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Crossing Stories, Crossing Cultures: Hybrid Spaces in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* (1984), one of the most popular contemporary Native American texts, is often classified as “postmodern writing“ or “postmodern Native American writing“. However, in this novel Erdrich also reworks and adapts postmodern conventions to attain the postcolonial effect of hybridity and anti-imperial translation, affirming Owens's statement that “contemporary Native American authors are requiring that the readers cross over the conceptual horizon into an Indian world“ (1998: 20).

The novel's composition exhibits distinctive features of the postmodern style. Events stretching from 1934 to 1984, scattered about anachronistically in fourteen individual chapters, impede narrative symmetry, and extend, as Gleason puts it, "in all directions at once" (70). Flashbacks, repetitions and accumulation of narrators -- from those in the first person singular to those in the first person plural and the omniscient ones -- additionally loosen the narrative linearity and unity of the individual chapters and the novel as a whole. These characteristics also indicate postmodern procedures of *discontinuity*, *permutation*, *contradiction*, and even *excess* (cf. Lodge 273-283), since the same events are often fractured into several narrative angles and, as Silberman contends, a main hero or focalizer does not exist (104). Besides, the narrators' accounts often contradict each other or are incomplete. Lulu, for example, refuses to reveal Moses' real name: "He told me his name. I whispered it, once. I hold his name close as my own blood and I will never let it out. I only spoke it that once so he would know he was alive" (82). Similarly, Lipsha will not answer the question whether Gerry really killed the state policeman:

If I tell you he said no, you will think he was lying. You will think a man don't get two consecutive life sentences for nothing beneath the U.S. judicial system. You'll keep thinking that, too, unless you happen to rub against that system on your own. Then things will astonish you. I promise they will.

If I tell you he said yes, and relate to you how it all happened, it might get used against him. I'm sorry but I just don't trust to write down what he answered, yes or no. We have entered an area of too deep water.

Let's just say he answered: "That's the penetrating mystery of it. Nobody knows". (364)

Multiperspectivity (Boyne and Rattansi 7), as well as the removal of the omniscient narrative center, are the main characteristics of the postmodern plot (cf. Scheffel 76, Hassan 40, 160), which "begins where the whole ends"<sup>1</sup> (Welsch 26). Though, the meaning of the paratactical arrangement of fragments in Erdrich's novel is somewhat different. In spite of its fragmentation, the plot of *Love Medicine* unites the characters, motifs and themes, and represents a closed unity that is by no means disintegrated, but is becoming more and more complex with each new reading. The thematic-fabular integrity is foremost expressed through the genre of *saga*, which underlines a genealogical, matrimonial or extramarital connection between different characters, as well as a continuity of the novel's events. Thus, although it represents an independent episode, each new chapter at the same time invites the previously accumulated narrative sediment, which completes the events and unites the characters within a network of family and tribal destinies. Thus, that is not a postmodern play with the beginnings, an ironic immersion of a text into its own interpretive possibilities or exhaustion of all possible narrative combinations (cf. Lodge 274, Solar, 1989: 235). The novel itself is a result of a combining and reconstruction of previously published short stories "Scales", "The Red Convertible" and "The World's Greatest Fishermen". As the author explains, arranging events related through the characters and the setting is in essence the telling of one and the same story "from other points of view and realizing in the process that there were many stories in this one" (qtd. in Quennet 78). Yet, Erdrich's strategy is very much in tune with the tradition of tribal storytelling, which is characterized by syncretism, variability, episodic configuration and a fluctuating coordination between individual events (Stokes, <<http://www.radford.edu/itw/infomark>>, Babcock 167).

Related to the minimizing feature of Native American oral narratives is the feature that stories are told in various segments, usually brief in length, that often seem unrelated to each other and for whom the connecting elements are simply omitted. Kroeber describes these units as "interdependent segments" (Retelling 77) that accrue their meaning once the segments are understood to be part of a

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<sup>1</sup> My translation

larger context. Kroeber is quick to point out that these story segments are not the same elements that structuralists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp isolate as recognizable subunits in Native stories, where, for Propp especially, fairy tale units predictably occur and always in the same order. What Kroeber and others describe as individual segments in a story are the very elements that traditional storytellers adapt and change to fit the context of their particular rendering. Therefore, the basic units of any story may be freely utilized to fit a storyteller's specific purpose. (Jacobs 25, 26)

