Willa Cather and Louise Erdrich: A Study of Ethnic Identity in the Wake of Modernity

Bashirah Abd-Allah

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Approved: _______________________________ Date: ____________

Thesis Director Signature
Professor Lisa Long

Approved: _______________________________ Date: ____________

Second Reader Signature
Professor Matthew Krystal
“Now this image he had himself, and with his own hands, fashioned, and had set it on the tomb of the one thing he had loved in life. On the tomb of the dead thing he had most loved had he set this image of his own fashioning, that it might serve as a sign of the love of man that dieth not, and a symbol of the sorrow of man that endureth for ever. And in the whole world there was no other bronze save the bronze of this image.”

–Oscar Wilde, *The Artist*

In discussions of modernity, its feats, accomplishment and promises, there exists a tone of lamentation and loss in the very same breath. It is a loss too subtle, slipping through the binds of language attempting to contextualize it. And yet, I have tried to capture what this loss might be.

My goal in “Willa Cather and Louise Erdrich: A Study of Ethnic Identity in the Wake of Modernity,” is to study and analyze how Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and *The Painted Drum* project ethnic identities and how the Ethnic struggles to maintain itself and function in the wake of modernity. In this essay, I will be making references to the “Ethnic,” a concept embodied and engaged with differently in each of the four texts. However, a common thread connects the Ethnic within these narratives: the Ethnic functions as a metaphysical, spiritual, intellectual and artistic essence. It is important to note that the Ethnic, in the framework of my argument, is removed from ethnicity, which ties into notions
of race and, potentially, blood. This essentialist understanding of the Ethnic would suggest that it resides inherently in some characters and not others, which is not the case.

Theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that there is no such thing as “ethnicity” or “race,” that they are merely a social, economic and political constructs meant to fundamentally organize social relationships” (Omi and Winant 61). Ian Lopez likewise dismisses essentialist notions regarding race and ethnicity: “There are no genetic characteristic possessed by all Blacks but not by non-Blacks; similarly, there is no gene or cluster of genes common to all Whites but not to non-Whites” (Lopez 967). In Cather’s and Erdrich’s novels, the Ethnic is a set of characteristics that are not exclusive. All characters may participate in the Ethnic and realize it within themselves. This is not to say that the Ethnic is not potentially founded on the cultures and traditions of certain peoples. My argument is that it does not matter which culture the Ethnic was founded on, people both from and outside that community may participate in and identify with it because it is an essence that conveys spirituality, intellect, and artistry, something everyone can potentially participate in, although the texts suggest not all people do.

For example, as I define it here, someone who is half Native American in heritage isn’t necessarily Ethnic if he or she does not participate in Native American traditions and practices. Meanwhile, someone who has no Native American heritage is still able to realize and identify with the Ethnic of the Native American tradition: A “white” individual can identify with the Ethnic embodied in the spirituality and arts of Native American tradition though he himself is not Native American. Of course, issues of authenticity will arise—can one who isn’t truly Native American fully identify with the Ethnic based on Native American tradition? Furthermore, no authority exists capable of determining what or who is “authentic.” This essay, however, is not concerned with issues of authenticity regarding the Ethnic. For Cather’s European immigrants in
Nebraska, the Ethnic is based on their cultures and traditions from the old country. However, this does not mean that all immigrant characters in Cather’s texts are Ethnic. But they, and other non-immigrant characters, can identify with and display characteristics of the Ethnic based on the immigrant traditions.

The Ethnic is projected and embodied differently in each of the four texts under consideration here. In *O Pioneers!, My Antonia* and *Love Medicine*, the Ethnic is a source of identity struggle and crisis as it is threatened by modernity. In defining modernity and relating it to the three texts, I’ve relied heavily on Marshall Burman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Invoking the works of Karl Marx, Charles Baudelaire and Johann Goethe, Berman argues that:

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are… [modernity] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be in a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air.” (15)

For Cather, a Modern writer, modernity is played out on the Nebraskan land which, as Berman points out, lures modern characters (the pioneers) with the promise of progress, growth and success. Here is a supposedly virgin land that can give and repay the sweat and toil put into it, offering one freedom and a financial existence that was unattainable in the old country. And yet, following that very promise is another reality of the Nebraskan land, one of starvation, isolation, failed crops, failed farmsteads and broken pioneers who gave their all but never succeeded, never
attained the land’s promise, the promise of modernity. Cather suggest that the Ethnic’s artistic and intellectual nature cannot survive modernity’s harshness and demand, but is silenced and defeated instead.

Though Erdrich is a postmodern writer in her own right, *Love Medicine*, published in 1984, does accommodate a modernist interpretation that *The Painted Drum*, written much later in 2005, does not. Edrich’s characters in *Love Medicine* speak to what Berman suggests is an innate part of modernity, the “terror of disorientation and disintegration” of the self (13). Berman quotes a passage from *The New Eloise* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who is “the first man to use the word *moderniste* in the ways in which the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will use it” (17). The line is spoken by the novel’s hero, Saint-Preux, a country boy who has made the move to the city (the symbol of modernity) and is trying to find himself and his center in the chaos of the metropolis:

I’m beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects passing before my eyes, I’m getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is nothing that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to. (Berman 18)

The two characters I focus on in *Love Medicine*, Moses Pillager and June Morrissey, unlike Rousseau’s hero, Saint-Preux, do not live in a crazy city atmosphere, but in the more subdued region of North Dakota. Nonetheless, they are very much posed as victims of modernity. We witness Moses’ and June’s struggles to preserve the Ethnic within them against the disintegrating effects of modernity—here embodied by the predominantly white culture of the United States—that sees Native American traditions as standing in the way of progress.
I have not included *The Painted Drum* in my modernist reading of the Ethnic, as I do with the other three novels. This is because *Painted Drum* functions as a more postmodern novel, responding to, rather than dramatizing, the modern dilemmas of existence and selfhood in a world where everything “melts into air.” Erdrich, in the twenty-one years separating *Love Medicine* and *Painted Drum*, has come to see the Ethnic as a source for healing the fragmented, dissolving self in the wake of modernity, rather than being another cause of identity crises. Whether or not the Ethnic *gives* one a stable or concrete perception of self is not necessarily the concern of *Painted Drum*. Erdrich is suggesting that the Ethnic of Native American traditions, by becoming one with the modern world, can give her characters solace and self-contentment in a world where everything is in continuous flux and change.

The driving factor behind my interest in studying how the Ethnic is projected and compromised in *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* stems from my own academic experiences studying Cather. I was taught to read her texts as a celebration of “The Land” and our pioneer forefathers who “built this country.” Such a reading led to a highly embellished and simplified understanding of Cather’s work. But as I read *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* again, these celebrated myths of the American frontier life begin to dissipate as voices of dissonance appeared to me. Voices that speak on behalf of and beg us to recognize how the ethnic identities of our forefathers and mothers were forced into silence or assimilation in order to create the frontier communities we so proudly romanticize and celebrate today. I have chosen to include Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and *Painted Drum* alongside Cather in my argument because, as a “modern” reader, I found myself empathizing and identifying with the identity crises of her characters. One doesn’t have to be Native American to understand the anxiety of having to reconcile the forces that push and pull at our concept of self in today’s modern world.
Initially, I chose to approach Louise Erdrich and Willa Cather’s texts as Midwestern narratives. As I searched for the Ethnic voices in Cather’s novels, I realized there existed no mention of or encounters with Native American peoples. How could such a prominent culture, indigenous to the Midwest region, fall silent in Cather’s pioneer narratives, narratives that have helped define our nation’s beginnings? Perhaps the development, expansion and progress of the Midwest—the narrative of modernity—does not recognize the Ethnic. Or did not want to.

Cather represents voices of the Ethnic in her European immigrants, but they are ones with the potential of becoming “white” Americans. Erdrich’s Native Americans, on the other hand, cannot become “white.” And judging by their silence and erasure from Cather’s texts, which speak to our development as a nation, perhaps, they can’t become American either. Both Erdrich and Cather suggest that the Ethnic is something that cannot exist in the modernizing world in its purest, uncompromised form. And that, perhaps, is our loss in modernity.

Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* and the Death of the Ethnic

*My Antonia* is a novel about community development and growth on the Nebraskan prairie. Though Cather tends to romanticize the pioneer, frontier life within her

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1 In defining “progress,” I have relied on Berman’s definition—not because I agree with it personally, but because it lends itself suitably to discussing Cather’s work in the framework of the essay’s argument. Berman defines “progress” through Charles Baudelaire who claims it is humanity’s “most cruel and ingenious torture; whether proceeding as it does by a negation of itself, it would not turn out to be a perpetually renewed form of suicide…Progress, that eternal desideratum that is its own eternal despair” (Berman 142). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “progress” as an “advancement to a further or higher stage, or to further or higher stages successively; growth; development, usually to a better state or condition …applied especially to manifestations of social and economic change or reform” (December 2008).

