

Augustana College

Augustana Digital Commons

Audre Lorde Writing Prize

Prizewinners

Spring 2023

Hosts/Saints/Witches: Women and Food under Catholicism in Love Medicine

Blake Traylor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward>

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Traylor, Blake. "Hosts/Saints/Witches: Women and Food under Catholicism in Love Medicine" (2023). *Audre Lorde Writing Prize*.

<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward/53>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Audre Lorde Writing Prize by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Blake Traylor

Hosts/Saints/Witches: Women and Food under Catholicism in *Love Medicine*

ENGL-490: English Senior Inquiry

Dr. David Crowe

Fall 2022

Long Analytical Essay

In Louise Erdrich's writing, the Catholic Church looms in Native American communities as a living artifact of their colonization. In her memoir *The Blue Jay's Dance*, Erdrich specifically condemns the Church as a force that oppresses Ojibwe women's experiences of their own physicality: "Organized Christian religion is more often about denying the body when what we profoundly need are rituals that take into regard the blood, the shock, the heat, the shit, the anguish, the irritation, the glory, the earnestness of the female body" (quoted in Winter 45). Erdrich identifies that Christian doctrine is invested in human bodies—especially the bodies of Native American women—because it wants to transform them into something else: the divine body of Christ, an ethereal ideal often represented as caucasian and male. From its inception, Catholic tradition has incorporated food as a tool of this transformation. The performance of the Eucharist at mass models eating as becoming. Believers share in the bread and wine that, when blessed, become the body and blood of Christ. Upon accepting this sacramental meal, they enter into a literal Communion with their God as their bodies absorb Him and are remade by Him. For medieval Catholics it was especially true that, in the words of medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum, "Communion was consuming—i.e., becoming—a God who saved the world through physical, human agony" (14).

In Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*, Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw demonstrates an awareness of the religious power of food and eating. When Marie reflects on her youthful desire to "rise" socially if not spiritually by becoming a nun, she compares herself to "those bush Indians who stole the holy black hat of a Jesuit and swallowed little scraps of it to cure their fevers" (LM 45). Marie's anecdote renders Ojibwe people's assimilation of Catholicism physical, and her language ties hunger and bodily need to a Catholic faith that native converts expect to fulfill them. By integrating Catholicism into themselves, however, "those bush Indians" are poisoned and

destroyed: “But the hat itself carried smallpox and was killing them with belief” (LM 45).

Whatever transpires in the life of the soul, the Ojibwe body rejects and is rejected by this European God that seeks to colonize. In this brief passage, Erdrich explicitly describes Ojibwe experiences with Catholicism—assimilation and annihilation—in the language of the body: hunger, food, eating, and sickness.

Previous critics have drawn connections between many factors that influence social power in Native American communities, but none have explored in detail how symbols of food and eating enrich Erdrich’s denunciation of Catholicism as a threat to Ojibwe women. Kari Winter offers a stepping stone toward understanding how Erdrich links symbols of food and faith in her characters’ struggles with power, but Winter is only peripherally interested in Catholicism in Erdrich’s writing. Other critics of Erdrich’s work center Catholicism’s ties to issues of race and gender but largely neglect the role of food. Susan Castillo focuses on the Sacred Heart Convent as a site of women’s (lack of) authority but offers little in the way of thorough analysis. Patricia Riley and Brian Ingrassia both highlight interactions between race and religion as well as offer useful close-readings of Sister Leopolda and Marie’s hostile dynamic that mix Catholic symbols with those of other cultures.

Winter’s far-reaching argument asserts that in Erdrich’s work “the politics and erotics of food shape people’s relationships to themselves, other people, animals, and the land” (44-5). Much of Winter’s article is guided by the claim that “Erdrich contrasts Ojibwa and white ideologies by dramatizing what Carol J. Adams calls “the sexual politics of meat”” (49). The breadth of Winter’s scope, however, affords limited room for close-reading *Love Medicine*. Winter merely glances at Nector Kaspaw’s peculiarly buttery affair with Lulu Nanapush/Lamartine as a gesture toward Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion that “in the act of eating...the

confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world” (quoted in Winter 46). Though I strongly doubt that Erdrich shares in the anthropocentrism that Bakhtin’s words suggest, Erdrich certainly uses food as an important transitional, even transgressive, symbol that disturbs the boundaries between eater and eaten. Winter’s analysis of June Kashpaw, grounded in the symbolism of eggs and alcohol, is a visceral indictment of European-American cultural dominance, concluding that “June’s death as well as the suicides, murders, abandonments, rapes, beatings, and alcoholism that pervade Erdrich’s fiction are rooted in colonialism’s mortification of (Indian) flesh” (52).

