Dialogism or Interconnectedness in the Work of Louise Erdrich

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By

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ABBREVIATIONS

AW 98	*The Antelope Wife*, 1998
AW 2012	*The Antelope Wife: A Novel. New and Revised Edition*, 2012
BIOC	*Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country,* 2003
BJD	*The Blue Jay's Dance,* 1995
BP	*The Bingo Palace,* 1994
CC	*The Crown of Columbus* (by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich), 1991
FS	*Four Souls*, 2004
LM 84	*Love Medicine*, 1984
LM 93	*Love Medicine: Revised Edition,* 1993
LM 2009	*Love Medicine: Newly Revised Edition,* 2009
LR	*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, 2001
T	*Tracks,* 1988
TBL	*Tales of Burning Love*, 1996

INTRODUCTION

LOUISE ERDRICH AND AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE

This is a study devoted to an exploration of selected works by Louise Erdrich and the way she works as a writer, mother, and bookstore founder and owner. It is suggestive, not exhaustive, as Erdrich is a prolific writer and to analyze her entire oeuvre and address its formal and thematic scope would yield several volumes. My aim is to portray how Erdrich's work extends Bakhtin's concept of dialogism significantly beyond the original idea. The introduction, in addition to defining the dialogic principle, presents this contemporary writer and explains my motivation to write about her, as well as delineating the contents and the organization of this study.

This study aims to formulate, theorize, and apply the logic of dialogism, as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, to the works and nonpareil writing practice of Louise Erdrich, who re—writes[1] the genre of a novel. The objective is also to demonstrate how the novel characteristics (the form) are inter—woven with and reflected by the thematic scope of her work (the content): the multifacetedness and open-ended quality of the narrative fabric are paired with multiple metamorphoses of the dynamic protagonists. The underlying logic of this study being the Bakhtinian concepts of the novel and of dialogism, I wish to underscore the intricacies of the narrative texture and the selected protagonists' identities, both works-in-progress, accentuating the process and the dialogues, not the outcome. I intend to show that Erdrich extends the dialogue: by looking at selected novels and new editions of two novels, by including an analysis of her autobiographical writing, and by quoting from interviews with her and Michael Dorris.

[1] I use a dash on purpose instead of a hyphen. The logic of this gesture will be explained when writing about prefixes.

Dialogism

What is dialogism? How to pinpoint its fluid character? As an appendix to their translation of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist present a glossary of Bakhtinian terms in an attempt to facilitate the adoption and assimilation of his theories. They understand "dialogism" to be "the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" ("Glossary" 426). It is a mode which advocates parity of experiences based on a dialogue, be it between individuals, religions, spiritual practices, sexes, nationalities, or ideologies. This study attempts a critical survey of Erdrich's selected works from a dialogic angle. I will strive to foreground different dialogues at work, and therefore different dimensions, also generic, of Erdrich's work. By analyzing the textual fabric of Erdrich's memoirs and novels, I intend to demonstrate that Erdrich's dialogic re—writing, co—writing, and writing practices correspond with the thematic and formal dialogisms of her novels.

This study is not a veiled biographical project, but an attempt to view the selected literary works as one entity while paying attention to its singular elements, among them the writer's insights into the processes of writing and reading. In "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (a chapter in *The Dialogic Imagination*), Bakhtin draws a distinct line between the textual ("the world represented in the work" 253) and material reality ("the actual world as source of representation" 253) and warns the readers not to confuse the two and not to engage in "naïve realism;" not to identify the "author-creator" with the person of the author ("naïve biographism" 253). These will be the traps I will try to evade when arguing my theses. Erdrich denies her novels are autobiographical, yet they stand in a strange, almost counterintuitive, but dialogic inter—action, when she does admit she has used conversations and episodes she witnessed or experienced and weaves them into the texture of her novels: "I never hear stories that go into my work, although place description might. Just germs of stories, and most of those I hear from my father. I've internalized my father to such a degree that sometimes he has only to start a few sentences and my mind races off" (Halliday 2010). People sometimes ask whether she has experienced everything she writes about, but she says laughing "Are you crazy? I'd be dead. I'd be dead fifty times. I don't write directly from my own experience so much as an emotional understanding of it" (Halliday 2010).

I am re—reading Bakhtin through Erdrich in order to see how her contemporary novels might interrogate and complement a theory that is almost a century old. I will harness Bakhtin's theoretical approach in order to posit dialogism in Erdrich's oeuvre, emphasizing the importance of the whole and the inter—dependence and parity of its constituents. The aim is to take Bakhtin's theorizations of dialogism a notch further and include Erdrich's practice of writing, co—writing, re—writing and, not least, reading novels in this study.

