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NATIVE AMERICAN SPIDER IN POSTMODERN LABYRINTH: NARRATIVE, NARRATION AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S NOVELS

What I'm after is the most unobtrusive technique possible.
(Louise Erdrich)

Louise Erdrich – a Native American writer of German and Turtle Mountain Chippewa descent – is the author of interrelated novels about contemporary Native Americans which have recently become a subject of the debate concerning postmodern dimension of ethnicity, as well as a problematic quality of form in todays Native American literature. The main interest of literary criticism concerns the question of whether the form of Erdrich's writing is amenable to the postmodern literary conventions and forms. Characteristically, this side in the debate which argues that Erdrich's writing can be interpreted as postmodern literature, tends to skirt the most important issue, namely, the approach to form in Native American literary tradition. To justify and understand the problem, one should take into consideration the complexity of the question, the usually over-interpretative urge in defining anything in the light of postmodernism, as well as a misleading quality of the comparative material such as Erdrich's novels. The golden mean in this debate could be an assumption that the form of Erdrich's writing is much more modernist than postmodernist, and where it bears certain traces of postmodernism, it appears to be a comment on postmodernism, a particular reaction to it rather than a conscious *auto da fé*. In other words, the form of Erdrich's novels is far from being overtly postmodern, since it is based primarily on the traditional – even if modernist – formal and stylistic devices. To begin the considerations of the form in Erdrich's five novels, it would be reasonable to examine a specific mode in which Erdrich constructs her texts, and see how her scheme of plot development is perceived from both Native American and European American perspective.

The plot construction in Erdrich's novels constitutes a fundamental question in considering the overall form of her texts. It is also one of the most often discussed points in the debate concerning her writing. What strikes most of the contemporary readers of her books is complexity of the plot, which stems from the multitude of characters and events, as well as a specific approach to the perception of time, characteristic of Native American literature. Although Erdrich's fiction seems to be complex and generally difficult to follow, after a close examination it turns out that the novels are governed by a particular pattern which has been discussed at length by Paula Gunn Allen, and which rests on the spider web image (Wong 1995, 172). The significance of the spider web image in Native American literature and culture has also been emphasized by Hertha D. Wong, who observes that this image is employed in Native American traditions to convey "the interconnectedness of all aspects of life" (1995, 172). Wong presents a very apt explanation of how this pattern works:

> Just as one individual filament cannot be touched without sending vibrations throughout the entire network, one story, although it can be read in isolation from the others, cannot be fully comprehended without considering its connection to the others (172).

As soon as the reader becomes aware of this natural way of constructing the narrative, its complexity and entanglement turn out to be much easier to follow. The qualities of such an image employed in the narrative are multiple. First of all, as it has been observed above, it is a natural pattern conceived in nature, which makes it particularly significant in Native American culture. Furthermore, a spider web construction is regular, since it comprises a certain number of "hoops" consisting of meshes which – even though separate – are connected with one another so that the meshes' sides adhere. Such nature of its structure makes this image respond to the regular cyclical sequencing of elements typical of Native American writing. The construction adequately serves the purpose of the composition in Erdrich's narratives, where events can be seen as isolated facts, but at the same time they constitute a unity. For example, not only are we meant to read stories from *Love Medicine* separately, and they will constitute self-contained tales; but they could be also read as a novel. Each story presents its own given set of events from a certain perspective, but reading the short-story cycle as a whole gives a composite and organised picture of the multitude of events and characters. A similar observation can be made in the case of *Tales of Burning Love*, where it is possible to read the stories narrated by the four women-characters separately – virtually ignoring the frame-tale which gives a full dimension to the whole novel. The technique is different in the other books where the plot is organized into chapters, and therefore they should be read as complete novels. Yet,