While not explicitly interested in Catholicism as a theme in Erdrich’s work, Castillo presents a fairly bare-bones feminist reading of Pauline Puyat (later, Sister Leopolda), Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw, and Zelda Kashpaw: three tiers of the same motherline, all associated with the Sacred Heart Convent. Castillo draws on prior critics’ distinction of power, “the ability to act effectively on persons or things,” and authority, a construct that “is socially validated and implies a hierarchical chain of command and control” (14). Castillo identifies all three women as agents who exercise power despite lacking apparent authority, “fascinated by the all-female world of the convent, a realm in which women exercise both power *and* authority” (16).

Riley highlights the tension in Marie’s mixed heritage—Ojibwe and European, Native and Catholic—as an example of Erdrich’s refusal to enact the common trope of “sacrifice” in American literature, which condemns mixed-race characters as doomed (13). Riley argues that

Erdrich’s use of Catholic symbolism, her exposure of pre-Christian elements embedded in that symbolism, combined with her use of myths and symbols drawn from other sources of discredited or denied knowledges...imbues her work with

various layers and shades that create a discourse that openly resists the authority of the West (14).

However, Riley's analysis is much less interested in Catholic symbols than in the symbols grounded in non-dominant cultures, such as Ojibwe and ancient Egyptian myth, that Erdrich uses to characterize Marie.

Ingraffia more amply develops Erdrich's use of Catholic symbols as part of his agenda to contradict previous critics' interpretations of Erdrich's work as spiritually ambivalent (314-6).

Ingraffia's project spans three of Erdrich's novels:

By contrasting Pauline Puyat's conversion to Catholicism first with Marie's rejection of Catholicism and then with Father Damien's conversion to Ojibwe beliefs, I will demonstrate that while Erdrich sees Native Americans' conversion to Christianity as "deadly," she represents the conversion of a Catholic to Native American spirituality as beneficial (315).

Ingraffia, too, emphasizes the link between race and religion as a colonizing force. He claims that Pauline's "conversion to Catholicism is motivated by an internalization of the white hatred of her race" (317), and "her radical ascetic practices result from her desire to put to death the Native American part of her identity" more than out of any desire for or devotion to her Catholic God (319).

Riley and Ingraffia have already interpreted Sister Leopolda's attempts to convert Marie into a Catholic nun—that is, into her Sister—by analyzing a symbol of hunger, the want of food, derived from traditional Ojibwe culture. Both critics center their readings of "Saint Marie" on the figure of the windigo, a creature associated with cold and an endless, contagious greed in Ojibwe folklore. Riley argues that "Erdrich characterizes Marie's arch-nemesis, Sister Leopolda, and the

Sisters in general, as windigos, the dreaded cannibal spirits of Chippewa mythology,” which she relates to Leopolda’s strength via self-starvation and her attempt to impose her hunger on Marie (16-7). Ingraffia curiously inverts Riley’s interpretation of the Sisters as windigo-missionaries, asserting instead that “Leopolda pours the burning hot water on Marie to melt the Windigo that she imagines possesses Marie” (322). Ingraffia supports his claim with Leopolda’s words to Marie: “You’re cold. There is a wicked ice forming in your blood...I see the beast,” usually interpreted as the Christian Satan and the Ojibwe Trickster but here as the windigo, “the beast watches me out of your eyes sometimes. Cold” (LM 52). Riley perceives Leopolda as a windigo seeking to infect Marie with her hunger; Ingraffia perceives in Leopolda a fantasy of thawing Marie’s cold windigo heart to boil away her Ojibwe self. While Riley and Ingraffia’s readings glance at these characters through an Ojibwe lens by way of the windigo, my analysis will attempt to see what Leopolda sees in the mirror—that is, observe her, as well as Marie and Lulu, from within a Catholic framework steeped in its own concerns about hunger, food, and gender.

