

A third model of hybridization in the works of Louise Erdrich manifests at the level of gender, with its portrayal of berdache or two-spirits traditions. In fact, this is not something new in Erdrich, for Native Americans have enjoyed a long history of hybrid gender tradition, including both male and female homosexuality and transgender. Despite the attempts of the western missionaries to put an end to these “deviant” practices, alternative gender roles continued to be one of the most widely
shared features of North American tribes. In “The North American Berdache,” critics Charles Callander and Lee M. Kochems define the berdache as a person, usually male, “who was anatomically normal but assumed the dress, occupations and behavior of the other sex to effect a change in their gender status. This shift was not complete; rather, it was a movement toward a somewhat intermediate status that combined social attributes of male and female” (Barak 50). Since many of the berdaches indulged in cross-dressing, it was assumed that all berdaches were homosexual. However, Callender and Kochems find this frequent equation with homosexuality distorting the sexual and communal aspects of berdachehood. While two-spirits people generally engaged in homosexual relationships, often marrying individuals of the same biological sex, their gender, more than their sexuality, was deemed their definitive trait. The social roles undertaken by the berdache demanded a community responsibility and, hence, social commitment was given more importance than their sexual orientation. Economically, berdaches were beneficial to the community because of their varied occupational choices. While male berdaches were exceptionally skilled in women’s work, female berdaches similarly excelled in male activities, especially, hunting.

Often connected to the creation stories/origin myths of the tribe, the concept of the berdache, nevertheless, was not understood merely in terms of physiology. With most tribes that gave credence to the berdache, it meant as much a spiritual state of being. In Native American culture, berdache enjoyed a special social status and was highly esteemed in the tribe. For many Native American communities, the presence of the two-spirits people signified the health and harmony of their societies, for they were thought to balance male and female forces within one person. Since they were believed to have received the “call” through supernatural intervention, as in a vision,
they were thought of as holy or special. Thus, many of the Native American tribes including the Cree, Ojibwe, Mohave, Navajo, Lakota, and Winnebago, honoured and accepted them as valuable members of the society. Because of their unique internal balance and mediational skills, the berdaches were assigned special cultural roles. During naming ceremonies, the berdache was usually chosen for the auspicious task, and they were thought to have a special talent in educating children. His/her guidance also extended to the daily lives of the native people in the capacities of spiritual leader and healer, and they were believed to be especially skilled in native medicine. The long history of contact, however, affected Indian definitions of sexuality. Under the influence of the rhetoric of Christianity, many tribes began suppressing their long-held beliefs. Just as shamanism became taboo, so did homosexuality and the custom of berdache among the tribal communities.

In the recent decades, American Indian writers have devoted increasing attention to the two-spirits tradition in tribal communities. Native texts of resistance, especially, write from within their own tribal framework, using native myths, culture, stories, language, and even gender imagination. In the counter narratives of Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Gerald Vizenor, one finds a deliberate attempt to reinvent gender roles and break western sexual stereotypes. For mixed-blood writers, the berdache becomes a means of resistance and identification because of his/her special ability to transcend gender boundaries. Like the “Third Space,” the berdache becomes a “free zone” that exists somewhere beyond the margins of definable sexuality. By reviving alternative gender traditions, native writers attempt to establish the permeability of gender boundaries, thus resisting the Eurocentric notions of sexuality and emphasizing cultural survival.
The figure of berdache becomes significant while analyzing Erdrich’s gender hybridity, through which she challenges western notions of sexuality. It is the comic trope of the trickster employed in her novels that helps her defy definite gender classification. Through her characters, who manifest what Caroline Rosenthal calls “transgenderation,” Erdrich resists western gender markers and patriarchal modes (110). Her use of this image aims at portraying its undefinability in terms of sexuality, thereby creating a third space of gender negotiation. Reviewer Julie Barak, in her essay, “Blurs, Blends, and Berdaches: Gender Mixing in the Novels of Louise Erdrich,” calls upon native two-spirits tradition to explain the fluidity of gender identities in Erdrich’s trickster characters. In her tetralogy, one comes across several gender-mixed characters, who are described as exhibiting or acting out opposite gender behaviours. The strategy of gender blurring is seen at work in the portrayal of Erdrich’s male trickster characters, but more so with her female characters. For all the important male characters who figure in her series of novels–Nanapush, Moses Pillager, Eli and Nector Kashpaw, Russel James, Gerry Nanapush, Lyman Lamartine, and Lipsha Morrissey–it is, nonetheless, Erdrich’s female transgenders, who most effectively preserve what remains of their tribal values and work toward cultural rebirth; the chief figure of cultural preservation and continuance being Fleur Pillager.

