

# Ritual Circles to Home in Louise Erdrich's Character Names

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Like many American women of color, Louise Erdrich writes novels in which characters are committed to building community in order to heal the damages of racial and gender oppression. In the multi-ethnic societies Erdrich creates, characters reach across interpersonal boundaries and also reach deep within to find the selfhood where healing and power reside. The characters' names reflect their ethnic identities, their individual spirit quests, and their search for healing circles of home and community.

The circle has traditionally been seen as symbolic of the feminine. In many Native American traditions, the circle represents the wholeness of creation, the oneness of earth and spirit. In a circular arrangement, no one is superior to another; all are equal. In contrast to the top-down pyramid of patriarchy, a circular structure is inclusive, egalitarian. A circle is a mode of inclusion; we draw others into the circle to make them welcome.

That ritual of welcome, an image of strengthening the community, is often enacted in fiction by American women of color. Paula Gunn Allen, a poet, novelist, teacher and literary critic of part-Native ancestry, argues that women, like the Earth itself, are creative agents, seekers of harmony and balance. She describes ritual cultures in which women have a great deal of power because, she claims, they are especially attuned to the world of the spirit. In the work of Latina poet and critic Gloria Anzaldúa, borders of race and gender can become bridges rather than barriers between people of different blood, language or culture. Contemporary novelist

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Louise Erdrich participates in this literary ritual of unification by creating characters whose names illustrate cultural border-crossing and bridge-building, reinforce the wealth of traditional identities, and contribute to the survival of their communities.

The symbol of the circle, “found again and again in Native American traditional rituals and architecture,” represents the unified world view held by indigenous people (Versluis 1993, 104). This interpretation is shared by anthropologists, artists and theologians. Art historian Ralph T. Coe argues that the circle represents the native peoples’ connectedness to their own tribes and to other tribes, to the created world, and to the universe (1976, 18). Similarly, the authors of *A Native American Theology* claim that the circle symbolizes the unity of family, tribe, clan, and all creation (2001, 47). The circle illustrates the egalitarian nature of those relationships; in a circle, no one has dominion over anyone else.

The circle also represents a Native American sense of time. While Europeans describe time as the linear progression of events, native people understand time as cyclical and continuous. The seasons of the year and the earth, the rhythms of hunting and cultivating crops, the cycles of the life of a family and of an individual, all are recognizable as recurring patterns. The four seasons, or the four directions and their symbolic colors, or the four stages of a person’s life can be represented in a medicine wheel, a circle circumscribing a cross. Enclosure in the circle illustrates the unity and interrelatedness of these distinct elements. These natural cycles are marked by rituals and ceremonies that reflect, create or restore the harmony needed for continued life and peace within the tribe and nation.

A particular element of the unified Native American world view is the realization that just as there is no separation between the human and animal worlds, so there is no separation between the visible and the spiritual worlds.

Christian anthropologist Michael F. Steltenkamp notes that, for native peoples, “the life-cycle [is] perceived as a sacred, ongoing, and inter-connected process” (1982, 86). The cross within the circle of the medicine wheel illustrates the sacredness of the ordinary, with the horizontal bar, representing time, intersecting the vertical bar, representing timelessness (Versluis 1993, 104). For native people, the visible daily world is permeated by the invisible world of spirit.

In many native cultures, the permeability of worlds is mediated by the shaman who draws on spirit power to move back and forth between worlds, much like the river otter moves between land and water (Versluis 1993, 54-55). Totems are images of birds, animals and sea creatures representing particular spirit powers that guide or protect particular families and clans. The use of an animal’s hide or feathers or a painted representation assists the shaman in accessing spirit powers. The spirit powers assist the tribes, and the tribes make gifts to the spirits and to the ancestors who have gone into the afterlife. Shamans and other individuals within the clan or tribe with access to the world of spirit are honored and welcomed to share that access with others.

According to Allen, some of the goals of these Native American rituals and ceremonies are to “restore the psychic unity of the people, reaffirm the terms of their existence in the universe, and validate their sense of reality, order, and propriety”—in other words, to bring harmony and oneness (1992, 73). One particularly significant and powerful ritual, especially among the Ojibwe<sup>1</sup> people, was the naming ritual. Significant elements of these ceremonies were recorded by pioneering ethnologists Frances Densmore, in her 1929 study for the Smithsonian, and Ruth Landes, in her 1937 dissertation at Columbia; their work is corroborated by the studies of contemporary Ojibwe linguist and anthropologist Basil Johnston.

