"Red Mother": The Missing Mother Plot as Double Mystery in Louise Erdrich's Fiction

BY SHEILA HASSELL HUGHES

Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), opens with the death of June Kashpaw, a motherless American Indian woman who abandons her own child and later returns to haunt him and others throughout this book and the later novel *The Bingo Palace* (1994). June's is just the first of many such abandonments. Fleur Pillager; Lulu Lamartine; Lipsha Morrissey; Marie Kashpaw; Pauline Puyat; Karl, Mary, and Jude Adare; Augustus Roy I and II; Matilda Roy; Celestine James; Russell Kashpaw; and more: the list of Erdrich's motherless characters is stunning in its weight and variety. Children somehow severed from their mothers have, in fact, played important roles in every one of the ten adult novels the prolific and much acclaimed "mixed-blood" (French-Ojibwe and German-American) writer has produced since 1984. In many cases, the mother's loss is somewhat abated by one or more surrogates, but in every instance the original mother's absence remains as powerful as any physical or spiritual presence, haunting her children and readers alike. The story of the missing mother is also always a mystery. Indeed, this essay takes up the missing mother as the primary, endlessly repeated plot mystery of Erdrich's fiction and asserts that it carries other sorts of meaning, constituting, in effect, a religious mystery as well. In demonstrating the intertwining pattern of these two forms of maternal mystery in the trope of the "red mother," I will also argue that this multivalent figure requires multiple modes of reading and response,

including not only cognitive *comprehension*, achieved through the employment of multiple disciplinary and cultural frameworks, but also a more thoroughly transformative response—through both a religious sort of *apprehension* that "rearranges" the reader, and through a resulting commitment to *political engagement* in the ongoing struggles of Indigenous women and their communities.

The implications of this pattern of double-mystery, I will demonstrate, are not only cultural, socio-political, and psychic, but also religious. The missing mother is in some sense an embodiment of colonial processes that have left generations of Indigenous people in varying degrees of literal and spiritual displacement, homelessness, and motherlessness. Again and again Erdrich embeds these larger processes and effects in the lives and psyches of her characters through maternal relations, and so it is through the problem posed by the absent, failed, or forsaken mother that we find our way to religious mystery. But while Erdrich treats motherhood itself as something sacred and mysterious, it never appears in her fiction as something simply "natural" in the way the biological relationship is often romanticized. Maternity has a radical power to shape identities and transform lives, but it is always open for disintegration, contestation, remaking. And while the concrete facts of the mother's actions may eventually be established (though even these are likely to shift from one narrative account to the next), the meanings they hold for her, for her children, and for others remain open—like a wound, or like a sacred text—an enfolded secret that pulls us back into it again and again.

To apprehend the meaning of the missing mother's mystery, I contend, characters and readers alike must be able to respond in a way we might call "religious," recognizing her irreducible otherness, suspending final judgment in favour of fearful or awe-full recognition, and also looking within ourselves and allowing this present-absence to speak to us and to reframe our own roles in the grand scheme of social, political, and spiritual relations. The notion of "religious reading" proposed by scholars in the field of literature and theology, such as Greg Salyer and Robert Detweiler, requires engaging the text dialogically, applying not only critical-interpretive but also imaginative and reflective faculties, allowing literary texts to challenge and potentially to transform our own assumptions and beliefs. Such a practice is particularly difficult, but also especially important, for culturally privileged scholars approaching works of nondominant traditions—traditions such as Erdrich's Anishinaabe culture, which offers a religious worldview that has been eroded and marginalized but nonetheless persists

and continues to mend itself. I see the practice of religious reading as one strategy for attempting what Native critic Devon Mihesuah calls for from feminist scholars engaged in social-scientific research with Native women: "they must abandon any posturing about being an expert on what counts as knowledge about Native women," she asserts, and "engage in reciprocal, practical dialogue with their informants" so that "Native voices, too, will become a part of feminist discourse" (8). For literary scholars, I would argue, such dialogue involves an openness to the text working not only in service of one's argument but also upon it, and upon oneself.