2 James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* discusses how modernity lacks authenticity and thus compromises by seeking it out in the primitive Other. I do not seek to reinforce such a notion in considering the Ethnic. The purpose here is to begin to understand how the Ethnic is influenced by modernity as the four texts suggest.
novels, if we look closely, we realize *My Antonia* offers a darker view of the Nebraskan prairie. Mr. Shimerda, a Bohemian immigrant, intellectual and musician, becomes the epitome of the Ethnic within the novel. He is an older character who strongly identifies with and is rooted in the Ethnic—as defined in the introduction—which is founded on his Bohemian culture from the “old country.” His inability to forgo or compromise the Ethnic within him for the sake of a Nebraskan identity makes him a victim of modernity, which is played out on the Nebraskan land.

In order to survive the fickle and often cruel prairie landscape, it was crucial for the early Nebraskan pioneers to form a communal network, which would function as a support system and foundation on which they could rely for survival and success. Thus, a Nebraskan identity had to be created in order to unite the various pioneers, from the East or from abroad, to better withstand the land. The task of constructing a Nebraskan identity from a multitude of diverse individuals, ethnicities, cultures, beliefs and experiences is a complex process. Cather suggests that in order to create a Nebraskan identity, the pioneers had to forgo part of their previously held individual identities—of the Old Country or the East—which didn’t accommodate or supplement the formation of a Nebraskan identity.

The Nebraskan identity in *My Antonia* is projected as one suited to facilitate better chances at survival and success on the Nebraskan landscape, which, as I will demonstrate, personifies the dark forces of modernity. To understand how this potentially unifying Nebraskan identity is formed and realized, I have turned to literary critic Lisa Lucenti’s article, “Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*.” Lucenti argues that memory plays a significant role in forming characters’ identities:

The very breadth and diversity of these critical interpretations suggest that memory has multiple and changing functions in Cather work—suggests, in fact,
that reading Willa Cather is perhaps most of all an act whereby one can both
discover and imagine an almost endless number of ways in which memory
inspires and terrifies, comforts and haunts, sustains and shocks not simply
individuals but also communities, cultures, and nations. (Lucenti 1)

Lucenti suggests that Cather’s characters are a product of their memories. It is their memories
that give substance and definition to the threatening void Cather attributes to the Nebraskan
prairie, which is capable of canceling characters’ identities. In the first chapter of My Antonia,
Jim Burden describes how the open, empty landscape holds a power and majesty capable of
erasing one’s identity, in a way quite reminiscent of Rousseau’s Saint-Preux of The New Eloise:
“between the earth and the sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayer that night: here,
I felt, what would be would be” (Cather 8). If memory is the foundation of identity in My
Antonia, canceling the prairie’s erasure of self, as Lucenti would argue, what do we make of Mr.
Shimerda and his Ethnic identity?

Mr. Shimerda is an incredibly nostalgic character, always talking about his memories and
stories of the Old Country, which Antonia continues to pass on to Jim and her own children. The
Ethnic within Mr. Shimerda—his intellectual, artistic and sensitive nature—is rooted in his
memory of Old Bohemia. However, because Mr. Shimerda identifies so strongly, if not
completely, with the Ethnic (based off of his memories of Bohemia), he becomes a victim of the
Nebraskan land for two main reasons: (i) His Ethnic identity is not pragmatic and suitable for the
frontier, while a Nebraskan one is; and (ii) Mr. Shimerda’s strong attachment to the memories of
Bohemia hinder him from forming a Nebraskan identity which could potentially save him from
the prairie’s erasure of identity, as Blythe Tellefsen argues.
In his article “Blood in the Wheat,” Tellefsen discusses the difficulty in forming, arguably, what could be described as a Nebraskan identity. Like Lucenti, Tellefsen considers memory and forgetting in his theories of identity formation in Cather’s work. He cites the work of Ernest Renan regarding national formation of identity: “Forgetting…is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (Tellefsen 2). If we connect Tellefsen and Renan’s notion of forgetting with Lucenti’s notion of memory, we see that Mr. Shimerda’s inability to forget and relinquish parts of his Ethnic identity, rooted in his memories of Bohemia, prevents him from partaking in the formation of a Nebraskan identity. Tellefsen and Renan argue that the process of forgetting is not optional, but necessary. The forgetting creates a void where new memories can form: Without Mr. Shimerda forgetting parts of his previous memories, rooted in and formed from the Old Country, he has no void to allow new memories, beginning to form in Nebraska, from taking the place of the forgotten memories. Thus, as Tellefsen’s logic follows, Mr. Shimerda is unable to form a Nebraskan identity because he does not hold Nebraskan memories, as Lucenti argues.

Mr. Shimerda’s inability to forget the Old Country, which sustains his Ethnic identity on the prairie, leads to the silencing of his voice on the Nebraskan prairie. In studying Mr. Shimerda’s silencing and erasure by the land, I’ve understood the land as an embodiment of modernity. Marshall Berman would argue that Ethnic identities, such as Mr. Shimerda’s, are considered obsolete and in the way of modernity’s goal of progress and development. Berman makes reference to the old couple in Goethe’s Faust who stand in the way of Faust’s culminating project of progress, a watchtower that can “gaze out into the infinite.” The old couple become “the first embodiment in literature of a category of people that is going to be very large in modern history: people who are in the way—in the way of history, of progress, of development; people who are classified, and disposed of, as obsolete” (Berman 67). Goethe assigns Ethnic
attributes to the old couple: they are very spiritual and Christian-like, they ascribe to idealistic notions such as “innocent generosity, selfless devotion, humility, resignation” (67)—all un-pragmatic characteristic that won’t cut it in Faust’s capitalistic and economically driven establishment.

Mr. Shimerda’s Ethnic identity, like the identity of Faust’s old couple, is obsolete and in the way of progress inscribed on the Nebraskan landscape. In Bohemia, Mr. Shimerda was a man celebrated, respected and known primarily for his musical talent and intellectual thought. However, when he comes to Nebraska, these Ethnic qualities Mr. Shimerda represents are muted. The Nebraskan prairie does not allow his Ethnic identity because it is not an environment suited for the arts, but rather for practical dispositions which can facilitate arduous physical labor. Bruce Baker, in his article “Nebraska’s Cultural Desert,” marks how Cather depicts the Nebraska prairie as a region where the expression of art, representative of the Ethnic, comes to die: “Much of Cather’s early written responses to the Great Plains, Nebraska is portrayed as a cultural desert, a setting often hostile to those of an artistic bent, a place indifferent if not actively hostile to a man’s creative spirit” (Baker 1). Mr. Shimerda is similar to the cricket his daughter rescues during the fall season, a creature capable of producing such beautiful music and yet incapable of existing in a cold environment that will soon become its death. Like Goethe’s couple, Mr. Shimerda, and the Ethnic he embodies, is obsolete in the face of modernity, which is the Nebraskan prairie.

There are reasons why My Antonia is celebrated as a story of American progress and of the “American dream” realized. In many ways, My Antonia can be read as a narrative of progress and development. For Mrs. Shimerda, Nebraska becomes the embodied promise of modernity. Despite the hardships she and her family endure to get to Nebraska and build their farmstead, she
maintains the belief that Nebraska is the answer to everything, that it will offer her family all the possibilities and opportunities Bohemia couldn’t: “America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls” (Cather 59). Berman would relate Mrs. Shimerda’s statement to Goethe’s Faust, after Faust has created an artificial and massive hill through human labor. Faust acknowledges that the men and women who created his hill, an emblem of progress and power, suffered to do so. But he also believes the suffering will, in the long run, benefit the men and women because it is towards economic and capital progress. Berman analyzes this part of Goethe’s Faust in a way that parallels Mrs. Shimerda’s own hopes regarding the potential of the Nebraskan land:

These [men who built the hill] are new men, as modern Faust himself. Emigrants and refugees from a hundred Gothic villages and towns—from the world of Faust, Part One—they have moved here in search of action, adventure, an environment in which they can be, like Faust himself, tätig-frei, free to act, freely active. . . [These men and women] are eager to pit their communal will and spirit against the sea’s own energy, confident they will win. . . Thus the process of economic and social development generates new modes of self-development, ideal for men and women who can grow into the emerging new world. (Berman 66)

How well Berman’s reflection fits that of the Nebraskan ethos of self-development and progress! The land promises the common men and women opportunities “of economic and social development” that people like the Shimerdas may not have found in Old Bohemia. Therefore, modern-minded pioneers, like Mrs. Shimerda, are eager to pit their all against the mass and dark energy that is the Nebraskan land, which has crippled and broken other like-minded pioneers,
“confident they will win” and attain the promise of modernity, a new mode of self-development. Nebraska will give Mrs. Shimerda wealth, land for her sons and husbands for her daughters.