Densmore notes several ways by which an Ojibwe might be named. Parents might give a child the name of a

friend as a way to honor that friend. A person might acquire a name or nickname in childhood based on physical appearance, a personality trait, or resemblance to someone or something. Some Ojibwe bore the name of their kinship group; some had English names although the pronunciation had shifted through Ojibwe pronunciation (e.g., *Margaret* had become *Magid*). Some names were English transliterations of traditional names, such as *Hole-in-the-day*, and some were simply "euphonious names without any significance" (1979, 52).

In addition to these fairly informal namings, Densmore describes in great detail the processes by which Ojibwe women and men acquired ceremonial names. A youth or adult might acquire or discover a name through a dream or dream-quest, often at puberty. This name might be used rarely, if at all, but the dream gave the dreamer a spirit power that could be shared with others and that sometimes entitled the dreamer to confer dream names on others (1979, 52).

At the birth of a child (sometimes even before the birth), the parents would ask someone known to have such spiritual powers to confer a name. The naming might not happen for months, for the namer would need to pray and wait for the dream in which the name would be revealed. According to Densmore, the namer gives a feast at which he or she announces the child's name and perhaps confers a dream article for the child's cradle board. These activities occur in the context of recounting the dream and revealing the spiritual significance of the name and its power. The witnesses at the feast smoke a pipe to confirm the name: "In this manner the namer conferred on a child what he believed to be its best equipment for a successful and upright life" (1979, 55). The child thus received a significant spiritual power; however, Densmore observes that "it rested somewhat with the child whether this power was developed" (1979, 54). In Ojibwe culture, then, names often carried spiritual significance and power. To grow into the power of one's name required

awareness and effort. Indeed, through a significant achievement or change in life situation an adult might earn a new name. In any case, Basil Johnston notes that naming is “the most important event in a person’s life” because it confers one’s identity as revealed by access to the spirit world (1982, 28). In this Ojibwe tradition, novelist Louise Erdrich uses the names of her characters to reveal and develop their identities, particularly in relation to the wholeness of their families and communities.

Although she is of mixed ethnic heritage—French and German and Ojibwe—novelist Louise Erdrich is generally identified by critics as a Native American author. Most of the central characters in her novels are full- or part-Ojibwe, living in towns or cities in the upper Midwest, on or near reservation lands in North Dakota and Minnesota. In naming her characters, Erdrich draws on the Ojibwe understanding of the name as a key to the person’s identity. The traditional name given at birth, the saint’s name given at the time of Christian baptism, or the descriptive name chosen to mark an achievement, all contribute to the reader’s understanding of a character’s identity. And like Erdrich herself, her characters reveal a mixture of ethnic backgrounds. The inclusive circle of her characters’ families and their names suggests that Erdrich is modeling, and inviting, a wholeness of human society that can heal divisions resulting from ethnic prejudice.

In a brief essay entitled “The Names of Women”, Erdrich reflects on what has been lost and what endures from the disrupted histories of her Ojibwe ancestors “decimated by disease, fighting Plains Indian tribes to the west and squeezed by European settlers to the east.” Despite its being “a confusion of loss, a tale of absences” (1996, 86), the story of her people does yield the precious record of names and thereby knowledge of personalities.

Mining the 1892 tribal rolls of her Turtle Mountain reservation, Erdrich scans these earliest written records of her indigenous ancestors as a way of discovering her own

identity. Reading the names of the women reveals much about their personalities and relationships: “*She Tramp* could make great distance in a day of walking. *Cross Lightning* had a powerful smile. When *Setting Wind* and *Gentle Woman Standing* sang together the whole tribe listened” (1996, 87). The daughters of these women are listed by their Christian names, which reveal, Erdrich notes, more about French preferences among the saints than about the women’s identities. Nevertheless, the fact that these women survived difficult times leads Erdrich to deem them “sensible, hard-working, undeviating in their attention to their tasks,” as well as lucky (1996, 87-88).