As Schultz explains, Anishinaabe stories convey their meaning usually through multiple narration and cyclical connectedness. Explaining the inevitability of defocalization and contextual adaptation at the transmission of traditional Native American stories, Vizenor, too, points to the fact that, by creating stories out of visual sounds -- "recollection of multiple senses of an experience" -- narrators can tell a story from many different angles (qtd. in Jacobs 26). On the other hand, the transmission of characters, themes, events and motifs from one story to the other holds together not only the chapters of *Love Medicine*, but also this novel and the novels *Tracks* (1988), *The Beet Queen* (1986) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Due to this, some critics classify the novels as "The North Dakota Quartet" (Quennet 1). Although *Tracks* was published four years later, it denotes a chronological starting point of events described in *Love Medicine*. As Hutcheon reminds, "the relation of texts to other texts", stories to other stories, is a hallmark of postmodern fiction (1992: xiii). Likewise, this is the main characteristic of oral storytelling, whose coherence is never accomplished in only one performance, but is a result of a totality and multiplicity of experience of an individual character and his/ her contact with others. There is no isolated version of a story, explains T. C. S. Langen, but it resounds against the listener's knowledge of the whole "held by each person present at the performance" (qtd. in Adamson Clarke 36). Accordingly, individual episodes are not plot segments independent of each other, but are, on the contrary, thematically, causally and formally interconnected (cf. Babcock 168, 172).

Negating the fragmentariness by crossing the intra-textual borders, Erdrich uses a postmodern operation to translate meanings from the Western to the tribal mould, thus confirming Vizenor's thesis that postmodern poetics is a suitable medium for releasing the tribal narratives (1990: 279). That effect is also discernible through the omnipresent features of the mythic oral chronotope. In a postmodern manner, *Love Medicine* attempts to "ignore space and time as much as possible"<sup>2</sup> (Solar, 1988: 59). According to Solar, the slicing of time

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<sup>2</sup> My translation

according to a hero's subjective perception, as well as the abandonment of calendar time are the main traits of the contemporary novel (Solar, 1989: 345). Regardless of the fact that each chapter begins with a title, along with a temporal mark, which follows a chronological pattern, the structure of *Love Medicine* throws off the implied convention of metric time since many events are already known from before; they took place in some earlier episode or in some other novel of the "Quartet". Therefore, like the legendary matrix, which, as Pitman says, is always directly present "here and now" (784), history is a necessary part of the story's actuality in Erdrich's novel as well. In that sense intra-textuality is a stylistic signal of both discontinuity and permutation, and of the narrative cohesion, so that we can declare that Erdrich's novel at the same time both invites and refuses postmodern conventions. In traditional Anishinaabe stories the same characters emerge in many stories, and different narrative perspectives often represent contradictory events. Frequently, a final version of a story does not exist at all, so that the characters that died in one story can live again in another one (Stokes, <<http://www.radford.edu/itw/infomark>>). However, in contrast to the postmodern novel, which reduces the chronology and interrelationship between the stories, myth requires certain structure. Babcock explains:

... there is nonetheless some deep structure... all such cycles have a syntagmatic arrangement, that different classes of episodes may be substituted in certain narrative "slots" and, though only one tale may be told at a given time, both narrator and audience are aware of its place in an unlying, "ideal" syntagm. (168)

As Solar contends, mythic time knows no future because, according to the law of cyclicity, it has already happened in the past and is, therefore, already known. Therefore, unlike the novel, that knows its own history through historiography and literature, the myth recognizes no past (1989: 347, 348). Native American stories disclose the same trait:

... stories connect, people connect, events connect so that everything that happens is related to the story of life that never ends but continues and encompasses all aspects of being... This idea of interconnectedness is applied to human behavior as well as to the stories, in which nothing is irrelevant, everything matters, and what has happened in the past is connected to the present and future in the same way that the present and future affect the past. (Jacobs 15)

According to Vizenor, a people acquire their identity through a mass of little stories, "narrative wisps", as he calls them, "stories that sometimes let themselves be collected together to constitute big stories" (1990: 227). Oral stories are "fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves," says Minh-ha (143). The fragmentation of the plot in oral storytelling, therefore, does not disintegrate the narration, but, quite to the contrary, points at the wholeness and, as Morace contends, "calls attention to the communal nature of storytelling and to the communal need for story" (43). Seen in that light, the fragmentation and intra-textual fractures in Erdrich's fiction are not the postmodern destruction of narrativity, but, on the contrary, its rehabilitation.