This essay will trace medieval European, particularly Catholic, attitudes toward food and gender in *Love Medicine*’s depictions of sexual power dynamics to underscore how these persistent colonial values convert women into mere objects for men to consume. Bynum, an outstanding student of medieval religious women and food, notes that in medieval European cultures women prepared and symbolically became food, while men ate of these women (10). In Erdrich’s novel, women are especially identified, both by men and other women, with bread—the staple of medieval European eating and worship (Bynum 2)—as well as butter and the act of baking. Sister Leopolda and Marie bodies are both associated with the bread of the Eucharist. Sister Leopolda caricatures an obsessive devotion to the holy bread of Communion through fasting, a well-documented practice among late medieval women mystics, which

prepares her for assimilation into her Catholic God. Marie, however, refuses to commit herself to Christ's body. Instead, she sustains a mortal husband, Nector Kashpaw, and even turns to Ojibwe magic, condemned by European Catholicism as witchcraft. However, Erdrich associates Lulu, a woman known for her promiscuity and power over men, most strongly with Ojibwe spirituality. The food symbols that Erdrich weaves throughout *Love Medicine* portray Catholic culture as a force that effaces women and Ojibwe magic as a device that allows women to subvert male dominance and provide more fruitfully for themselves and their communities.

1. Offerings & Saints

Male characters in *Love Medicine* explicitly describe the women they have (or desire) sex with as food. Nector recalls that when he was young he received “offers for candy, sweet candy between the bedcovers. There was girls like new taffy, hardened sourballs of married ladies, rich marshmallow widows, and even a man, rock salt and barley sugar in a jungle of weeds” (LM 121). Nector equates his sexual escapades with eating candy, and he imagines these women—plus one man—in terms of sweets and highlights their varying textures. He reduces his partners down to their mouthfeel, the pleasurable experience of holding them between his teeth. He goes on to contrast Marie and Lulu with the same candied language: “Her [Marie’s] taste was bitter. I craved the difference after all those years of easy sweetness. But I still had a taste for candy [Lulu]. I could never have enough of both” (LM 122). Here, Nector’s lust morphs into gluttony as he confesses his hunger to partake of both women despite being bound to one. In Nector’s eyes, sex and eating are equivalent, and the women in his life are defined as objects for his consumption.

Throughout “Lulu’s Boys,” Beverley Lamartine compounds Nector’s association of Lulu with food, though Beverley prefers to think of her as bread. During the funeral service for Henry Lamartine, his brother and her husband, Beverley’s gaze fixes on how “her round face and chubby hands were a pale dough color,” as if in her grief, deprived of the heat of Henry’s love, she regresses from mature bread into immature dough, plump and vulnerable to Beverley’s handling (LM 104). In his dreams, Beverley renders her “a doll of flour sacking,” a plaything made of stuff even rawer and more susceptible to his manipulation (LM 108). Beverley’s imaginary bread-Lulu takes on its most erotic cast as he watches her “buttering a piece of bread soft as the plump undersides of her arms,” once again highlighting the abundance of her flesh and its allure for him (LM 109). Beverley’s descriptions of Lulu foreshadow Nector’s first buttery intercourse with Lulu, well after he marries Marie: “I rub a handful [of butter] along her collarbone, then circle her breasts, then let it slide down between them and over the rough little tips. I rub the butter in a circle on her stomach” (LM 128). While Beverley’s transformation of Lulu into bread occurs in his own mind, Nector’s treatment of Lulu is literal and physical. Nector prepares her for himself, buttering her in the places most charged with sexual energy: her breasts, her stomach (perhaps conflating it with her uterus), and ultimately her groin (LM 129). At the same time, he fashions butter into a maternal symbol, as butter comes from milk which in turn comes from breasts and, in this case, is returned to them. In both cases, Nector reinforces and defines Lulu’s womanhood with symbols that attach her existence to her potential to feed others, namely men.

