

Regeneration through Domesticity in *Love Medicine*

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Introduction

In her debut novel *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich dramatizes Ojibwe Native Americans suffering from the ineluctable influence of settler colonialism. Many characters end up succumbing to the power of colonial domination, as manifested in a variety of forms ranging from land dispossession to alcoholism. Notably, however, some characters such as Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw, Albertine Johnson, and Lipsha Morrissey seem to be more resilient to these overwhelming forces. In his illuminating essay, William Gleason proposes that laughter/humor makes it possible for people to withstand oppression. While I wholeheartedly concur with Gleason in that “*Love Medicine* is a redemptive, regenerative, celebratory text” (Gleason 64), I do not believe that the “regenerative” power is anchored in laughter/humor. Rather, I would like to argue that domesticity is the primary factor that enables the aforementioned characters to survive their ordeals. In order to demonstrate how the power of domesticity serves as a countermeasure against the pernicious repression, this essay concentrates on the descriptions of their hands and contends that their hands assume a certain sense of holiness. In so doing, the present paper seeks to partly revise the critical consensus that Erdrich’s interrelated stories present “systematic suffering inflicted by institutions of government and religion” (Egenolf 57). While *Love Medicine* does foreground the façade of Catholicism, it does not fail to explore alternative spirituality that offers salvation to the characters.

I Marie’s Domestic Labor and Holy Hands

Broadly construed, domesticity refers to the activities of taking care of a house characterized by ordinariness. Indeed, *Love Medicine* is replete with images of

domesticity such as cooking, knitting, washing, and cleaning. One of the central characters who undertakes domestic chores is Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw. A cursory glance at the text reveals how Marie is tied with domesticity. In “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” for instance, we see elderly Marie is in the middle of “unlocking her expensive canned ham. She patted it before putting it in the oven and closed the door carefully” (20). In “The Beads,” young Marie is busy taking care of her children and her husband Nector who is steeped in liquor. In the beginning of the story, Marie does not let her mother and brother-in-law step onto the “washed floor” of her house (85). On top of that, when her children play outside in the woods, Marie engages in “churning and thinking” (87). One can say that Marie is committed to taking care of her family throughout her life, but this is not to simply say that she is relegated to the domestic sphere.

Love Medicine delineates how Marie transforms her household into something comforting and empowering. Tellingly, in “Resurrection,” after Nector dies, we learn that elderly Marie “spent cleaning her house” (255), and in “Flesh and Blood,” having learned of Nector’s infidelity, young Marie starts to peel the potatoes:

The afternoon was getting on, and I was still sitting there without having thought what I should do next.

I should peel the potatoes, I told myself. No doubt they would bring in a duck at least.

So I went in the kitchen and sat down with a bowl of potatoes. I had peeled enough potatoes in my life so far to feed every man, woman, child of Chippewas. Still I had more of them to go. It was calming to remove the rough skin, the eye sprouts, and get down to the smooth whiteness. I ate a raw slice. I would eat a raw potato like some people ate an apple. (158)

This passage tacitly acknowledges Marie’s pride as a matriarch of her family and community while the necessity of peeling as a way to sustain her life. The act of peeling the potatoes resonates with the scene where June Morrissey has decided to live with Eli Kashpaw instead of Marie. As Enrique Lima puts it, “Marie loves June intensely and cares for her as she would any of her birth children, but despite her love, June’s pain at her mother’s death and the neglect and loneliness before and after that death always keep her at a distance” (Lima 314). After June leaves, Marie does not voice her feeling, instead she “kept peeling the potato” (94). Her act of peeling potatoes, along with other

domestic acts, is her way of controlling her vulnerability and overcoming her difficult situations. By applying herself to peeling, Marie seems to find an outlet for her turbulent emotions. Marie conceives of the power of domesticity that is not necessarily reducible to servitude.

Curiously enough, the text couples domesticity with Marie's hands. In "The Plunge of the Brave," through Nector's eyes, Erdrich takes care to depict how Marie's hands are damaged by her repetitive housekeeping: "Her hands are big, nicked from sharp knives, roughed by bleach" (137). Marie's rough hands are reiterated in "Flesh and Blood": "I put some potatoes on to boil. My hands hurt, full of acids, blistered by the knife" (159). We sympathize with Marie all the more because we know that, in "Saint Marie," Marie's hand is already wounded because Sister Leopolda, "a representative of the colonizing force of white" (Ingraffia 318), under the guise of imparting 14-year-old Marie the devotion to God, stabs her in the hand with the poker. Indeed, since Marie consequently is, in an ironic twist, respected by the sisters in Sacred Heart Convent because of her injured hand, her rough hands due to domestic labor could be interpreted as the hallowed stigmata. We might take it for granted that we do household with our hands, but the novel endeavors to detail Marie's hands which are part and parcel of domesticity.