A frequent ontological switch in *Love Medicine* is the discourse of gossip. The narrator in this novel is usually also the one who overhears the rumor, keeps a secret or gives his/her opinion of a character who is absent. June Kashpaw, for example, does not have a narrative voice of her own, and her story unveils exclusively through other characters' judgments and memories of her. The reader learns most about June out of the mouth of her cousin Albertine who transmits pieces of intimate conversations of other members of the household. Albertine, for instance, uncovers the family taboo, the fact that Lipsha is an illegitimate child from June's relationship with Gerry: "One secret I had learned from sitting quietly around the aunts, from gathering shreds of talk before they remembered me, was Lipsha's secret, or half of it at least. I knew who his mother was" (30). Lipsha himself does not discover this until the end of the novel. Explaining Erdrich's narrative tactics in *Love Medicine*, Michael Dorris points out that in absence of a hero and the central focalizer, the novel's central intelligence is the communal voice which is brought about through rumors and speculations (qtd. in Coltelli 22). Although it is one of the signposts of multiperspectivity and the postmodern play with pieces of the grand narrative, gossip is also an important marker of hybridity, as well as orality and, due to its inter-subjective nature, it confirms one's attachment to the group and the community. Besides, as Sands contends, "the very nature of gossip is instability" (15). Homi Bhabha finds the social significance precisely in that characteristic of this discourse. The indeterminacy and uncontrollable contagiousness of rumor, as well as the hidden presence that evades sanction and control, represents, according to Bhabha, the performative power of this discourse, a potential of "revolt and resistance" (1994: 200-202). In light of Bakhtin's theory, we could also say that gossip is characterized by the carnevalesque subversion since it lays bare and brings to the public square all that is intimate and hidden. According to Hirschkop, the square is the battlefield of verbal exchange whose main quality is "social integration" (<[http://:search.epnet.com](http://search.epnet.com)>). Similarly, although she dies in the first chapter

far from the reservation and her dear ones, the rumor speech uncovers June's presence in the lives of other characters and the community, and establishes her as the novel's central character. The discourse of gossip thus also subverts the Western convention of identity narrative, according to which the ambiguity and incompleteness signalize "the failure of self-actualization", a hero's isolation and dislocation (cf. Flavin <<http://www.lias.psu.edu>>, Reid <<http://www.radford.edu/itw/infomark>>).

Simultaneously appropriating and reconceptualizing the postmodern strategies, Erdrich directly interferes with the horizon of reception, toward which, according to Bakhtin, every discourse orients itself (cf. Dale Peterson 763). She manipulates the reader's expectations, announcing a recognizable form, which she then withholds or dissolves. Yet, that very authorial maneuver attaches *Love Medicine* to the postmodernist poetics once again. Like a typical contemporary novel, Erdrich's text forces the reader to juxtapose and correlate, intra-textually as well, and complete the narrative puzzle by filtering the narrators' accounts. According to Holt, in an ethnic text like *Love Medicine* such a position marginalizes the reader and blocks the final understanding, since the "value judgments, so easily arrived at in the Western tradition, have no place here" (151). Identically, Rainwater holds that Erdrich's texts "lead the reader away from the synthesis and into a permanent state of irresolution" as the conflicting codes create "epistemological dilemmas", preventing the reader's interpretation of a text (Rainwater 406-410). Quite differently, some critics suggest that the reader of Erdrich's texts is in a privileged position. Linda Ainsworth, for example, holds that it is only the reader who has insight into the whole narrative instances, and therefore the reader's knowledge surpasses that of the characters or the narrators (27). A confirmation of this view can be found in the chapter "The Good Tears", in which Lulu confides to us: "Nobody else ever knew of us. Nobody, if they don't read this ever, will" (281), although we have already learned about her secret from Nector in one of the previous chapters. Reid, too, finds that the reader of Erdrich's texts holds a privileged position, as, by filling the textual "gaps" offered through fragmentation, repetition and interconnectedness of individual parts, he/she is granted access to the totality of the story. Yet, if we take those contradictory interpretations of the reception of Louise Erdrich's texts as a form of dialogue, we can come up with a somewhat different understanding of the reader's role. Simultaneously both privileged and deprived of the control over the textual meaning, the reader holds an in-between position, which is foremost a dynamical one. As a result, such a receptional configuration very much resembles the narrator-listener transaction in oral culture. The recipients of the storytelling are not only witnesses to the process of creating the stories, an

instance that generates a meaning independently of the text and the author, but are also "co-creative participants" in the telling of a story (cf. Owens, 1992: 6, Lincoln, 1983: 49, Silberman 112), an instance that "fills in the blanks of the teller's synecdochic omission(s)" (Stokes <<http://www.radford.edu/itw/infomark>>). Bakhtin offers a similar interpretation:

For Bakhtin too, narrative is privileged not because it is closer to reality or history than other forms of discourse... but because it establishes a complicated set of social, political, philosophical, and formal relations among narrator, actor, and reader (listener) that are dynamic rather than fixed. The reader or listener of one story always has the possibility of becoming, and is even compelled to become the narrator of another, the narrator of one becoming the reader of another, the actor of one, the narrator of another, etc. This possibility, this opening to the other, to alternative narratives and thus to a rearrangement of relations and positions, is at the heart of all narrative... (Carroll 75)

Such a definition of a reader, as an instance that represents a mouth of a text's hybrid potential, again shifts the reader out of the frame of the postmodern discourse. Forced to integrate and dissolve the meanings, "shift position, turn, ponder" (Sands 12) and drop one's own ideological baggage in the process, the reader becomes a direct participant in an intercultural mediation. According to Ruppert, mediation is a central instrument of innovativity of contemporary Native American writers, whose in-between position makes it possible for them to shift and navigate between two different worlds and worldviews. In that way, these writers simultaneously meet the expectations of both audiences, while initiating a receptional reorientation, illuminating and stretching the conceptual spaces of both traditions (cf. Ruppert 7-21).

[t]he text will effectively need to teach any reader how to read the work, and, thus, how to perceive new evoked realities and new modes of knowledge ... The reader would be required to reconstruct the discourse of mediation that is the text. He [or she], too, must mediate. (Ruppert, qtd. in Reid)

An effective example of such an epistemological mediation can be found in the chapter "The Plunge of the Brave", in which Nector remembers how as a young man, having been noticed by a Hollywood talent seeker, he played a Native American in one of the popular western films.

His company was pulling in extras for the wagon-train scenes. Because of my height, I got hired on for the biggest Indian part ... right off I had to die.

"Clutch your chest. Fall off that horse," they directed. That was it. Death was the extent of Indian acting in the movie theater. (122, 123)

Later, thanks to his good looks, Nector becomes a model for a painting representing a Native American who jumps from a cliff:

I could not believe it... *Plunge of the Brave*, was the title of it. Later on, that picture would become famous. It would hang in the Bismarck state capitol. There I was, jumping off a cliff, naked of course, down into a rocky river. Certain death. Remember Custer's saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian? Well from my dealings with whites I would add to that quote: "The only interesting Indian is dead, or dying by falling backwards off a horse". (124)

At this point Erdrich brings to the extreme the noble savage stereotype. Nector's posture -- implying his upcoming death by falling off the cliff -- sublimates the main features of nineteenth-century artistic representation of this stereotype (Scheick 83, Sollors 132, 119, 126). In the twentieth century the Native's spectacular departure by falling down the waterfall or off a high cliff became one of the commonplaces in Hollywood portrayal of Native Americans. Along with the construct of a headdress and tomahawk decorated murderer, American film studios also gave life to the character of a stoic warrior that never laughs, talks very little, mostly grunts, with an almost perpetual scowl on his face, and as a rule stands in a tight posture with a flat hand above his eye, looking far into the distance (cf. Kilpatrick 34, 36, Holm 351, Barker 12). In the 1940s and the 1930s popular family radio programs featuring "the Lone Ranger" and his faithful companion, mixed-blood Tonto, produced yet another celluloid stereotype -- the character of a Native American travel companion and friend who offers spiritual relief and help to the white hero, even at the expense of his own life (Churchill 180, Espey <<http://www.radford.edu/itw/infomark>>). According to Ward Churchill, the Spanish word "tonto" virtually means "fool, dunce or dolt" (179) and is one of the most popular racist formulas which represents Native Americans as an object of laughter because of their cultural incompetence (Churchill 179, Ryan 20). According to Deloria, such inadequate images of American Indians are deeply rooted in the dominant culture to such an extent that "when a real Indian stands up and speaks the truth at any given moment, he or she is not only unlikely to be believed, but will probably be contradicted and 'corrected' by the citation of some non-Indian and totally inaccurate 'expert'" (qtd. in Ruoff 2).

In tune with the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, who finds the popular representation of Native Americans to be proof of the domination of the virtual over the real in American culture (2, 13-15), many Native American critics point out that the media prototype is "the Indian that never was" (Bataille 4), "a static artifact", "a place of signification to be emptied out and reinhabited by Euramerica" (Owens, 1998: 5). For Gerald Vizenor, too, the Indian is a romantic colonial invention, an absence of true Natives and their tradition (1998: 14, 35, 37, 1990: 279, Bataille 4), a simulation that has become the main disguise of the colonial surveillance (Vizenor, 1994.: 9, 1976: xiii).