even then, the network of events resembles the spider web with the logical sequencing of events, and the sooner this pattern is observed by the readers, the better their understanding of the novels becomes. Moreover, Paula Gunn Allen suggests that all the components of Native American culture are of an egalitarian status, that is, they are not hierarchically ordered or organized on the scale from more to less important issues; therefore, there exists "a tendency to distribute value evenly among various elements," and "no single element is foregrounded" (Wong 1995, 173). Such an approach is inherent in Native American culture, and becomes reflected in Indian literature as well. In Erdrich's novels, where the events are presented by many narrators, each version is equally valued. What seems to be the most important quality of the spider web image, however, is the fact that a web always has its center, which unites all its elements. What appears to be central to Native American culture is tradition, which is exactly what happens in Erdrich's novels. They tell stories, engage in political and historical issues, but most of all they center on the tradition of Native Americans. In *Love Medicine*, the framework of the tales is employed to provide reconciliation between the oral tradition of storytelling and storywriting. In *The Beet Queen*, absence of Native American issues serves as an emphasis on the loss of this tradition; as Susan P. Castillo observes in her essay "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," "Erdrich's silences are often very eloquent indeed, and are perhaps more politically effective than overt sloganeering" (Castillo 1995, 182). *Tracks*' central problematics is ethnicity and history seen from the perspective of Native American tradition. *The Bingo Palace* also centers around the problems of life on the reservation, this time presenting the younger generation of Native Americans, and their approach to tradition. *Tales of Burning Love* focuses on the disowned tradition embodied by the main character, Jack Mauser, who is a mixedblood unable to accept his origins. The book foregrounds the question of Jack losing and then finding his way to identity, which leads to his reconciliation with the tradition, and his acceptance of being a Native American. Thus, all the five novels find their common center, the core of which is Native American tradition.

Considering all those elements and features characteristic of the spider web image in the plot construction of the five novels in question, it can be claimed that the complexity of Erdrich's texts is to a large extent organized and ordered. What is more, the natural pattern employed in the narratives' construction has little to do with the postmodern understanding of the textual complexity of a literary work. A pattern which is often evoked in connection with the postmodern plot construction is a labyrinth understood as a literary device which does not lead to any conclusion, and

ultimately destroys the commonly accepted notions of time and place in literature (Fokkema 1984, 54). Therefore, as a structure employed in the text, the postmodern labyrinth functions in the European American tradition as the opposite of the spider web image in Native American literary tradition. The spider web brings an immediate association with nature, whereas the labyrinth has its roots in culture. Thus, the labyrinthine construction of the plot assumes an irregular network of passages, there being little or no interconnectedness between them. The labyrinth is more often associated with disintegration of the narrative coherence. Furthermore, the labyrinth may have a multitude of centers, or no center at all, while the common center characterizes the spider web. What is more important, however, is that the spider web is oriented towards the center; unlike the labyrinth – the structure of which is directed outwards – leading to an exit, a multitude of exits, or even having no exit at all if it constitutes a closed form. Here, the important question is whether the way in which Erdrich has constructed her texts responds to the new perception of ethnicity. One might argue that the image of a labyrinth is more suitable for her narratives, since she focuses on the multicultural and multi-ethnic aspect of contemporary life. Nonetheless, while it is true that she does not present Native Americans as an isolated group, but situates them in the multicultural context, it is also true that it is their tradition and their perception of the universe that is ultimately foregrounded in Erdrich's novels. It is contemporary Native American culture and history that constitute the primary concern of this literature, and that is why, the spider web image best characterizes its natural and regular logic.

The second inherent component of the plot development, often controversial in the case of postmodern literature, is narration. Again, the differences between Native American and non-Native American approach to narration are crucial in examining the nature of narration in Louise Erdrich's novels. Since a multitude of different voices function in the five narratives, this aspect of their construction becomes a subject of particular interest. A recently developing study of the narrative originated by structuralists – narratology – examines the internal relations between different textual levels in the narrative, such as the plot and narration. Narratology makes an attempt to create the whole typology encompassing – among other problems – detailed analysis of narration, types of narrators, as well as the time of the narrative. This branch of literary criticism which takes into account such comprehensive considerations, has given a broader perspective to the study of the narrative. The French critic, Gérard Genette, has proposed a distinction in a narrative between *récit* (the actual order of events in the text), *histoire* (the actual sequence of events, as inferred