Berman explains that one of modernity’s greatest tragedies is that in order to continue towards progress, it must break down and destroy the progress it has already achieved, to make it bigger and better the second time around: “It is ironic that both in theory and in practice the mystification of modern life and the destruction of some of its most exciting possibilities have gone on in the name of progressive modernism itself” (Berman 170). This theme of modernity’s ironically self-destructive nature is likewise played out in *My Antonia’s* famous plow scene, further demonstrating how modernity is realized on the prairie landscape: Jim, Antonia, Lena and Tiny have just enjoyed a wonderful evening frolicking in an “untouched” and isolated part of the prairie. They rest to look off across the country as the sun sets. Their eyes rest upon an “upland farm,” where a plow had been left standing on the field:

> It stood out against the sun, was exactly contained with the circle of the disk [of the setting sun]; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. Even as [they] whispered about it, [their] vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below [them] were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. (Cather 156)

This passage from *My Antonia* carries a mournful tone. As Jim, Antonia and the girls look onto a highland farm, a symbol of the progress and accomplishments of the pioneers who worked so hard, their eyes fall on the plow which made that progress possible. And yet, this plow has been forgotten and left out on the field, unattended and subject to the elements which will destroy it.
The plow, which issued the development of the Nebraskan prairie into a rich, productive farmland, is already part of the past. It is left to rust and destruction. In its place a new technology will emerge, the tractor, which will birth a new phase of development.

Mr. Shimerda, however, similar to Faust’s old couple who prefer the “old ways” and unlike his wife, is less interested in buying into modernity/the Nebraskan prairie’s frenzied move towards progress. Mr. Shimerda’s daughter explains after his suicide that her father was “sad for the old country. . . He don’t like this kawn-tree [Nebraska]…He not want to come, nev-er! My *mamenka* make him come” (Cather 59). But because Mr. Shimerda refuses to buy in, like Goethe’s couple who Faust kills, he too will be destroyed by modernity. Howard Kushner’s findings in his psycho-social article “Immigrant Suicide in the Untied States,” reveals that during the 1890s, roughly the time frame of *My Antonia*, foreign immigrants were at higher risk of suicide and where the level of migration had been the highest, so were the suicide rates (Kushner 6). He further claims that the majority of the immigrant suicides did not stem from the psychotic, nor the irrational, but from these individuals experiencing “object loss” (15). This unidentifiable “object loss” immigrants experience was, perhaps, a loss of their voice to a modern world which did not appreciate aspects of the Ethnic they brought with them from the Old Country, aspects of the Ethnic with which they strongly identified. Modernity is a force that threatens the Ethnic not only in Cather’s *My Antonia*, but also in *O Pioneers!* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*.

**O Pioneers! and the Language of the Ethnic**

Similar to *My Antonia*, Cather’s *O Pioneers!* portrays the Ethnic battling against modernity. In *My Antonia*, the Ethnic constituted notions of artistry and intellect, epitomized in the form of Mr. Shimerda. In *O Pioneers!*, the Ethnic, represented by Frank Shabata, is represented similarly; however, here Cather features its reliance on foreign languages other than
English. Modernity is expressed in the English language which dictates capitalistic and social
development and, thus, functions as the operative tool of modernity on the Nebraskan prairie:
Cather makes it clear that to survive the developing structure of commerce and production in
Nebraska, one must be able to master English, the predominant language of the prairie. In the
previous section, I spoke of how a Nebraskan identity insured better survival because it was
depicted as more practical and suitable for the harsh landscape and how it united a diverse
community of pioneers to create a better structure of support. Citing critics Tellefsen and
Lucenti, I spoke of how such an identity is formed through the process of memory and
forgetting. In this section, I will speak of how language played a part in the formation of a
Nebraskan identity. Cather admired and celebrated the diversity of cultures and languages, but
she also explored the negative effects some imagined would result from this diversity on the
Nebraskan prairie.

Forming a communal identity becomes an easier process if one predominant language
enables people to communicate and understand one another, and thus come together. However,
this is not the case on Cather’s Nebraskan prairie, where a diversity of nationalities and tongues
exists. Though the diversity of languages gives a richness and color to the landscape in O
Pioneers!, it also hinders the process of creating a Nebraskan identity, which was predominantly
English speaking. It became so that those pioneers who mastered English were more Nebraskan
than those who had not. Heidi Sjostrom, in her critique of My Antonia, likewise recognizes the
tension language plays in distinguishing those pioneers who are of a Nebraskan identity from
those who are not:

The pluralistic community Cather advocates is also not without its tensions… [In
My Antonia] Even Jim is irritated that Antonia can’t speak English when a snake
behind him terrifies her. He says, “What did you jabber Bohunk for?” (51). Later he adds to Antonia, “People who don’t like this country ought to stay at home” (101-102). Although Jim never truly wished that Antonia or her family would go home and only made his cruel comment out of disappointment and anger, Cather is fair in presenting the tension present in a journey like the one to Nebraska’s prairie. (Sjostrom 7)

Though Cather valued notions of a pluralistic and diverse community, she recognized that these diverse communities, which didn’t always quickly embrace the English language, proved problematic in creating a harmonious Nebraskan identity, or at least they myth of one, which could better withstand the dangers of the prairie landscape. Had Antonia been able to speak English, Jim would have been less surprised by the snake and more quick to kill it and defend both himself and Antonia. The snake scene is a beautiful metaphor demonstrating how a linguistically divided community was more in danger on the prairie than one united and capable of providing quick, instantaneous understanding and help to one another.

In *O Pioneers!*, ingenuity alone was not the salvation of Alexandra’s farmstead; it was also her ability to *communicate* with neighboring farmers, to “[talk] to the men about their crops and to the women about their poultry” (Cather 37). Alexandra converses in Swedish, with people such as the eccentric Ivar about caring for livestock, and converses in English with “the smart young man who is raising the new kind of clover” (39), leading to her success on the farmstead. Alexandra’s facility with two languages--especially English, the predominant one of the Nebraskan prairie--gives her the ability to understand the economic discourse governing the

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3 I do not believe that communal or national identities can only be achieved through the establishment of one, predominant language. Such a conceit is overly simplistic. Nonetheless, Cather’s texts do suggest this.
prairie. She can listen and pay attention to the big “men in town who are buying up other people’s land” (39) for reasons the “struggling farmers” couldn’t comprehend because they were usually foreigners who didn’t speak English. Alexandra’s financial and agricultural success stems from her ability to effectively use the language of capitalism on the prairie: English is the language of modernity in Nebraska, the tool to finding success within it. In one of his foot notes regarding modernization and language, Marshal Berman states:

In the nineteenth century the main transmitter of modernization was England, in the twentieth century it has been the U.S.A. Power maps have changed, but the primacy of English—the least pure, the most elastic and adaptable of modern languages—is greater than ever. It might well survive the decline of the American Empire. (Berman 161)

Berman’s footnote helps us understand why English would have been the “transmitter” of a new capitalistic and social order on the Nebraskan landscape. Unlike the other languages such as Swedish, German, French, Czech, etc., English was the “least pure, the more elastic and adaptable” through which all the foreign immigrants could merge and communicate with one another.

It follows that one’s ability to speak English on Cather’s prairie begins to represent who is more or less “Nebraskan,” depending on their fluency with the language. And if a Nebraskan identity is one better suited to withstand the prairie, then one’s proficiency in English becomes a gauge establishing who will and will not make it on the frontier. Languages besides English are treated with great unease in O Pioneers! Many of the second generation, immigrated characters

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4 Berman’s suggestion regarding the “primacy of English” is perhaps due to English imperialism more than its elasticity and adaptability. Though I disagree with Berman’s position, Cather’s work speaks to it.
deem it shameful to speak in their native tongue, so much so, that the third generation usually only speaks English:

Oscar's wife, from the malaria district of Missouri, was ashamed of marrying a foreigner, and his boys do not understand a word of Swedish. Annie and Lou sometimes speak Swedish at home, but Annie is almost as much afraid of being "caught" at it as ever her mother was for being caught barefoot. Oscar still has a thick accent, but Lou speaks like anyone from Iowa. (57)

It is interesting, as much as it is unfortunate, that the “up and coming” Bergson family is one that in many instances tries to hide its “foreigness” from the world by not speaking its mother tongue from the Old Country. Because of this, Oscar’s boys (who are maybe second or third generation—it’s not clarified) have already lost the language of their heritage and much of the rich cultural identity that goes along with their Swedish roots. In other words, they’ve lost the Ethnic which Cather equates with foreign languages in O Pioneers!. It is important we pay attention to Cather’s emphasis on accents. Why does she take the trouble to point out how Oscar maintains a thick accent while Lou sounds like an average Iowan? Because the Nebraskan prairie at this point has already begun to develop the structure of a social class. The Bergsons, a successful and wealthy family now constituting the upper class, are marked not only by their land, Alexandra’s fancy, well decorated guest room, or her niece’s ability to play the organ and piano, but also by their fluency and dependency on speaking English, not Swedish.