Erdrich's version of dialogism is very comprehensive and reaches beyond what Bakhtin argued. Her open-ended work strives for logic in variety. Although the novel's characteristics have been employed by numerous other writers, the entirety of her oeuvre and writing practice, featuring e.g. series-like writing, re—cycling protagonists, heteroglossia, polyglossia, shared authorship, blogging about books and recent Facebooking about political activism, constitutes Erdrich's dialogic and idiosyncratic *modus operandi*.

Prefixes

I posit that Erdrich's work engages in multiple dialogues: it is *inter—faith* and *inter—gender, inter—generic*, *inter—lingual* and *intra—lingual*, *inter—textual* and *intra—textual*. Initially, I employed a hyphen ("-"), but decided it was not enough visually. A hyphen stands for connecting, while I needed something to symbolize an interruption which a dash can stand for. I write these terms with a dash ("—") in a gesture of intervention, or implicitly with a double hyphen ("--") in a gesture of connection, to draw the attention to the prefixes: "**inter**—" and "**intra**—" and their meaning of "betweenness," hinting at the dialogic. I will also apply the logic to other prefixes: "**re**—," signaling a repetition, doing something new in dialogue with the older version; "**co**—," depicting a joint, therefore dialogical effort; and "**trans**—," depicting a phenomenon of reaching across and beyond; also in order to pinpoint the inherently dialogic quality taken for granted when terms with these prefixes are spelled as one continuous word. Throughout this study, by separating certain words with a long dash I attempt to re—invest the subordinated and silenced prefix with meaning, to re—claim its capacity by highlighting its dialogic potential when applied to describe the entirety of Louise Erdrich's writing practice.

Postcolonial Literature?

Another intervention is to ask whether Native American fiction is postcolonial fiction? I think there is no doubt about the existence of a colonial encounter and logic in the history of North America, as "Colonialism involved territorial, economic, political and cultural subjugation, appropriation and exploitation of another country and people. Colonialism was not restricted to the countries and peoples of the 'Third World,' but also applied to other contexts" (Wolf 127). The quandary, however, is located in the prefix "post" and whether it denotes sequentiality or polarity, in other words the question is whether the emphasis is temporal, and whether colonialism is over in this context; or dichotomous, the stress falling on opposition and resistance. I suggest that the prefix be invested with agential meaning, more antinomian than temporal, for colonialism with regard to American Indians is an ongoing phenomenon, entailing a "continuing process of resistance and reconstruction" (Wolf 129).

Louise Erdrich: "I prefer to simply be a writer"

Karen Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, and grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota where her parents, Ralph Erdrich and Rita Gourneau Erdrich, taught in a school governed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She is the oldest of seven children and of Turtle Mountain Ojibwe[2], German, and French-Canadian ancestry. She "writes from a vantage point in-between . . . cultures," where "both her German as well as her Native backgrounds have influenced her writing and kindled her need for storytelling," as Caroline Rosenthal notes (107). Regarding her heritage, upbringing, and university education, she can be positioned at multiple intersections: "Native American and Euro-American (French and German), Ojibwe and Catholic, North Dakota and New England, Turtle Mountain Reservation and Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars" (Morace 37). Erdrich was among the first women to enter Dartmouth College in 1972. That year marked the introduction of a new program in Native American Studies founded and headed by Michael Dorris (Modoc) at Dartmouth. She majored in English and Creative Writing initially. It was not until later,

[2] Several designations to name the tribe are employed by scholars, critics, and laypeople: Chippewa, Ojibwa, Ojibway, Chippeway. But, as the writer and literary scholar David Treuer (Leech Lake Ojibwe) puts it: "Ojibwe is our name for ourselves" (*Rez Life* 4).

curious and willing to learn more about her Ojibwe background, she took classes in the program.

Her father gave her a nickel for every story she wrote as a child, mostly about "Lonely girls with hidden talents" (Halliday 2010). They have maintained a lifetime of correspondence:

> My father is my biggest literary influence. Recently I've been looking through his letters. He was in the National Guard when I was a child and whenever he left, he would write to me, he wrote letters to me all through college, and we still correspond. His letters, and my mother's, are one of my life's treasures. (Halliday 2010)