Despite the rich array of maternal relationships to consider in Erdrich's fiction, this essay focuses on just one mother–daughter dyad: the infamous Pauline Puyat, a.k.a. Sister Leopolda, and her offspring, Marie Kashpaw, characters who make their most spectacular appearances in *Love Medicine*, *Tracks* (1988), and *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). They make an especially interesting pair because, between them, they embody what is arguably the worst example of the anti-mother, in Pauline, and one of the greatest redemptive maternal figures, in Marie, that Erdrich's oeuvre has to offer. Tracing the detailed history and developments of even this one relationship is still beyond the scope of what I can accomplish here, however, and so I will narrow my focus yet more, offering a careful analysis of one short narrative in the novel *Last Report*—a section titled "Red Mother"—in which the young Marie discovers the truth of her missing mother's identity. It is here, I will show, that we see articulated most clearly the religious weight carried by the missing mother trope.

Feminist literary critics have noted the pattern of missing mothers in Erdrich's fiction and traced its meaning in a number of helpful ways. Hertha Wong's study, one of the first to explore the meanings and challenges of maternity in Erdrich's work, does so in the context of Ojibwe cultural practices. Taking issue with the feminist psychology of Nancy Chodorow, Wong points out that from a Native American perspective, an identity that is shaped "in relation to others" is not an effect of "ambivalence and confusion over ego boundaries" but rather a realistic reflection of the nature of relations among all creation (Chodorow, qtd. in Wong 175). Because older generations of women are often the transmitters of such cultural views, Ojibwe mothers and grandmothers can provide important links to tribal heritage and identity (190). For this reason, broken bonds between mother and child have served in Native American literature as markers for a larger cultural alienation, insofar as "mother" stands for what Paula Gunn Allen elaborates as "an entire generation of women" who orient the Native child.

"But naming your own mother (or her equivalent)," Allen emphasizes, "enables people to place you precisely within the universal web of your life, in each of its dimensions: cultural, spiritual, personal, and historical" (208).

The possibility of an "equivalent" is important to note here. As Wong and others point out, mothering has always been something of a communal practice in Native communities. The mother who "throw[s] away" her child and breaks the link may be acting out the suffering and "cultural alienation" inflicted upon her by colonization (Wong 174, 189), but her action is often also partly redeemed, and the connection potentially mended, by others who continue to operate more traditionally, within a cultural system of extended and constructed familial responsibility.

Jeanne Smith's analysis of "transpersonal self-hood" also employs something of a psychological approach, but she emphasizes the connection of identity, body, and culture to landscape. Alienation is prompted by colonization, a process marked and measurable geographically, but it is primarily felt, she argues, in a loss of connection both to the mother and to one's own body and personal identity. Because boundaries are necessary to both identity and connection, threats to personal and communal boundaries can undermine both individual survival and cultural continuance. "By linking the boundaries of identity with shrinking reservation borders," Smith explains, "Erdrich affirms the inseparability of identity from land, and equates western encroachment on native American lands with an equally devastating threat to self-concept" (19). Mothers provide an especially important link to land because, like the earth itself, their very bodies are the source and sustenance of life. Smith quotes Erdrich:

> In our own beginnings, we are formed out of the body's interior landscape. For a short while, our mothers' bodies are the boundaries and personal geography which are all that we know of the world. Once we emerge we have no natural limit … and yet we cannot abandon our need for reference, identity, our pull to landscapes that mirror our most intense feelings.[1]

For Native peoples who understand the Earth as co-creator, sustainer, and mother, and whose histories are carried by stories of emergence from and interaction with particular lands, the extended metaphor of the mother as embodied and psychic landscape is an especially powerful one. As Andrea Smith points out in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, however, "the connection between the colonization of Native people's bodies—particularly Native women's bodies—and Native lands is not simply metaphorical … [since] [t]he colonial/patriarchal mind that seeks to con-

trol the sexuality of women and indigenous peoples also seeks to control nature" (55).