Frank Shabata well demonstrates the tensions of the Ethnic in the modern Nebraskan prairie. His poor English, reliance on German and artsy persona dooms him. Frank Shabata is a problematic character. He is an envious, selfish and cold-hearted person with no compassion towards those around him. When his wife, Marie, suggests Frank mend Old Woman Hill’s fence
to prevent her hogs from disrupting his wheat fields, Frank makes a petty argument rather than accepting the wisdom of her words: “Not-a-much, I won’t. I keep my hogs home. Other peoples can do like me. See?” (Cather 79). It doesn’t matter to him that Old Woman Hill only has her “lame boy to helper her,” or “that she does the best she can” (78). Frank speaks with heavily accented English, marking him as not truly Nebraskan while simultaneously dooming him to economic and social failure on the frontier landscape. Languages, foreign and English, were a subject of great concern and awareness for Cather. She saw them as a social and communal tool of identity:

> The language people speak to each other is the native tongue. No writer can invent it. It is made… in communities where language has been undisturbed long enough to take on colour and character from the nature and experiences of the people. The “sayings” of a community… imply its history, suggest its attitudes toward the world, and its way of accepting life. (Cather, *On Writing* 56)

If language becomes a means of communicating one’s history and an ideological method for approaching reality, if it takes on the “color and character from the nature and experiences of the people,” what does it imply then that certain foreign dialectics are silenced or made objects of shame (as with a good many members of the Bergson family)? Through the muting of tongues other than the predominant English of Nebraska, people like Frank Shabata (and Mr. Shimerda) are unable to project the colors, history and experiences of their identity and instead become like their foreign tongues, unheard. If we take Cather’s quote into consideration, we must ask ourselves how Frank can reform his attitudes towards and perceptions of the reality of the frontier life if he is unable to master the language of its discourse. Frank cannot hold a compassionate and communal disposition because his operative language is German and not the
English of Nebraska. If he spoke better English, Frank would be a part of the Nebraskan community and realize that he does not stand alone, that not everyone is out to get him (79). But since he is not truly English speaking, his reality does indeed place him outside the Nebraskan communal identity as “Other;” he is alone and everything is against him. Thus, English designates who can and cannot participate fully in the dynamics of wealth, power and communal identification on the Nebraskan prairie depending on how fluent and capable individuals are in speaking the language.

The problem with Frank Shabata is his innate failure to recognize that Nebraska doesn’t owe him any recognition of existence and being. The land could care less if his mother was a successful farmer in the Elbe Valley. And yet Frank came to Nebraska with a sense of privilege, believing he deserved things to work for him, to be successful. Furthermore, he came to Nebraska attempting to set himself above the other settlers by projecting an artistic, sensitive and “cultured” nature, not knowing that such an unpragmatic characteristic worked against rather than for him on Cather’s frontier:

His silk hat and tucked shirt and blue frock-coat, wearing gloves and carrying a little wisp of a yellow cane. He was tall and fair, with splendid teeth and close-cropped yellow curls, and he wore a slightly disdainful expression, proper for a young man with high connections, whose mother had a big farm in the Elbe valley. (80)

This land-aristocrat, artistic identity Frank sought to construct during his earlier days on the frontier, most probably marked him as a future victim of the Nebraskan landscape more than anything else. He cannot expect the class privilege he may have enjoyed back home. A man in gloves is one who cannot dirty and humble himself before the land to insure his survival and
prosperity; such a man is not pragmatic enough or useful in Nebraska. Despite this, Frank is able to seduce Marie Trovesky into marrying him through his practiced art “of drawing out his cambric handkerchief slowly, by one corner, from his breast-pocket, that was melancholy and romantic in the extreme” (80). When Marie tells her father of her engagement to Frank, his response is one that well expresses how many of his pioneers neighbors must have felt towards Frank Shabata:

Why don't he go to work like the rest of us? His farm in the Elbe valley, indeed! Ain't he got plenty brothers and sisters? It's his mother's farm, and why don't he stay at home and help her?...Don't I know the look of old Eva Shabata's hands?

Like an old horse's hoofs they are--and this fellow wearing gloves and rings! (81)

In a world constantly threatening its inhabitants, destroying and erasing farmsteads, Frank Shabata is a useless and incomprehensible character. Mr. Trovesky is horrified that a man such as Frank could have the audacity to claim his daughter’s hand when he shows no capability in supporting a family, but is instead supported by his own mother, thousands of miles away.

Like Mr. Shimerda, Frank’s artistic and romantic notions of identity do not cut it in Nebraska. Patrick Shaw argues “the mysterious prairie grows wheat, corn, wild flowers, and pragmatic people aplenty, but it cannot nurture artistic sensibility, sexual unorthodoxy, philosophical diversity, or idealists” (Shaw 22). Mr. Shimerda and Frank are not “pragmatic” people with their “artistic sensibilities.” They are misplaced identities in a world not able to accommodate their attitudes. When Marie’s father sends her to a boarding school, hoping to reprimand her thoughtlessness in picking Frank for a husband, her beloved—instead of proving himself to her and her father by working a homestead, demonstrating he’s a match to the land—captures posed images of himself, “taken in a dozen different love-lorn attitudes” (81). It is
thought provoking that Frank chooses posed photography to function as a token of himself and the love he shall give Marie. These poses are not realistic or truthful in any sense; they are a performance of an identity, one that is artistic and sensitive. Cather seems to suggest that the Ethnic notions Frank tries to project are not “authentic,” but a mimickry. Frank, unlike Mr. Shimerda, is very conscious of wanting people to see his Ethnic side, a dimension of his identity, by enacting and performing it. Regardless of Cather’s provocative suggestion of the performative nature of the Ethnic, Frank will be condemned by the forces of modern Nebraska, nonetheless, for his Ethnic characteristics--authentic or not. Berman cites Charles Baudelaire who despised the art of photography because:

Photography had the capacity to reproduce reality more precisely than ever before—to show the “Truth”—this medium is “art’s mortal enemy”; and insofar as the development of photography is a product of technological progress, then “Poetry and progress are like two ambitious men who hate each other. When they meet on the same road, one or the other must give way.”(Berman 140) [My emphasis]

Perhaps Frank’s performance of the Ethnic notions of art, sensitivity and intellect is due to the fact that such identities can only be performed on the Nebraskan prairie. The frontier in O Pioneers! is preoccupied with achieving progress and because of that, art and poetry “must give way.” Whether or not Frank has authentic Ethnic characteristics that are not a performance, his fate on the prairie would be similar to Mr. Shimerda’s, whose Ethnic “authenticity” led to his death.

Frank Shabata is a delusional performer who actually believes himself to be the dandy he acts. Frank’s fixation with the role obscures the “truth” of the matter. He develops a superiority
complex, thinking he is cultured and above the rest of the pragmatic and dull Nebraskan settlers. His “proud heart,” which had once bled for Marie, turns bitter towards her when he realizes she won’t humor his performance by glorifying him and demeaning their neighbors:

He wanted his wife to resent that he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative people; but she had seemed to find the people quite good enough... he wanted her to feel that life was as ugly and as unjust as he felt it. He had tried to make her life ugly. He had refused to share any of the little pleasures she was so plucky about making for herself. (Cather 146)

Frank Shabata is a selfish and egotistical character, to say the least. But why is he so fixed on having Marie (especially) and others recognize “he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative people” (146)? Why is it that he can only get along with people if they make a bigger deal out of him than he really is, as Alexandra tells us? If we look closer, we realize that Frank Shabata is yet another Mr. Shimerda, less likeable, but sharing the same concerns and anxieties of being erased and silenced on the Nebraskan landscape. Furthermore, if we understand Marie as an embodiment of Nebraska’s spirit, as critic Mark Noe argues, Frank’s need for her to esteem him beyond the rest lends further insight into his violent retaliation when she refuses to do so.

Noe argues Marie’s eyes are Cather’s way of embodying the alluring and yet dangerous spirit of Nebraska in her character:

The gemstone Cather chose to illustrate Marie’s eyes is the important factor. The tiger’s eye is quartz of a generally uniform yellow-brown color, but it includes a bright golden slash running through it… Thus, it presents the image of the fiery, passionate, dangerous eye of a tiger (Schumann 124). In the first scene, even with
Marie still just a little girl, such an image defines her and should present warning
to those around her. (Noe 1)

Noe argues that Marie’s eyes are the “fatal flaw in *O Pioneers!,’” a condemning passion she
possesses, “destined to bring others down with her, if not to death (Emil), then to heartache at
least (Frank and Alexandra)” (2). What Noe perhaps fails to illustrate is how the passion of
Marie’s eyes, so similar to the “yellow wheat…[and] rustling corn,” not only parallels the
passionate nature of the Nebraska ethos--its fickle nature in determining the fate of it’s
inhabitants—but also like Marie, condemns some to death and others to heartache. But to label
Marie’s eyes and what they embody as the “fatal flaw” of Cather’s novel is overly simplistic and
unfair to the text. We must allow Marie and the Nebraskan landscape the complexity of character
Cather is attempting to demonstrate.

