

GAMES WITHOUT WINNERS: CONSIDERATIONS OF IDENTITY IN
LOUISE ERDRICH'S *SHADOW TAG*

by

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CHAPTER I

The Tangle

“This conflict between what we see, what we know, and what portion of the two we acknowledge is the central tangle of the novel” (Noori 94).

Fabricating an identity, a concoction to serve as an example, is a good way to begin. For the purpose of discussion, let us imagine a fictional character that is not unlike, at least in terms of complexity and diverse composition, the identity of most Americans. The collective characteristics of this individual are as follows: Polish, Roma descent, immigrant, currently living in Florida, male, heterosexual, Catholic, retired, Baby Boomer, AARP member, fisherman, and devoted fan of the Miami Dolphins. Now, attempt the task of mentally placing these attributes in order of significance. Which element deserves placement at the top of the list as being the most influential? Which element contributes most to the man’s identity? Varying opinions concerning the constitution of identity exist. For many, identity is thought to be a consequence of genetic or biological arrangements; for others, identity is the sum and consequence of a collection of choices. Diversity, the variation in the contributing factors of identity, is a consequence, as Josina M. Makau writes in the *Encyclopedia of Identity*, of “race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, age, socioeconomic status, geographic background, job or profession, physical capacities and limitations, age, communal memberships, character traits, types of intelligence and native abilities, interests, values, and beliefs (236). Richard Jenkins, covering “Society and Social Identity” in the same *Encyclopedia of Identity*, adds to this list by including “consumption patterns, musical tastes, sporting allegiances, and leisure activities” as contributing to the concept of identity (767). It is

foolish to consider these attributes as equally influential or even measurable. Who and what truly “is” our above imagined man? If he spends more time in the football stadium than in church, does this mean that the greater part of his identity is that of a Dolphins’ fan and less of a Catholic? Is he more Roma or more Polish? Straight or retired? The answer does not exist because the man is not real and able to decide for himself; that’s the determining factor, after all: the individual’s perception and practice. Even with the certainty of this statement, the complexity of identity formation is difficult to grasp. At the beginning of this chapter, Noori’s description of Louise Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag* not only highlights this novel’s layered disposition, but it also speaks to the amorphous and entangled properties of identity construction.

There is no agreed-upon ranking or singular characteristic that bears the weight of greatest significance in terms of what items contribute to one’s identity most. Neither science nor scholarship will tell someone who he or she “is.” This is not to say that identity scholarship is non-existent; only the claim of absolutes and formal declarations of whom one should “be” are absent. As discussed later, this is rightly so. Perceptions of others and the perception of one’s self are fluid and varied. Due to the immense importance given to individual perception of identity, art and literature play a helpful role in the search for greater understanding of the dynamic nature of concepts of identity. Louise Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag* is one of these works that leaps into the pond of identity debate, not to explicitly purport an opinion or declaration, but to highlight the complexity and passion we engage with in the never-ceasing attempt to define who we are.

Irene, *Shadow Tag*’s despondent and morose protagonist, begins the novel with an announcement that initiates the novel’s lengthy exploration of identity: “I have two

diaries now” (3). From the outset, the audience is introduced to the difficulty of defining identity. Irene admits with her first words that there are layers, some apparent and some not, that stack upon one another to form the greater self. In her blue notebook, a text that she plans for him never to read, she confesses to her husband that there is an additional diary that she will use to create an identity that is not truly her own, or at least one that she intends to be somewhat fictional: “After quite a lot of searching, I expect, you have found my red diary. You have been reading it in order to discover whether I am deceiving you” (3). The irony is that the diary itself, in part, is the mode of delivery for the deception, which immediately highlights the impossibility of defining truth and objectivity in and for others. Diaries have traditionally been repositories of truth, a storeroom for admissions and revelations; they usually hold the recordings of events and behaviors that the author considers to be personal, those most authentically sincere. *Shadow Tag* shows, through the function of the antithetical diary, the inconsistent, manipulative, and paradoxical nature of identity. This absence of accuracy or reliability in reference to identity was emphasized at Irene and her husband Gil’s first encounter, as reported in the Red Diary: “I lied and told him that I was an artist’s model. He lied and told me that he needed to hire a model” (173).

Authorities operating in the realm of identity studies predominantly agree on at least one characteristic: identity is not static. Absolute identity is not a consequence of parentage equations and genealogy charts. Jenkins summarizes the common ground well by stating, “Where there is a bedrock of broad agreement, some of this common ground is helpful if we want to understand how identification works: First, there is an insistence that identity is not fixed or primordial . . . and, second, a healthy skepticism about

political universalism, with its tyrannical implications of compulsory homogeneity” (769). These considerations are incredibly important for the Native American community, considering the practice, and as some may report the “need,” to distinguish the Indian from the non-Indian. If the interdisciplinary interpretation of identity is that it is not anchored to something constant and measurable, even though Native American individuals and families must often “prove” the extent of their Indian heritage, conflict and confusion are natural outcomes. One certainly cannot quantify another’s feelings of “being” Indian or “being” anything for that matter.

This confluence of identity criteria, social perceptions, individual sentiments, and historical relevance is a critical focus of much of Native American literature; this is especially true in the works of Louise Erdrich. *Shadow Tag*, revealing an assortment of identity influences and the sensitivities that rise or dissolve as a result of their collective collision, can be especially agitating to an audience’s conception of identity. The characters in *Shadow Tag* explore, enhance, and evade certain stereotypes of various identities, demonstrating both the disintegration and strengthening of identity “boundaries” (Noori 93). Margaret Noori, writing in *Studies in American Indian Literature* about *Shadow Tag*, maintains that “It is a story about boundaries and identity and how one cannot exist without the other. Peripherally, it is also about how these issues, of boundaries and identity, are peculiarly complicated in American Indian communities. These are not new themes for Erdrich, but they are approached with a new focus” (94). And in *Shadow Tag*’s case, Erdrich accomplishes this task exceptionally well. This “new focus” is incredibly convincing.