from the text), and *narration* (the act of narrating itself) (Eagleton 1983, 104–105). The distinction seems to be crucial as regards Erdrich's novels, since it allows a more detailed analysis of her narrative than the previously employed distinctions which tended to treat rather superficially the complexities of, for instance, the first or third person narration. Therefore, it can be argued that Genette's typology sheds a new light on such narratives as Erdrich's novels.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette observes that while reading a work of literature, we are not always aware of the narrator's presence, or even of the act of narration itself – "the narrating instance" – as Genette refers to it (Onega, Landa 1996, 172–189). In other words, sometimes we read the story paying little or no attention to its narrator, simply because we feel that this knowledge is not necessary for this particular story. At other times, the way a story is narrated seems to be equally or even more important than the story itself, which is characteristic of many postmodern experimental works, where the question of author-narrator and recipient-reader distinction is essential for the interpretation of the story (Eagleton 1983, 174). In the case of Erdrich's novels it is interesting to observe a coalescence of those two characteristics, which stems from her approach to the question of form; that is, the creative balance between "native forms of expression and nontribal literature such as a novel" (Silberman 1989, 102). It appears that narration becomes a vital element of Erdrich's writing, but only when it is considered in the light of the novels' content. In other words, Erdrich's narrative technique is meant to contribute to a particular understanding of the narrative's meaning. Hertha D. Wong observes that although polyvocality in Erdrich's novels is a modernist literary strategy, it is also inherent in oral traditions with its repetitiveness, recurrent development, and associational structure (Wong 1995, 172–173). She further contends that "the Native use of multiple narrators often has little to do with alienation and loss, and much more with the coherent multiplicity of community" (Wong 1995, 174). Therefore, the assumption that this mode of narration "introduces a modernist sense of relativism and discontinuity" (Silberman 1983, 106) appears to be a considerable misunderstanding as far as Native American literary tradition is concerned.

Close examination of narration patterns in Erdrich's novels proves that despite the multitude of voices narrating often inevitably modified versions of events, the actual protagonist that emerges out of the complex narrative is the community itself (Wong 1995, 173). In *Love Medicine*, the plot extends from the year 1934 until 1984, but the events are not narrated chronologically. The first chapter begins with the year 1981 and the narration goes back to 1934 already in the second chapter. Surprisingly, the lack of chronology does not impair the process of following the story,

since the readers gradually find out about the events told and retold by the characters. Moreover, the paradigm of temporal relations in Native American perception is quite different from the way of perceiving time by the Western society. While Western readers employ the paradigm of mechanical or industrial time, Native Americans turn to ceremonial time (Rainwater 1990, 406). In *Love Medicine*, the two "conflicting codes" – as Rainwater refers to them – function together. June's death at the beginning of the story-sequence can be interpreted in two ways; as a resurrection in Christian terms, and "rebirth" in Native American understanding (Rainwater 1990, 407). Nonetheless, either way we approach the event of June's death, it will signify the idea that she transcended to some higher sphere of existence. So, the interpretation may verge on the edge of the two codes, but the narrative does not become frustrated. It oscillates between the first person and the third person narrators who move in time quite freely (Silberman 1989, 105). However, to label Erdrich's narration merely in terms of the first or third person would be a blatant oversimplification. Actually, the prevailing mood of narration in the short-story sequence is that of the community voice. The fact that Erdrich decided not to employ the first person plural narration explicitly, emphasizes her need to show the variety of different personalities and characters speaking different languages in term of idioms and individual flavor, having different access to the events, different perspective in looking at them, but ultimately combining their experiences into one tribal voice. Treating the question of narration in this way, Erdrich avoided presenting Native Americans as unidimensional characters sharing the same qualities and, at the same time, she managed to avoid creating one typical Native American voice. Instead, she succeeded in presenting a complex voice of Native American people – the multiple subjectivity. Thus, what emerges in the process of reading the narrative is a complicated – yet logical – mesh of facts and events, so that the plot resembles a jigsaw puzzle, in which different elements are supplied at different times (Silberman 1989, 105). However, what makes it different from a typical jigsaw puzzle is that the elements are not supplied at random, but they come in at appropriate moments in the course of the narrative. In fact, each of them appears just in time to avoid misunderstanding of the events sequence. This feature makes Erdrich's book very different from postmodern use of a jigsaw puzzle as a literary device, where the readers are supposed to get confused because of the plot's complexity, or because of the intention of the author to mislead and tease them. The last thing that Erdrich expected to achieve is the readers' confusion. Her use of polyvocality, as well as the choice of the form of short-story sequence, are conscious efforts to preserve the mode of storytelling in writing and to express the traditional approach to literature. *The Beet Queen* portrays

the life of both European-Americans and mixedblood Indians in Argus, North Dakota, and constitutes "a parallel series of personal stories" (Wong 1995, 185). This time, Erdrich does not use the short-story cycle form, but the form of a novel which is a combination of more or less alienated voices. Here, the communal voice appears only in several instances, for example, at the beginning of the novel, where Mary Adare (whose origins are not clear, except for the implied Indianness when the black color of her hair is mentioned) recalls her family life using the second person plural form:

> This story starts then, because before that and without the year 1929, our family would probably have gone on living comfortably in a lonely and isolated white house on the edge of Prairie Lake. We rarely saw anyone else. There were just us three: Karl and me and our mother, Adelaide. There was something different about us even then (5).