You see, *indians* are simulations of the discoverable other, and only posers or the naive dare stand with an ironic name. That is to say, the simulations of the other have no real origin, no original reference, and there is no real place on this continent that bears the meaning of that name. The *indian* was simulated to be an absence, to be without a place. The reference of the simulation is a weak metaphor of colonialism, and, of course, manifest manners. (Vizenor and Lee 85)

According to Vizenor, the introduction of the photographic camera in mid-nineteenth century played a great role in disseminating the invented Indianness in the dominant culture (1998: 152). Ethnographic images, says Vizenor, have always fascinated the explorers, who from the very beginning captured the Natives into images and carvings (1998: 161-2). Photographs are an important trump-card in the hands of the colonial institutions, warns Loomba (99). Similarly, for hooks, too, images represent a powerful instrument of inner colonization that plays a key role in implementing the political power and constructing the relations between ethnic groups in the contemporary world (5). From its beginning, the mankind has believed images more than truth itself, says Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (3):

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - and, therefore, like power. (4)

After the opening of the West in 1869 by the completion of the transcontinental railroad, came the colonization through photography. The case of the American Indians is the most brutal. (64)

McClintock, too, points at the close relationship between imperialism and photography. Due to the technological improvement at replicating reality, pictorial language put an equal sign between itself and Western knowledge and claimed authority “to reorder... the hierarchies of world history“. In the service of political representation, photography wrenches its object out of the historical context and immerses it into panoptical time that marks the narrative of imperial progress, concludes McClintock (123-125).

By accepting the film role and posing for the picture *Plunge of the Brave*, Nector, thus, becomes a direct accomplice in the fabrication of his own identity and panoptical surveillance. As Rogin (503) and Pease (35) contend, the phenomenon of the hyper-real is directly related to the concept of historical amnesia. According to Rogin, the spectacle “colonizes everyday life...” and, blurring the border between the fictive and the real, obscures historical memory (507, 508). Significantly, Nector also loses his memory later in the novel. His granddaughter Albertine describes him as:

Elusive, pregnant with history, his thoughts finned off and vanished. The same color as water. Grandpa shook his head, remembering dates with no events to go with them, names without faces, things that happened out of place and time. Or at least it seemed that way to me. Grandma and the others were always hushing up the wild things he said or talking loudly over them. Maybe they were bored with his craziness, and then again maybe his mind blurted secrets from the past.

If the last was true, sometimes I thought I understood.

Perhaps his loss of memory was a protection from the past, absolving him of whatever had happened. (19, 20)

Consenting to becoming a part of the dominant imagination, Nector, thus, loses control over his history and tradition and in that way negates himself once again. Erdrich alludes to that through Gordie’s joke about an Indian, Frenchman and Norwegian. Whereas the other two, due to the malfunction of the machine, are saved from the guillotine, perceiving where the problem is, the Norwegian advises his executioners: "You guys are sure dumb. If you put a little grease on it that thing would work fine!" (34), thus proving that if we think like those who seek our life, we lead ourselves to death.

On the other hand, Nector's career as an actor and a model also points to the bond between the colonization and the consumer discourse, a phenomenon which McClintock labels

as "commodity racism" (33). As a prototype to a series of "artistic paintings" (233), printed on "all the tourist guides to North Dakota" (233) and thousands of cans of cheap food, Nector's character is symptomatic of the process of trivialization of Indianness in American mass culture. According to San Juan, racism as a political and ideological phenomenon is undistinguishable from the material forms of production and it coincides with the emergence of a system based on the "exchange-value: the production, circulation, and consumption of commodified others" (11, 13). In contemporary American culture Native Americans have become a regular target of American commercial folklore -- mascots of sports clubs like the "Washington Redskins" and the "Cleveland Indians", trademarks of the military and automobile industry, pictured on labels of food and tobacco products, and, more recently, presented in connection with healthy food and environmental movements (Hoxie 404). As Dorris observes:

Ersatz Indians have inspired hippies, Ralph Lauren designs, and boy scouts. But flesh and blood Native Americans have rarely participated in or benefited from the creation of these imaginary Indians, whose recognition factor, as they say on Madison Avenue, outranks, on a word scale, that of Santa Claus, Mickey Mouse, and Coca Cola combined (99).