CHAPTER II

Identity Saved

“Indians would not have needed Krazy Glue or money but, she reasoned, she was a contemporary Indian. A mixture of old and new” (Erdrich 118-19).

In order to understand identity considerations in *Shadow Tag*, it will benefit us to first look at identity theory and identity politics. Simply, identity is the culmination of all things that collectively portray who we are by comparing and contrasting ourselves to others. Describing identity in a straightforward and accessible manner, Richard Jenkins states that identity “is a matter of who people are, or, rather, who they are seen to be, by themselves and by others” (768-69). This does not suggest that what is “seen” is always distinct from what “is,” but rather what is “seen” plays an integral role with identity construction; the reasoning here, of course, is not limited to qualities that are only physically observable. “Identification,” continues Jenkins, “is the complex generic human capacity to work out who’s who, individually and collectively, in the human world [sic] the multidimensional mapping of a human world that is in perpetual motion, of our place in that world, and of the places of others” (769). Apart from academia, especially the realm of identity studies, a conventional concept of identity seems to arise from another interpretation, one that subscribes to the “what is” perspective. A widespread belief involves an equation of sorts, one that gives more weight to some contributing factors like genetics and ethnicity while regarding other influences as less significant. This viewpoint considers the contributing factor an objective constant, an influence that is equally affecting to all individuals. For example, if someone is born of two “full-blooded” Irish parents, then they, as many believe, must be “more” Irish than

someone who only has one Irish parent. The commonplace sentiment is that blood quantum is a reliable measure of identity authenticity. This belief is rooted in the idea that identity has little to do with choice or practice: identity must be given to us by our parents and the many generations that came before. Although this belief is abundant, it is exceptionally problematic for identity when considering shifts in human behaviors, especially over the past hundred years.

There are technological factors occurring in modernity that easily allow us to see some of the fallibility of such a narrow interpretation regarding identity. For the greater part of the past century, humans--at least those enjoying the necessary means--have indulged in the benefits of immediate travel, meaning that within a full day's time, one can literally travel from one side of the planet to the other. Travel has been an aspect of human exploration and migration for some time, but it was limited by the mode and pace of transportation; one either walked, rode, or sailed, which meant few ventured great distances from their places of birth. So the more classic assumptions of identity, like the contributing factors of genetics and ethnicity, remained generally static and continuous. This contrasts with the current state of affairs where a 747 traveling from New York to London can carry nearly 500 passengers potentially representing every continent of the world. Static group identities are no longer protected by vast oceans or mountain ranges. Also, sexual interaction between individuals of dissimilar geographic identities occurs much more frequently today, further complicating the notion of identities fixed in historical lineages. If identity is largely dependent upon the genetic contributions in our blood, then the future is destined to see humanity as having one global identity, an amalgam with few recognizable genetic exceptions. This is one reason, therefore, that

identity cannot be shackled by the restraints of what is given to us by our ancestors.

There are many more variables providing identity, and their significance is largely dependent upon the choices, practices, and instincts of the individual, not the regional origins of one's parents.

Think of our identities like pies; it is an elementary comparison, but useful. Some pies have cherries or pecans, and so then the pie is referred to as the "cherry pie" or the "pecan pie." This label, nevertheless, does not tell us everything about the pie. There are variations in the type of crust, the amount of sugar, the type of cherries, whole pecans or pecan pieces, time in the oven, etc. Two pies may have cherries, and both pies may be individually called "cherry pie," but the two pies can have exceptionally dissimilar tastes. With humans, the variables are countless. There may be "types" of humans that bear the weight of a shared label, but every member of that group has other competing influences that may affect the individual's life in a more significant manner. Identity, then, is much more a consequence of how an individual interacts, voluntarily and involuntarily, with the various identity-affecting variables in his or her world. Therefore, identity is largely a product of a convergence of subjective forces rather than an exclusively objective enterprise. The substantial library of work concerning identity studies, as Joseph Davis advises in his article "Social Change and the Problem of Identity," supports this belief: "In this now large literature, collective identities are treated not as some natural or primordial property of a group's members, but as subjective, symbolic entities that are negotiated and renegotiated in social interaction" (4). Consequently, one may have deeper ties and shared characteristics with a specific group largely because of the extent of interaction with other members of that same group. One may have parents who fully

descend from a long line of group constituents, but if the interaction with that group is absent, the markings that are perceived to demonstrate the identity with that group will largely be absent. Again referring to what has been established through identity studies, Davis states, “No unique features are seen to distinguish group members from all other people. Rather, basic distinctions and boundaries, including biological distinctions, such as the inscription of gender on the body, are called into question and reformulated as the outcome of specific social practices and sociopolitical processes” (4). *Shadow Tag*, acting as an artistic contribution to the body of identity literature, reflects this understanding thoroughly. Erdrich’s novel investigates the desire for individuals to increase social interaction, familiarity with traditional practices, and the knowledge of the past so to strengthen the characters’ satisfaction in their own efforts of sustaining their Native American identities.