The letters were about life and its little wonders, such as

> Mushroom hunting. Roman stoics. American Indian Movement politics. Longfellow. Stamp collecting. Apples. He and my mother have an orchard. He used to talk about how close together meadowlarks sit on fence posts—every seventh fence post. Now, of course, they are rare. When I went off to college, he wrote about the family, but in highly inflated terms, so that whatever my sisters and brothers were doing seemed outrageously funny or tragic. If my mother bought something it would be a cumbersome, dramatic addition to the household, but of course unnecessary. If the dog got into the neighbor's garbage it would be a saga of canine effort and exertion–and if the police caught the dog it would be a case of grand injustice. (Halliday 2010)

Erdrich is of multiple backgrounds, therefore the issue of choice is a poignant one. Rosenthal states that straddling cultures can be a double-edged sword: "on the one hand, part of being mixed blood involves having a choice—to a certain extent—over which ethnic group you want to be part of. On the other hand, ethnic background is a shaping force of your existence, which you cannot simply walk away from" (108). Her literary work resists clear-cut taxonomies and contests the notion of a monolithic American Indian identity. Erdrich's writing is often claimed as American Indian, but the author has reservations about it: "I don't think American Indian literature should be distinguished from mainstream literature. Setting it apart and saying that people with special interest might read this literature sets Indians apart too" (Coltelli 25). Her writing aims at being dialogic, by including dialogues between different experiences, white and Ojibwe, and between forms, the novel and oral storytelling.

Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris' co—operation was not only marital and domestic, but also literary. They have read, commented on and edited each other's manuscripts. Dorris stated that the cultural work their

fiction attempts is to do away with harmful stereotypes and clichés of American Indians, "for any stereotyping simplifies individuals and invariably limits their freedom" (Chavkin and Feyl Chavkin, "Introduction" xii-xiii). In order to prevent stereotypical and harmful visual representations of Native American culture, the writers defended their right to approve the covers of international editions of their novels. Erdrich's approach towards labeling can be thus summarized:

> I think of any label as being both true and a product of a kind of chauvinistic society because obviously white male writers are not labeled "white male writers" . . . But I really don't like labels. While it is certainly true that a good part of my background, and Michael's background, and a lot of the themes are Native American, I prefer to simply be a writer. Although I like to be known as having been from the Turtle Mountain Chippewa and from North Dakota. It's nice to have that known and to be proud of it for people back home. (Wong, "An Interview" 31)

Assigning identities and loyalties based on an author's ethnic background is problematic. Dorris seconded that when asked how he wished to be labeled:

> It adds a level of complication to say that you are a Native American writer because it sets up expectations in readers which you may or may not fulfill for them. Then they like or don't like what you've written based on whether you've fulfilled their expectations. One would hope that one gets a reputation for writing with some sensitivity about the subjects one deals with. And if it were just a question of whether this person is a Native American and also a writer, fine. But "Native American writer" strikes me as a little cumbersome. (Wong, "An Interview" 32)

The label "Native American" triggers questionable expectations and foreknowledge, for mostly they are based on stereotypes which can potentially obscure the idiosyncratic writing practice of the writer thus labeled.

While discussing *Love Medicine*, Erdrich demarcated her priorities: "The people are first, their ethnic background is second" (Grantham 14). She articulates a preference for being included in the American literary tradition: "Being Indian is something we're terribly proud of. On the other hand, I suppose that in general sense I would rather that Native American writing be seen as American writing, that all of the best writing of any ethnic group here would be included in American writing" (White and Burnside 111). Asked whether one of the goals of her writing was to "undermine not only racist ideas but also romantic notions many people

have about Native Americans," she says she hopes that will happen "as a result of a reader following a story in which Native people were portrayed as complex and unpredictable" (Feyl Chavkin and Chavkin, "An Interview with Louise Erdrich" 231).

Ambivalence, complexity and unpredictability are inherent to dialogism and are key words when it comes to Erdrich's writing. Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee) defines Erdrich's work also in terms of accessibility. Readers from all backgrounds are invited to identify with the protagonists, without compromising the specific context:

> Erdrich does not ignore the racism and brutality of Euramerica's dealing with Indian people, but for the first time in a novel by a Native American author, she makes the universality of Indian lives and tragedies easily accessible to non-Indian readers. Kashpaws and Morriseys and Lazarres and Lamartines are people readers can identify with much more easily and closely than they can with an Archilde, Abel, or Tayo. These tangled lives are not so radically different from the common catastrophes of mainstream Americans, certainly no more so than those dreamed up by Faulkner or Fitzgerald. And yet no reader can come away from *Love Medicine* without recognizing the essential Indianness of Erdrich's cast and concerns. (Owens 65)