The spiritual blending of hands and domesticity is observable in Marie's act of cleaning. In "Flesh and Blood," after peeling the potatoes, Marie cleans the floor:

I filled the tin bucket with hot water and spirits. I hauled the potatoes out of my way. Then I took up my brush. . . . I never went down on my knees to God or anyone, so maybe washing my floor was an excuse to kneel the night. I feel better, that's all I know, as I scrubbed off the tarnished wax and dirt. I felt better as I recognized myself in the woman who kept her floor clean even when left by her husband. (160)

It is quite evident that the act of scrubbing the floor with the brush assumes an aspect of praying because, for one thing, Marie "filled the tin bucket with hot water and *spirits*" (emphasis added); for another, Marie for the first time falls on her "knees." It is crucial that this scene is right after Marie finds out Nector's affair with Lulu Nanapush/Lamartine. Since Marie faces the unprecedented crisis of her family, her act of cleaning the floor down on her knees is imbued with a spiritual undertone. Although Marie sees how dysfunctional Catholicism is in "Saint Marie" and "Flesh and Blood," her quotidian household and her rough hands are tinged with holiness like the Virgin

Mary.¹

II. Water and Washing Machine

In order to investigate how domesticity is inseparable from the possibility of regeneration, we should pay particular attention to the aforementioned cleaning scene once again. We should especially recall Marie telling us, “I filled the tin bucket with hot water and spirits” (160). Perhaps, it is no mere coincidence that Marie uses hot “water” to clean the “dirt” (160) off the floor. Let us here take heed to the fact that, in *Love Medicine*, the image of water is used extensively with a negative connotation. For instance, in “The Plunge of the Brave,” Nector is discernibly linked with a Native American who is doomed to die and to Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick* who is destined to drown. In “The Red Convertible,” despite the help of his younger brother Lyman Lamartine, Henry Jr. presumably commits suicide by diving into the Red River. In “Crown of Thorns,” drunken Gordie Kashpaw see his ex-wife June’s ghost in a hallucination, at his small house near the lake, to name but a few. All of these examples are indicative of how the novel is flooded with the images of water associated with death. This is also the case with Marie who equates the rosary beads with the stones at the bottom of a lake after June leaves her:

I touch them, and every time I do I think of small stones. At the bottom of the lake, rolled aimlessly by the waves, I think of them polished. To many people it would be a kindness. But I see no kindness in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear. (95)

Here, there can be no doubt that the “small stones” illustrate Marie’s and, by extension, women’s psyche which is encroached upon by the masculine “waves.” The ebb and flow of the tide gradually deprive Marie of her agency and finally makes her “disappear.” Erdrich underlines the paramount importance of water which undermines Marie’s power. Water is figured as something that runs concurrently with the destructive force of colonialism which makes characters feel less powerful at best and

¹ Erdrich hints that Marie is synonymous with the Virgin Mary not only by the phonetic similarity of their names but also by making Sister Leopolda call Marie “Star of the Sea” (54, 148), which is an ancient title for the Virgin Mary. For an account of how Catholicism wields influence on Erdrich, see, for instance, Ripatrazzone 160–64.

die at worst.

With that being said, *Love Medicine* also offers a way to counteract the detrimental power of water as psychological oppression. In addition to Marie's act of cleaning the floor, the regenerative power finds expression in the washing machine in "The Plunge of the Brave," wherein Nector cannot deal with his family life and starts extramarital relation with Lulu. After having sex with Lulu in the car, Nector comes home and finds out Marie has been waiting for him holding a catalog, saying, "Look at this washer" (129). Marie wants the washing machine from the bottom of her heart as Nector tells us, "Marie only wanted one thing that I could give her. Not love, not sex, just a wringer washer" (132). Erdrich underscores how the couple is too destitute to purchase a washing machine, but she insists on buying one nonetheless. As Nector admits, washing machines would make Marie's housework so much easier, but considering the innumerable images of water in the novel, it is possible to submit that the washing machine is an effective tool that transforms the water as negative being into something positive that cleans off the dirt of clothes and extends care to her family members.² Regarding the image of water, Karla Sanders has made a case that "dust is associated with death and with Sister Leopolda, while water represents life and love" (Sanders 136). Even though Sanders does not seem to consider the death-associated water images or the fact that Sister Leopolda soaks Marie's back with scalding "water" (52), she is right in pointing out the tangible connection between dust and Sister Leopolda. Indeed, the washing machine is to be read as a measure to generate a counterforce against oppression as represented by Sister Leopolda. Although it is hard to tell whether or not Marie buys a washing machine in "The Plunge of the Brave," which is set in 1957, it is useful to note that, in "The World's Greatest Fisherman," which is set in 1981, Albertine sees "a washer" in the room next to the room where Marie "was dozing" (24). We cannot emphasize the fact too much that Marie can sleep peacefully thanks to the washing machine. Marie, consciously or unconsciously, succeeds in finding a way to resist/survive the power of water. In what follows, then, I shall attempt to throw light on how the power of Marie is passed on to Albertine and Lipsha, by specifically focusing on the descriptions of domesticity and their hands.