Yet, in spite of the fact that it seems to completely conform to the popular cliché of Indianness, at the same time Nector's Hollywood episode denies that very cliché. Although, like Tonto, Nector takes part in the narration that wants to wipe him out -- and on the set submissively falls off the horse and jumps into the abyss of evanescence -- he challenges that narration at the same time. When the white woman asks him to disrobe, Nector pretends that he does not understand what is expected of him: "'Disrobe,' she repeated. I stood there and looked confused. Pitiful! I thought. Then she started to demonstrate by clawing at her buttons. I was just about to go and help her when she said in a near holler, 'Take off your clothes!'" (123). Through such a deliberate misunderstanding of the woman's message, Nector appropriates the colonial "forked tongue" tactics and creates a communicational boomerang which has all the characteristics of Bhabha's "third space" and the concept of hybridity:

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 signs can be, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha, 2002: 37)

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (Bhabha, 2002: 112)

As a result of such a semantical maneuver, the dominant construct of Indianness bursts and folds back on itself, so that from an object of colonial authority Nector becomes the subject of a *trickster* discourse, wanting to disrobe the white painter instead of himself.

As one of the most popular characters in the Native American oral tradition, the *trickster* represents a comic hyperbolic variety of man who, through mischief, resists all virtues and values -- family, cultural and social (Ramsey 27) -- and through its negative example defines the borders of the permissible "we must not pass" (Ballinger 25). According to Ramsey, the *trickster* has the ability to transform both his own form and the reality itself, so that, besides denoting human boundaries, he can also dissolve them and open up new perspectives and possibilities (27). The transitory nature of this character is visible, among others, through his position in between postmodern and Native American poetics. According to Jeanne Smith, postmodern and *trickster* theories uphold each other and overlap (16, 17). Lowe, on the other hand, finds the ethnic comic discourse to be essential for the supplementation, but also correction of contemporary definitions of postmodernism (104). A confirmation of these views can be found in Gerald Vizenor's *trickster* theory. Supported by the poststructuralist methodology, Vizenor clearly points at the *trickster's* postmodern qualities (Krupat 184). For Vizenor, the *trickster* narrative represents "contradictions, not representations of culture" (1994: 170). It is "not a real person or 'being' in the ontological sense", but "a comic holotrope" (1993: x, 187), "a language game" (1988: x, 1991: 80), "a semiotic sign" (1990: 192, 284) which, through its flexibility and anarchic creative energy, releases and creates new possibilities of social discourse, tests dominant ideas, laws and conventions (1988: ix). Vizenor especially stresses the *trickster's* skill to defrost the hardened meanings and in a postmodern fashion suggests "there can never be 'correct' or 'objective' readings of the text or the tropes in tribal literatures, only more energetic, interesting and 'pleasurable misreadings'" (1990: 278,

Blair 76, 77). Similarly to Bhabha's "third space", which loosens the fixity of cultural symbols (1995: 206-209), Vizenor, too, sees the *trickster's* position as a position of power, which makes it possible to create a turnover of laws, governments and social conventions, to overthrow beliefs, ideas and ideologies. The novelists who use the trickster discourse, explains Klinkovitz, "reveal the hybrid nature of all culture, the ambivalence at the source of any imposition that enables its subversion" (349). Like Bakhtin's clown, whose subversion manifests itself as "virtual insanity, militant naiveté," "intentional misunderstanding" of a convention that it questions and dismantles (Holquist 142), Nector, too, blurs the borders of the authoritarian discourse. According to Bakhtin, "this varied play with the *boundaries of speech types*, languages and belief systems is one most fundamental aspect of comic style (308), in which

... one and the same word often figures both as the speech of the author and as the speech of another – and at the same time. Another's speech... is at none of these points clearly separated from authorial speech: the boundaries are deliberately flexible and ambiguous, often passing through a single syntactic whole, often through a simple sentence, and sometimes even dividing up the main parts of a sentence." (308)

Lipsha describes Nector's tactics as a "smokescreen": "Smokescreen is what irritates the social structure, see, and Grandpa has done things that just distract people to the point they want to throw him in the cookie jar where they keep the mentally insane" (232). Unlike Henry Lamartine who dies in a direct collision with the Northern Pacific train, an emblem of "conquest" of the American West, he defiantly runs to meet (107), Nector survives precisely by literally cleaving to the dominant codes:

I knew that Nector Kashpaw would fool the pitiful rich woman that painted him and survive the raging water. I'd hold my breath when I hit and let the current pull me toward the surface, around jagged rocks. I wouldn't fight it, and in that way I'd get to shore. (124)

Nector, thus, outwits the colonial language by playing a "dumb Indian". In other words, he implodes the stereotype with the stereotype by simulating a simulation. Simulation and adaptability are the *trickster's* key features, explains Vizenor (1990: 286, Zamir 420), and

humor is one of the main forms through which Native people can subvert the simulation of their own identity.