When Frank Shabata realizes he’s lost his wife to something he is not—the fully
Nebraskan, fluent English-speaking upper class character of Emil—he is crushed. By betraying
Frank for Emil, Marie, the “spirit of Nebraska,” has sealed Frank’s failed fate on the frontier. She
has turned her affection and attention towards the promising Emil, whose education and fluency
is prized by modernity’s goal of progress and development on the prairie. After killing the two
lovers, Emil and Marie, Frank “stood by the windmill, in the bright space between the barn and
the house, facing his own black doorway [and] he did not see himself at all” (145). After killing
his Marie, Frank is unable to “see himself at all,” because he has killed his only connection to
Nebraska, Marie. Though Frank and Marie’s love was questionable, she did take it as her wifely
duty to appease Frank’s moods and neutralize the neighbors’ relationships with him. She
functioned in giving Frank a temporary membership to a Nebraskan identity, despite his
unpragmatic nature and broken English. Were it not for Marie, none of the neighbors would put
up with Frank’s outrageous, self-isolating behavior: they “bore with Frank for [Marie’s] sake” (79). Rather than being silenced by the prairie, Frank attempts to commit violence against it through silencing Marie. He fails.

Without Marie living and grounding Frank to Nebraska, he becomes more and more “Other.” When Alexandra goes to the jailhouse to visit him, he no longer has the privilege of possessing a name but is given the random call number of “1037” (160). When Alexandra speaks with him, we realize his English has regressed. Her apologizes to Alexandra on behalf of his speech: “I forget English. We not talk here, except swear” (161). Whatever his prospects were of becoming Nebraskan through his mastery of English, they are now completely obliterated.

Alexandra’s visit might have demonstrated how unable Frank was to achieve what she has achieved, the economic and social success and assimilated Nebraskan identity. Frank’s spirit finally falls and he recognizes Nebraska to be the dark force that it was: “I guess dat place [his homestead] all go to hell what I work so hard on” (161); despite his years of trying to root himself to the territory and make a name for himself, the prairie—in just a few months of his absence—has reclaimed the land, regressing to its natural and unbroken state. Frank Shabata finally gives up his frontier struggle, promising Alexandra if she succeeds in releasing him from the prison system, “[he] not trouble dis country no more. [He] go back where [he] come from” (162). For Frank to exist, he must leave Nebraska and return to the Old Country.

*Love Medicine* and the Isolated Ethnic

In Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*, a novel that is perhaps more relatable to a modern reader than Cather’s are, the Ethnic is embodied in Native American spiritual practices and traditions. Modernity, in the framework of *Love Medicine*, is white and Christian culture. Characters who identify too strongly with the Ethnic elements of their Native tradition
experience a struggle with their identity as they try and reconcile it with their modern, American identity, which works against the Ethnic in many ways. However, unlike the case with Cather, the Ethnic in Erdrich’s narrative is not silenced or defeated, but maintained—albeit in a struggle—through her characters’ stories about themselves and their community.

Erdrich suggests that a fully Ethnic identity is one that cannot exist as a part of a modern society and community. To exist in modernity is to identify and participate with its predominant identity—in the case of Love Medicine and later on The Painted Drum, one that is projected as being a predominantly white and Christian identity as critics Karla Sander, James Ruppert, and Sinder Larson also argue. Erdrich demonstrates the boundaries of the Ethnic in a modern world by juxtaposing fully Ethnic characters, such as Moses Pillager, against marginal and modern characters--defined in this essay as those who identify with the Ethnic and modern identity simultaneously--such as Lulu Nanapush and June Morrissey.

A modern identity is a marginal one (Berman 52). Modernity takes everything—belief systems, values, ideals, notions of one’s identity—and tears it down so that it can all be constructed once more and again, but bigger and better: “all [things in modernity] are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms” (Berman 99). To live in a modern world is to live in a world of uncertainty, flux and constant forced innovation; it is to live in a world that marginalizes and fractures identity.

James Ruppert, in his article “Mediation and Multiple Narrative,” chooses to read Love Medicine as “a dazzling, personal, intense novel of survivors who struggle to define their own identities and fates in a world of mystery and human frailty” (Ruppert1). It is interesting that Ruppert chooses to distinguish Erdrich’s Native American characters as “survivors,” begging the
question: Survivors of what? Erdrich’s characters are struggling to sustain not only their Ethnic identity from the fracturing and marginalizing of modernity:

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. (Berman 13)

Erdrich suggests that the Ethnic identity of her characters, especially, is able to survive through narrative practice. For Ruppert, “celebrating and protecting the stories of survivors can imply the creation of meaning in characters under the pressure of competing senses of identity” (Ruppert 1). In other words, the multiple narratives of Erdrich’s characters can become the saving grace of her characters’ Native American tradition, with which they identify, against the threatening and “competing senses of identity” of America. Ruppert claims:

The sets of cultural identities [within the text] become visible through merging of epistemological codes, which are used to create these identities. She [Erdrich] harmoniously evokes the various story realities: each narrative grouping of the novel has the potential of being read as a psychological story and social story (using the most common white senses of identity) or as a communal story and a mythical story (using Native American sense of identity) depending on the code and positioning of the perspective that Erdrich employs. (Ruppert 1)

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5 “Native American” is a broad term encompassing many different, specific identities such as Ojibwe, Seneca, Zuni, Etc. However, it is the terminology that Ruppert uses in his argument.
Narrative maintains and preserves notions of Ethnic and American identity through use of Native American or American epistemological codes that reinforce and give rise to the identities. However, the fact that certain characters can use white/American epistemological codes in their narratives, unlike others, suggests that, similarly to Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, Erdrich offers an identity boundary, distinguishing between her marginal/modern characters and her fully Ethnic characters.

Charles Taylor argues that our identities are shaped and formed by our language, a language that comprises “not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the ‘language’ of art, of gesture, of love and the like” (Appiah 20). If we attempt to see the concepts that shape our lives as a language capable of speaking, as Taylor suggests, then we realize that our lives are but many narratives and stories strung together. Alasdair MacIntyre explains, “because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives we live out, the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others” and presumably, of ourselves (22). If we take MacIntyre and Taylor’s claims about how narratives function (in giving rise to and understanding identity) with Ruppert’s argument about Erdrich’s marginal characters telling narratives that consist of two epistemological codes, we could begin to understand how the Ethnic is maintained in modernity.

If narratives are what function in giving rise and understanding to our identities, it is crucial that Ruppert’s notion of Native American (Ethnic) epistemological codes do exist in the multiple narratives of *Love Medicine*. If they didn’t, then the Ethnic of Native American Ojibwe tradition would be silent and forgotten in modernity, existing like Moses Pillager—utterly isolated. Other of Erdrich’s characters, however, allow their modern and Ethnic *language*—in
the sense Taylor describes it in the previous paragraph—to coexist and thus, shape their identities jointly.

Moses Pillager is the epitome of the fully Ethnic character in *Love Medicine*. It is important to note that he does not have his own chapter and personal narrative in *Love Medicine*. If we see the multiple narratives of Erdrich’s characters in *Love Medicine* as emblematic of their fragmented and mutiplicitous natures, their “modern” identities, it suggests something powerful that Moses cannot partake in their modern narrative. Moses does not have the tools to participate in the modern narrative, which Ruppert argues to be the saving grace of the Ethnic in modernity. His epistemological codes are solely Native American, Ethnic, and not modern, which is the narrative code of the novel.

Moses Pillager is a “time capsuled” character whose identity is locked into a historical time and period, remaining unchanged, not participating in or assimilating to the modern world of capitalism, globalization and modernization. He is not part of what Berman explains as *innovative self-destruction*—the tearing down of self. Moses’ does not have to participate in the saving narratives of *Love Medicine* because he is not a marginal character, though he literally lives on the periphery of society, isolated. He does not have to *maintain* his Ethnic identity because there’s nothing to maintain it against on his island: One cannot be marginal if one is not *recognized* by a social or political construct that *makes* a person marginal. In an effort to save Moses from the sickness assaulting her people, Moses’ mother preserved him and turned him into a Native American time capsule, securing his Ethnic self from modernity’s forced assimilation and integration of identity.

She decided to fool the spirits by pretending that Moses was already dead, a ghost. She sang his death song, made his gravehouse. Laid spirit food upon the
ground, put his clothes upon him backwards. His people spoke past him. Nobody ever let out his real name. Nobody saw him. He lived invisible, and he survived… The next winter he walked across the lake and appeared in town. His clothes were patched with the tanned and striped skins of cats. He walked with a cat’s care, only backwards\(^6\). (Erdrich 74)

The price of Moses’ mother fooling the spirits into believing her son dead was a heavy one. Ironically, in order to save his body from the grips of a deadly disease, his mother had to “kill” his identity by never letting “out his real name” (74). A person’s name is something powerful, the most important signifier to their identity. Without Moses having people recognize his identity by speaking his name, instead talking past him, he becomes dead and “invisible” to not only the community he was living in, but also to the world in general; Moses, the embodiment of the Ethnic, becomes a ghost—not part of the living and modern realm, since he’s never acknowledged as existing.