² One should point out, in passing, that automatic washing machine was first introduced in 1937 and it was important in liberating women from the burden of housework. For a concise social history regarding household appliance including the washing machine, see Greenwood 47–50.

III. Albertine and Lipsha as Marie's Successors

Albertine Johnson and Lipsha Morrissey are two of the most sympathetic characters in *Love Medicine*, both of whom are connected to Marie: Albertine is a granddaughter of Marie, and Lipsha has been raised by Marie since he was abandoned by his mother, June. As for the former's domesticity, it is important to note that Marie asks Albertine to "put the laundry out" (28) in "World's Greatest Fisherman." Marie tells Albertine to hang out the laundry probably because Marie places her trust in her granddaughter. Albertine also tries to collect and fix the pie King destroyed in an effort to unite her family (42). Albertine is thus associated with domesticity and her hands are focalized when she is devoted to knitting in "Scales": "I picked up her [Dot Adare's] needles and began knitting, as well as I could anyway, jerking the yarn back after each stitch, becoming more and more absorbed in my work" (202). Like Dot, whose husband Gerry is absent when she is in pregnancy, Albertine channels her emotions resulting from the ill-treatment of Ojibwe into knitting.

In considering how Albertine's domesticity is connected to the possibility of regeneration, one should capitalize on the fact that Albertine changes her career goal. Albertine is initially "a nursing student" (7), but when Lipsha reunites with her at Nector's funeral, she studies very hard to be a doctor: "She had gotten all skinny and ragged haired from cramming all her years of study into two or three. She had decided that to be a nurse was not enough for her so she was going to be a doctor" (249). Albertine has changed her mind probably because of her interactions with Henry Jr. and Gerry Nanapush. In "A Bridge," 15-year-old Albertine has a sexual encounter with Henry Jr. who suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Albertine witnesses how the Vietnam War has changed Henry Jr. irrevocably. In "The Red Convertible," Lulu negates the possibility of sending Henry Jr. to "a regular hospital" (183) because he might be institutionalized. In "Scales," Gerry is in and out of prison for a long time, and when his wife Dot is about to give birth, Albertine and Gerry go to Saint Adalbert's Hospital. Albertine sees nurses look at them with "hostility" and the hospital reminds him of "institutions" (203–4). In short, Gerry feels imprisoned wherever he is in a society ruled by white people.³ Since Albertine is there and sees

³ As evidenced by the fact that Gerry is first arrested for attacking "a cowboy" who insults him by asking him "the question . . . of whether a Chippewa was also a nigger" (197), the trope of the Western is employed extensively to suggest the conflictive relationship between Native Americans and the society.

what the hospital is like, it is plausible that she decides to be a doctor in order to change the hospital into something that is equally hospitable to Native Americans. Albertine decides to be a doctor, and her choice is conterminous with her domestic acts so that she can extend her care to the disempowered people. Albertine is expected to be a catalyst that makes a difference in the Ojibwe community.

Lipsha is another revolutionary character who represents the decolonial power of domesticity. In fact, in “Love Medicine,” after seeing “that tears were in her [Marie’s] eyes,” we see Lipsha is “in the laundry” (230). We have already examined how Marie transforms the nature of water, but I would argue that Lipsha’s act of doing the laundry has a lot to do with his healing ability called “the touch.” Besides the fact that Lipsha recounts “it was [his] touch that led [him] to the laundry room” (234) where Nector and Lulu are touching each other intimately, it is worth keeping in mind that Lipsha elaborates on the power of his hands as follows:

I know the tricks of mind and body inside out without having trained for it, because I got the touch. It’s a thing you got to be born with. I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask. Take Grandma Kashpaw with her tired veins all knotted up in her legs like clumps of blue snails. I take my fingers and I snap them on the knots. The medicine flows out of me. The touch. I run my fingers up the maps of those rivers of veins or I knock very gentle above their heads or I make a circling motion on their stomachs, and it helps them. (227)

This passage is pivotal because Erdrich links Lipsha’s “touch” to “medicine,” as well as connecting the blood vessel to “rivers of veins.” The expression “rivers of veins” highlights how the debilitating power of water infiltrates the bodies of Native Americans. Lipsha’s Jesus-like healing ability is therefore a means to spread his love to his fellow people who are caught by the riptide of assimilation. As is the case with Marie, Lipsha’s holy hands are imbued with the domesticity he embodies.⁴

It is useful here to emphasize that the characters’ hands are described to suggest affective solidarity among indigenous people. Albertine, for instance, holds Lipsha’s hands at Nector’s funeral: “She took my hands” (249). The scene undoubtedly echoes the moment Albertine “grabbed Lipsha’s arm” (37) on the reservation after June dies.

⁴ From a different standpoint, commenting on how Lipsha restores his hand power, John A. McClure argues that it “has little to do with traditional ceremonies and a great deal to do with the mysteries of the heart” (McClure 160).

By holding each other's hands, they seem to unite one another and form a spiritual alliance. Moreover, it is significant that Marie also holds Lipsha's hands firmly:

She took the beads off the bedpost, where she kept them to say at night, and she told me to put out my hand. When I did this, she shut the beads inside of my fist and held them there a long minute, tight, so my hands hurt, I almost cried when she did this. I don't really know why. Tears shot up behind my eyelids, and yet it was nothing. I didn't understand, except her hands was so strong, squeezing mine. (254)

It is reasonable that Marie's power is passed on to Lipsha through the act of "squeezing" his hands. Since both Marie and Lipsha are grief-stricken over Nector and since the "beads" were originally June's, the scene could be understood as their prayer over the deaths of their loved ones.

In further considering the solidarity among Marie, Albertine, and Lipsha, it is imperative that we pay due attention to how the text juxtaposes their hands with their eyes brimming with tears. In the above-mentioned passage, since Marie seizes Lipsha's hands so tightly that he "almost cried" (254). Lipsha goes on to tell, "I don't really know why. Tears shot up behind my eyelids, and yet it was nothing" (254). What is more, when Albertine holds his hands, Lipsha recognizes that her "eyes were bloodshot from driving and crying" (249). Although the reasons behind their tears are different, they remind us of Marie's tears in "Saint Marie." When Sister Leopolda grabs Marie for corporal punishment, she tells us, "I asked the Dark One to enter into me and boost my mind. I asked him to restrain my tears, for they was pushing behind my eyes" (47). Marie's tears unmistakably gesture toward her suffering, but if we consider how their hands assume spirituality and how their tears are associated with hands, it is possible to argue that the three characters' tears are indispensable to creating solidarity.

To probe how their tears are related to spirituality, we should turn our eyes to Sister Mary Martin de Porres who sheds overflowing tears. "Crown of Thorns" features Sister Mary Martin's love when she shows empathy toward the female deer that Gordie kills: Sister Mary's "[t]ears had filled the slight cup where her glasses' frames touched her cheeks, and they leaked straight down from there along the corners of her mouth. The tears dropped on her hands" (223). Here, one can argue that the Sister Mary's tears for the dead deer (which is connected to June) imply a sense of Christian compassion, which is reminiscent of weeping Virgin Mary. It is equally essential that the image of

the Virgin Mary is evoked in “The Good Tears,” wherein Marie shows her all-embracing love toward Lulu, a woman who has had an affair with her husband for a long time. Having been saturated with the sorrow of losing her son Henry Jr., Lulu is unable to shed tears even after Nector dies a sudden death, but toward the end of the story, Marie puts eyedrops into Lulu’s eyes, saying “Somebody had to put the tears into your eyes” (293). Lulu subsequently recounts that “She did not mention Nector’s funeral. We did not talk about Nector. He was already there. . . . We mourned him the same way together. That was the point. It was enough” (293). It suggests that, with the makeshift tears, Lulu is finally able to properly mourn Nector. Being reconciled, Marie takes care of Lulu in “the way a mother must look to her just-born child” (294). Marie and Sister Mary Martin are thus associated with the Virgin Mary and, as such, it is not too far-fetched to argue that, just like the washing machine Marie wants to buy, the cathartic tears play a significant role in creating transformative energies, which spreads the sense of compassion and become concerted agents of regeneration.