Female characters also participate in their own identification with food. In “Saint Marie,” Sister Leopolda and Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw physically mark each other as bread in the kitchen where hosts are baked. Leopolda’s markings of Marie as a martyr most obviously include

tormenting Marie with boiling water from a kettle (LM 51-3) and piercing Marie's hand with the fork that "she used to tap the delicate crusts of loaves," embedding a stigmata directly linked to Communion bread (LM 57). Leopolda's treatment of Marie's burns more subtly reinforces her dual association with food and sanctity. Marie tells us that "I remembered her hands on my back, rubbing a buttery ointment into the scalding burns that she herself had put there" (LM 150). Leopolda's buttering of Marie serves as a disturbing premonition of Nector's buttering of Lulu, underscoring the predatory nature of Leopolda's destructive maternal affection, more likely lavished on the scars she has imprinted than on the daughter who endured them. Leopolda's violent attempts to mark her daughter echo in Marie's confrontation of Leopolda. By trying to shove Leopolda into the oven used to bake Communion bread, Marie simultaneously marks Leopolda as a witch and a saint, confusing and tainting these archetypes with each other. Several critics note this action's similarity to the climax of the European fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel," but none endeavor to make much sense of the parallel (Castillo 15) (Ingraffia 323) (Riley 20). When we more carefully consider Marie's full story in light of "Hansel and Gretel," however, we see that Erdrich aims to demonize not only Leopolda but the violent tradition of indoctrination in which she participates. Leopolda, like the old German witch, means to incorporate Marie into the structure of Catholic authority. In place of the candy house, the Convent lures Marie in so that the whole Sisterhood can swallow her up. Marie, realizing that Leopolda means to consume her, forces Leopolda into her place as sacrificial victim—but Leopolda has already voluntarily committed herself to sacrifice.

The oven scene also evokes the *Life* of Christina Mirabilis, a medieval saint who supposedly baked herself in ovens among loaves of Communion bread and wallowed in boiling water (Finke 90-2), a culinary baptism echoed in Leopolda's (then Pauline's) self-torture by

scalding water (*Tracks* 190). Critic Laurie Finke observes that “in the Eucharist, the bread is transformed into the body of Christ,” whereas “Christina is transformed in the oven from body to “bread”; she escapes her body into the monumentality of a cultural symbol” (92). Christina’s entrance into the oven and therefore into the body of Christ effectively kills her selfhood as she ascends into abstract being of God. What Christina and Leopolda might understand as divine ecstasy, Marie frames as damnation. Marie perceives the oven as “like the gate of a personal hell” in which she imagines Leopolda would feel “one-millionth of the heat she would feel when she finally collapsed in his hellish embrace” (LM 57). Marie accurately reads Leopolda’s desire to collapse, her self disintegrating, in the heat of the love of the body of Christ. Where Christina’s baking was voluntary, in this moment Leopolda’s baking would not have been. Leopolda’s relationship with oven, then, is less like that of a saint than like that of a vile witch, consumed by the same device she uses to assimilate the young.

Leopolda’s self-perception is vastly different, as she fully means to feed herself to her faith through fasting. Leopolda’s obsessive diet of dust and hosts, which culminates in “Flesh and Blood,” underscores the horror of her Catholic mystical practice of self-annihilation. From the outset, Marie believes that Leopolda’s “strength was a kind of perverse miracle, for she got it from fasting herself thin” (49). Leopolda’s fasting becomes more disturbing as she grows older: “Like Saint Theresa, she lived for many weeks on Sacred Hosts,” the body of Christ made bread, and “she licked dust off the windowsills...[and] made meals of lint” (143). Leopolda’s extremely restrictive diet imitates and incorporates Christ’s saving pains. She allows her body to absorb only two foods: 1) Christ’s body in the host, so she can become more like Him, and 2) her own body in the dust (i.e., dead skin) of her room, as if willing her body to swallow itself up so she can become less like herself. In both cases, she submits herself to a windigo-like cannibalism.

The goal of her diet is not to nurture her corporeal life but to annihilate and transcend it. She feeds herself to herself and therefore to the immaterial God with whom she wishes to unite. Leopolda's appearance when Marie visits her decades after "Saint Marie" reveals the physical toll, or success, of her piety: "She had shriveled on the stick bones. Her arms were thin as ropes... Her hair was pure white and sprang out straight and thin from her skull like the floss of dandelions" (LM 148). Pale and emaciated, yet wielding a will as strong as ever, Leopolda increasingly resembles the God that resides in her as "the deep hate of the wheel of devilish dust that rolled wild within her emptiness" (LM 59). Leopolda envelopes herself in holy sterility.