In Erdrich’s stories of survival, compared to the characters with single gender characteristics, mixed-gender characters are more independent, and endowed with the ability of controlling their environment. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Fleur in Tracks, where one finds the application of mythology in shaping her berdache identity. She emerges as the quintessential berdache; she is a good hunter, better than most men on the reservation. She is big and strong, hauling her cart of wares through the reservation. She is also portrayed as a medicine woman, with superhuman
abilities. Like most berdaches, Fleur is somewhat feared and respected for her powers. Pauline describes her as a shape-shifter; and the stories she tell about Fleur imply something demonic about her, particularly, in relation to men. Pauline also hints at Fleur’s relationship with one of the most powerful manitous in Anishinaabe culture—Misshepeshu the water god. Since it is clear that Pauline’s perspective is heavily influenced by her Christian conditioning, it may be surmised that what she labels as demonic are shamanism or traditional Anishinaabe religious practices, some of which were declared taboo by the Church. In Chippewa myth, the water monster is male, and is often depicted as evil. Hence, Fleur’s sexual encounter with the water monster and her later cross-dressing deconstruct oppositions such as good/evil, spiritual/corporeal, feminine/masculine etc.

The berdache image has also been applied in the character portrayal of Old Nanapush, the more obvious trickster figure in the novel. Like many berdaches, he is a healer, and his care saved Fleur from death, when consumption was rampant on the reservation. He exhibits maternal instinct for Fleur’s daughter, Lulu, which is evident in the description of his saving her from death, where his language is gendered as feminine. When he tells Lulu of how he saved her feet from severe frostbite, he is heard employing the metaphor of pregnancy. His description of motherhood and his strong feminine instinct clearly reveals Nanapush as a two-spirits person. As he sings a “cure song” to calm her, he thinks,

Many times in my life, as my children were born, I wondered what it was like to be a woman, able to invent a human from … her own body. In terrible times … when the earth swallowed back all it had given me to love, I gave birth in loss. I was like a woman in my suffering, but my children were all delivered into death. It was
contrary, backward, but now I had a chance to put things in proper order.

Eventually, my songs overcame the painful burning and you were suspended, eyes open, looking into mine. Once I had you I did not dare break the string between us…. you were lulled by the roll of my voice.

(167)

When Fleur leaves the reservation after losing her land, Nanapush becomes Lulu’s guardian, raising her like a surrogate mother. Even after she grows into a woman, he continues to be protective about her, and his narration of Anishinaabe history to Lulu is to help her know her people and take the right decision about her marriage. In the absence of the real mother in the child’s life, Nanapush tries to fill the gap, his berdache identity evoking the maternal space.

The blurring of gender also becomes a hybridizing strategy in *The Beet Queen*, a novel that has frequently been critiqued for its lack of political commitment to issues of race and identity. As Louis Owens observes, “the excruciating quest for Indian identity in late twentieth century America that haunts other fiction and poetry by Indian writers is simply not here” (Meisenhelder 45). But, what has been deemed apolitical silence on the part of the author, is better understood when one realizes that *The Beet Queen* is almost exclusively devoted to treating gender issues in the postmodern Native American context. Gender is more sharply foregrounded here than in the other North Dakota novels.