The narrative entanglements Erdrich portrays, especially in *Love Medicine,* as Helen Jaskoski argues, are reminiscent of Faulknerian methods. The novel, "like the sagas of the Compsons and the Snopeses, aims at a complex rendering of the intricate and far-reaching minglings and conflicts and interlocking fates among people of differing races and culture groups, all of whom feel a deep sense of their ties to the land and to their history upon it" (Jaskoski 33). Erdrich's writing is widely read and acknowledged because it concerns shared human experiences such as relationships, and because it underscores the messiness, the ambivalence, the risks, the pain and, most important of all, the beauty thereof. As Owens puts it: "Though the frailty of lives and relationships and the sense of loss for Indian people rides always close to the surface of her stories, Erdrich's emphasis in all her novels is upon those who survive in a difficult world" (54). She is not accusatory in her writing, but respectful of both cultures, not perpetuating stereotypes of victimhood, yet cognizant of the problematic history of one culture trying to annihilate, or at least to colonize the other (Gondor-Wiercioch 77); of the history of deprivation and dislocation. Erdrich includes instead of alienating, describes and sympathizes instead of judging, which makes her an internationally respected and popular author, her work crossing topographies, ideologies, ethnic identities, and belief systems. This is how I, as a non-Native

American reader, found my entry into her writing. I unravel the complexity of her novels, especially as pertaining to the protagonists and the situations, as I live and experience relationships. No wonder it was not love at first reading. In my twenties, I was ignorant and arrogant. It was only a decade later after I had been through several crises of my own, that I learned to appreciate her stories. Her writing has potential for inspiration, for non-invasive edification, or as Bennett posits that: "Erdrich presents truths—some ugly and some beautiful—with humor and grace. She leaves us with hope" (Bennett, "A Review of *The Bingo Palace*" 88).

In addition, the quality of her writing, what Deborah Madsen terms "the aesthetics of Mino Bimaadiziwin" (1), or "the good life" in Ojibwe (6), helped me appreciate and adapt Erdrich's writing for my own reading purposes. The "good life" happens in spite or because of hardships, or as Madsen states: "even though opportunities for living well, with courage, generosity and kindness are limited for her characters, many of who are of mixed native and European descent, [they] live under conditions of colonization and within a history of physical and cultural genocide" (Madsen 2). Erdrich herself defined the concept of "Mino Bimaadiziwin" in her 2009 Dartmouth commencement address as: "Knowledge with courage. Knowledge with Fortitude. Knowledge with Generosity and Kindness . . . knowledge without compassion is dead knowledge. Beware of knowledge without love" (Madsen 6). It is the good life in spite of drawbacks and thanks to the survivalist properties of her characters, negotiating Ojibwe life in the context of troubled US-Native history and relations (Madsen 13), which attract readers and critical acclaim, and "[i]n contrast to many other Native American writers, Louise Erdrich's work is read and received as Native and as mainstream American literature" (Rosenthal 3).

Erdrich is a recognized writer; I do not have to prove her skill to the world. *The Plague of Doves* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2009. In November 2012 she won the National Book Award in Fiction for *The Round House*, a novel also named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She commenced her acceptance speech in Ojibwe to honor her people and her daughter Persia, who is studying to become an Ojibwe immersion schoolteacher. Erdrich's present loyalties are thus made clear, even if her identity is an amalgam of influences, subject to ambiguity. She can be specific in her writing and sound accessible at the same time, which warms the audiences to her. Perhaps the solution is not to categorize her writing in order to evade any generalizations, and as a peaceful gesture defying the colonial logic of describing the world and its manifestations on a two-color, two-pole model. Her newly published book *LaRose* (2016)

constitutes the last element of a trilogy also consisting of *The Plague of Doves* and *The Round House* (see McGrath; Ogle), or as she says in *The New Yorker*

> This book is the last of three books I've written about justice. The first, "The Plague of Doves," is about wild justice (revenge); the second, "The Round House," is about justice denied (sexual violation, tangled jurisdictions); and this last book deals with natural justice, a reparation of the heart, an act that has old roots in indigenous culture. (Treisman)

The structure of the study

The first chapter elucidates the phenomenon of the novel and its dialogic qualities as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin and as applied by Louise Erdrich in one of her novels *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. The following two chapters will be devoted to the application of the dialogic principle to Erdrich's literary production and re—production. **The second chapter** portrays Erdrich as an author who wrote some of her novels in close co—operation and dialogue with another author; thus re—defining the very practice of writing a novel. Writing is usually considered a solitary activity, but Erdrich has shared it with her late husband Michael Dorris. While a few examples exist of writers who are married and edit each other's writing, who discuss, give advice and critique, for example Ayelet Waldman and Michael Chabon, or Siri Hustvedt and Paul Auster, I will argue that Erdrich's co—writing routine was unusually comprehensive, albeit problematic at times. While a published book is usually considered the final stage, Erdrich has re—written her novels. In **the third chapter**, I will trace the logic of dialogism in Erdrich's practice of re—writing by analyzing *Love Medicine* (three versions) and *The Antelope Wife* (two versions), and tracing the alterations, the dialogues between different versions of the same, yet different novel.