Because of the odd, unnatural circumstances of Moses’ existence, he lives a life unaffected by the world around him since he is “dead” and forgotten. He is a character calling attention to the borders distinguishing the fully Ethnic/un-marginal identity from the marginal in the framework of *Love Medicine*. Moses and his island are behind one border, representing the total Ethnic identity based on more authentic and less corrupted Native American Ojibwe traditions and practices. Beyond Moses’ island exists the marginal identity, embodied in the

\(^6\) Erdrich could be referencing the Ojibwe tradition of *heyoka*, or “Contraries,” people who are called on by a special vision and enact the opposite of what is considered normal in the culture. For example, if it was extremely hot, they would dress in their blanket and shiver with cold. The function of the Contrary tradition was not only to provide self-reflective humor for the community, but to also demonstrate the significance of the traditions they practice, which the Contrary (or Clown) enacts abnormally (Barbra Tedlock 105-18).
Ojibwe reservation, a world subject to modernity which struggles to maintain its Ethnic identity in the wake of its white/American one, through participating in both narrative practices.

Lulu Nanapush has the agency to traverse the “identity border,” stepping fully into Moses’ Ethnic side when she visits him. Ruppert would argue that she has the epistemological codes of the Ethnic, which license her to do this. Lulu can and does identify with the Ethnic. Yet Lulu forgets that Moses, unlike her, cannot traverse the identity border, leave his island and cross into the modern realm of marginal identities. When Lulu carelessly suggests that she and Moses cross the border into the Ojibwe reservation to raise their to-be-born son, she’s met by a violent response from Moses:

It was as though I cut his wind off, raked holes in his chest. For a long moment he could not breathe. Then he tangled his arms around me and wrestled me down so hard I thought he’d hurt the baby. I pushed him away in rough protection, and saw fear empty out his eyes. He was not able to leave—I’d always known that. (83)

Lulu’s suggestion that he leave the island is unfathomable to Moses. He simply cannot do it. He has not been given the epistemological codes of white, American culture that he would need in order to be recognized in the modern world. His fully Ethnic identity would have to be greatly compromised in order to cross the border—he would have to become marginal. Moses’ violent response to Lulu is his innate animal instinct to preserve his life’s existence.

In Ojibwe tradition, narrative practices are likewise considered crucial in developing and maintaining Native American beliefs, and thus an Ethnic identity. Irving Hallowell describes two traditional oral narratives within Ojibwe tradition:
1. “News or tiding,” i.e., anecdotes, or stories, referring to events in the lives of human beings. In content, narratives of this class range from everyday occurrences, though more exceptional experiences, to those which verge on the legendary.

2. Myths, i.e., sacred stories, which are not only traditional and formalized; their narration is seasonally restricted and is somewhat ritualized. The significant thing about these stories is that the characters in them are regarded as living entities who have existed from time immemorial. (Dennis Tedlock 149-50)

Erdrich’s characters in *Love Medicine* maintain their Ethnic identities through their Ojibwe epistemological coding that stems from their Native American tradition. When her characters tell their stories and thus reveal *who they are*, they do so through the stories of their relatives and community members, relying on both Ojibwe forms of traditional narrative codes along with white/modern ones. Joseph Epes Brown understands the merging existence of the Native American and modern/white codes of language as “a polysynthetic metaphysic of nature,” which Ruppert explains:

> Erdrich merges this *Native* sense of multiple levels of meaning for each physical act with a powerful belief in the mystery of events as they make manifest the sacred process of the world, and this meaning informs all of [the characters] of *Love Medicine*... Events take on spiritual, mythic, cultural, personal and religious meanings for phenomena in which Western [also “modern”] thought often would see only physical effects. (Ruppert 3)

An example Ruppert points to in the merging of two codes, ethnic and modern, is the narrative in which Gordie hits the deer. If we read its white language codes, it is a story about Gordie
experiencing a psychological and emotional breakdown when he hits the deer, believing it to be his mother—“We are not surprised that at the end of the encounter with Sister Mary Marti, he should end up running mad in the woods” (Ruppert 5). However, if we read the narrative as engaging its Ojibwe/Native American codes, we would understand that in

Traditional [Ojibwe] worldview, the spirit world is the source of special insight and power. A dead wife returning to visit the husband who abused her is not unusual, especially if she is not buried in the appropriate manner; June’s journey home at the time of her death is completed by her visit to Gordie. (5)

The narrative of Love Medicine thus serves both the modern and Ethnic identities of Erdrich’s characters.

June Morrissey is a character who represents how the Ethnic and white narratives can and do exist jointly for Erdrich’s marginal characters, but also how they become a source of great struggle, leading to identity crises. The earliest memory we have of June comes from Marie Kashpaw’s narrative, “The Beads.” June, discovered by her drunkard grandparents, had been surviving alone in the woods due to her father’s abandonment and her mother’s untimely death. Marie wonders at June’s survival when seeing the girl’s diminutive frame: “Not older than nine years. She [June] could hardly stand upright. I looked at her. What I saw was starved bones, a shank of black strings, a piece of rag on her I wouldn’t have used to wipe a pig” (Erdrich 86). Marie Kashpaw’s description of “starved bones” and a child unable to stand is one of waste and death; June’s clothing, “a shank of black strings, a piece of rag,” reminds us of a shroud covering the long dead. That June managed to survive the woods at all is a source of mystery and discomfort. Young June is found with a black rosary around her neck. When Marie asks June’s grandparents about the rosary, they explain “It was them bug eyes… them ignorant bush Crees
who found her and couldn’t figure out how she was raised, except the spirits…They slung them beads around her neck…To protect themselves” (86). We are told later that June kept herself alive because she had “sucked on pine sap and grazed grass and nipped buds like a deer” (87). June’s knowledge of the Native American arts of survival does not appease the discomfort felt by people such as the Crees, however. Though detail of the length of time June survived in the bush isn’t divulged, it is suggested that sucking on pine sap and grazing grass doesn’t suffice as an explanation for her continued existence; there is something unnatural and unearthly about it. So she is given a rosary by the Crees to wear and counter her unnatural, ungodly existence. This passage describing June’s rescue is crucial in understanding how a fully identified Ethnic character, as June was at the time, is not understood in the modern world. She is something unearthly and unnatural, ghostlike—characteristics attributed to Moses.

Throughout *Love Medicine*, Erdrich attributes a transcendent-dual quality to June. When Marie Kashpaw bathes the young June, looking for physical cues to define and link June’s lineage, she’s unable:

As I scrubbed the pitiful scraps of her and wiped ointment over the sores, I saw nothing, no feature that belonged to either one, Lazarre or Morrissey, and I was glad. It was as if she really was the child of what the old people called Manitous, invisible ones who live in the woods. (87)

June exists in the physical present, absorbed as a member of Marie’s family and yet, like Moses, she is “invisible,” with an identity linked and rooted to her mystical, unworldly existence in the

7 The text does not specify why the Crees are discomforted by June. However, it implies that the Crees detected a negative supernatural force. Considering the anxiety regarding the devil in *Love Medicine* (springing from the Catholic ideology projected in the text), I would assume the Crees believed June was possessed by the devil, which would explain their use of the rosary. The relationship between the Crees and Ojibwe is not fully explained in *Love Medicine*. 
woods where she was discovered. June was transplanted into the world of Marie, the world of modernity, given place and voice within that world (through learning its modern epistemological codes), but it doesn’t change that her identity is originally rooted to a mysterious beginning and existence, one rooted to the Ethnic.

One could argue that June is a young Moses who is not allowed a continuous, isolated existence, but forced to compromise the Ethnic part of her identity by taking on the white and modern epistemological codes Ruppert describes. Similar to Moses’ violent response to Lulu at her suggestion that he leave the island—a threat to his fully Ethnic identity—a young June violently reproaches Marie Kashpaw, who intervenes in June’s attempted suicide act as a young child playing cowboys and Indians; June lashes out, “I wasn’t scared! You damn chicken!” (22). Marie remembers June’s reaction at being reproached:

She [June] was standing upright, tall and bone-thin and hopeless with the rosary wrapped around her hand as it is around the hands of the dead. “You ruined it.” Her eyes blinked at me, dry, as she choked it out. “I stole their horse. So I was supposed to be hanged.” (90)

When Marie reprimands June for not knowing the difference between what’s real, death, and unreal, games, she senses that June does know the difference and the “game” was still ruined by Marie (90). June’s suicide attempt could be interpreted as a failed quest to preserve her Ethnic identity from further compromise in the modern world. We know that death in Native American tradition doesn’t function as silence and loss, but that the dead find new voice and existence through Ojibwe narrative traditions. With her attempted suicide, June would have been erasing her modern/Western identity, one that is grounded—as Ruppert and Hallowell would argue—in the physical and present-here-and-now world, understood as removed from the spiritual realm.
June’s suicide would have canceled out her temporal body, which modern and western ideology values as essential to maintaining the spirit in the present world. But her death, in Ojibwe tradition and beliefs, would not have erased her spirit and identity; June would have simply become part of the spirit world, deemed just as real, important and active as the non-spirit.