In the novel, Erdrich’s characterization breaks through traditional gender-based divisions by refusing to rely exclusively on either a male or female code of values, and by seeking to accommodate, often within a single character, elements derived from both gender traditions. Most of the central characters in the novel–Karl
and Mary Adare, a brother and sister abandoned by their mother Adelaide; Celestine James, who remains Mary’s life-long friend; Wallace Pfef, Karl’s lover and surrogate father to Karl and Celestine’s daughter, Dot; and Dot Adare—stretch conventional gender norms in some form or the other in the novel. In *The Beet Queen*, a character’s failure or ability to forge a communal identity, and survive seems directly related to his/her ability to attain a harmonious and balanced reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine. Those who stick exclusively to the codes and values of one gender tradition seem doomed.

Through her delineation of the white woman, Sita Kozka, who bases her self-esteem on physical beauty, and Russell Kashpaw, a Native American male, who strives for success through football and military exploits, Erdrich questions white America’s ideals of masculinity and femininity. The author juxtaposes their character portrayals, and draws symbolic parallels between the two. Both Sita and Russell emerge as individuals who have been reduced to objects, serving the interests of a society controlled by the white man’s gender ideologies. While Erdrich does acknowledge the toll that defiance of societal gender norms takes on her berdache characters, she reserves the direst fate for Russell and Sita—two characters in the novel who desperately try to fulfil social definitions of the ideal male and female.

Right from early childhood, Sita tries to escape the ugliness of her butcher shop background by pursuing the white man’s ideals of beauty and success. With her aunt Adelaide as her role model and marriage as her dream, Sita dreams of settling in the nearby town of Fargo, and become a model in a department store. Her desperate attempts to meet the standards of beauty set by the American society are viewed comically and ironically by the narratorial voice. At one point, Sita is described as looking “stuffed and preserved,” a description which foreshadows her tragic doom
 devoid of a strong sense of self and individuality, and tired of maintaining her appearance, she thinks that the only way to save herself is to find “the ideal husband” \((BQ 76)\). However, the conventional norms of wifehood and femininity that Sita values, in fact, wreck her life. During her wedding feast, Sita wears “a glazed look of surrender,” with the “mist of loveliness” glowing around her face concealing a “bleak” smile, and a stare “razor sharp with nervous exhaustion” \((BQ 87-88)\). The restaurant she gets as part of alimony after her divorce, which she converts into a French-style gourmet restaurant, “Chez Sita,” has the shape of an unmoored ship. With its doors “padded like the walls of a lunatic’s cell,” it strikes her cousin Mary as “the ship of the dead” \((BQ 104)\). Sita’s social climbing, and ever more desperate attempts to stay beautiful against the advance of age, lead to self-estrangement, inauthenticity and, ultimately, to self-destructiveness. After her second marriage, she suffers a psychological breakdown and, after losing her ability to speak, ends up in a mental asylum. In the end, she withdraws into an isolated existence in the basement of her suburban house, and when her store of antidepressants runs out, she takes an overdose and kills herself.

Sita’s gradual self-estrangement and disintegration is shown to be the result of her emulating the gender ideals of white culture. Towards the end, she prefers to spend most of her time in the basement recreation room of her house. This is a distinctly male territory, displaying images that bespeak the personalities of her husbands. In this room, a “monument to both of them and to neither one,” Sita sits like an ornament \((BQ 254)\). When Mary and Celestine discover their dead cousin, they find her wedged into the branches of a tree, her head propped up by her garnet necklace caught in a branch, her lips “set in exasperation, as if she had just been about to say something and found out her voice was snatched in death” \((BQ 262)\). Sita’s
story comes to an ironic turn when Mary and Celestine, out of a sense of loyalty, refuse to leave her dead body behind. As they do not want to put her in the back of their meat delivery truck, they put her in the front seat, propped up between them, and proceed to Argus, where they get caught up in the Beet Queen Parade, with Sita, even in death, appearing “imperial and stern” like a queen (BQ 296).