Still, since the Christian names cannot reveal identity as the traditional names do, Erdrich uses old photographs of her great-grandmothers as keys to their personalities. Both Elise Eliza McCloud and Virginia Grandbois “were known as women with carts” (1996, 88). In her photograph, Elise Eliza looks proudly from the seat of her cart—a buggy, more properly—from which she built a reputation for selling hand-made needlework or wild berries and nuts. Virginia used her cart to haul potatoes, drinking water, whatever was needed to care for her family. As an old woman who “did not live in the present or in any known time at all,” Virginia was cared for by her daughter, Erdrich’s grandmother (1996, 89). Although her mind and body were frail, she was determined to walk to her home, a hundred miles away and long sold. She had to be restrained to prevent her from walking back because she so strongly “wanted her own place back, the place she had made, not her daughter’s, not anyone else’s. Hers. There was no substitute, no kindness, no reality that would change her mind” (89). Erdrich’s great-grandmothers’ identities—wives, mothers, providers—are profoundly rooted in their homes and their work.

In their identities Erdrich explores her own identity, symbolized by an “urge to get home” which she expresses not in the sewing, beading, farming and housework that her

foremothers did, but in writing. Erdrich observes that, unlike her mother, she “scratches the ground for pleasure, not survival. . . . I record rather than practice the arts that filled the hands and days of my mother and her mother, and all the mothers going back into the shadows” (1996, 91). In her novels, Erdrich records the domestic and useful creative arts practiced by her grandmothers. This analysis of the traditional arts of women echoes the work of African-American novelist and critic Alice Walker who, in her ground-breaking essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” honors the artistry of her foremothers who, without access to the education and resources needed to create “high art,” nevertheless were consummate artists, producing quilts and gardens that nourished their families’ spirits as well as their bodies. As Erdrich identifies the skills, seekings and relationships of her maternal ancestors, she traces their namings and reveals the spirit-lives of “transformation and continuance” (Allen 1992, 101) that are the theme of all Native American fiction.

Since the 1984 publication of her debut novel *Love Medicine*, Erdrich has developed a cycle of novels that builds the saga of several interrelated extended families in the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota, and a nearby Ojibwe reservation. *Tracks* (1988), opening in 1912, introduces the Ojibwe clans of Kashpaw and Nanapush, Morrissey and Lamartine. Erdrich follows the lives of these characters, their descendants, and increasing numbers of white and mixed-race characters through the 1920s and the Great Depression and into the 1990s in *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Four Souls* (2004), *Tales of Burning Love* (1997), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), and *The Painted Drum* (2005). Some of these characters appear in *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), also set in Argus but focused on immigrant German characters. *The Antelope Wife* (1998), set in contemporary Minneapolis, features characters from different Ojibwe clans. In all of her novels, Erdrich attends to individuals who struggle with the age-old

dilemmas of identity and relationship. Symbolic of that struggle are her characters' names.

In the formal and informal rituals of the characters' namings and personal growth, Erdrich demonstrates the transformations of individuals and cultures. Erdrich brings many non-Native characters into the novels as neighbors, government employees, friends, lovers and spouses. The Ojibwe characters' identities shift when they intermarry with people of German, French or Yankee ancestry. Some of Erdrich's pure-blood Ojibwe characters are noble heroes, while others are marginalized, even feared. The strongest and most admirable of her characters tend to be mixed-race individuals or those seeking to discover their backgrounds; their names reflect conscious choices of identities and behaviors focused on healing their communities.

One of Erdrich's early "mixed" characters is Albertine Johnson, who appears in *Love Medicine* (1984) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Albertine is the daughter of Zelda Kashpaw and her husband Swede Johnson, but she is named for Zelda's first true love, Albert Xavier Toose. After high school, Albertine leaves the reservation for Fargo, symbolic of separation from the extended family, but she moves away in order to study the healing profession of nursing. She is intent on healing relationships as well as illness. After a family gathering disintegrates into a drunken donnybrook, Albertine tries to repair as much of the damage as she can, checking on the baby who has slept through the fracas and, symbolically, trying to repair the fruit pies ruined in the brawl. "But once they smash there is no way to put them right," Albertine reflects (1984, 42). Her surname is that of her Swedish father; her Christian name is the French feminine of her mother's first love, an Ojibwe. With this blended Swedish-Ojibwe ancestry, Erdrich makes Albertine a character who is attentive to relational difficulties and committed to restoring harmony.