This duality of existence of an Ethnic and modern identity is one that haunts June until her death. Her “modern” existence and identity outside of the woods, in Marie Kashpaw’s society, is one that competes and threatens to overshadow her Ethnic identity:

Walking towards the ladies’ she [June] was afraid to bump against anything because her skin felt hard and brittle, and she knew it was possible, in this condition, to fall apart at the slightest touch… All of a sudden she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone. Sitting, she leaned down and rested her forehead on the top of the metal toilet-roll dispenser. She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked—only the skins were stiff and old.

(4)

In this passage, pulled from the novel’s first chapter, June’s duality is embodied in her self-perceptions of a physical (representative of her modern identity) vs. metaphysical existence (representative of her Ethnic one). June needs to maintain and protect her skin, “hard and brittle,” from falling apart at “the slightest touch;” yet, despite her efforts to maintain a hold on her physical being, something that appears to be “grounding her,” June still drifts out of her “clothes and skin with no help from anyone” becoming a disembodied June. June’s task at having to ground herself in her physical body so as not to “drift out,” which she does without effort “or help from anyone,” emphasizes her earlier established fully Ethnic self, which now longs to escape its modern counterpart.
This duality in June’s identity takes its toll as the spiritual realm of her Ethnic self continuously tugs at the physical realm of her modern self, hoping to be full proprietor of June’s being. We see the pain this duality of existence and identification has on June in Marie’s description of her childhood attempt:

I turned her [June’s] head toward me and looked in her sorrowful black eyes. I looked a long time, as if I was falling down a hill. She blinked gravely and returned my stare. There was a sadness I couldn’t touch there. It was a hurt place, it was deep, it was with her all the time like a broke rib that stabbed when she breathed. (91)

Marie cannot “touch” the sadness in June’s eyes because it is one at the core of who she is—it is June’s mournful realization that the struggle of traversing two identities—Ethnic and modern—will not cease. Not only can June never revert to her fully Ethnic identity (June of the woods), she can’t cancel either that one or her modern identity. Once one enters the modern world and becomes marginal, there is no going back.

Recuperating the Ethnic in The Painted Drum

Louise Erdrich’s The Painted Drum falls into a different category than Love Medicine or Cather’s O Pioneers! and My Antonia. With the previous three novels, I have discussed the Ethnic as it struggles in the wake of modernity. With Cather, the Ethnic’s struggle ends with its silencing by modernity. With Erdrich’s Love Medicine, the Ethnic is maintained through narrative practices which merge the characters’ Ethnic and modern identities, although it is a process of struggle and continuous anxiety. Published in 2005, Painted Drum accommodates a postmodern reading rather than the modern reading suited to the three previous novels. With Painted Drum, Erdrich confronts modernity’s pressures and anxieties about the self. She
suggests that the Ethnic, rather than being another source of contention, can now begin to heal or
at least bring contentment and inner peace in the ever changing flux of modernity’s wake.

In my discussion of Love Medicine I wrote about how in the Ojibwe tradition the
spiritual/spirit realm is very much active and present in the living, every-day realm. Characters
who identify with the Ethnic, based on Native American traditions, like June Morrissey and
Moses Pillager, usually hold spirit-like, ghostly characteristics. Like Ruppert, Karla Sanders also
views Erdrich’s characters as *survivors*, “attempt[ing] to reconcile their Native American
Heritage [characterized as the Ethnic here] with the expectations of the dominant white culture in
the modern and postmodern United States” (Sanders 129). Sanders claims that the identity crises
they experience, such as in June’s case, arise because their two identities—modern and Ethnic—
work against one another.

Sinder Larson talks about the coming of European religions in the early 1800s to Ojibwe
tribes and communities in relation to Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. There were “serious problems
associated with the coming of Catholicism” (Larson 2). One of the more serious problems,
according to Sanders and Larson alike, were:

> The ambivalence and tensions that resulted when Indian people tried to live with
> both Native American and Roman Catholic religious beliefs. Knowledge of both
> was in some ways an advantage, but at other time it had a paralyzing effect
> resulting from contradictory system. (Larson 2)

It was difficult for Erdrich’s characters in *Love Medicine* to maintain their Ethnic with their
modern selves in narrative practice. Sanders argues this is because their modern identity, derived
in part from the Catholic belief system, cancelled out their Native American traditions, their
understanding the world and themselves. Though Catholicism and religion may not play
themselves out prominently in modernity, as we understand it today, historically it was used as a tool of modernization by the colonizers of Native American tribes:

Erdrich uses religious beliefs in order to display the contradictions faced by her. In many Native American beliefs the “magic” is part of the natural world…but supernatural works against Native ideas of inclusion [of identity and identification]. (Sanders 132)

Sanders argues this incredible contradiction between two identities leads to “confusion as well as spiritual and psychological ill health” (129). It seems that Erdrich also believed this to be true. In The Painted Drum, she engages the dilemma in her attempts to reunite the spiritual and natural worlds through objects and locales, allowing Native beliefs—the Ethnic—to exist in a modern world.

Faye Travers and her mother lead a successful business where they liquidate the estates of the deceased at auctions and other such venues. Faye tells us that her line of work would be very special in the Ojibwe tradition because objects of the dead must be handled with care. Once a person dies, their possessions are thought to attract their souls back to where they are located. Therefore, it was up to a communally-designated member of the tribe to parcel out the belongings of the deceased throughout the community (33). The deceased’s family never kept his or her belongings.

It is interesting to consider the implications of this tradition. If objects attract their late owner’s spirit, it is understandable that a grieving family would not be emotionally ready or capable of handling a spirit-visit so soon after their loss. But rather than the family ridding

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8 The destruction of Native American culture, though European colonization, was justified by officials as necessary for the loftier goals of the soon-to-be established settlements of the new world.
themselves of their late beloved’s possessions, the possessions are instead absorbed by the community. If objects represent spirits of the dead coming back, then the parceling of objects throughout the community is similar to the voice of the deceased becoming absorbed by the community. Hallowell informs us that the Ojibwe believe that the spirit of the dead would often return to the living realm in order to guide their family and community members. Parceling out the possessions of the dead would thus encourage the dead to visit and guide members of the community through their trials and tribulations.

According to Hallowell, the Ojibwe are not “animists in the sense that they dogmatically attribute living souls to inanimate objects” (147); however they do recognize “a priori, potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances” (148). Faye tells us of how some estates, in her line of work, “come to life” (34) while others do not, but remain more or less inanimate objects. For example, Faye considers the handkerchief box of L.M.B. to be a case where the inanimate “comes to life.” Faye’s first reaction at discovering the box is excitement at the novelty of such a box, kept by a lady “so stingy with her tears, she kept them” (Erdrich 35). The value Faye perceived in the tear-stained handkerchiefs would have been solely of a monetary worth if she had not continued to search, then read the notes chronicling the pieces of cloth, documenting the joys and sorrows of L.M.B.:

I was left alone with the box in my lap and it was then, sitting with L.M.B.’s sorrows and joys that my eyes filled with tears...So when I did feel that swell of sadness I reached immediately for one of the handkerchiefs, dabbed my eyes dry, and added my own tears to the box...That seemed like the proper close to the collection. (35)
The reason why L.M.B.’s estate becomes animate is because her voice, its pains and joys, were written on and preserved by the handkerchiefs. Faye read and witnessed the tears L.M.B. shed for “Theodor’s Precious Birth. Aunt Lilac’s Deathbed Supper…Cousin Franklin’s Wedding to Mildred Vost” (35). Faye empathized with L.M.B.’s story to the extent that she was moved enough to weep a tear for the old lady, despite not being one to cry. The beauty of this passage is witnessing how the private, life narrative (almost diary) of L.M.B. was finally appreciated and acknowledged by Faye, someone she’s never met; how Faye is so moved by L.M.B.’s story that she decides to conclude it, adding her own tears for the sake of a woman who shed them for many others. At last, someone cried for L.M.B. The handkerchiefs in this passage demonstrate how objects are able to retain a voice, narrating stories of those absent from the realm of the living. This “animate behavior” L.M.B.’s handkerchief box, in its ability to parlay into narrative, could very well make it an animate object by the Ojibwe tradition standard. And yet L.M.B. is not a Native American character. Erdrich suggests that voices and narratives of the dead can be maintained and preserved by anyone and that they transcend ethnic categories.