In her study of the adoption policies and practices represented in Erdrich's fiction, Jill Deans takes a "more new historicist" approach than Wong or J. Smith (Deans 239). Tracing the pattern of children abandoned or given over to adoptive care, Deans concludes that biological and adoptive relations are "not quite the same," but, drawing from Erdrich's memoir of maternity, *The Blue Jay's Dance* (1995), she concludes that "motherhood requires both biological and adoptive impulses" (235). Highlighting the role that "construction," as well as "conception," plays in the formation of personal identity, she concludes that in Erdrich's work identities, "like plants, *take* roots rather than *have* roots" (237). Dean's lengthy analysis of the role of maternity and adoption in Erdrich's own life with late husband Michael Dorris adds a strongly biographical component to her analysis, suggesting, however, that ideas as well as identities have sources beyond our own making.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen's discussion of Erdrich in her book *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* takes a postmodern view of the missing mother figure. After tracing the history of mothers without children in modern Native American literature, Hansen turns to a number of novels identified as the collaborative efforts of Erdrich and her late husband, Michael Dorris. She begins with socio-historical forces, noting that thanks to "disease, boarding school, and … adoption … the figure of the missing mother is more likely to represent the norm rather than the exception" in Native communities (118), but Hansen then moves into a more epistemological analysis of the trope, arguing that the figure "exceeds, though it by no means ignores, the demands of a realistic picture of either cultural alienation or the resources of collective childcare" (121). She articulates my own sense that the missing mother is a "haunting" figure, a "centripetal force, an insistent goad to storytelling, and a key to reading" Erdrich's oeuvre (121). Hansen portrays the mother who abandons or sacrifices her child as a woman who may eventually be understood to some degree, even forgiven, by her child, but who also remains beyond the scope of full recovery *as* mother (123). And even when a child seems to have come to "know" the answers, such truths are never final or infallible. Whether a "mystery" like Adelaide Adare (140) or a "ghost" like June Kasphaw (152), such mothers remain as "other," inaccessible, and lost to their offspring (and to readers) as most of what has been taken, collectively, from Native peoples.

In their discussions of mothers as emblems of connection to tribal lands and traditions and/or of tragic loss and alienation, Wong, J. Smith, Deans, and Hansen are cautious of the temptation to romanticize Native

women either as uncorrupted "earth mother[s]" (Wong 174) or as tragic victims. While this is clearly a danger for non-Native scholars writing about American Indian women, in general, my own sense is that the variation among and within Erdrich's maternal characters significantly inhibits such a critical move. There is too much irony and humour, variety, idiosyncrasy, bizarre coincidence, and sheer human complexity in these characters and their plots to enable such reduction.

My goal here is thus not to reduce the missing mother figure to a single semantic trajectory, but rather to add another important layer of meaning to the pattern at large. I will do so by first laying out more carefully the religious issues I see as most relevant and then offering a careful reading of one passage of Erdrich's work that manifests these issues in relation to one mother-daughter pair. In part because other feminist critics have done such a fine job establishing the breadth of the missing-mother trope, I feel freer to narrow my study to one example, highlighting the religious implications that have been neglected by others.

As indicated above, the missing mother functions as a central mystery in every one of Erdrich's novels. But what kind of mystery does she represent? Clearly, the absence of a biological mother is not a mystery in the sense of being an historical anomaly in Native communities. Rather, on the most obvious level, she appears as a plot mystery. Indeed, Hansen classifies Erdrich's mother-without-child tales as mystery fiction (148). Such mysteries—the definitive form being the detective novel—are meant to be solved. But, as Navajo police detective Joe Leaphorn concludes at the close of a television adaptation of Tony Hillerman's crime novel *Coyote Waits*, "Sometimes I think we don't solve anything; we just rearrange the mystery." Finding out who did what to whom, with what weapon, and where—this is only part of the story, and if it is what drives Erdrich's characters in many instances, it is not what most interests the author or her readers.