Nonetheless, the use of the first person plural narration only in this short passage suggests the intentional device which could point to the breakdown of the family, and what follows, also a disintegration of the community. It is certainly true to say that the mode of narration in *The Beet Queen* reflects "the emptiness and self-destructiveness which characterize much of contemporary reservation life" (Castillo 1995, 189).

The community voice is also present in *Tracks*, the plot of which covers the years 1912 till 1924. Differently from *Love Medicine*, but similarly to *The Beet Queen*, this novel's temporal scope is chronological. The two narrators are: the tribal elder Nanapush and the young mixedblood girl, Pauline Puyat (whom the readers remember as Sister Leopolda from *Love Medicine*). The two narrators present two entirely divergent points of view. As Susan P. Castillo argues, Pauline is a victim of accelerated acculturation (1995, 187), whereas Nanapush is a survivor (1995, 188) and an embodiment of the tribal tradition. It is Nanapush who speaks with the community voice at the beginning of *Tracks*: "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. . . But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once" (1). Here, Nanapush sounds like a tribal leader, the chief of the community. Pauline's and Nanapush's voices function in two different realities, and it is only the space between the two worlds that can contain the complex history of the Chippewa tribe (Castillo 1995, 188). The next novel by Erdrich, *The Bingo Palace*, is equally interesting as far as the question of narration is concerned, because of the occasional use of the first person plural narration. The very first scene of the novel presents Lulu Lamartine observed by the community, and followed by the community voice commenting on her actions: "We knew her routine – many of us even shared it . . ., we saw her pass into the heart of the reservation" (1).

Later on in the novel, the same tribal voice judges Lipsha Morrisey: "We give up on that Morrisey boy Marie Kashpaw rescued from the slough" (5). In case of *The Bingo Palace* the communal voice clearly precedes the regular pattern of the first and third person narration. In *Tales of Burning Love*, there appear several instances of the first person plural narration, but this time its use serves a different purpose. When the four wives of Jack Mauser begin to tell one another stories while imprisoned in a snow-bound car, their voice is united in both their love and hate for Jack: "All of our love stories begin with our mothers" (209). At the very end of the novel the common voice speaks again, but this time, the first person plural narration seems to constitute an undefined voice which encompasses and summarizes the existential truth of our life:

> We are conjured voiceless out of nothing and must return to an unknowing state. What happens in between is an uncontrolled dance, and what we ask for in love is no more than a momentary chance to get the steps right, to move in harmony until the music stops (452).

The universality of this statement suggest the common experiences in the life of Native American and Euro-American characters. *Tales of Burning Love* foregrounds the common condition of contemporary people, regardless of their origins.

Erdrich's approach to the question of narration is far from whimsical postmodern experimentation, which is intended to tease the reader, and frustrate the narrative. The way she constructs the voice in her texts is subject to constant transition in each novel, from the technique of multiple narrators in *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *The Beet Queen*, throughout the usage of the first person plural narration as the community voice in *The Bingo Palace*, to the first person plural narration treated in a more universal way in *Tales of Burning Love*. While it is true that she employs some of the modernist literary devices to make the narratives more dynamic and direct, to all intents and purposes, her technique does not seem obtrusive as long as the reader accepts the Native American literary perspective. On the contrary, the use of these techniques allows her to bring the oral tradition of storytelling as close to the medium of writing as it is possible. Instead of presenting the two traditions as being divergent, Erdrich creates a narrative balance between them, watching closely their complex and problematic relationship, but not negating it. Nonetheless, despite its complexity, the mode of narration in Erdrich's novels constitutes only one facet of her multidimensional narratives.

The next question concerning Erdrich's fiction which has been discussed in the light of postmodernism is intertextuality, analyzed by Hertha D.