Marie rejects Leopolda's efforts to prepare her body to please the Catholic God. Instead, Marie attempts to subvert Catholic tradition from within its own code of authority. After Leopolda scars Marie's palm and knocks her unconscious, Marie awakens "on the stiff couch in the Mother Superior's office," encircled by the Sisters as they kneel in prayer at what they believe to be "the altar of a saint" (LM 57-8). Marie has been moved to the literal seat of highest authority in the Convent, above all of the nuns who crowd around her. Marie relishes the illusory sanctity that Leopolda, who keeps "her face buried in her knuckles," has marked her with (LM 58). Marie describes how the nuns' "faces turned like flat flowers of adoration to follow that hand's movements. I let it swing through the air, imparting a saint's blessing" (LM 59). Marie's language is not only condescending but outright infantilizing. Her new status transforms the Sisters into her daughters, who eagerly follow Marie's bloody hand like babies gazing at their mother's breast. In medieval European knowledge, blood and breast milk are essentially the same substance: "to medieval natural philosophers, breast milk was transmuted blood, and a human mother... fed her children from the fluid of life that coursed through her veins" (Bynum 15). Bynum even "suspects that stigmata... appeared on women's bodies because they (like the

marks on the bodies of witches and the wounds in the body of Christ) were not merely wounds but also breasts” (Bynum 15-6). By marking Marie’s hand with stigmata, Leopolda has equipped Marie with a symbolic nipple that grants her the insurmountable status both of mother—a role suggested from the outset by Marie’s name, shared with Mary the Mother of God—and of Christ. The miraculous appearance of “a golden beam of light” that “flooded down directly on [Marie’s] face” suggests melting butter and further identifies Marie with mother’s milk and the body of Christ as host (LM 59). Saint Marie seems to exude the qualities of a virtuous Catholic mother that authorize her as her children’s custodian.

However, Marie’s disingenuous sainthood is not liberating but binding. Ingraffia aptly recognizes that “even though Marie has succeeded in being venerated as a saint, she realizes that she has not overcome Sister Leopolda,” for “she herself is the one who has been “caught” (LM 60) by Sister Leopolda” (323). Marie initially perceives her saintly motherhood as a victory partly because of Leopolda’s reluctance to let Marie nurse her. While the rest of the Sisters huddle around Marie, “Leopolda still kneeled in the back of the room. Her knuckles were crammed halfway down her throat,” as if she would rather choke on herself than accept her daughter’s offering (LM 59). Marie insists:

“Come forward, Sister Leopolda.” I gestured with my heavenly wound. Oh, it hurt. It bled when I reopened the slight heal. “Kneel beside me,” I said. She kneeled, but her voice box evidently did not work, for her mouth opened, shut, opened, but no sound came out (LM 59).

In her speechlessness, even Leopolda resembles a baby’s mute mouthings in the face of Marie’s gentle, though biting, commands. Marie’s terrible whisper demands that Leopolda “receive the dispensation of my sacred blood,” a statement that evokes both nursing mother and Christ at the

Last Supper (LM 60). In the end, Leopolda does accept Marie's blessing, but in that very moment Marie feels herself turn to dust: "My skin was dust. Dust my lips. Dust the dirty spoons on the ends of my feet... There is no limit to this dust!" (LM 60). Just as Leopolda desires for herself, Marie is devoured by holiness. Though Marie manages to invert her relationship to Leopolda by accepting her new role as Leopolda's spiritual mother, even in this position Marie remains tethered to the mouths of the Convent, which reduce her vitality to dust.