What disturbs Hillerman's otherwise generic murder plot and, on a much grander scale, pervades Erdrich's fiction is the kind of mystery that is primarily to be experienced, wondered at, grappled with, and ultimately reverenced, honoured, or perhaps denied. The first kind of mystery—that of the literary genre—generally depends upon some material absence: a dead person, a missing body, a stolen treasure. Tied to an unfolding plot, it is inherently temporal. Particular places serve such mysteries primarily as variables of the central, always already past, action, and they require participants to uncover clues and provide a solution.

The second kind of mystery, by contrast, hinges not on an absence but on a spiritual presence: a force that might become noticeable only when

it stirs up or "rearrange[s]" the structure of the material realities we have come to expect. Such presences—whether understood as forces of nature, divine intervention, spirits, or ghosts—are also deeply enmeshed in a Native understanding of religious mystery. Indeed, Indigenous terms such as the Anishinaabe *manitou*, often translated singly as "spirit" by Christian missionaries, can also be rendered in English as "mystery."[2] Hansen points in this direction when she identifies the multiple appearances of June Kashpaw's spirit in *The Beet Queen* (1986) as pushing the novel from mystery into the "ghost story" genre, while acknowledging that there is no question that "the ghost is real" (152).

In contrast to the temporal orientation of the simple plot mystery, American Indian spiritual mystery is bound up in a people's shared sense of place. Spatiality, according to Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George Tinker's *Native American Theology*, is the "foundational metaphor ... in Indian cultures." The authors elaborate: "Each nation has some understanding that they were placed into a relationship with a particular territory by spiritual forces outside of themselves and thus have an enduring responsibility for that territory just as the earth, especially the earth in that particular place, has a filial responsibility toward the people who live there." Because of this "kinship tie" to particular lands, "conquest and removal" of tribes from their historical homelands constitutes a form of cultural and religious genocide (45). This spiritual relationship to the earth sustains a religious sense of "mystery" because it is also a profoundly reciprocal relation. Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker explain: "The American Indian notion of reciprocity is fundamental to all human participation in world-balancing and maintaining harmony. Reciprocity involves first of all an understanding of the cosmos as sacred and alive, and the place of humans in the processes of the cosmic whole" (41). The epistemological implications of such a reciprocal vision—in which human and nonhuman spiritual beings relate and mutually depend upon each other—is dramatically different from Western approaches that emphasize separation and distinction between the knowing human subject and a natural world that exists in fixed and static space, waiting to be known, named, and dominated (39).[3] The fabric of reciprocity and mutual dependency is clearly torn by maternal abandonment (and these theologians are quick to point out themselves that "Two-Leggeds" are the only creatures who ever "forget" to care for their relations, both human and nonhuman, 38–39). But this spiritual perspective also suggests that the mysterious mother—even if literally or practically dead to her child—remains a spiritual relation to be reckoned with.

Finally, whereas plot mysteries invite solutions, sacred mysteries ask of human witnesses that they turn inward and then offer an appropriate response. As Abenaki scholar Joseph Bruchac explains, "When one begins to understand the Great Mystery, to know (in a way which transcends conventional knowing) that our human spirits are part of a great circle of spirit, then that understanding must also translate into action. We begin with thanks" (104). Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker add to the range of appropriate responses in the face of religious mystery: "It is [the] emotional experience of anxiety, fear, and wonder in the face of the power of the environment that best characterize[s] the religious experience of many Indian people.... [H]uman beings realize their humanity in relationship to beings in nature—trees, rocks, water, winds, animals—anything that has the capacity to move and change" (88). From a Native perspective, then, the metaphysical sort of mystery is tied to the sacredness and reciprocity of all creation, and to a sense of one's place in an active and never-ending set of relations.