Mirroring Sita’s fate, Russell manifests the vulnerability of a Native American male, who strives to meet white America’s ideals of masculinity. Russell, a “blue chested man with a soft voice,” is an Indian who seeks to accommodate white cultural values. In his youth, he appears as a football player, much published in the local papers for making touch downs. Popular consensus has it that here is “one Indian who won’t go downhill in life, but have success” (BQ 44). Later, he fights the white man’s wars, and the local veterans’ organizations declare him “North Dakota’s most decorated hero” (BQ 111). His uniform, war medals, and photographs are displayed in the state museum. In the opinion of reviewer Susan Meisenhelder, “Ironically, for both Sita and Russell, the symbols of their status as ideal male and female – Sita’s garnet necklace and Russell’s war medals, which both wear with pride throughout the novel – are, in fact, stark emblems of their enslavement” (47-48).

For both characters, attempts to emulate the gender ideals of white culture results in dehumanization, though in different ways. After the war, Russell returns with his body marked with “scars and stripes”–Erdrich’s ironical remark on his misplaced patriotism. “Map[ped]” like the Chippewa land of his ancestors, he is exploited, his wounds “ridged like a gullied field,” and his body “plowed like a tractor gone haywire” (BQ 64, 67). Sita, too, despite her efforts, is reduced to a physical wreck in seeking a perfect body. Just like Russell’s face, which looks “all sewn together,” with its “claw marks, angry and long, even running past his temples and
parting his hair crooked,” Sita’s face also becomes “cavernous,” “wrinkled,” distorted into “a Halloween mask, witch-like and gruesome” (BQ 108). In both characters, their physical distortion reflects the psychological and emotional disintegration they experience.

Russell’s later breakdown following alcoholism and stroke is juxtaposed with Sita’s mental deterioration and her drug dependency. Further, both become partially paralyzed, and as they become increasingly debilitated, they also lose their power of speech. No one understands Sita’s “jammed-up sentences” or Russell’s “shattered vowels” (BQ 186, 269). In an interesting turn of events, both Sita and Russell, icons of American femininity and masculinity respectively, end up in the Beet Queen parade. Significantly, both flaunt the symbols of their aspirations—Sita, in a white dress and clutching a “white leatherette purse,” and Russell, in his uniform with medals pinned in a “bright pattern over his heart” (BQ 268). They are cheered by the crowd, and it is ironical that no one notices Sita’s death or Russell’s near deadly stroke during the procession. During the parade, Russell imagines himself travelling down the road of death, and sardonically notes that the onlookers are solemnly saluting “a dead Indian” (BQ 270).

Unlike Sita and Russell, the berdaches in the novel remain strong and independent, directing and shaping the plot. Mary, Celestine, and Dot are strong survivors precisely because they resist traditional gender definitions, internalizing both male and female values. They may be described as “manly-hearted women,” a term anthropologists coined for American Indian women, who performed third gender roles by assuming the behaviour and occupations of men (Barak 51). Mary Adare’s alternative gender behaviour, independence, and dream visions all suggest the presence of two-spirits tendencies. But, as with her brother Karl, because of her loss
of ties with her family, she is deprived of any kind of communal traditions that can give meaning and context to her spiritual inclinations. Mary has male characteristics both in physical appearance and character. Unlike Sita, she is short and stocky, stubborn and proud, and indifferent to the white standards of femininity. Her friend Celestine notes that “if you didn’t know she was a woman you would never know it” (BQ 214). As a young woman, she is fiercely independent, fully in command of any situation, always displaying a “male” talent for initiative and leadership. She runs the butcher shop she inherits from her aunt single-handedly. Mary is shown to slaughter animals in cold blood but, the very next moment, she is also portrayed as fiercely affectionate and possessive about Dot.