The Shawano clan that Erdrich presents in *The Antelope Wife* (1998) has a rich ethnic background and a long and



troubled history to accompany it. The family tree reaches back to include an Ivory Coast slave, a Quaker turned soldier, and a windigo, as well as several deer and antelope ancestors. A member of the youngest generation of mixed-ancestry Shawanos, Cally Roy is a twin, the daughter and granddaughter and great-granddaughter of twins who all have spirit names linking them with ancestors. Reflecting on her diverse and sometimes bizarre family, Cally observes that, “all in all, we make a huge old family lumped together like a can of those mixed party nuts” (1998, 110):

Some bloods they go together like water—the French Ojibwas: You mix those up and it is all one person. Like me. Others are a little less predictable. You make a person from a German and an Indian, for instance, and you’re creating a two-souled warrior always fighting with himself. . . . Swedish and Norwegian Indians abound in this region, too, and now, Hmong-Ojibwas, those last so beautiful you want to follow them around and see if they are real. (1998, 110-11)

Cally’s observations on interwoven ancestries embody the novel’s structure and its central metaphor of traditional beading. The narrative is not chronological: Erdrich begins and ends the novel with episodes from the life of the nineteenth-century Quaker-turned-soldier Scranton Roy and his grandson Augustus Roy, ancestors of Cally’s mother. Scranton’s bayonet attack on an old grandmother echoes in Cally’s dream-search for her own identity. Each of the novel’s four sections begins with a vignette of mythic twins beading the designs of human destiny. Cally sees her family in Minneapolis “scattered like beads off a necklace and put back together in new patterns, new strings” (1998, 220). Exploring the interconnected patterns of her own life and heritage, Cally (like Erdrich) finds her way home as she uncovers the significance of her spirit name, her truest identity.

As the novel follows Cally’s growth through adolescence, Erdrich shows the girl and her mother Rozina

(who has survived the death of her own twin sister) struggling to understand the power their spirit names hold for them individually and in the family. Cally suffers the pain of separation at the age of eleven when her twin Deanna dies accidentally. Working through her grief, Cally clearly remembers the day when the twin grandmothers had blessed the twin girls in a ritual of eagle fans and sweet grass:

Just a few people at one time are born to name. They have to dream certain dreams, hear them in the wind, get the instructions just so. I do know that my grandmas' dreams were big-time powerful. They got a lot of names you never heard, as well as some brought to them as spirit gifts. New names. Old ones. . . . That day we were named . . . I watched my sister walk in the hold of her new name given by the spirits.

It is a name I do not speak. That name couldn't save her. That name died with her. My sister, I miss her so bad. She went before me, broke ground for me, tested my mother's body. Then she made a path for me to the next world, left her footsteps for my shoes. (1998, 109-10)

Eventually Cally asks the grandmothers to tell her the story of "what the spirits call me," Ozhawashkwamashkodeykway (1998, 102). Grandmother Zosie recounts how, as a young mother-to-be, she dreamed of gambling with a Pembina woman for some beautiful blue beads, wagering her own life and the lives of the twins she carried. When Zosie won the beads, the Pembina woman gambled to get them back, but all she had to wager were her names: Other Side of the Earth and Blue Prairie Woman. She lost these names to Zosie who, as an old woman, passed on both names to her granddaughters: Deanna became Other Side of the Earth and Cally received the spirit name Blue Prairie Woman.

In the dream, though, the Pembina woman warns Zosie about both the names and the beads:

"Our spirit names, they are like hand-me-downs which have once fit other owners. They still

bear the marks and puckers. The shape of the other life."

[Zosie] waited. "Why should I take the chance?" [she] asked, stubborn. "So what?"

"The name goes with the beads, you see," she said, "because without the name those beads will kill you." (1998, 217)

Abruptly, Cally realizes that those magnificent blue beads are in the mouth, under the tongue, of her Auntie Klaus, the woman her uncle Klaus has made his wife: "No wonder she was silent. And sure enough, as she holds them forward to barter, now, she speaks. . . 'Let me go'" (1998, 218). Cally realizes the power of her own spirit name, Blue Prairie Woman, and sees the power of naming to bind and free the woman they have known as Sweetheart Calico. In this moment, the girl becomes a woman, realizes that the seeking part of her life has concluded, and understands her place and responsibility in the design of the world now that she possesses the truth of her name:

Family stories repeat themselves in patterns and waves generation to generation, across bloods and time. Once the pattern is set we go on replicating it. . . . I study it now in my classes, work the meaning of it out at home. From way back our destinies form. I'm trying to see the old patterns in myself and the people I love. (1998, 200)

As Erdrich closes the circle of family, the granddaughter and grandmothers, spirits and dreams and lives of the dead, are revealed as intertwined forces of strength and survivance.