Since the terms “genetic,” “cultural,” “racial,” and “ethnic” are frequently heard amidst discussions concerning identity, analyzing these concepts will be helpful before moving on to Erdrich’s work. Traits passed on from parent to child through the process of reproduction—distinct from behaviors learned through physical interaction and observation—seem to be held in high esteem by the general public regarding the legitimacy of identity claims: one born with red hair can rightfully claim to be “red headed.” Nonetheless, sociopolitical concerns with identity are rarely centered on inherited physical characteristics. One of the most significant exceptions is Albinism, which in some locations and communities can lead to the persecution of individuals exhibiting the genetic markers. The repercussions for identity are overwhelmingly tied to the tracing of lineage from a group, like those often referred to when discussing Native

American “bloodlines” or “blood quantum.” The gravity of being able to prove one’s Indian heritage is outlined by the authors of the 2002 article, “Genetic Ancestry Tracing and American Indian Identity”:

The stakes are especially high for American Indians, for whom the connection between genetics and identity carries tremendous economic and psychological importance. Official recognition of a group by the federal government as an Indian tribe has profound implications for federal financial support, land treaties, and sovereignty claims. Similarly, an individual’s recognition by the federal government as an Indian has profound implications for access to educational, health, and housing programs. The most commonly used marker of American Indian identity is the so-called “blood quantum,” or percentage of Indian blood. (Parry 10)

Although believed by many to be a major contributor to identity, the utilization of heredity and lineage, as stated above, fulfills more of a political function in most instances. Some of the most notable have been the criteria attached to the racist Jim Crow laws, certain countries’ requirements for citizenship, proving eligibility for affirmative-action benefits, and legal acceptance into an assortment of aboriginal and native communities (Parry 9).

One of the most negative consequences of relying on genetics to authenticate identity is that it lures society to then ignore or lessen the importance of the more influential contributors to identity. The assemblage of other factors is made secondary to the role of genetics. This, again, has political ramifications as Parry points out: “Yet

genetic ancestry tracing may reduce Indian identity to a matter of genetic constitution, leaving out other (and arguably more important) aspects of identity: language, social history, cultural inheritance, and so on—especially if the importance of genetic ancestry tracing were to become enshrined in law” (11). An additional drawback for focusing on genetics is that some of the procedures used to ascertain one’s ancestry are deficient and not as conclusive as much of the general public believes (Parry 10). The notion that genetic ancestry is an objective way of proving or disproving one’s identity is unsound and even harmful.

There is a hypothetical comparison that provides a point for consideration by those participating in identity debates. Imagine that two children are orphaned at birth. One child had Inuit biological parents but is adopted by a Norwegian couple and is raised fully participating in Norwegian traditions and cultural practices. The other child had Norwegian parents but is adopted by an Inuit couple and is raised fully participating in Inuit traditions and cultural practices. When the children become adults, who is more Inuit and who is more Norwegian? The comparison becomes even more difficult when including tribal membership rights and government benefits. In this unlikely circumstance, but nevertheless cause for some skepticism, the orphaned child whose identity is populated with the same characteristics of a similar neighbor child with Inuit parents and an Inuit upbringing might be refused legal recognition and potentially advantageous educational and financial assistance. So, partly due to the unsteady foundation genetics serves for much of the general public’s conception of identity, a better understanding of the categories that are also often misapprehended, in addition to being incorrectly tied to genetics, would be beneficial for all. These include the concepts

of culture, ethnicity, and race. All of these are devices that are frequently relied upon when referring to Native American identity.

Culture is one of the factors of identity that is also misconstrued as it pertains to the associations between individuals of a group and the sharing of behaviors in which they engage; culture is not a mask, a drum, or a stained-glass window. Kashima Yoshihisa explains that “culture can be understood as the traditions, customs, beliefs, values, norms, and perspectives that are learned through shared behavioral patterns and cultural practices, passed down from generation to generation” (186). Culture serves the incredibly important task of being “the foundation for meanings we attribute to our perceptions” (186). These shared understandings are markers for cultural entities. The expression of culture is then observed “in the attitudes and behaviors that characterize a group of people who share implicit norms and rules” (186). This is perhaps why the tools that are identified as part of this mode of expression are misunderstood as cultural entities themselves. Yoshihisa clarifies the distinction:

That is, behavior and artifacts may act as markers of culture, but they are not part of culture themselves. Culture differs from society in that the latter refers to a collection of individuals and groups, their relationships (interpersonal, intergroup, and group membership), and their institutions. Social institutions such as rituals, laws, and the like are special kinds of artifacts, which often represent cultural information. However, they are not culture themselves. (186)

Culture, then, is not something that one is born with; it is learned through exposure and experience amongst a group. As a child, personal choice does not generally have an

effect on the amount of culture one learns. The decisions, behaviors, and habits of the parents and the community will contribute greatly to the child's cultural outcomes; however, choice becomes a factor in terms of the family's participation and then the continuation of that participation when the child becomes an independent adult.

Ethnicity, like culture, is equally free of genetic or biological direction. This, for many, can be an even more surprising fact of identity constitution. Ethnicity deals with one's development and membership in a larger body and is chiefly the consequence of being raised in a location populated by that body (Brown 188). In "Culture, Ethnicity, and Race," Timothy Brown suggests that "ethnicity is the self-consciousness of a group who share a common origin or a separate subculture to maintain a distinction between themselves and outsiders" (188). He adds that "Ethnicity is a more positive expression of social categorization because it is not an imposed ideology (such as the concept of race); rather, it is the group's self-constructed social categorization that embraces its own heritage and meaning. Ethnicity is a positive manifestation of the language, customs, practices, and traditions of a group of people" (188-89).

Focusing on ethnicity offers a means to distinguish one from another because variations in ethnicity, especially by those within the group, can be observed due to differences in "national or regional heritage, religion, class, language, or culture," as Alwin Jones explains in the *Encyclopedia of Identity* (259). Ethnicity plays a significant role with considerations of identity since these attributes are generally apparent to observers, especially when in communion with the larger ethnic community: "In other words, ethnicity generally refers to a community or group of people who share some form of 'kinship' with each other that identifies them as different from (to varying

degrees) other communities within a particular region, city, or nation. It remains a way to differentiate one group from another for political, cultural, social, class, or racial reasons” (Jones 259). The boundaries of ethnicity, who is “in” and who is “out,” is the topic of considerable debate (Jones 259). Even though most of the characteristics of ethnicity listed above are acquired through the act of living with others, many still view ethnicity to be an objective measurement stemming from a biological arrangement, again highlighting the incapability to objectively define identity for another.