Celestine James (the only other character of native descent in the novel besides her brother Russell), like Mary, is hardly bothered by conventional standards of beauty. “I don’t look in the mirror for pleasure but only to take stock of the night’s damage,” she says (BQ 125). A big “six-footer,” she is “not pretty” but “handsome like a man,” physically strong and muscular from wrestling with her half-brother Russell (BQ 67). Like the other two-spirits in the novel, Celestine is a leader, and she is also guided by her dreams. Even when she gets involved with Karl, she refuses to accept the traditional notions of female subservience. Once she realizes that she is “living on Karl’s borrowed terms” (BQ 125), she reasserts her identity and rebels against his western/patriarchal idea of marriage. Her presenting him with The Bible as a farewell souvenir becomes a symbolic gesture, marking her defiance of Euro-American patriarchal values. She insists on raising her child alone, preferring to be a single mother. Towards the end, Celestine emerges as a leader of her community, using her influence within her Ojibwe and Anglo communities. Unlike her friend Mary, she is not alienated from her family or community. Connected to her
community, especially, to her brother, Celestine maintains her berdache qualities with a sense of balance that Mary cannot achieve.

Dot, who is the Beet Queen in the novel, also embodies characteristics of berdache, and is expected to carry on the native tradition. Erdrich uses animal metaphors in delineating Dot’s peculiar nature. The early description of Dot as an infant makes it clear that she is unlikely to follow the footsteps of Adelaide or Sita. The passage describing baby Dot reads thus:

In her shopping cart stroller, she exercised to exhaustion, bouncing for hours to develop her leg muscles. She hated lying on her back and when put that way immediately flipped over to assume a wrestler’s crouch. Sleep, which she resisted, did not come upon her gently but felled her in odd positions. Draped over the side of the cart or packed in its corner, she seemed to have fallen in a battle. But it was only a momentary surrender. She woke, demanding food, and when set free, exploded in an astonishing fast creep that took her across the room in seconds. (BQ 162)

Tough and fearless as a child, Dot grows into a female berdache, fitting anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s description of female berdache as “a manly-hearted woman”. As a young woman, though, Dot is confused about her identity. Uncle Wallace’s desire to build Dot’s self-esteem leads to her being crowned as the Beet Queen in the first annual Beet Festival. The role offered to her is one in keeping with Anglo ideals of beauty; a role involving objectification of feminine charm. Dot’s accepting the role would hence identify her with the defeated women in the novel like Adelaide and Sita. Her mother Celestine, seeing Dot on the stage, marks the “frothy confections … like the magazine models or mannequins in store windows” (BQ 292).
However, like Celestine, Dot also cuts herself free of these constricting definitions of femininity she is presented with. For Dot, the incident provides her with the right perspective; it helps her to recognize her true strengths. When she finally rebonds with her mother, Dot is, in fact, reuniting with the community context that she has missed all along; a context which will enable her to develop her alternative gender identity.

Unlike Erdich’s female berdaches, male berdaches have more trouble defining their identity. One of the striking male berdaches in the novel is Adelaide’s son Karl Adare, in whom the author blurs gender characteristics. More vulnerable than his sister Mary, he is more deeply traumatized by the childhood experience of being abandoned by his mother. At fourteen, Karl manifests both physical traits and behaviour that are, in western terms, unmasculine. He is tall, pale, and delicate, his mouth “sweetly curved, his skin fine and girlish” (BQ 23). Like his sister, Karl, too, is susceptible to visions, a trait characteristic of two-spirits. The rapture he experiences as a boy, on seeing a flowering tree, suggests his berdache sensibility. He loses faith in love in early adolescence as a result of a disillusioning homosexual experience he has on a train. The experience reveals to him “the depth of his loss,” and he jumps out of the moving box car into “nothing” beyond (BQ 26). He is rescued by Fleur Pillager, the wandering pedlar, who cures Karl’s splintered ankles and drives out his pneumonic fever with her medicinal powers. However, after Fleur hands him over to the nuns at the convent, Karl seems doomed, lost in moral, existential, and sexual ambiguity. His sexual insecurity continues in his seminary days, leading him to homosexual relationships. Later in life, Karl is increasingly drawn towards women. Erdrich blurs the lines of grace and damnation in his character delineation, and throughout the novel, Karl is associated with contrary images. Incorporating both
masculine and feminine elements, Karl hovers uneasily “in-between,” unable to reconcile both sides into a balanced whole.