Most of Cally's family, the Shawano-Roy clan of *The Antelope Wife*, lives in Minneapolis and makes visits to the grandmothers on the reservation. However, most of Erdrich's novels are set in or near the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota, which, like many twentieth century towns in the upper Midwest, has a diverse ethnic population. In Argus, readers meet characters who are German (Bohl, Mauser, Miller, Ober, Pfef, Schlick, Strub, Waldvogel), Eastern

European (Kozka, Kuklenski, Shimek, Watzka), Swedish (Johnson) and Irish (Adare). Her Ojibwe characters, in Argus and on the nearby reservation, have surnames such as Lamartine, Lazarre, and Puyat, indicating long-ago marriages or liaisons with French trappers and voyageurs. These extended Ojibwe families live in traditional ways, often as practicing Catholics who also maintain traditional Ojibwe rituals and beliefs. As the chronology of the novels proceeds through the twentieth century, Erdrich brings in more and more characters of European descent, and over time, the ethnic groups blend through intermarriage, complicating and enriching the characters' identities and relationships.

But before involving the deeds of the white Americans, Erdrich presents generations of full-blood Ojibwe characters, many of whom live apart from white settlements, prefer to use their traditional names, sometimes given in the old language, sometimes transliterated. Nanapush, one of the narrators in *Tracks*, has "the use of" a Christian name from his Jesuit education at a mission school, but he does not give it out because, he says, a name "loses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file" (1988, 32). Named for the Ojibwe folk hero Nanbozho, Nanapush is a trickster figure, at once transgressive, comic, and paternal. Sometimes he cooperates with U.S. agents and Catholic missionaries, but sometimes he subverts their power, and their language, in order to ensure the survival of his people. Teaching a young man about traditional ways, he passes on the names and identities of his wives, whom he loved but lost to death: *Sanawashonekek*, which means Lying Down Grass; *Omiimii*, the Dove; *Zeziikaikwe*, the Unexpected; and *Wapepenasik*, White Beads, the mother of his children (1988, 45). In a dream vision, he saw again his dead children: "I held our small daughter, Moskatitinaugun, Red Cradle, whom I'd called Lulu. Our son Thomas, also named Asainekanipawit, Standing in a Stone, was there too" (1988, 220). By providing the Ojibwe names and their English equivalents, Erdrich invites readers into

traditional culture; by showing the Christian names of these traditional people, she reveals the increasing influence of the Anglo culture; by emphasizing their deaths, she shows the cost to Ojibwe life and identity as Anglo influence makes ever deeper inroads into traditional life.

In all of Erdrich's novels, the character who most consistently embodies tribal resistance to the incursions of white culture and influence is a woman known as Fleur ("flower" in French), the last of the Pillager clan. She appears, at least in passing, in all of the Argus novels. This character rarely uses English, refuses Christianity, and lives on the outskirts of the settlement, close to the woods. By keeping Fleur mysterious and distant, as remote from the readers as from the other characters in the novels, Erdrich emphasizes the spirit power Fleur guards behind the façade of the innocuous name.

Throughout the Argus novels, Erdrich builds Fleur's persona by accumulating fragmentary details about her mother and grandmother, much as Erdrich assembles her own sense of self by exploring details about her great-grandmothers. For instance, in *Four Souls*, readers learn that Fleur's grandmother Fanny Migwans survived the smallpox epidemic that killed her mother. So angry was she that she chose to confront death herself, and so had herself buried for four days and four nights, breathing through a leather tube while her relatives kept watch. Through this ordeal, Fanny earned the spirit-power of healing, as well as the name *Anamaiiakikwe*, *Under the Ground* (2004, 49-50). In time, *Under the Ground* had a daughter whom she named Anaquot, which means "cloud". Anaquot survived illness not once but four times, thus earning the spirit name *Four Souls* in honor of the spirits she released each time she cheated death. It was a powerful name and thus one that was rarely spoken.