Erdrich's two memoirs *The Blue Jay's Dance* and *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* foreground writing, reading, and mothering, and will be analyzed in **the fourth chapter,** exploring the dialogic rapport between creative and procreative, productive, and re—productive processes and bringing to the fore gestatory vocabulary used for both of these activities, i.e. mothering and writing, such as birth, conception, labor, gestation, or fertility.

Next, I will tackle her novelistic oeuvre tracing dialogues on the thematic and narrative levels. **The fifth chapter** will deal with Erdrich's North Dakota tetralogy which evolved into "one long book" (Erdrich, "Author's Note" 5) and other books in the series, taking a closer look at

structural and narrative characteristics of the texts and at re—cycled themes. I will thus argue that a singular ecology of writing is employed by Erdrich. I will highlight several striking examples of dialogism in Erdrich's novels and thus will reiterate the potential nestled in the genre and in its dialogic stance, i.e. the potential to engage in a mutually respectful relationship without eradicating or obfuscating the differences between the speakers. **The sixth chapter** will trace the metaphorics of translation as a dialogic exercise portrayed in Erdrich's novels, and I will capitalize on the shift in the practice: from that of forced imitation (resembling colonial encounters) to that of trans—formation (reminiscent of a dialogue between equals). I will tackle translation literally and thematically, quoting germane passages from Erdrich's novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. I subscribe to the project of ridding translation of its alleged secondariness. Translation, though chronologically preceded by a text in a different language, is not merely re—producing the text, and thus of a lesser quality. A published novel is not the final stage, epitomizing absolute perfection, but a work-in-progress potentially awaiting an afterlife, i.e. being translated into other languages to foster dissemination.

The coda will conclude this study by elaborating on Erdrich's novelistic vision, i.e. concepts of dialogism and inter—connectedness in her novels resulting in an open-ended, multi-voiced, and evolving compost pile of an oeuvre.

CHAPTER I

COMPOST PILE AND TEMPORARY STORAGE: DIALOGISM IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE*

Louise Erdrich's writing re—defines theories of the novel. Erdrich's novels focus on multiple individuals, rather than on one protagonist. She writes a series of novels which grows, as it builds novels on novels and from novels. What is her motivation to probe the limits of the genre? By imbuing the novels with oral quality, she makes her novelistic writing become more responsive to and dialogic with Ojibwe tradition. By experimenting with open-endedness and dialogism, she addresses the restrictions of the novel as a genre.

The Novel: Bakhtinian Theory and Erdrich's Practice

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the major figures of twentieth-century literary theory, a philosopher of language and a literary critic, outlined his ideas in works such as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929, 1963), *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and *The Dialogic Imagination* (published as a whole in 1975). For political reasons, Bakhtin's major works were not disseminated and widely read until after the 1960s. His ideas continue to pollinate minds and are applied in literary criticism and linguistics. In his seminal work *The Dialogic Imagination* he asserts that the novel is a genre which does not lend itself facilely to the practice of taxonomy: "experts have not managed to isolate a single definite, stable characteristic of the novel" (8).

Attempts at cataloging this nebulous genre can stymie its potential. How then does he define this most protean of genres? Bakhtin was trying to identify some characteristics of the novel by comparing it with the epic genre. Unlike the epic, the novel is not concerned with "a national epic past," "the national tradition," and "an absolute epic distance [which]

separates the epic world from contemporary reality" (Bakhtin 13). An entity in itself, a non-divisible, impenetrable, impermeable, and organic whole, the epic does not invite polemic, nor any other form of a dialogue: "the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any open-endedness, indecision, indeterminacy" (Bakhtin 16).

The novel is everything an epic is not; it is its foil insofar as it is malleable, inconclusive, and situated in the unheroic present, which "is something transitory, it is flow, it is an eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic conclusiveness and consequently lacks an essence as well" (Bakhtin 20). It can have no ending, instead it can suggest mere beginnings, promising a series of novels for example. The novel embraces and welcomes, unlike the epic world which demands reverence and creates distance. The epic is a genre glorifying the rigid past, whereas the novel capitalizes on the pliable present, the now where anything still can happen.