We have so far seen that regenerative power manifests in Marie’s act of housekeeping, as well as that the three characters’ hands and tears assume spirituality. As to Lipsha’s hands, the scene where Lipsha digs the dandelions with his hands merits our attention:

The earth is full of life and there were dandelions growing out the window, thick as thieves, already seeded, fat as big yellow plungers. She let my hand go. I got up. “I’ll go out and dig a few dandelions,” I told her.

Outside, the sun was hot and heavy as a hand on my back. I felt it flow down my arms, out my fingers, arrowing through the ends of the fork into the earth. With every root I prized up there was return, as if I was kin to its secret lesson. The touch got stronger as I worked through the grassy afternoon. Uncurling from me like a seed out of the blackness where I was lost, the touch spread. The spiked leaves full of bitter mother’s milk. A buried root. A nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither. A globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible. (254)

This scene is Lipsha’s transcendental moment in which he feels connected with “the sun” and “the earth” through his body, especially through his “arms” and “fingers.” The “root” of the flower evokes a sense of home that characters seek to attain, and even if it is uprooted, Lipsha seems to believe, the flower does not lose its vitality and power to disseminate, suggesting, by extension, the “indestructible” nature of Native Americans. Lipsha seems to find the possibility of empowerment and restoration

because his act of digging using his hands could be understood as his attempt to excavate the history of his tribe. It is certainly safe to say that Lipsha attempts to mourn Nector who likewise digs “dandelions” (233). The scene also makes us recall the scene where Albertine ruminates upon June after her death. After hearing her aunt’s death, Albertine finds some “dandelions” while walking “on the university lawn” and then lies “down on that patch of grass, above the ground” (10). Unlike King Kashpaw and his father Gordie who suffer from the death of June in a melancholic way, both Albertine and Lipsha appear to be in harmony with nature and succeed in mourning, which is rendered through the image of hands.⁵

Indeed, by the end of the novel, Lipsha seems to find an inner peace, symbolically coming to terms with his mother June. In “Crossing the Water,” after hearing the story of June from Lulu and his father Gerry, a sense of tranquility pervades Lipsha’s mind, which is worth quoting at some length:

I didn’t turn the headlights on until I hit the highways. Near dawn, I came to the bridge over the boundary river. I was getting pretty close to home now, so I stopped the car in the middle of the bridge, got out to stretch, and for some reason I remembered how the old ones used to offer tobacco to the water. I looked down over the rail.

It’s a dark, thick, twisting river. The bed is deep and narrow. I thought of June. The water played in whorls beneath me or fixed over sunken cars. How weakly I remembered her. If it made any sense at all, she was part of the great loneliness being know now. The son that she acknowledged suffered more than Lipsha Morrissey did. The thought of June grabbed my heart so, but I was lucky she turned me over to Grandma Kashpaw.

I still had Grandma’s hankie in my pocket. The sun flared. I’d heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dokotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home. (333)

It is clear that Lipsha finally forgives and mourns June, who, on the eve of Easter, dies in a blizzard on her way back to the reservation in North Dakota. In the words of Michael D. Wilson, “[t]he general plot of *Love Medicine* is a movement from

⁵ It is not incidental that the hands of King and Gordie are focalized in such a way as to suggest that they are physically abusive to their wives, Lynette and June, respectively.

opposition to affirmation—from the death of June to Lipsha’s embrace of her in the final pages” (Wilson 119). Although June does not accomplish her homecoming on a physical level, Lipsha is determined to “cross the water and bring her home.” Redolent of Jesus who miraculously walks on the water, Lipsha is strong enough not to be consumed by the destructive force of water, and complements his mother’s homecoming.

Conclusion

Arguing that to survive and resist colonial oppression resides at the heart of Native American literature, Gerald Vizenor famously used the term “survivance” as compound of “survive” and “resistance.” In “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” Vizenor expatiates on the thrust of “survivance” as follows:

The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry.

Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name.

Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance. (Vizenor 1–2)

Even though each Native American author has a distinct way to approach “native survivance,” as far as *Love Medicine* is concerned, domesticity is Erdrich’s peculiar way to address it and is illustrated through the characters’ hands. Marie, Albertine, and Lipsha seem to fulfill the requirement for the practitioner of “native survivance” who can reinvigorate the current state of the Ojibwe reservation. *Love Medicine* chronicles people suffering from the ever-present power of oppression, but it allows for the possibility of regeneration, which is embedded within the fabric of the novel.

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