Wong in her article "Narrative Communities and the Short Story Sequence," which places Erdrich's novels in the larger "constellation of narratives" – Native American and European American (Wong 1995, 181). What seems to constitute a difference between the postmodern and Native American approach to intertextuality is the fact that for contemporary Native American authors intertextuality is the use of tradition, as Paula Gunn Allen suggests (Wong 1995, 181); whereas intertextuality in the purely postmodern context often means the exhaustion of literature, which has led to the reworking of older texts in the new literary works. In other words, "a postmodernist is convinced that the social context consists of words, and that each new text is written on some prior text" (Fokkema 1984, 55). It emphasizes the postmodern inability to create an entirely new text without reference to some prior writings. This aspect of postmodernism, however, can also be viewed from a different perspective. If we assume that there exists a variety of texts – a literary tradition – a source of reference and inspiration for many authors nowadays, then, it can be argued that intertextuality is the use of tradition not only for Native Americans. Thus, the difference does not lie in the negative or positive approach to intertextuality, but rather in the way in which it is employed both by non-Native American and Native American writers. When reading different postmodern works of literature from the point of view of intertextuality, it is noticeable that the use of literary tradition in these texts often includes parody or pastiche of different works, and such a way of employing different literary motifs is not intended to emphasize the interconnectedness of the literary tradition, but rather to underline its variety as well as the impossibility of connecting them into one inclusive underlying text. The attempt to show this homogenous interconnectedness of literature, culture, and tradition in general, is the essence of Native American approach to intertextuality. Western literature balances between different texts to show the differences and incongruities of a variety of literary motifs, often to an intentionally comic effect. The gap between the two opposite perceptions of the whole body of existing literature, stems from the differences between Western and Native American literatures, as Paula Gunn Allen claims, "because the basic assumptions about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western peoples are not the same" (Allen 1983, 1–2). Native American use of intertextuality is a natural process of using and reworking traditional family stories, mythical narratives, and community narratives to continue traditions of oral storytelling (Wong 1995, 181). Family stories have been a fundamental element in shaping Erdrich's narrative style, and community narratives are "natural extensions of Chippewa familial and clan identity and of identity shaped by a small-town community" (Wong 1995, 182). As to the Native American mythical narratives, Erdrich employs several images and characters connected not only with the Chippewa mythology, but with Indian

myths in general, such as – for instance – the mythical Chippewa Trickster, Nanabozho, echoed in Erdrich's fiction in the name of Nanapush, where he functions as a creator and culture hero (Wong 1995, 182). Another immediate example here is Gerry Nanapush who manages to outwit the police in *Love Medicine*, and several times in *Tales of Burning Love*. In *Tracks*, the monster of the lake Matchimanito – Missepeshu – also haunts the narrative. The use of myths is accompanied by the historical context in Erdrich's novels (Wong 1995, 183). In *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*, the 1887 Dawes Allotment Act and the politics of the government towards Native Americans are foregrounded. The problem of alcoholism (June and Gordie in *Love Medicine*, Shawnee's sisters from *The Bingo Palace*), and the question of Native American veterans returning home from Vietnam (Henry Junior from *Love Medicine*) constitute the underlying conflict presented by Erdrich. In the same way, the novelist makes use of the oral traditions as well as the Western literary influences (Wong 1995, 182), not only creating five extensive narratives, but constructing one grand homogenous text which functions as a recreation of Native American tradition. The most vivid literary influence acknowledged by Erdrich is that of William Faulkner's technique of storytelling. As Wong observed, Erdrich – similarly to Faulkner – "makes use of multiple narrators, whose stories overlap, confirm, contradict, or extend the others" (Wong 1995, 183). Apart from Faulkner's strong influence upon Erdrich, her fiction has its roots in Native American literary tradition, represented by short fiction of Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, and a novel by Mourning Dove (Christine Quintesket) *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (Wong 1995, 184). Finally, despite the Silko-Erdrich controversial debate, Hertha Wong observes a resemblance of Leslie Silko's writings to Erdrich's texts (Wong 1995, 184). The multitude of influences, both Western and Native American, serves as a subtext for Erdrich's narratives. Nonetheless, what makes her approach to intertextuality even more fascinating is the fact that Erdrich reworks and retells her own stories within her novels. Yet, even this kind of intentional experimentation with her own material – although of a somewhat playful quality – remains natural in the Native American context. The way in which the stories are reshaped resembles the technique of storytelling where shifts of point of view, changes, sudden transitions, multiple endings, and finally different – but not divergent – versions of the same story are the consequence of the multitude of voices which traditionally repeat the story. Again, the process of retelling, and reconnecting familiar motifs adds to the authenticity of the narrative, and as such has little to do with the parallel devices employed in non-Native American texts labelled postmodern and experimental. In *The Bingo Palace*, Erdrich makes an attempt to justify her technique:

> We were curious to know more, even though we'd never grasp the whole of it. The story comes around, pushing at our brains, and soon we are trying to ravel back to the beginning, trying to put families into order and make sense of things. But we start with one person, and soon another and another follows, and still another, until we are lost in the connections. . . . Keep a hand on the frail rope (5).