Like Vizenor, numerous representatives of contemporary Native American criticism point out the political character of humor, its relation to “the wounds of history” (cf. Nancy Peterson 36) and the potential to destabilize the metanarratives of “conquest and assimilation” (Allen, qtd. in Lincoln, 1993. 7): “Humor is a primary means of reconciling the tradition of continuance, bonding, and celebration with the stark facts of racial destruction” (Allen, 1986. 159). As “the social sanction to look at things differently” (Bowers 140), mythic characters like the *trickster* play the key role at renewing and recreating a culture because of their boundless ability of survival, and often appear precisely in those situations which threaten to unsettle values (Smith 3, 7, 8). Vine Deloria, too, sees humor as the main vehicle for survival of contemporary Native Americans:

[h]umor, all Indians will agree, is the cement by which the coming Indian movement is held together. When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that people can survive. (169)

Louise Erdrich’s words confirm that, as well:

I really think the question about humor is very important. It's one of the most important parts of American Indian life and literature, and one thing that always hits us is just that Indian people really have a great sense of humor . . . it's a different way of looking at the world, very different from the stereotype, the stoic, unflinching Indian standing, looking at the sunset. (qtd. in Cutchins 7)

The concept of the *trickster* can also be conceived of as a metafictional metaphor of Erdrich’s narrative strategy itself. Resonating Linda Hutcheon's postmodern thesis that myths, conventions and images cannot be avoided (2002: 51, 1992: 48) and Owens's claim that Native Americans can achieve their visibility, audibility and existence only by accepting the stereotypes about themselves, posing "as the absolute fake, the fabricated 'Indian'" (2001: 17), the author turned the receptional convention upside down, precisely by appropriating it

consistently. Thrusting her character into the jaws of stereotypes, she produced a *short circuit*<sup>3</sup> and in that way underlined “an other’s word” and “echoes of the other’s utterance” (Bakhtin, 1986: 88) in her text. In that way she achieved what Bhabha describes as repeating, relocating and translating "strategy of representing authority" (1995: 207). The success of Erdrich's method of liberation from the colonial meta-narrative is confirmed through Nector's words: "Call me Ishmael ... For he survived the great white monster like I got out of the rich lady's picture" (125).

Dissolution of the colonial symbols is also alluded to through the description of the souvenir factory that Lyman opens on the reservation, "a facility that would produce fake arrows and plastic bows, dyed-chicken-feather headdresses for children, dress-up stuff" (303). Although it appears to be a threat of the disappearance of authentic cultural values, through the technique of *short-circuit* Erdrich wraps Lyman's project of the commodification of the Chippewa tradition into humor. Whereas the traditional process of crafts production is of exclusively spiritual nature -- led by higher forces and helpers, dreams and visions, and the object itself is a repository of psychic and spiritual powers (cf. Allen, 1986: 204) -- the production process in Lyman's manufacture is completely despiritualized:

1) Billy Nanapush inserts precut rectangle into punch press. Trips press. Press inserts grommet into leather. Drops leather into pile at next station.

2) Agnes Deer picks up leather rectangle right hand, pinewood dowel left hand. Draws leather thong through grommet. Ties thong loose knot. Passes dowel handle next station.

3) Mary Fred Toose picks out assortment of feathers. Inserts quill ends into knot. Draws thong tight. Passes handle.

4) Felix Pukwan, glue-dripper, drips oone drop glue on end dowel handle. Piles handles at next station.

5) Lipsha Morrissey, Billy Nanapush, Norris buny secure heads with rawhide and more glue.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Lodge, *short-circuit*, that can manifest as “exposing conventions in the act of using them“, is a frequent postmodern narrative technique (284).

6) Bertha Ironcloud inspects assembled war clubs. Heads reinforced with black suede strips. Bertha strings colorful beads on strip and lays war club on short conveyer belt. (309)

Since they cannot compete on the market with objects from their own culture produced in China and on Taiwan, the Chippewa tribe resolves to produce "museum quality artifacts" (303):

Tobacco pouches, roach spreader, hair ties, makuks, deer calls and cradle boards were slated for work systems analysis, and by the third month I put into production two other traditional Ojibwa items: moccasins, and my favorite: patterned birch bark. In the past, women bit the shapes of snowflakes and stars into pieces of birch bark and hung these against the light. I had wanted to manufacture these pretty toys from the first, but systematizing was a challenge. I could not have my workers sit around nibbling, dental benefits wouldn't cover it. In the end I went over to the tooling plant and worked up a machine fitted with champers, iron slugs shaped like molars and incisors. One worker operating this machine could produce, in a day, the winter's work of a hundred Chippewa grandmothers. (310)