Thanks to the entrenched legacy of matters involving the concept of race, which are sadly those historically awash in the villainy of power, dominance, and inequality, most people outside of identity studies still view race as an identifiable and measurable piece of the identity puzzle. From the perspective of scientists and scholars, race is an abstraction that no longer has any value for contemporary theories (Brown 189). It has been a political tool of the oppressor employed to further the separation of the majority from the minority. As Brown notes, “Racial thinking was at its height in the 19th and 20th centuries and was associated with the ideologies of empire and colonialism. Ideas about distinct racial groups with distinct characteristics were developed to support the notion that some races (those of White, European origin) were innately superior to others (usually non-White races of African or Asian origin)” (189). Race was rarely a tool employed by a marginalized group to enhance its position or standing in relation to the majority.

The negative leverage for which race has been put to use is considerably more apparent when one learns that it is a social construct; this also removes race as a legitimate gauge for identity. The construct is the result of a formulation of ideological

opposition paired with an absence of biological, genetic, or empirical absolutes (Brown 189). General characteristics were perceived to be representational of an entire population and then used as flags to further an often racist or hegemonic agenda. The application of race to expedite western expansion is exceptionally important within the historical record of the Native American. The Indian “race” was portrayed as being animalistic, uncivilized, and inferior so that those promoting federal policies that would lead to the destruction of most Indian communities would not be accused of murder or what today would be labeled “crimes against humanity.” The only tie that race had to identity was to become a method for stereotyping and targeting. The same application was used by Nazi Germany against the Jewish community; this successful effort is fiercely documented in the examples of propaganda that display horrific and grossly inaccurate caricatures of Jewish persons. In similar but perhaps less overtly sinister ways, the United States used racial propaganda to defend its actions against those who lived on the land that it so desperately wanted. Although the massacre and subjugation of the Native American nations was complete, the defense and celebration of the White Man’s lucrative occupation of Indian lands was frequently a smoldering force behind many Hollywood films depicting the savage “Red Man.” Ultimately, the notion of race has little to do with authentic concepts of identity. This, unfortunately, has not removed race from the political movements surrounding the identity debate. For Native Americans, the constrictions of racial qualifiers continue to create division, self-doubt, and hegemonic structures for political modes of domination. This is incredibly unfortunate when considering that assumptions of race are still relied upon to pass judgment on identity.

Many of the misunderstood concepts described above play central roles in the interpretation of one's identity by another. Genetic testing may be employed and lineages may be traced, but these efforts are usually an attempt by an individual to prove something to a governmental body or an organization's gatekeeper. Rarely do we read or hear about an individual setting out to prove his or her identity to himself or herself. Family lineage is researched so to enhance the understanding of family ties and migration, but lineage does not dictate whom one should or shouldn't be, or more correctly, whom one feels he or she is. Identity is a collection of personal experiences, ongoing behaviors, and biological realities, yet none of these trump the others unless the individual makes it so through choice. Culture and ethnicity can be supportive of the direction of this choice, but they are not critical to one's identity unless "adopted" by the person, as Brown explains. This qualifier is at the heart of why considerations of identity can be so challenging:

From a communication perspective, culture, ethnicity, and race have been at the center of the construction of identity and how individuals attempt to make sense of and attribute meaning toward others. Within this complex negotiation of identity is how an individual defines his or her identity in relation to his or her orientation toward his or her culture or ethnicity. Individuals can demonstrate identification with their culture by adopting the behavioral norms and language codes, in addition to associating with the culture literally and figuratively. (189)

CHAPTER III

To Be Indian

“Don’t paint Indians. The subject wins. A Native painter himself had said this. You’ll never be an artist. You’ll be an American Indian artist. There will be a cap on your career. You’ll only go so far” (Erdrich 37).

Ignorant of many of the factors that truly and fundamentally forge identity, legislation was passed in the form of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 to clarify the parameters for which one can “legitimately” identify oneself as an Indian: “All persons of Indian descent who are members of any recognized tribe now under Federal jurisdiction, and all persons who are descendants of such members who were, on June 1, 1934, residing within the present boundaries of any Indian reservation, and shall further include all other persons of one-half or more Indian blood” (Parry 10). There are other qualifications as well depending upon which governmental body is making the determination. An individual in many cases must navigate federal, state, and tribal mandates to ascertain if he or she is Indian “enough” to qualify for recognition. Since an assortment of significant benefits, services, and tribal rights are often available to Native Americans, the need has arisen to qualify people’s claims of Indian identity. Instead of confronting the nation’s long history of imperialism, racism, and economic exclusion and the consequences of this history on all minority groups, women, and the working class, the United States has chosen to single out injured parties and attempt to soften the consequences of wealthy white hegemony through an assortment of “Band-Aid” programs. As a result, securing one’s claim as being Indian now can affect, as Joane Nagel pinpoints, “such important matters as child custody rights, health benefits,

scholarships, legitimate means of livelihood, land claims, mineral and resource rights and royalty payments, political and criminal jurisdiction, taxation, and myriad other personal and financial matters” (96). Therefore, sought-after resources are currently provided to a relatively small percentage of the population based upon a person’s relationship with a federally recognized tribe or the measurement referred to as “blood quantum.” An obvious consequence, then, is that there are individuals who will relentlessly pursue these benefits because they are available, regardless of their personal beliefs and sentiments concerning their own identity characteristics. As reported in the 2010 article, “Purging Dissidents from Membership Rolls,” “Tribal casinos generated \$25 billion in revenue” the year before, “according to the National Indian Gaming Commission” (5). Profits accrued through tribal casinos are often dispersed, depending upon the tribes’ formulations, to tribal members. In the same article, Ray Henry admits, “But that paycheck can lure people with dubious claims of ancestry. The Pechanga Band of California said it was deluged with membership claims after it opened its casino in 1995” (5). As soon as the potential to profit from the relationship arose, the desire to add Pechanga Band to one’s identity index became much more enticing to many previously uninterested people. The dilemma seems unavoidable and will be growing in complexity as distribution of services and benefits grow and trends in reproduction continue to connect individuals of historically distinct communities.