As a young woman, Anaquot abandoned her husband, daughter and son to move in with the Pillager man who was the father of her infant daughter. The man's wife,

Ziigwan'aage, understandably resentful of a second woman in the household, seemed to Anaquot to be preparing poison or a charm to kill the baby, despite her pleasant conversation during daily chores:

Anaquot was extremely careful with the information she divulged, for information is power. She did not tell her baby's name to Ziigwan'aage. Instead, she used a nickname she herself had been given by an old French trader. Fleur. So that baby was disguised before it had even spoken. . . . [Anaquot] was more determined than ever to protect her. For it seemed the spirits had some great work in mind when they made the child. (*Painted Drum* 2005, 139)

The character known as Fleur possesses enormous spirit power, much of it clearly tied to her spirit name, which remains unknown (*Four Souls* 2004, 48). Since Erdrich claims that women's names "told us who they were," her decision to conceal the truest name of the woman known as Fleur suggests that her identity, her spirit power, must remain out of the reach of ordinary people ("Names of Women" 1996, 91).

In the early chapters of *Tracks*, Fleur's physical strength becomes a subject of awe and resentment among the butchers at Kozka's Meats in Argus. To further their humiliation, she beats them at cards. Enraged, three men assault her in the slaughter yard, beating and raping her. Within hours, a tornado strikes Argus, and the men seek shelter in the meat locker where their frozen bodies are found days later (1988, 22-30). Did Fleur cause their deaths in retaliation for the assault? Twice on the reservation, it seemed that Fleur had drowned; in both cases, the men who rescued her were later found dead, one of them drowned (1988, 10-11). Did Fleur exchange their souls for hers, thereby causing their deaths? Fleur's spirit power is a mighty reality for the people who know her. Some tell of hearing the chuffing of a bear when she comes near; others report seeing bear prints on the ground after she walks away (1988, 12). In her old age, young people

on the reservation know her simply as Mindemoya, the Old Lady. And they know to keep their distance.

Despite her spirit power, or perhaps because of it, Fleur refuses to name the daughter she bears after her return from Argus and refuses to identify the child's father. Weakened by childbirth, unaware that the priest has come to the house, Fleur is unable to prevent the child's baptism. But before the priest can confer a Christian name, Margaret Kashpaw rushes the baby back to Fleur's bed. Left alone with the priest, the old man Nanapush gives his own name as the father and declares that the child will be called Lulu, the name of his dead daughter. In fact, he and Margaret will raise Lulu as their own child because Fleur will not acknowledge the child as her own, and Lulu refuses to call Fleur "Mother." *Tracks* is in part the old man's narrative for Lulu of the events of her mother's life. Without personal connection to her mother, Lulu cannot know her own identity.

Without Nanapush and Margaret's act of adoption, Fleur's decision to reject her daughter would leave Lulu adrift in Ojibwe society, without family, without identity. To confer a name is to confer power, identity, the source of spirit strength for the individual and for the community. To choose a name is to seek the power it holds. After reservation lands have been logged and mined to build a mansion for a St. Paul industrialist, Fleur risks her life to travel to the city to avenge those depredations. To protect herself on this dangerous mission, she chooses to bear one of her mother's names, Four Souls, in order to draw on its spirit power:

What Fleur didn't know was the name would take over and have more of an effect on her than she could have conceived. For the name was forceful, it was old, and it has its own intentions. In the end, it was even stronger than Fleur. (*Four Souls* 2004, 46-47)

Her mission to the city is at least partly successful in that she makes the industrialist keenly aware of the cost of the wood and stone and labor in his gilded mansion. However, Fleur

loses her vengeful wrath on that trip and much of her spirit power; the name allows her just enough power to return home, with a mixed-blood child. She knows she must return home to restore her spirit sufficiently to pass spirit to her son.

The arrival of the unnamed child, a boy, is described in both *The Bingo Palace* and *Four Souls*. Like his mother, he is a card player who immediately sits down to gamble with the government agent to win back the tribe's stolen lands. The wary reservation people conclude that the boy "must be a soul Fleur had tossed out in the face of death. An argument. Bait. He was a piece of her own fate used to divert attention from her real business" (*Bingo Palace* 1994, 142). His whiteness and lack of a name frighten the people. Ojibwe anthropologist Basil Johnston asserts that an unnamed child "was without identity . . . It was no more than a presence with a potential and, with care and good fortune, a future. That and nothing more" (1982, 15). Indeed, Fleur calls him merely "My son . . . n'gozis" (*Four Souls* 2004, 200). Margaret Kashpaw, who has raised Fleur's rejected daughter Lulu, is horrified to realize the truth:

As far as we were concerned, the boy was nameless. For sure, such a thing was no accident. I opened my mouth to ask Fleur to tell me his name, but then a thought stopped me, an answer. *She had not named him.* I knew this as sure as I knew my own name. Oh, he'd have a name for the records, for papers, surely. A name for chimookomaan law. He'd have a name for the whites to call him, but no name for his spirit.