What aggravates Karl’s insecurity is the lack of moorings in his own native culture. Cut off from Fleur’s nurture and native healing powers, Karl takes up the typical white middle class job of a wandering salesman. Driving along the endless stretches of Dakota highways, Karl finds himself trapped in a weird kind of motionless motion. During one of his long rides, Karl suddenly has a vision, in which he sees himself “at the center of unchanging fields of snow and brown branches. The landscape stayed so much the same so that … I seemed suspended, my wheels spinning in this air. I hung motionless in speed above the earth like a fixed star” (BQ 320). Karl continues to hover between his homosexual and heterosexual love, always in the grip of his childhood fear of plunging into an underlying void.

Erdrich’s trope of the berdache overthrows western gender pattern, and helps to construct the characters’ identities in a hybridized mode. Berdache, like the trickster, denies all attempts at stereotyping, and defies gender definitions. The dual gender identity of Erdrich’s characters provides them with a flexibility, which helps them in their negotiations of identity. In the comic world of “survivance” that she depicts, alternative gender people are survivors and community builders; while those like Sita and Russell, who attempt to conform to rigid western gender definitions, fail miserably. Reviewer J. James Iovannone contends that Erdrich’s novels demand “transgendered” readings, and that they depict “gendered identities that exist beyond the binary categories of male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual” (41). To conclude, gender hybridization, with Erdrich, becomes a mode of cultural resistance, opening up the ever-changing possibilities of liminality or in-betweenness.
Hybridity enables the postcolonial writer to renegotiate the dangers of cultural binarism (us/them) and the fundamentalist urge to seek “pure” cultural forms. It marks a move, where older forms are retained, but recast to account for present day conditions of globalization, multiculturalism, and transnationalism. Postmodern hybridity is certainly generated in the articulations of difference marked by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language; but it is equally to do with the process of negotiating gaps, which is characteristic of diasporas and minority cultures. In the tribal context, hybridity points to postmodern native realities, which are adapted from many sources and not exclusively from the ethnic past. It is to be noted that postmodern hybridity emphasizes not fusions, but negotiations created through the performative transgression of national grand narratives—what Homi Bhabha refers to as the “shreds and patches” of many and diverse national voices (“DissemiNation” 294). For Bhabha, it is those indeterminate spaces and in-between subject positions that the natives forge that become the locale for the disruption and displacement of hegemonic narratives. He points out the dangers of fixity and fetishism both within binary colonial thinking and essentialist nationalism in minority cultures, arguing that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. Any attempt to stabilize ethnic, racial, or national definitions, he argues, crumbles under the pressure of multiple and mobile interfaces of contemporary multicultural reality.

This argument is emphasized by Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, who holds that artists and writers who initiate a new politics of difference, and who are the carriers of difference themselves, must have boundary-crossing visions. As multiculturalists, they are to develop theories of mestizaje—border inscriptions which draw on a combination of cultural values and traditions. To Anzaldúa, notions of mestizaje can offer a new “reading” of culture, history, and art; one that does not
reinstate the Manichaean binary. Multicultural texts, she admits, are written by the dispossessed and the marginal, and they do deal with the writer’s struggle to decolonize subjectivity. But, for the *mestizas*, it is not sufficient simply to reinscribe the traditional culture they emerged from, and thereby reset the binary divisions. Multicultural perspectives based on representation, Anzaldúa argues, unlike that of “political conservatives,” problematize these binaries, asking how people negotiate multiple worlds everyday (“The New Mestiza Nation” 210).