The quandary surrounding identity is for many reasons brought to the forefront when discussing what it means to be Native American and who then falls within this definition. Problems arise at the outset of this consideration because the non-Indian perception of what it is to be Native American is still so often different from reality. As

Louis Owens points out in his wonderfully entertaining and equally enlightening *Mixedblood Messages*, “the so-called American Indian is a European invention that has little or nothing to do with the indigenous people who lived on this continent by the millions before 1492 and who live here still” (116). Erdrich, as will be discussed in more detail later, illustrates the difficulty that Riel, the daughter of the protagonist, experiences as she is engrossed in the caricature of this “invention,” even as a daughter of two Native American parents. The Indian identity continues to evade an objective and absolute definition, in addition to being stereotyped and misunderstood. The expanding and ever-fluctuating parameters of identity are frequently explored amongst the pages of Erdrich’s novels, as A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff reminds us, especially when our novelist portrays “the infinite varieties of Indianness that exist from generation to generation” (184):

Among the many forms of Indianness she describes are Nanapush and Fleur Pillager’s staunch traditionalism in *Tracks*; Gerry Nanapush’s mythic trickster adventures in *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, and *Bingo Palace*; Pauline Puyat’s (Sister Leopolda) bigoted religious assimilationism in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*; Lipsha Kashpaw’s tentative struggles to connect with the traditions of his tribal heritage in *Love Medicine* and *Bingo Palace*; Celestine James’s diminished links to her Ojibwe roots in *Beet Queen*; and Jack Mauser’s dim recollection of his Ojibwe ancestry in *Tales of Burning Love*. (184)

The varieties of any cultural expression are innumerable, and at no point does Erdrich suggest that one interpretation deserves recognition for being more legitimate than another.

Perhaps it is the consequential frustration of those attempting to define something that exists in incalculable “versions” that leads to the setting of qualifiers for American Indian status, which often depend on considerations of blood quantum. Understandably, the contention amongst the affected parties continues to be sharp (Parry 10-11). Variations also exist amongst how the tribes ascertain membership. “Some tribes require that members trace their ancestors as a basis for tribal rolls,” as noted in the article “Genetic Ancestry Tracing and American Indian Identity,” while “others require anything from 1/32 to 1/2 ‘blood’ of that tribe” (10). A 2007 article in *News from Indian Country* refers to a combination requirement of presumably one tribe that requires “a minimal percentage of blood,” which is “as low as 1/132 as long as descent can be proven” (George-Kanentiio 31). Knowing that the tribes themselves have differing standards for membership, some varying quite dramatically as to the characteristics that make an individual a Native American of that tribe, plainly indicates that the path of securing proof of one’s identity, as well as distinctly defining that identity, is dysfunctional at best. Some tribes including the Mohawk Nation have added requirements that applicants be of “good character” and “demonstrate some kind of permanent connection” (George-Kanentiio 31). This highlights the distinction between being a member of a tribe and being an ancestor of a tribal member. Perhaps someone of bad character born of Mohawk parents will be viewed just as Mohawk as anyone else with similar lineage, but the perception of others as to his or her rectitude may become the sole obstacle to his or her gaining full membership to the tribe. Does the lack of membership make the person less Mohawk? Probably not, but yet again, the conclusions are murky.

Although tribal affiliations are exceptionally important to many, there is a collective sense of unity across tribal lines that has been widely present since European colonists began dismantling Native American communities and stereotyping all Indians as enemies or obstacles to white expansion. This shared aspect of identity also ties the Native American population to indigenous communities around the world; the ancestors of victims of unrestrained colonialism stretch from hemisphere to hemisphere and pole to pole, entangling these nations with a common historical interaction with an international oppressor. This “pan-Indianism” is a result, as Kathleen Roberts states, of an “affiliation and identification with other indigenous people regardless of tribal identity. This is true within nation-states . . . and across borders, as when First Nations powwow organizers invite Hawaiian or South American Indian dancers to their events” (288). Since the consequences of European colonialism touched indigenous populations in varying ways, the shared identity characteristic is that of being distinct from the European oppressor, in addition to having historical and geographical roots in a location that was once invaded by foreign powers. From this perspective, the “other” are the beneficiaries of Western expansion and colonial systems of government, and the identity shared amongst the “we” is an informal coalition of significantly dissimilar indigenous populations, some separated by thousands of miles of ocean, yet involuntarily tied together having been the troublesome inhabitants of desirable land. In this way, the shared identity is not a consequence of biological variables or behavioral consequences of the target population but rather the outcome of a separate and counter population’s self-interest and subsequent decisions.

While there is a shared history of victimization amongst most indigenous societies, the types of injustices committed against American Indians marshal a unique collective identity shared amongst the tribes. In “Louise Erdrich and American Indian Literary Nationalism,” the reader is reminded that “There were over five hundred tribes in what is now America at the time of contact, about a half-dozen major language groups, and several distinct racial strains. Not only cultural but also physical differences were dramatic” (31). Yet despite these differences, there was and is a significant commonality: the Native American community are the casualties of North American colonization, and as a result, have exhibited “a sense of pan-Indianism” (Velie 32). An ironic consequence of state and federal governments’ efforts to disempower and uproot various tribes was the unification of the greater Native American body politic. The white “other” became the most aggressive and consequential foe, and many of the tribes in conflict with one another were forced to turn their attentions to the greater threat.