"You haven't named your own son," I hissed at Fleur, outraged at her carelessness. "He's strange in the head because the spirits don't know him!" (2004, 200)

Wise in spirit lore, and weary from her time away from her ancestral home, a source of her spirit power, Fleur replies in shame that it was impossible to name the child away from the reservation: "Who would dream a name for him? Who would smoke the pipe? Who would introduce his spirit to the name



and help his spirit to embrace that name?" (2004, 200-01). Naming is a process of spirit that confers spirit; naming must not be taken lightly. The woman known as Fleur needs to return home in order to confer spirit power on her son, to give him a name that will connect him with his people and his land, rather than with the people and home of his white father.

Another character with no name and no connection to home is a central and symbolic figure in *The Antelope Wife*. Her true name is never known, and her life is miserable because she has been forcibly taken from her family and homeland. Kidnapped from a Montana powwow and craft show by Klaus Shawano and held captive in his Minneapolis apartment, the woman is known to Klaus as Sweetheart Calico Woman; Klaus's nieces and nephews call her Auntie Klaus. She refuses to use English, although she understands enough to get by. Cut off from her home, her daughters, her language, she is trapped in an alien place. When Klaus finally sinks deep enough in his own misery to recognize hers, he "tie[s] her hand to his hand gently with the sweetheart calico" fabric that has provided the name he used for her in his world, and side by side they walk back to the open prairie where he sets her free (1998, 228-29). Part of her liberation is that she need no longer live under a name that is not hers; her spirit is free to reconnect to its sources, its home, giving restored life and healing to her captor in the process.

Knowing oneself and one's name in order to be connected to family and to the spirit world is an essential component of health and balance in Erdrich's fiction as in traditional Ojibwe life. Several of her characters are ignorant of their true identity and heritage; in response to this disconnection, these characters are deeply committed to creating and maintaining connectedness and relationship. Without a name and a heritage, it is a struggle to know oneself and one's place in society. Delphine Watzka, in *The Master Butchers Singing Club*, and Marie Lazarre, in *Love Medicine*, are

two of Erdrich's "thrown-away children" (Wong 1991), who must create relationships in order to create selves to go with their names.

As far as Delphine Watzka knows, she is the child of Roy Watzka and his long-dead wife Minnie, whose photos Delphine treasures. Delphine is a devoted daughter who works incessantly to protect and restore her father from his drunken binges. She becomes the devoted neighbor of Fidelis ("faithful") and Eva (the first woman/mother) Waldvogel, helping Eva in the Waldvogel butcher shop, becoming her confidante, nurse, and dearest friend as Eva slowly and painfully succumbs to cancer. She remains in the butcher shop as Fidelis's bookkeeper, helping to make a home for his sons, until finally she and Fidelis realize their love and marry. While the oldest son Franz is overseas during World War II, Delphine is friend and confidante to Franz's young wife Mazarine. Delphine is an old-fashioned homemaker, perhaps Erdrich's echo of the name of the traditional garden favorite delphinium: loving, faithful, committed to building and maintaining family ties, to creating a home.

The irony of her passion for relatedness is that Delphine Watzka's name is an invented identity. Ray Watzka is not her father at all; "Minnie," while not her mother, is indeed the one who gives Delphine life by rescuing her from the outhouse where her birth mother, a young Mrs. Shimek, has dumped her immediately after her birth. Late in the novel, Erdrich reveals the true identity of "Minnie": she is not Roy's late wife but rather a mysterious (perhaps Minneconjou) Sioux woman known in the town as Step-and-a-Half, an itinerant who walks incessantly, in and out of town and in and out of people's lives. As a small child wearing a little ghost shirt under her dress, she had survived a brutal massacre in which her father was one of many Indians gunned down by the U.S. Army. Grown to adulthood without name or family, Step-and-a-Half is unable to settle down or maintain a stable relationship with anyone. Instead, she roams the area, doing

anonymous good whenever she can, living on scraps from the butcher shop, and watching over her “daughter” from a distance. Unwittingly, in her supportive care for Mazarine, Delphine becomes a surrogate older sister for her blood sister, as both are daughters of Mrs. Shimek. The disconnected Step-and-a-Half creates a family for Delphine, who in turn rebuilds the family of the widowed Fidelis, and nurtures Mazarine and her own child after Franz’s wartime death.