In her essay, “Border Arte,” Anzaldúa discusses the border artists who try to express their sense of “disorientation in space” through art. According to Anzaldúa, to be disoriented in space is “the normal way of being” for *mestizas* living in the border lands:

> To be disoriented in space is to experience bouts of dissociation of identity breakdowns and buildups. The border is in a constant *nepantla* state and it is an analog of the planet. That is why borderline is a persistent metaphor in *el arte de la frontera*, an art that deals with such themes of identity, border crossings, and hybrid imagery. (181)

The *nepantla* state, she argues, is the natural habitat of artists, most specifically for the *mestiza* border artists, who partake of the traditions of two or more worlds and who may be bi-national. Hence, she says, these artists create a new artistic space—a border *mestiza* culture. She cites Chicano/a art as an example for border art: an art shared with Mexican counterparts from across the border, with Native Americans and other groups of colour, and also with whites living in the vicinity of Mexico/U.S. border. She says that the highlight of Chicano/a border art is that, while it challenges and subverts the imperialism of the U.S., and combats assimilation efforts on the part of the U.S. or Mexico, it acknowledges its affinities to both. The multi-subjectivity
and split-subjectivity of border artists create counter art, but it frustrates a polarized us/them, insider/outsider culture clash. Hence, she says that the border is a historical and metaphorical site, *unsitio ocupado*—an occupied border land—where the *mestiza* artists transform space so that the different home territories become one. In Anzaldúa’s words, “Border art deals with shifting identities, border crossings, and hybridism” (184).

For the marginalized native communities in the U.S., the creation of new hybrid spaces helps them to move beyond the confines, constructs, and definitions of the hegemonic discourse. By applying hybridizing techniques, Erdrich refuses to accept the western constructs that deny or suppress the cultural realities of Native Americans. Erdrich has long maintained that the responsibility of contemporary American Indian writers is to preserve what is left of their ethnic culture and prevent it from dying out. However, her strategy and approach is markedly different from that of the celebratory and reclamatory phase of Native American Renaissance. Rather than renouncing her European heritage and reclaiming a pre-Columbian ethnic space to forge pure native models, she uses her hybrid, mixed-race identity to her own advantage, demonstrating her power as a cross-cultural navigator. The hybridized narrative mode, where cultural identities move beyond hegemonic constructs and binaries, opens up a third space, incorporating past and present, native and white, male and female. As a story teller, Erdrich renegotiates the terms of power set by the white society, through characters who tell stories of cultural survival. The hybridized narratives also reveal the narrowness and limitations of the canonized definitions of “American Indian Literature.” Louise Erdrich’s hybrid fiction certainly points to the need to take a fresh look at the diverse realities of indigenous existence in today’s multicultural America. Refusing to employ the bifurcated conceptualization of native-
white relationships, Erdrich’s hybrid mode recognizes the multiple subject positions, aspirations, and contrasts that continually engage each other through ongoing interaction and exchange. From Silko’s assumptions of culture and ethnicity based on “us/them” dualism, Erdrich moves to a liminal space which acknowledges and negotiates not only difference but also the blurring of differences.

Erdrich’s “border art” clearly reflects the postcolonial notion that no culture is pure or essential. In her fictional world, one comes across a territory of contradictions and ambiguities at the levels of narrative, religion, and gender, providing for a politics of resistance, which goes beyond the essentialist politics of exclusion. In her novels, the “Third Space” is not merely a nostalgic space; rather, it is a mode of articulation, a productive space that engenders new possibilities. Reflecting Bhabha’s notions of borderlands in “Frontlines/Border Posts,” Erdrich’s hybridized narratives open up an interruptive and interrogative space of resistance that constitute “the discursive conditions of enunciation” (“The Commitment” 55).