Although no longer the communal recipients of widespread violence, the shared American Indian identity is furthered in other ways. This universality in modern times perseveres among the children of parents from different tribes or the children of “mixed-blood” parents whose genetic history does not secure a place for the individual in a specific tribe but contributes to a feeling or connection with being Indian (Velie 32). Erdrich’s stories provide an entryway into the lives and minds of characters who interact with this connection in an assortment of ways and in various times, avoiding the shallow, stereotypical expectations of many non-Indian audiences. In the introduction of *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, Allan Chavkin writes, “She depicts not only the tragedy of the dispossession and the suffering of the Indians but also their dignity and

humor. In contrast to the ubiquitous stereotypes of Indians in film, television, and popular culture, she presents them in all their complexity and reveals their essential humanity” (2).

As is true in the African American community, which continues to combat the economic repercussions of slavery, segregation, and pervasive disenfranchisement, Native Americans also still struggle to find a course free from the “challenges summed up in postcolonial theory,” as Kathleen Roberts outlines (288). She continues to explain that “past persecutions have kept indigenous peoples out of mainstream institutions and economic opportunities. The history of marginalization has yielded a cycle of poverty for most natives living in postcolonial contexts” (288). Unique genetic identities have been overlooked to form a greater collective identity that stems from a connection to past targets of colonial greed. Poverty is not a product of genetic lineage but capital lineage, and this too-frequent reality for many American Indians does not preclude membership through blood-quantum designations or tribal affiliation.

As a result, Native Americans are often forced to choose between maintaining regular interaction and participation with their communities or a path of economic assimilation in the urban centers. American Indians, continues Roberts, must “strive to strike a balance between their native identity and the necessity of living in the capitalist nation-state. For many, economic survival requires moving off traditional lands and into urban areas where there are more educational and professional opportunities” (Roberts 288). In *Shadow Tag*, Irene’s family resides in an urban center, far from the reservation of her childhood. Gil’s financial success as an artist depends upon the art market only available to him in a metropolitan area like Minneapolis. The children are only familiar

with life in the big city. Nevertheless, the reader is frequently invited to partake in Irene's memories of reservation visits as a child, an ongoing act that Irene seems to rely on to keep her identity tied to her roots. Throughout the novel, Erdrich seems to suggest that one's proximity to a given community has an almost unequaled significance to the formation and maintenance of one's identity.

The Native American experience is also affected by the meeting of two cultural realities, a junction that is marked by the attempt by one to depose the other. The manipulation and conversion of cultural properties by the forces of imperialism can create in indigenous populations a state of hybridity (Ahmet 338). Identity is impacted by the response to the collision and partial melding of two different cultures. Yet, a new static identity does not rise from the event; a churning, push-and-pull existence materializes as described by Ahmet Atay:

In colonized cultures, individuals often experience constant in-betweenness and crossovers because they continuously experience the clashes and intersections between their original culture and the colonizer's culture. While they are adjusting to new rules and regulations and assimilating to the new ways of performing self, individuals from colonies try to keep their customs and cultural practices alive. Usually, this tension results in hybrid, constantly shape-shifting, in-between crossovers of identities. Individuals who experience in-betweenness create hybrid identities. (338)

These resulting identities are no less connected to the American Indian experience, but they can be unique because of the additional cultural influences enacted upon them. Yet,

this is not simply a product of being born from disparate cultures. The need exists for one to be present at that intersection for the hybridity to become manifest. Again, the hybrid identity grows from exposure and proximity of one culture to the other, not from an equation or genetic standard. Being born of mixed parents does not necessarily lead to a state of hybridity; a parent of a certain foreign lineage may not have been raised within that culture. Consider the extent of international adoptions occurring today. Perhaps it is unlikely that an individual can be fully detached from all emotional connections and sympathies towards an originating culture thanks to media, globalization, and a curiosity towards people who may share similar physical characteristics. But ultimately, this is a psychological consequence and not a biological outcome.

Along the lines of hybrid identities is the concept of “mixed-blood,” a circumstance created by the union of individuals exhibiting varying foundations of identity considerations: a white German father and an Ojibwa mother, for example, as is the case for Erdrich. The notion of “mixed-blood” pertaining to the chemical composition of blood is obviously a product of hematological ignorance at its best or overt racism at its worst. Nevertheless, the frequency in which one hears parentage referred to in this way suggests that the concept may be thought of by much of the general public as more of a biological truth than a figurative description. In *Shadow Tag*, Irene, Gil, and their three children fall within this uneasy category, which drives much of the book’s deliberations on identity. Erdrich does not treat the mixed-blood state as only a mixture of two inviolable substances, similar to a mound of salt and pepper. The product of this type of lineage is unique to itself, a solution of sorts existing as something different than just a sum of its parts. This uniqueness is a consequence of the

psychological and sociological aspects of existing in an undefined identity sphere, one where an individual may not be seen as being German “enough” or Ojibwa “enough” to classify as either.

Louis Owens reflects on this mixed-blood identity type further in *Mixedblood Messages*. Owens investigates the dilemma encountered by “Mixedbloods,” including himself, by contemplating the treatment of this population through multiple lenses, incorporating Native American Literature, popular culture and films, and an autobiographical rumination. Addressing the term and concept that focuses much of his book, Owens admits to the ironic circumstance of writing about an identity label that does not exist in the manner in which it is treated and one that may be more harmful than the convenience of using it figuratively is worth: “Although I have thought and written considerably about the mixedblood in American literature and American culture . . . perhaps paradoxically I have to think that on some crucial level it may be wrong in a profound ethical, moral, deeply human way to even conceive of such a thing” (192). Owens recognizes that the label is an abstraction used to discuss a state that is only identifiable on a personal level depending upon the recognition and treatment of a mixed-blood individual by others, as well as by one’s self. The experiences encountered by an individual born of dissimilar parents and the environment in which he or she exists within determines the nature and extent of the feelings associated with mixed-blood characteristics. As Irene’s family demonstrates, the mixed-blood categorization means little without a connection to past generations, like grandparents, the memories of a place associated with at least one of the families, or cultural practices and activities seen as unique to one of the sides. Irene and Gil’s children will qualify their mixed-blood

identities in varying ways as a consequence of their disparate exposure to their parents' families.