2. A Defense of Witches

Like Marie and Leopolda, Lulu is associated with bread, though she more firmly resembles the gingerbread house than the holy host. Beverley and Nector perceive Lulu, a woman with close ties to Ojibwe spirituality and its magic, as contaminating rather than consecrated. In the mouths of these men, she becomes a fearful witch who feeds herself to them—that is, exercises her sexuality—as a means of entering into them and taking hold of their bodies. Medieval European lore against witches often links food, sex, and sorcery. Bynum informs us that medieval Church authorities believed that "a major danger posed by women was their manipulation of male virility by charms and potions added to food," one of the few realms in which women were allowed some autonomy (Bynum 10). Lulu realizes exactly this fear by acting as tainted food in her affairs with Beverley and Nector. In "Lulu's Boys," Lulu destabilizes Beverley's power and identity as a man. Erdrich tells us that "Beverley had always felt exposed, preyed on, undressed around her" (LM 112). Unlike other women, Lulu reflects Beverley's gaze back at him, rendering him and "his hero's stubborn, sagging flesh" vulnerable in her place (LM 113). When Beverley recalls the sex he and Lulu had shortly after his brother Henry's death, he remembers "her teeth grinding in his ear" and the feeling that "he wasn't man

or woman... Yet he was more of a man than he'd ever been... and after a while he came into her again, tasting his own miraculous continuance" (LM 116). Lulu's grinding teeth suggest her consumption of him, as he himself relishes the deconstruction of his masculine self in her embrace.

Lulu's affair with Nector is far more extensive, lasting years and leaving Nector deeply afraid for his own autonomy. When Nector first butters and consumes Lulu, he admits that Lulu "guides me forward into her body with her hands," attributing an active quality to her role in their intercourse (LM 129). Lulu invites Nector into her, and he unwittingly invites her into him. They bind themselves to each other with a link that Lulu has learned to grip and tug with her own strength. When Lulu reflects on her affair with Nector, the language she uses to describe her power over him is visceral, rooted in his physical body: "I was the blood that pounded in his temples. I was the knock of his heart" (LM 278). Lulu identifies herself with Nector's blood because she, like Saint Marie with the nuns, infiltrates the stuff of his life and is integrated by it. He eats her; she becomes him; and he becomes hers. As Nector and Lulu's affair continues, Nector becomes increasingly afraid of how his body has been compromised. He feels endangered by the fact that his self is being shared and negotiated with Lulu and all her cunning. When Nector returns to Lulu for their second tryst, he feels estranged from his own body, now perforated and filled with foreign energy: "I moved, witching water. I was full of sinkholes, shot with rapids... I rushed into Lulu, and the miracle was she could hold me" (LM 130). Nector weaves insistent water imagery with violent language that imagines him chewed and swallowed in a current that surrounds, then courses through, him. Nector's metaphor of being assimilated by water combines with Lulu's description of herself as his blood to underscore her possession of him. While they both flow into each other, Nector frames himself as caught in a force that

originates outside him, devours him, and casts him into Lulu, who in a “miracle” contains that force and takes it into herself as if it sprang from her, like an ocean reabsorbs a stream. She has become part of him, and he has become part of her.

Lost in his hunger for Lulu, Nector depends on her to feel whole, and because he admits he cannot control her (LM 134), he fears losing her and therefore himself. His fear inspires him to violence; he first attempts to destroy himself and his home, then turns on the woman who has charmed him. After seeing Lulu and failing to “make her into my own private puppet that I could dance up and down any way I moved her” (LM 133), a metaphor that recalls Beverley’s description of Lulu as a “doll of flour sacking” (LM 108), Nector considers drowning himself in a lake (LM 134). Given the impossible ultimatum of leaving Marie or losing Lulu, Nector looks to suicide as though it were the only choice he could make himself, without Lulu’s influence. Nector chooses to live, however, and to desert his family with Marie for Lulu, though he denies that the choice is his own. In his letter to Marie, he claims that “she [Lulu] pressured me...I don’t have a choice,” and in his letter to Lulu, he submits to her: “Here I am for the taking, girl, all one hundred percent yours” (LM 136). Nector resigns from his role as the proverbial man-of-the-house and marks himself as a passive object for Lulu’s consumption. As he sits waiting for Lulu on her doorstep, however, “the terrible thing happens”: his discarded letter to Lulu catches fire, and soon “long oily flames are licking up the side of the house,” devouring Lulu’s home (LM 140). Nector feels himself so emasculated that his account buries his own agency in the fire, which he reduces to an accident, something that “happens” without him. “I have done nothing,” he tells us, “I feel the heat rise up my legs and collect, burning for Lulu, but burning her out of me” (LM 141). He perceives Lulu’s presence within him as purged by fire, like a witch burned at the stake—or in her own oven. Lulu’s doughy flesh is finally baked and

even burned, made more or less inedible in her baldness, which she herself recognizes as a symbol of her sexuality's clipped power (LM 273).