Here, the nature of Native American narrative is revealed and its entanglement means in fact the attempt to recreate tribal identity. In other words, the narrative technique is not a textual experiment independent of the contents, but an element of the story's meaning. At one point in *The Bingo Palace* Lipsha says: "Us Indians, we're so used to inner plot twists that we just laugh" (17). Lipsha's statement expresses historical and cultural complexity and entanglement of Native American existence in a bitter and ironic way. It is worth observing how his words oscillate between two perspectives: one referring to the form of the narrative, the other to its content. The same thing happens several times in this novel, once after Lipsha's luckless adventure at the Canadian border, when he wants to "zoom back into the story" (37), he actually means undoing fate, but his words are understood in a twofold way. The story as the plot of the narrative, and the story of one's life merge into one thing in *The Bingo Palace*. This assumption pertains to the overall form of Erdrich's writing. The boundary between the form and content in Erdrich's texts is blurred and misleading, since whenever the reader encounters a literary device which seems to be but a textual trick, it soon turns out to be pregnant with meaning. This is why, while it is true that Erdrich's novels may appear to be postmodern on the surface, they are really a recreation of the Native American tradition, tending to perceive the universe as a harmonious whole woven out of thousands of apparently confusing and contradictory fragments.

Hertha D. Wong also observes that Erdrich's use of intertextuality becomes manifest in the interrelated novels, each of which should be associated with one of the four elements: *Love Medicine* with water, *The Beet Queen* with air, *Tracks* with earth, and *Tales of Burning Love* with fire (Wong 1995, 185). In fact, all the four elements and the whole body of imagery associated with them serves as a device connecting each novel, as well as one novel with another. Such a mode of construction is probably the least experimental of all. *The Bingo Palace*, on the other hand, deals with the younger generation of characters, and employs a variety of associations and references to the novels prior to it. Here, among other well-remembered characters, the writer evokes Gerry Nanapush from *Love Medicine*, Fleur whom we remember from *Tracks* and *The Beet Queen*. But most of all, one finds out more about June – the character who haunts the five novels – and whose unhappy childhood is revealed only in *The Bingo Palace*. The revelation of this fact throws a different light on the previous books, the first of which – *Love Medicine* – begins with June's

death in the snow. Thus, *The Bingo Palace* becomes a meaningful interplay of themes and motifs from other novels, and so does the fifth novel, published after *The Bingo Palace* – *Tales of Burning Love* which is a continuation of the story of Jack Mauser – the previously insignificant Andy from June's last accidental affair. Unexpectedly, Jack's complex story ramifies into several stories told by his four wives. The stories within the story which takes its direction from yet another story is perhaps the shortest description of *Tales of Burning Love*. This novel differs from the other four texts as it seems on the surface to be the most neutral with respect to Native American tradition. But even in this case the underlying context is the disowning of Indian tradition by Karl who is a mixedblood, and his gradual acceptance of his origins, which connects this novel with others. Moreover, *Tales of Burning Love* constitutes a witty comment on the Western conventional and stereotypical love-story form. The title suggests a trivial content, although it is in fact an insightful deconstruction of the love-story cliché. This literary manipulation, together with the form of a story within a story makes the book the most modernist of these five narratives.

To sum up, Erdrich's novels constitute one great open-ended text consisting of many strands, which have their roots in family tales, community narratives, myths, history, as well as in literary influences. Moreover, Erdrich reworks her own stories and motifs within the novels, but even this playful experimentation is different from the postmodern use of intertextuality, because it does not obstruct or ridicule the narrative but assists its development, being equally important as regards both form and content of the texts. Certainly, analyzing the narrative, narration, and intertextuality in Erdrich's work, one has to account for "the conflicting codes" – to evoke Catherine Rainwater's term – operating on the edge of two cultures (Rainwater 1990, 407). Nevertheless, the harmonious coexistence of both traditional and modernist elements in her texts proves that such reconciliation is possible.

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