The above considerations highlight the complex, and equally faulty, behavior of interpreting and then consequently defining another person's identity, especially when attached to a claim of objectivity or certitude. This reality is made more apparent when coupled with an awareness of current population trends, in addition to the harmful repercussions resulting from a denial of one's identity claims by another individual or entity. Consider that if a "purity" of lineage is a requirement for recognition of certain identity traits, similar to conditions applied to Native Americans, then identities set within the parameters of strict qualifications are vanishing. Citing research conducted by C. Matthew Snipp, Gary D. Sandefur, and Trudy McKinnell, Joane Nagel reports that "The rate of racial intermarriage for American Indians is the highest of all American racial categories, with fewer than half of American Indians marrying other Indians" (100). If lineage alone separates the authentic from the fake, then "real" Indians will face a death by dilution with no consideration of a continuation of behaviors, languages, beliefs, and cultural practices. If seen this way, this can also be viewed, ironically, as the last stages of a five-hundred-year-old genocide, one completed not with guns or poisoned blankets but with marriages and reproduction. This is unreliable and misleading because the American Indian story is not one moving towards a climax of annihilation; it is a story of survival and endurance despite the efforts of unrestrained colonialism and the subsequent efforts of identity control.

When the parameters and qualifications of identity are controlled by political, cultural, and economic hegemony, considerations of identity not only become more

turbid, but the purpose appears to shift away from a desire to clarify and express who one knows his or herself to be and moves towards being a tool of outright oppression.

Matthew King's law review article "Indian Gaming and Native Identity" calls attention to how these efforts of identity control are uniquely targeting Native Americans:

Law in particular sets about to eliminate definitional uncertainty and to concretize, stabilize, and control the distributive outcomes of identity formation. A ready example of the phenomenon is the federal recognition process, under which many self-identified Native Americans fail to qualify as "Indian." One might query the extent to which this practically suppresses and profoundly undercuts identity formation in individuals and groups. Certainly Native Americans are the only ethnic group in the United States for which legal documentation is a precursor to acceptance.

(14)

When the legal documentation is absent, yet a sense of identity and belonging is profoundly felt by the individual--coupled not with lineage proof but with another measure like language, participation, or upbringing--the consequences can be confusing and destructive. There are individuals who attended Indian Schools and have lived regularly amongst unique tribal groups, but do not fall within the stricter blood quota guidelines, and are then left to feel disenfranchised and abandoned (Ruckman). There are also occurrences of persons having smaller percentages of blood quantum for multiple tribes, meaning they lack the specific quantum requirement for enrollment in one tribe, yet clearly see themselves as Indian when considering the ties to all of their ancestors' tribes (Ruckman). The unreliable criteria for American Indian status imposed by both

federal and state governments, as well as various tribes, is imperfect at best. At its worst, it is a continuation of the events beginning with Christopher Columbus's first imprisoned Native American slave. Nagel reports that "Some critics call for the entire abolishment of ancestry or blood quantum regulation of tribal membership, arguing that such rules, particularly when applied by the federal government, tend to heighten tension among Native Americans, creating disunity and suspicion" (99). The reliance on these identity barometers, even if intended to protect resources and the various benefits associated with certain tribal memberships (Nagel 84), is harming the population that the measures are often advertised as assisting. In the article "Indian Identity is More than Poetic Names or Car Tags," S. E. Ruckman asserts, "Ultimately, our own mirror reflection tells us who we are. Perhaps identity should not be solely an outward distinction. . . . Self-identification rather than an official designation seems to lessen the impact, even if it is the U. S. Government keeping score."

The goal of this chapter has been to communicate the impossibility of empirically defining identity and to expose many of the complications that have arisen from the attempt to do so to members of the Native American community. *Shadow Tag* reflects on the inconsistent and volatile nature of identity, even when one attempts the act of defining oneself. The intersection of memories, practices, behaviors, beliefs, and learned stereotypes is not one of lucidity and certitude. Several of the key characters experience the frustration of attempting to demarcate their identities, and the Native American consideration is only one of many. Identity labels are often the product of misunderstandings or simple fiction, and the interpretation of another's identity through the lens of one's own identity bias confuses the act even more so. Owens speaks to this

problem and how it especially affects the American Indian: “Identity for Native Americans is made more complex yet by the fact that the American Indian in the world consciousness is a treasured invention, a gothic artifact evoked like the ‘Powwows’ in Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ out of the dark reaches of the continent to replace the actual native. . .” (*Other* 3). There is a costly perception, undoubtedly furthered by Hollywood cinema, that the “old-time Indians” were somehow the “real” Indians, locked in a celluloid state of purity and authentic existence. These misconceived notions of the motives and capabilities of the 19th-century Native American are still pervasive today. Erdrich touches upon the occurrences of false impressions and stereotypes through Riel’s quest to reinvent herself as an “old-time Indian.” Riel claims, “The old-time Indians could start a fire with their bare hands, probably” (*Shadow* 102). Irene, Riel’s mother, dispels the fantasy by retorting, “No, they used two sticks, or a flint, or a striker” (102). What was seen as being Indian was only a mythical identity construction. “Old-time Indians” could not conjure fire from the flesh of their hands.