Through yet another *short circuit*, emphasized through the indistinguishability between the production process of museum items and of objects designed for mass consumption, Erdrich also disturbs the substructure of the ethnological sciences. Through a postmodern play with the motif of the museum she denounces the ethnological discipline as yet another manifestation of the culture of the spectacle which, quite contrary to the ideal of protection and preservation of cultural heritage, under disguise of authenticity, contributes to the exploitation and erosion of indigenous traditions. Allen, too, points to the tie between the consumer and scientific hegemony:

... American Indian people remain curiously difficult to categorize outside of museums of natural history where we exist, frozen in time, as nostalgic accompaniments of American flora and fauna. Identifiably distinct in history, culture, style, and thought, Native people are also as American as fried chicken (a Cherokee recipe applied to a Celtic ingredient) and apple pie. (Allen, 1998: 12)

However, it is exactly through such discourse hybridization -- by drawing a parallel between Western institutions of knowledge, imperialism and mass culture -- that Erdrich paves the way towards new meanings. Like Nector, the Chippewas stir up the colonization paradigm “from within“, playing with its main footing - commodification. Through a conscious commercialization of their culture, they achieve what Bhabha calls “the loss' of meaning ... as a cutting edge, into the representation of the fullness of the demands of culture” (1990: 313). Adapting the process of artifact production to the principles of management and mechanization, they subvert the Indian Arts and Crafts Act from 1990, according to which “it is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell any craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced“ (cf. *Indian Arts and Crafts Board* (<<http://www.doi.gov/iacb/act.html>>)). Quite to the contrary, although it has been produced by the Natives, the final product from Lyman's factory is all but a costly traditional artifact. Erdrich describes it ironically as:

An attractively framed symbol of America's past. Perfect for the home or office. A great addition to the sportsman's den. All authentic designs and childsafe materials. Crafted under the auspices of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Anishinabe enterprises, Inc. Hand produced by Tribal Members. (310)

Hybridity represents “an ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject“, writes Bhabha. That is a “displacement of value” “that causes the dominant discourse to split along its axis to be representative, authoritative” (2002: 114). The tribe achieves the exact effect by exploiting its own trivialization. Imitating the “civilizational project“ itself, which was consistently followed by the arrival of worthless Western goods -- trinkets, beads, brass trumpets and false pearls (cf. McClintock 228) -- they on the one hand block the surveillance over true values of their culture, and, on the other hand, turn the imperial property into junk.

Like her characters, Erdrich's text, too, achieves “(cross) cultural translation“ (Bhabha, 2002: 228) from within the dominant paradigm. Employing postmodern narrative conventions to effect an inversion of values and meanings, Erdrich exhibits what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin term as strategies of “abrogation“ and “appropriation“ (138). As a result, she deconstructs the colonially imposed myths, discursive tropes and symbolic order by staying true to the Western mode. She becomes a “cultural breaker“ (Owens, 1998: 41) who mediates between poetics and epistemologies, inviting her readers to do the same. In that way, she at

the same time collapses and expands the boundaries of the Western discourse, utilizing its own tools.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the hybridity as a postcolonial strategy in Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*. Pluralizing the real in a typically postmodern way, *Love Medicine* demonstrates hybridity on both poetological and hermeneutical planes. Subsuming postmodern narrative conventions into a native epistemology, Erdrich navigates between the two symbolic systems, dynamizing conceptual dialogue and the postcolonial effect of appropriation, abrogation and rearticulation of Western symbols. Through the procedures of *discontinuity*, *permutation*, *contradiction*, *repetition* and *excess*, she invites the multiperspectivity, fragmentation and narrative disintegration to emphasize the unity of characters, motifs and themes, as well as the episodic and cyclical nature of oral storytelling. In the process, Erdrich's text pursues conceptual translation and mediation, dissolves its own horizon of reception and reeducates its audience, positioning the Western reader as a recipient of oral storytelling. In that way Erdrich utilizes the postmodern procedure and the concept of an active reader to stimulate the ontological switch. Using the technique of *short-circuit* and the postmodern assumption on the constructed nature of identity, akin to the *trickster* discourse, she challenges the imperial figuration of Indianness, deconstructing the trope of the "Vanishing Indian". Thereby she manifests the decolonizing potential of the postmodern discourse.

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