What then is the poetics of the novel? To theorize a nebulous genre embedded in a fluid reality renders the task ostensibly impossible. The potential of the novel resides in its "basic structural characteristics," which indicate the trans—formations the novel can undergo (Bakhtin 11). These characteristics, according to Bakhtin, are:

1. "stylistic three-dimensionality . . . linked with the multi-languaged consciousness realized in the novel" (11); in other words, heteroglossia and polyglossia respectively;
2. "the radical change it [the novel] effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image" (11) as it does away with the absolutes, and as it places emphasis on the less heroic quality of the quotidian present;
3. "the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images . . . the zone of maximal contact with the present . . . in all its openendedness" (11);

These characteristics signal the dialogic quality, and in his essay "The Epic and the Novel" Bakhtin introduces a concept of the novel as a dialogic representation of reality. Bakhtin posits that "the novelistic whole" is composed of "heterogeneous stylistic unities," e.g. "stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration," "stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)," "various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions,

memoranda and so forth)," "stylistically individualized speech of characters" (262). The novel is thus heteroglot and inter—generic. A synthesis of these elements constitutes a particular novel, as "the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its 'languages' " (Bakhtin 262). The novel, stylistically dialogic and in dialogue with the open-ended, unheroic and quotidian present, can thus be viewed as a work-in-progress.

Compost Pile and Temporary Storage

The "compost pile" and "temporary storage" are metaphors Erdrich employs to talk about her writing. For a long time, she did not realize she was writing a series of related stories (Feyl Chavkin and Chavkin 234). Asked whether she would term her writing "an organic whole," Erdrich replied: "It's more like a compost pile" (Feyl Chavkin and Chavkin 240). The implication of the "organic whole" is that it is pure and integral, perhaps complete, whereas the "compost pile" refers to a phenomenon that has an unfinished quality, is rotting and developing, will never be whole. It is capable of accommodating everything that the "organic whole" would reject.

A regular compost pile consists of organic matter which is supposed to disintegrate, to decompose and re—combine, thus creating something new altogether. Erdrich's ecological concerns will be addressed in the chapter analyzing her memoir *The Blue Jay's Dance*, so suffice it to say that she is ecology-oriented in her work as well as in life.

The books she publishes are temporary versions, they are subject to change if she chooses to re—write them, to add or to delete, to edit them as her artistic vision dictates her to. She revised her first novel *Love Medicine* (1984) twice and published the new editions in 1993 and 2009. She radically re—wrote *The Antelope Wife* (1998) and published it in 2012. "There is no reason to think of publication as a final process. I think of it as a temporary storage" (Feyl Chavkin and Chavkin 232), Erdrich says. She does not employ the word commonly associated with "final," namely "outcome," but chooses to imbue her expression with an oxymoronic twist: "a final process." It is not irrelevant that her writing career commenced with poems, which then grew into short stories, which in turn became novels. For her this was a logical development: "The best short stories contain novels. Either they are densely plotted, with each line an insight, or they distill emotions that could easily spread on for pages, chapters" (Erdrich, "Introduction" xiv). Her publications, compost pile-like, not only organically evolve from smaller forms, as if Erdrich is

testing ideas to be later expounded on, but, unlike those of many other authors, her works are also parts of an oeuvre in constant gestation: a saga-like series of novels irreverent of chronology.

Dialogue and Orality

The compost pile stands for the continuity and trans—formation, and is thus reminiscent of oral storytelling. Erdrich re—writes the novel (a Western genre) and adapts it trans—culturally to her own purposes, investing the form with the characteristics stemming from oral traditions (Gondor-Wiercioch 32) and with Native American themes. Orality pervades Erdrich's novels: "There's also a very real feeling of oral history in your novels, as if your characters are real people saying to your readers, 'sit down, I'm going to tell you a story' " (Schumacher 175). I view "oral" and "written" as categories of continuity, not in opposition. A story or stories, even when written down, can still be told to an audience. Erdrich grew up surrounded by storytellers in her family and stories they narrated. Before commencing to write, she and Dorris talked, formed a story orally. Asked whether she considers herself "a poet or a storyteller," she replies: "Oh, a storyteller, a writer" (Coltelli 23), treating these two functions as synonymous. Native Americans have "a long tradition of oral literature . . . [existing] in a tradition of performances . . . of songs, story, beliefs, and traditional forms rather than to a presentation of a static text" (Quennet 31-32). These performances are doubly dialogic: they rely on the relationship between a teller and an audience, and the narrative is revised as it is told and re—told (Quennet 32). Each narrated story is one of a kind, it never comes out the same. Similarly, her stories are without closure. Anytime Erdrich pleases she can come back to them, pick up the thread and continue with the story. Schoeffel observes that *The Antelope Wife* and other novels by Erdrich "tell variations of the same story over and over, in an attempt to heal the communal wounds caused by the violence of the past and present times" (89-90). Stories of parenthood, of love, of clashes between Native American and white value and belief systems preserve the memory of things past in order to influence the present tense of Native America.