Bruchac's explanation of a religious response to the "Great Mystery," as quoted above, also highlights for us the difference between two kinds of knowing: understanding based on reason and logical *comprehension*, by which the active subject masters and penetrates the depth of some passive object, on the one hand, and, on the other, a spiritual and relational *apprehension*—a recognition of oneself as one part of a cosmic whole, and a perception of that whole as entirely inspirited and inter-subjective. While this distinction bears some similarity to the "separated" and "connected" ways of knowing outlined in Belenky et al.'s study of female development, and also to common distinctions drawn between modern and postmodern epistemologies, the mindset identified by Bruchac is not simply nor primarily a feminist or postmodern one. It is an ancient way of being that is tied to particular cultural and religious practices and modes of perception. In any case, the apprehensive mode is not the kind of knowing that "solve[s] anything" in Detective Leaphorn's terms. It can, however, contribute to personal and communal healing. Acknowledging and entering fully into one's own place in the sacred scheme of relations can, in some sense, "rearrange" the mystery. It certainly implies a rearrangement and realignment of one's own life. In the analysis of "Red Mother" that follows, then, I suggest that these two kinds of mystery and two attendant ways of knowing intersect in the missing mother narrative in important ways, and that a religious reading of the text offers some hope of apprehension of the spiritual mystery at play in her work.

"Red Mother" is a subtitled section of about eight pages from Marie Kashpaw's interview with Father Jude Miller in the 2001 novel *Last Report*

on the Miracles at Little No Horse. As the "confession" of the abandoned child of an unidentified mother, "Red Mother" both answers the question of Marie's origins and explores her own knowledge of that relation.

First, then, the facts—the mystery to be *solved*. The young Marie, rejected at birth, abandoned to the care of Bernadette Morrissey, and later raised by Bernadette's daughter, Sophie Morrissey Lazarre, knows little of her origins. She has been led to believe that Ignatius Lazarre is her father (*Love Medicine* 85–87), but neither this fact nor the revelation of its falsehood is of much interest to her here. At the time recounted in "Red Mother," what obsesses Marie is her missing mother. What she knows about her is only that she is, like the Morrisseys and Lazarres, mixed-blood, but also worse: a despised Puyat (*Last Report* 321). The history of the Puyats, and especially of the "killing hatred" between mothers and daughters, is laid out for us earlier in *Last Report*. Erdrich identifies the historical root of familial violence—an enmity that was "passed down and did not die" (157)—in the relationship between Pauline's mother and grandmother (157). Caught in the grip of a mutual marital betrayal, her grandfather's dying words to his daughter were a command to kill her mother. Erdrich compares this mutual, intergenerational destruction to the "crazy ... grief" of the buffalo who, when "they saw the end of things" trampled their own calves, no longer "car[ing] to live" (158). Whether Marie knows the full story or not, it is clear that her suffering is in part the fruit of that cycle of abuse, a cycle of internalized destruction prompted by physical and cultural genocide.

In her adolescent encounter with a drunken and desperate Sophie Morrissey, as related toward the end of "Red Mother," Marie uses the promise of whisky to draw Sophie's story out and thus learns the fuller truth of her parentage. What she learns is that her parents are both closer and farther away than she might imagine. Her father, the murdered Napolean, was brother to Bernadette and uncle to Sophie (but now is dead), and Leopolda, the nun who clamours after Marie's devotion so violently in *Love Medicine*, is, in fact, the woman who gave birth to Marie, in her former life as Pauline Puyat. Marie's response to the news of her father is minimal; she is primarily intrigued because it suggests there is more to know of her mother. When she then learns of Leopolda, she is so shocked (and perhaps so overcome by a whole set of reverberating recognitions within) that all she can do is laugh hysterically at the news (*Last Report* 321, 324).

These identity questions are thus answered for Marie, and so the mystery of origins is *solved* to some degree. But faithful readers of Erdrich's Little No Horse saga have known all of this since first reading the much earlier novel *Tracks*. So the plot mystery is clearly not what drives us on here. Rather, it is

the impact of the relational trauma that is so compelling. Whether and when the young Marie might be "ready for the truth of [her] beginnings" is the more profound question probed by her story than the facts themselves (*Last Report* 319). And this question, explored more directly in the earlier parts of this narrative, is presented as a *spiritual* mystery.