Like Delphine, Marie Kashpaw is rejected by her birth mother and raised by someone else. Although neither character knows the identity of her mother, Erdrich allows readers to understand their ancestry. Marie is the daughter of Pauline Puyat, who seduced Napoleon Morrissey, killed him to shroud her pregnancy, and then did her best to abort the child before birth. Despite that bitter and violent beginning, Marie—named for the Blessed Mother Mary—grows into a loving and responsible young woman in the Lazarre household. As an adult, Marie repeats the pattern of taking in thrown-away children, even giving some of them her family name. She seems determined to provide for these children the family connections she did not have in her own childhood.

In Erdrich’s world, not knowing one’s name and having no name-able ancestry can leave a person rootless and isolated. When characters like Delphine and Marie overcome their disconnection by actively seeking relationships, they develop generous and other-centered personalities to counter the disconnection with which they began life. They choose the identity that grows to suit their name.

While it may be dangerous to have no name, it is deadly to reject the name and identity one knows. Erdrich’s most disturbed characters are the ones who reject their heritage and their names. Chief among these is Pauline Puyat, who becomes Sister Leopolda. In the course of the Argus saga, Erdrich reveals the full ancestry that Pauline either doesn’t know or chooses to reject: her father was a Polish aristocrat, and her mother the daughter of a French-Canadian voyageur

and a woman of the Crane clan. Pauline, though, rejects her mixed ancestry in favor of creating herself white and Catholic and taking the name of Leopolda upon entrance into the convent.

Erdrich introduces Pauline in *Tracks* as a teenager who leaves her family in order to move to Argus, to learn lace-making from the Sisters at the convent. Since only white girls may enter the convent, Pauline doesn't mind when her father warns her that she'll "'fade out there . . . .'" Pauline boldly claims, "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. . . . I would not speak our language" (*Tracks* 1988, 14). Once accepted as Sister Leopolda, she makes it her mission to drive "the Dark One" out of all the Indian children in the mission school, because she is sure that "the Dark One" is the voice of evil whispering to the children in the old language, preventing white Christianity from saving them (*Love Medicine* 1984, 46-48). Over the course of her long life, she develops a reputation for sanctity despite her cruelty: "[S]he was known for her harsh and fearsome ways," Father Damien would write years later (*Last Report* 2001, 157). Erdrich presents Pauline/Leopolda as an ironic caricature of what Christian love and devotion ought to be; while she lives under a false name and identity, her twisted sense of self poisons everything she touches.

Native American fiction often has a circular structure, according to William Bevis, with central characters not voyaging outward to seek adventure, but rather coming home to discover identity within the extended family. Home is partly a physical place, Bevis argues, but because it is also made up of the tribal and family connections, home—identity—is communal, "transpersonal" (1987, 585). In her novels about Ojibwe characters, Erdrich often establishes connections through names:

There are names that go on through the generations with calm persistence. Names that heal a

person just for taking them, and names that destroy. Names that travel, names that bring you home, names you only mutter in the deep water of your sleep. Names that bring memory of painful attachments and names lost to time and the reckonings of chance. Names are throwaway treasures. Names hold the sweetness of youth, bring back faces and unsettling resemblances. Names acquire their own life and drag the person on their own path for their own reasons, which we can't know. (*Four Souls* 2004, 47)

The healthy characters become who they are in the context of a community, working their way toward a sense of self, and finding the truth of their names. That is a hard thing to do, Erdrich says, because the stories of Native people are often “a confusion of loss, a tale of absences, of a culture that was blown apart and changed so radically” that all that is left, sometimes, is the names (“Names” 1996, 86). In her novels, Erdrich names her characters as the Ojibwe people did: thoughtfully, reverently, giving each a spirit name that reveals the deep spiritual identity, yet demanding that the character make his or her own search for the community that is self, that is home.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>The indigenous people who call themselves Anishinaabe are variously known as Chippewa, Ojibway, Ojibwa, Ojibwe. I use this last form, as Erdrich does in her most recent novels.

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