In *The Painted Drum*, objects not only possess the ability to preserve narratives and voices, as in the case of L.M.B, but also are able to instigate new narratives. These new narratives are not always understood by the people who witness their creation, but are nonetheless respected and allowed to continue until they are understood. As Anaquot and Ziigwan’aage bond over the deception of their lover and husband, Simon Jack, their bonding is fortified by a spiritual-like bead and stitching project. They would often sit together beading something of which they did not know the form or meaning. They continued beading and slowly, the project began to define itself to them:
They placed each bead just so and the velvet and the beads turned into four petaled flowers that told stories and held great meaning...What they worked on had the most amazing vitality. It grew between them. And still they could not tell what it was until one day Simon Jack walked in and saw that they were making him a dance outfit, either that or an elaborate set of clothes to be buried in. (144)

Erdrich suggests, in this passage, that sometimes narratives already exist, but that they simply remain untold until a suitable medium of voice reveals itself. For Anaquot and Ziigwan’aage, the story of Simon Jack’s betrayal and infidelity towards the two women was one they could not verbalize with their own voices. Perhaps it was too painful a story, or perhaps their words could not do their feelings justice. Their story of Jack’s betrayal makes itself known through their beadwork. Slowly the shiny smooth stones take form under their hands. We later find out this outfit is for burial, with its moccasin’s beaded soles, shoes only the dead wear. The beadwork of Simon Jack’s burial outfit, which his vanity pushes him to wear, is one that allows the story between him, Anaquot and Ziigwan’aage to be read and witnessed by all those who lay their eyes upon him within the community:

They [Anaquot and Ziigwan’aage] had trapped him. It was he who had donned the suit, after all, clothes that supposedly illustrated for the world his wives’ meek devotion. But those were not just flowers, not just vines, not, as I said, little beads. Those little spirits were his arrogance for all to see. Filth and brilliance. They were Simon Jack inside out” (182).

When the community sees Jack’s beaded suit they are reminded of his two wives and Jack’s deception of them. They also see what Anaquot and Ziigwan’aage need people to know, for their sake: that Simon Jack is a man seemingly brilliant in his visage, but underneath a soul so filthy
and ugly in spirit, capable of betraying two women and his children to an arrogant lust. The burial outfit, an inanimate objects at first, becomes animate through the story it tells of Jack, his wife and lover. More importantly, it becomes a medium by which the two women, together, can begin to understand the wrong done them by Jack, bonding together and becoming a powerful force against the man. Erdrich suggests that objects are capable of taking on spiritual meanings for people while also healing them. Sanders, likewise, believes that Erdrich’s characters are capable of healing their anxiety and pains once they “pursue spirituality” through “magical elements” (Sanders 132). Once the spiritual realm becomes part of the natural realm, the ability to heal is made possible.

For Faye Travers, the apple orchard near her house, though not an object so much as a locale, preserves the narrative of her sister’s tragic death. The loss of her young sister was something very hard for Faye since it was always insinuated by her parents that Faye pushed her sister from a high tree branch and to her death. Faye’s own identity and voice is complicated and fractured because “over the years [she’s] wrapped [her] life around [her sister’s] memory” (73). Because Faye has been unable for so long to reflect on and talk about her sister’s death, the memories of her sister are fading along with Faye’s identity, which is constructed from these memories. The apple orchard is where Faye and her sister invested much of their childhood, where they escaped the presence and emotional abuse of their father.

When Kurt Krahe, Faye’s lover, insists on breathing life back into the orchard by pruning it, Faye experiences a surge of anger and panic. She “like[s] it the way it is, dead and ruined” (64). Perhaps, Faye is not ready to have the voice of her sister come back to her in the spring orchard, which they haunted during their childhood. Perhaps the spring, blooming orchard functions as an object of possession for Faye’s younger sister, an object that will attract her
spirit. By previously never allowing the orchard to come to life, Faye “gave it away,” protecting herself from the pain to which her sister’s visits to the orchard would have subjected her.

But Krahe prunes the orchard anyway, and on a hot May afternoon, the “switch” is hit, and the orchard is teeming with life. The youth and energy of spring reminds Faye of her young, energetic sister. Faye becomes overwhelmed by how “the odor of white blossom is so profound that it makes steps into the air” (74). But then she concludes “only old wood can bear such rapture…maybe you have to die first, like the trees, like her [sister]” (74). Is Faye suggesting that the most intense feelings of joy and pleasure are those that come from death? Does memory of death make things more beautiful because it reminds us of the finite, passing nature of all things?

Now that the orchard has sprung back to beautiful life, Faye can no longer keep the death of her sister at a safe distance by having the orchard silenced in its own death, but instead, she is forced to begin remembering her sister once more. She remembers her sister’s energy and activity in the orchard, pictures the “dim shapes of the trees, their twisted arms that hold her [sister]” (74).

The painted drum, stolen from the Tatro estate by Faye, begins to exert an influence over her similarly to the orchard. Perhaps Faye’s efforts in the past to keep her sister’s voice and memory away, by withholding life from the orchard (for example), had their effects on her psyche. Faye confesses that it’s been years since her sister’s come to her in the dream world. With the entrance of the painted drum and the rebirth of the orchard, Faye’s sister is capable of returning to the natural realm of the living through Faye’s dreams. Chook, a character well versed in drum lore, tries to explain the significant power of a painted drum. She begins with talk of sorrow and human coping methods:

What I'm telling you is you wear down the sorrow using what you have, what comes to hand. You talk them over, you live them through, you don't let them sit
inside. See, that's what the drum was good for. Letting those sorrows out, into the open, where those songs could bear them away. (105).

The painted drum, like the orchard, allows Faye a return to her sister, one removed from the pain and grief of her loss. During her sister’s dream visits, Faye is surprised to realize that despite death, her sister has learned to play the piano, has married and become a grown woman (76). Death has not silenced her sister; she has continued to develop, leading a parallel life with Faye’s but in the spiritual realm of the dead. When Faye touches the drum after these dreams, she feels stronger (77). Her sister’s death is now something she can handle and reflect on in maturity. The drum has allowed Faye to let the painful childhood memories of her sister’s death out “into the open,” where the drum’s songs, albeit silent, “bear them away” (105). Hallowell explains that in the Ojibwe tradition, a drum such as the one described in Erdrich’s novel, “becomes a medium of communication between the living and the spirits of the dead” (Hallowell 165). The medium of communication between the realm of living and dead was considered crucial in living a healthy life:

The central goal of life for the Ojibwe is expressed by the term *pimādāziwin*, life in the fullest sense, life in the sense of longevity, health and freedom from misfortune. This goal cannot be achieved without the effective help and cooperation of both human and other-than-human-persons. (Halowell, “Ojibwe Ontology” 171)

The “other-than-human-persons” are understood as those belonging to the spirit realm. In order for Faye to heal from the loss of her sister, she had to allow her sister’s spirit to return to her via the orchard trees and the drum, entities which Western and modern thought would consider as inanimate. The spirit realm does not serve a function towards progress in a modern world.
The creation of the drum itself begins with the healing story of Old Shaawano. Desperate and in despair at the loss of his wife, son and deceased daughter, the latter comes to him in a dream. She looks upon her fallen father, seeing all his vicious and cold-hearted actions and crimes. Shaawano’s spirit daughter empathizes with her father’s consuming pain. She gives consolation, informing him that his solitude will not continue, that she and the other spirits “are waiting to sing with [him]” (155). Under his young daughter’s guidance, Old Shaawano constructs a painted drum. The process of constructing it is tedious, full of a physical labor that purifies his soul and mind. The drum, its very construction, begins healing Shaawano’s sorrow. He starts working productively, feeding himself well and showing respect towards the spirit world—things he had not done prior to his daughter’s guidance.

The drum’s healing powers extends from Old Shaawano into the Ojibwe community, bringing it together and healing it. Hearing that the previously violent and drunk Shaawano pulled his act together to create a painted drum, a spiritual privilege, the people of his community come together to witness the drum and talk about it. The drum begins curing people. The community dreams up songs for the drum, singing them together and participating as a community in traditional drum circles. Bernard Shaawano tells us that this is exactly “what the drum is about—it gathers people and holds them. It looks after them” (Erdrich 180). Hallowell explains how a drum used in such communal ceremonies is called “our grandfather,” in the Ojibwe tradition—not because drums are one of the “oldest” Native American traditions, but because “‘grandfather’ is commonly used, not only as a term of respect for any old man, but also in addressing, or referring to, spiritual helpers of all types” (Hallowell 162).

In *The Painted Drum*, Erdrich suggests that the Ethnic of Native American traditions does not have to be a source of further struggle and pain in our modern world. She urges us to
celebrate the Ethnic, to allow its presence in the natural realm. Erdrich hopes that by reinstating the Ethnic—that spiritual, intellectual and artistic nature—into our lives, we can begin to heal and mend in a modern world that fractures and marginalizes our identities and relationships.

In Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*, the Ethnic finds itself continuously struggling to maintain itself in the wake of modernity. Its essence of spirituality, intellect, and artistry is pushed aside in a world aiming for “progress.” But Erdrich’s later novel, *The Painted Drum*, suggests the Ethnic is an integral part of us all. By embracing and expressing the Ethnic within us, we may find contentment within our fragmented selves, and we may realize that not all “melts into air.”

Works Cited