Marie is a baptized Christian—indeed, the experience related here comes immediately after her descent from a stint with Sr. Leopolda in the convent on the hill—and so Christian notions of religious mystery come into play. Centred among "The Passions" composing Part 4 of the novel, the emotional and epistemological suffering of the "Red Mother['s]" forsaken child is marked as Christ-like. "I went to the woods. I aimed to live by myself," she explains, and her ensuing sojourn reflects both Christ's temptation in the wilderness, which followed immediately upon his baptism and preceded his public ministry, and also his suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to his arrest and crucifixion (*Last Report* 318; Matt. 4 and 26). Like Christ, Marie senses that "the end of all things [is] drawing near" (*Last Report* 319). And she, too, then faces a powerful spiritual temptation, which she describes to Father Jude in these heart-wrenching terms:

> Before me, as the dark was all of a piece, then, I saw my real mother rearing up. Even booze has a spirit. Yes, I said, it is the liquor who cares for me now. Alcohol is my red mother. She was fire, she was stupidity, she was light. She was all I needed. Her heart was a golden catchall of sorrows and pains. She told me that if I chose her, she'd stay by me and she used the word forever, which with her I could believe. (320)

Unlike Christ, Marie succumbs to temptation and then spends some time as an alcoholic bootlegger, feeding the self-destructive fire of others, like the Morrisseys, as well. But what her metaphor of "red mother" makes clear is that she turns to booze (or "spirits") as a surrogate for her own missing mother. So, like Christ, she feels parentally abandoned in her hour of need. That she never voices the biblical question "Why have you forsaken me?" only heightens its power, I think, for her whole story poses it dramatically.

But to read the mystery of Marie's suffering primarily through a Christian lens is problematic. After all, the loss mourned here is one that was in large part wreaked upon Native peoples by the Church itself. This dispossession is figured directly in Marie's biological mother—Pauline Puyat—whose rebirth as the nun Sister Leopolda has been contingent upon the denial of her own maternity, and so of her offspring, Marie (and, in fact, also the invention of an ethnically "immaculate" conception in which

she imagines herself no longer "Red" but instead "wholly white" [*Tracks* 137]). On a larger scale, the physical absence of the literal mother, here as elsewhere in Erdrich's fiction, is representative of the loss of cultural and spiritual origins—a loss advanced by historical practices of missionization and colonization. Just as the mother Pauline denies her offspring in order to enter the Church, so Native peoples were expected to turn away from the "Red Mother" of tribal tradition—from both women-centred practices and reverence for the earth—in order to convert to a Christianity that promoted domination of women and dominion over the earth. In discussing the environmental racism perpetrated against Native peoples, White Earth Anishinaabe activist and scholar Winona LaDuke clarifies the reciprocal relationship between these twin forms of domination:

> What befalls our Mother Earth befalls her daughters—the women who are the mothers of our nations. Simply stated, if we can no longer nurse our children, if we can no longer bear children, and if our bodies are wracked with poisons, we will have accomplished little in the way of determining our destiny or improving our condition. These problems, reflected in our health and well-being, are the result of historical processes and are inherently resulting in a decline of the status of women. ("Mothers" 216)

If, as LaDuke states, "women, all females, are the manifestation of Mother Earth in human form. We are her daughters, and … are to care for her" ("Mothers" 211), then the severed relationship between Marie and her mother is a personal re-enactment of the grand narrative of contact—a process that uprooted and undermined not only individual families but also spiritual and cultural traditions. The mystery of maternal origins that forms such a prominent pattern in Erdrich's fiction is thus a grand murder plot in which colonialism and Christianity are the culprits.

Re-reading Pauline's time in the woods through this lens, we can see it quite differently. It is a time fraught with isolation and alienation, not because she is in an inhospitable wilderness or a seductive garden, but because she fails to relate to the spirits of the place, ultimately turning, instead, to the demon of alcohol. But the narrative begins more innocently and poignantly with a set of images embodying Marie's childhood quest for a "Red Mother":

> When you don't have a mother, as I never did, you have to make one. Get yourself a piece of clay and shape in your fingers and the shape you always make will be a mother. Or press her together of mud and sticks. Sometimes a tree would

> do, gnarled around me. Bundles of reeds.... Sometimes just grass, grass was all I needed. The warmth of it in the sun was her golden green smell and the soft brush of it her fingers, stroking my face.
>
> You don't have a mother, you make one up. That's how I made mine and still she is standing where I made her, dark and red in the heavy woods. (*Last Report* 317–19)

As a dark figure fashioned out of clay by imagination instead of memory, this red mother suggests how the work of art can forge spiritual connections and play a part in the reconstitution of Indigenous cultures. The figure is an artistic rendering and reconstruction that relies on natural substance—the red earth—and an understanding of one's relation to it as a "Red" person.