Of course, even though Nector interprets his daughter Zelda's arrival during the fire as the apparition of Saint Marie (LM 141), Erdrich does not want us to read this scene as a heroic vanquishing of the unholy. While Beverley and Nector read Lulu in a thoroughly negative light, Erdrich emphasizes that Lulu's magic is a positive force that not only subverts these men's wishes to take advantage of her but also protects and nurtures her family. For example, Beverley's goal of whisking Henry Jr. away to live with him in the city threatens her family's integrity. While the strength of Lulu's allure already frightens Beverley, as he spends time with her boys, he becomes further disillusioned with his own agenda, observing that the boys

had grown into a kind of pack. They always hung together. When a shot went true, their gangling legs, encased alike in faded denim, shifted as if a ripple went through them collectively...Clearly they were of one soul...they were bound in total loyalty, not by oath but by the simple, unquestioning belongingness of part of one organism (LM 114).

The boys fit together into a group so tight-knit in their devotion to Lulu and to each other that they seem to form one body. To take even one of them away would dismember the whole. Dislocating Henry Jr. would win Beverley a false son at the cost of everyone's happiness. As Beverley sits defeated at Lulu's dining room table, "She [Lulu] seemed to fill pots with food by pointing at them and take things from the oven that she'd never put in. The table jumped to set itself. The pop foamed into glasses, and the milk sighed to the lip" (LM 115). Here, Lulu's magic is directly connected to food and maternity, shoring up dinner for her boys. Erdrich shows us that

Lulu's power encompasses more than her sexuality. Her magic is an integral part of her household that feeds and raises her boys in harmony.

Marie, too, finds greater fulfillment on the fringes of the Catholic Church. Before her final visit to Leopolda, Marie prepares jars of hot syrup to feed the nuns of the Sacred Heart (LM 142). While holding contempt for the structures of power and authority that their Church represents, Marie still practices charity and cares for the nuns who remain there, feeding them this time from the stuff of her own kitchen, on her own terms. Marie reflects that Leopolda "deserved to be packed in one [jar] alive" and so immerses Leopolda in boiling sugar, rendering her a woman dissolved and preserved in the sweet of her consumption (LM 142). Marie saturates her motivation to see Leopolda on her deathbed with the language of food, too: "I would let her see I had not been living on wafers of God's flesh but the fruit of a man" (LM 144). Marie's sexual metaphor of Nector's "fruit" suggests her similarity to Eve, who also fled the limits of God's role for her and became grounded in the greater earth. Unlike Eve, however, Marie plays far more than mere companion to Nector. While Eve is made from Adam's body, Marie asserts that Nector "is what he is because I made him," positioning herself as an active force that shapes and even gives substance to a passive Nector whose life depends on her (LM 150). Now, Nector is the dough and Marie the one who kneads, bakes, and eats him. Marie's consumption of Nector generates rather than destroys; she uses her power over him to push him out of his tendencies to drift and drink toward noteworthy political achievement. Much like Lulu, Marie sidesteps Catholic norms and deconstructs the gender roles that would subordinate her to Nector. Woman transcends dust and man, too, is encompassed by food and the mouths that take it in.

Works Cited

- Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women." *Representations*, no. 11, 1985, pp. 1–25.
- Castillo, Susan. "Women Aging into Power: Fictional Representations of Power and Authority in Louise Erdrich's Female Characters." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1996, pp. 13–20.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. Harper Perennial, 1984.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. Harper Perennial, 1988.
- Finke, Laurie. "The Grotesque Mystical Body: Representing the Woman Writer." In *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*, 75-107. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Ingraffia, Brian D. "'Deadly Conversions': Louise Erdrich's indictment of Catholicism in *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2015, pp. 313–330.
- Riley, Patricia. "There Is No Limit to This Dust: The Refusal of Sacrifice in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2000, pp. 13–23.
- Winter, Kari J. "The Politics and Erotics of Food in Louise Erdrich." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2000, pp. 44–64.