Tribalography

LeAnne Howe claims stories entail creation: "Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes. America is a tribal creation story, a tribalography" (29). However, she laments the fact that Western tradition

privileges writing and text over story-telling (Howe 40). The term she coins, *tribalography*, is inherently dialogic, inter—connecting and "comes from the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another" (Howe 42), i.e. the tribal matters with the need to record them for future generations' edification (the suffix "-graphy" denoting "writing" and "field of study"). In light of this definition, Erdrich is a tribalographer, her dialogic writing inter—weaves tribal themes, inter—connects people, history (past with the present), events, places, animals, and plants. At this point, we can extend the notion of dialogism to include the concept of the "good life" mentioned in the introduction and the idea of inter—connectedness, as the organizing principles of Erdrich's work and works.

Her writing is an antidote to uprootedness and disconnectedness, to separation and self-absorption ubiquitous nowadays. Tribalographies, or Native American stories, be they in the form of a novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, or history, are dialogic and add "elements together of the storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus (present and future milieus mean non-Indians)" (Howe 42). In other words, tribalography is also inter—cultural, it is "a story that links Indians and non-Indians" (Howe 46). It is part and parcel of American literature, of America's "literary and literal past" (Howe 46).

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

How does Erdrich construct and understand the novel-cum-tribalography? How does she give shape to the least formulaic of genres? Let me begin not with her first novel published in the 80s, but *in medias res* by investigating this synecdochically on the basis of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (referred to as *The Last Report* for brevity's sake), a novel published in 2001.

In view of any novel's incompleteness, "The problems of a beginning, an end, and 'fullness' of plot are posed anew" (Bakhtin 31). These categories become more fluid and are determined by writers themselves and also by readers. Leaps in space and time are the hallmark of Erdrich's fiction. The reader is asked to time-travel and connect the events him/herself. Some chapters in *The Last Report* are dated 1996, some 1910, 1912, 1919, or 1922, some narrate spans, such as 1910-1912, 1913-1919. Little temporal security is offered, and the reader has to be alert to realize what year it is, and to figure out what is happening in the novel. The reader is invited to engage in a dialogic exercise by recalling what

happened during a particular time in similar circumstances to other protagonists in other novels by Erdrich, or how different protagonists perceived similar situations and how they narrated those situations. Not only do the events in Erdrich's novels defy linear temporal order, the work, although series-like, is also not published in accordance with any recognizable order or logic. Whereas we are acquainted with Father Damien in *Love Medicine*, Erdrich's very first novel to be published (in 1984), we do not learn the protagonist's story until 2001, when Erdrich published *The Last Report*. We learn of its creative origins when Erdrich says she

> started writing *The Last Report* in 1988, originally intending it to explain how all the earlier novels came into being. She imagined the local priest in Argus, Father Damien, who had appeared as a minor character in *Love Medicine* . . . It wasn't until six years and several books later that Erdrich picked up *The Last Report* again. The completed version chronicles the life of Father Damien. Erdrich started the book with two images: a woman in a white nightgown floating down a river on the top of a piano, and a priest taking his clothes off for bed and revealing that he is actually a woman. Turns out they became the same person. (Olson)

The novel grew out of a dialogue with other novels, it evolved, and then Erdrich resumed writing it. Her novels are mosaic-like, they destabilize narrative authority by including multiple and alternating narrators: first-, second-, third-person singular, and even second-person plural. The narrators complement each other's stories, sometimes contradicting one another. Because there is much gossip, storytelling and subjective narration, their reliability is debatable. *The Last Report* commences with a "Prologue," a third-person narrative delineating the Old Priest's (Father Damien's) last undertakings and the penning of the last report. It divulges a well-kept secret, namely the fact that Father Damien is a woman. This is a foreshadowing of a less traditional kind, or in the words of Mieke Bal: "the summary at the beginning. The rest of the story gives the explanation of the outcome presented at the beginning" (Bal 93). This revelation at the very outset of the novel prepares the reader to anticipate, follow and appreciate the process. Once the outcome is known, the subsequent stages of the story are underscored.