But the natural and crafted surrogates described here are not enough for Marie, in part because as a child she is also denied the other forms of relation that might sustain her sense of connection to and care for and by the earth. Her connection to the earth is thus played out in absolute isolation, and her art is pure invention without the necessary and sustaining conversation of tradition. She finds no human resources to clarify her place on Mother Earth, for she is a mere "dog" to the Lazarres; she is told by the Morrisseys that a Puyat is "a thing not of this earth [but] [d]own below it"; and the only love she senses—from the vicious nun Leopolda—she feels "like a blow" (*Last Report* 321, 318). So when she flees both the convent and the Lazarres and retreats to the woods, she is not able to find a place and healing there. There are ducks, turtles, muskrats, and plenty to eat, but instead of forging a life of mutual sustainability, she "support[s]" herself selling whisky diluted with slough water to desperate alcoholics (*Last Report* 318). She cannot simply live with the land, but instead lives off other people. She has yet to learn to relate in nonexploitative ways.

Marie is thus "not ready for the truth of [her] beginnings" when Sophie discloses it. It is only, perhaps, through her subsequent marriage and incorporation into the Kashpaw family that she begins to grasp the positive power of maternal presence (*Last Report* 319). While she resists Margaret Kashpaw in many ways (claiming in this story that she held on to Nector "in spite of his mother" [324]), when Margaret and Fleur Pillager help Marie through the dangerous birth of her youngest child, Eugene, their relationship changes, and, as Peter Beidler and Gay Barton point out, she "at last finds in Margaret the mother she never had" (154). Marie eventually learns, then, how to be a mother herself, emerging as one of the grand maternal dames of Erdrich's saga, bearing and raising many of her own children and also taking in the motherless June—the series' original missing mother—and, later, her rootless son, Lipsha.

Through her pursuit of a maternal mystery of the literal-temporal kind, Marie learns the truth of her origins. Through her struggle to know her place in the natural, social, and spiritual world of extended relations around her, she bumps up against maternal mysteries of the religious kind. The family and community relationships she weaves in years to come bring a degree of healing, I think, but whether she ever achieves a full sense of the Great Mystery—a spiritual and relational apprehension, a recognition that she is part of a cosmic whole that includes her Mother, Earth, and that all Creation is inspirited and inter-subjective—is perhaps more than we can say. But her story here and others like it folded again and again into Erdrich's novels point to that Mystery for readers. It is up to us, then, not only to read, study, and teach such stories as plots to be resolved, but also to allow them to "re-arrange" us—and the social order—in response.

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Notes to Chapter 4

1 Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place." *New York Times* 28 July 1985, sec. 7: 24. Quoted in J. Smith 14.

2 Frederic Baraga's 1853 *Dictionary of the Ojibway Language*, for example, translates *manito* as "spirit" or "ghost." It offers no entry for *Kitchi Manito*. In contrast, the work of Anishinaabe scholar Basil Johnston offers a range of context-dependent meanings for *manitou* and explains that *Kitchi Manitou* refers to "the Great Mystery of the supernatural order, one beyond human grasp, beyond words, neither male nor female, not of the flesh." Inaccessible and indescribable in "human corporeal terms," the great creator spirit is known only through the manifestations of creation. *Kitchi Manitou* does not interact intimately with creatures, but rather has given them all they need "to continue the work put into motion by the Creator" and so has "abdicat[ed]" the world, inviting all creatures to imitate their Creator's work and generosity (2–4).

3 In *Recovering the Sacred*, Winona LaDuke provides compelling analyses of the cultural traditions that give rise to these different epistemologies in relation to the sacred and to the land of the Americas.

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