The structure of *The Last Report* is inter—generic. It evokes a kaleidoscope of embedded genres, it includes reports, letters and stories within stories. The novel inter—weaves elements of history with fiction, mentioning historical details and employing poetic prose. The language of the novel is internally stratified, reflecting the linguistic heterogeneity

which, in turn, corresponds with the variety of characters in the novel. They belong to different national and ethnic groups, they are U.S. Americans of Polish, German, French origin, as well as Germans, American Indians and mixed-bloods. The polyglossia of languages in Erdrich's novel (American English, Ojibwe, German, French), paired with the heteroglossia of sociolects, result from encounters and dialogues between individuals from various cultures, of different sexes, genders, ages, social classes, professions and nationalities, thus making the novel inter—lingual and intra—lingual. Bakhtin terms this phenomenon the *interanimation* of languages and cultures, a reciprocal animation, a dialogic relationship, a polyglot consciousness characteristic of the novel (65).

According to Bakhtin, the novel is unique not only because it eludes definitions and employs polyglossia and heteroglossia, but also because as it evolves, it adapts and parodies other genres and styles (5). Erdrich's work is inter—textual with regard to Native American and non-Native American texts, its allusions sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. What is more unusual is the fact that it is also intra—textual. Faulkner practiced a similar dialogism, yet Erdrich's version is more extensive. Her work enacts dialogues between other literary texts and between her own texts, earlier and later ones. The same characters become protagonists in different books. The same events are narrated or mentioned again, yet from different perspectives in different books by Erdrich, and this practice can lend "depth, volume, and complexity, while contesting simplistic explanations of the event" (Altman 289). It also reflects how different persons can view differently the same occurrence and thus help us flesh out their identities better. *The Bingo Palace* alludes to Ida, a protagonist from Michael Dorris' *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (Stookey 8), and it is difficult to pinpoint exactly whether this is an intra—textual or inter—textual gesture, as Erdrich and Dorris co—operated very closely on several of their books.

Her fiction and its intra-textual nature, compost pile-like, is incremental, augmented, where stories build on stories, characters return, incidents are re—told, where protagonists, settings, incidents are re—cycled. Fleur Pillager's tales are a case in point. She reverberates throughout the novel sometimes as a passionate young girl, sometimes an elderly medicine woman or a wife to a white man. By reading the entire oeuvre we might be able to piece parts of her story together, even the story of her ancestors. Because her story never gets told completely, there are still blank spaces to be filled. The novelistic project remains a work-in-progress.

Sometimes Erdrich's novels "collect" material, accrue over time. As she told two interviewers, "I think a title is like a magnet: it begins to draw these scraps of experience or conversation or memory to it. Eventually, it collects a book" (Schumacher 176) and "Bits of narrative always cling to a title, like magnetism. I love titles. I have lists of titles that I haven't gotten to. *Tales of Burning Love* and *Shadow Tag* were there for the longest time" (Halliday 2010). Erdrich creates a web of inter—related fragments, a dialogic intra—textual microcosm replete with characters, places and events the reader familiarizes him/herself with while reading subsequent novels, and spider web-like draws us into it – it is not that we cannot leave, we do not want to leave we become so involved, so invested. The author has not assigned an order in which the books should be read. It remains dependent on the reader's own initiative, whim or coincidence. Her literary universe has an unfinished and dialogic quality, the reader has not learned every story yet, and Erdrich continues her prolific writing, filling in the gaps and poking holes in our preconceptions and expectations. There is no security that the story Erdrich is telling and weaving is complete, and the possibility of further installments is implied. Her work is reminiscent of a *roman-fleuve*, or a saga novel, a long novel, often in volumes, chronicling the history of several generations of a family, or a community, and often portraying an overall view of society during a particular period, in Erdrich's case the twentieth century primarily.

Recalcitrant towards notions of finality and completion, Erdrich suffuses her writing with an incessant quality of changing and becoming. What more auspicious space to do it in than the novel, since "in a novel the individual acquires the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image" (Bakhtin 38). The protagonist of the novel is not obligated to exhibit or represent heroic qualities, is not trapped in a literary still life for future generations to revere. In the novel: "There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero . . . There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness" (Bakhtin 37-38). The protagonist's complexity, source of "an unrealized surplus of humanness" embodies potential space for experimentation. More ambiguity and more dialogism can occur in the "compost pile" of the novel, the most pliant of all genres with its unexhausted surplus.

The following analysis highlights the nexus and the dialogue between the formal category of the novel and thematic coordinates of religion and gender. I intend to corroborate the thesis that, in correspondence with the novel's complex gestation, vitality and perennial incompleteness as