The attempt to find an objective manner in which to catalog one’s identity is understandable, but this continues with little regard to the contemporary realities that hundreds of years of colonialism, mixed-parentage, and cultural hybridity have created. This is certainly not to say that the American Indian is vanishing any more than the Irish American is vanishing; it is to highlight the complexity of identity calculation as demonstrated by the current state of identity affairs impacting Native Americans, as well as the luminous characters we meet in *Shadow Tag*. As I’ll address in the following chapters, Irene’s family is constantly dealing with the desire to define themselves amongst the competing influences of history, family, location, and relationships. The task

is formidable but perhaps not unique to many families existing in the realm of multifarious influences and associations.

CHAPTER IV

Identity and *Shadow Tag*

“Germaine Okestaf-Becker had a joint name, yoked by a hyphen, which was all so barfingly PC. Plus he was more Indian than Gil, three-quarters as opposed to one-quarter, and so Germaine had him by a half quantum, which was a big plus as mixed-blood women are generally suckers for darker men and Irene probably was too, though she was careful not to say so.” (Erdrich 12)

Shadow Tag is a novel that explores many human enigmas. Identity, family, history, love, sex, despair, parenting, hybridity, alcoholism, abuse, and death are only a sample of the subjects that this contemporary novel surveys. The psychological and sociological examination resists producing any answers or solutions, which it certainly is not expected to do; the novel is beneficial to the reader through its compelling presentation of a family nearing combustion. *Shadow Tag*, as James Cihlar, points out is a “novel of ideas.” He recognizes that the novel “comments on the operation of culture at large, of zeitgeist” (219). The question of identity never dips far below the narrative’s surface. In many ways, the exploration of the many contributing attributes that uniquely make us who we are amidst billions of other humans is the magnetic force pulling most of the story’s elements together. *Shadow Tag* investigates how multiple variables contribute to the greater understanding of identity including the roles of spouse, child, artist, sister, scholar, lover, city dweller, and American Indian. Who we are and the lifewe experience are directly influenced by the manner in which we incorporate these roles into our overall identities.

Shadow Tag contributes to examinations of identity early on in the novel when Erdrich wonderfully casts a sarcastic hue over notions of quantum-measured individuals in the humorously ironic and slightly base statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Irene's husband, Gil, is desperately attempting to lure Irene's affection back, yet his efforts are fruitless and cause even more distance between him and his wife. His frustration provides cause for this insecure and sexist claim. Early in the novel, Erdrich uses Gil's juvenile suspicion to criticize the notion of blood quantum and its irrational relation to a more desirable man. Gil, never presented as a source of enlightened judgment and reliability, mentions that Germaine is "more Indian" due to his higher blood quantum. Gil believes that this makes Germaine more sought after by "mixed-blood women," a statement that clearly insults his wife's character by insinuating that "mixed-blood," and not "full-blood," women prefer "darker men" because of an intensified attraction to "purer" American Indian man. Gil believes his wife to be one of the weak who is drawn to an identity quality that he does not so readily exhibit. He continues to search out causes for his wife's aloofness, despite the fact that his actions are ultimately deserving of the blame. Irene's drifting attention has nothing to do with blood quantum since her dislike for Gil is solely a consequence of his behavior. The culmination of Gil's actions manifest an identity that Irene becomes averse to, an identity that he has constructed through an assortment of negative ingredients including alcoholism, abuse, and jealousy. Erdrich impresses upon the reader that Irene was very much in love with Gil earlier in their relationship when she was aware of the distribution of his lineage, but not yet exposed to the outcomes that would arise from his choices, the aspects of his identity that he had control over and that define his character throughout

the book. The prevailing characteristics of Gil's identity were largely a product of his life, not a blood quantum measurement that he uses to make excuses for his lessening appeal in comparison to the likes of Germaine.

As pointed out earlier in the chapter concerning identity studies, the scholarly consensus is that identity is a product of perception and social interaction; how one sees oneself and how others view the individual are the principal components of identity construction. This subjectivity can have multiple upon multiple layers. The characters of *Shadow Tag* are exceptionally dynamic; they are marked by disparate interests, skills, experiences, affections, and faults. To tackle this complexity, Erdrich employs the characters' own contemplations to convey to the reader the difficulty of absolutes. Cihlar explains that "If Erdrich's previous, community-focused novels are the public examination of colonization, *Shadow Tag* is the individual examination—up close and personal, and from the inside" (221). The Native American component of their identities is particularly important and a central motif of the novel, yet it serves as a constituent of each character rather than the sole quality for which he or she is identified. The children are just as much Minneapolis urbanites as they are anything else; however, this generalization must also be seen as a consequence of the reader's perception. Just as argued before, there is no measurement, no objective assessment to qualify the above statement. Since the children have been raised in a metropolitan city in northern Minnesota, the place where the vast majority of their experiences have taken place, the classification seems reasonable and appropriate. It is not, nevertheless, exact and is also only a fraction of the contributing elements of their identity.

This mixture concept, and its dependency on assumptions and generalizations, is accentuated in the characters of Irene and Gil, as is discussed in much greater detail later in this paper. Margaret Noori correctly highlights the representative qualities that the couple possess in terms of the situations and environment in which many contemporary American Indians find themselves: “Irene and Gil are of the pantribal generation whose parents somehow survived reorganization and termination. Empowered by the American Indian Movement, and both with access to college, they represent postcolonial urban Indians of today” (94). One of Gil’s roles that exemplifies the concept is that of an artist, a passion and occupation of his that is interpreted through an assortment of lenses by critics and patrons. Even though Gil’s “technical mastery had pushed his paintings past the West and Southwest, into Los Angeles and Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, and then at last into New York,” the title of artist was never free of an attachment: “He was still classified as an American Indian artist, or a Native American artist, or a tribal artist, or a Cree artist or a mixed-blood artist or a Metis or Chippewa artist or sometimes an artist of the American West, even though he lived in Minneapolis” (*Shadow* 37-38). This categorization shows how society cannot escape stereotyping content and images involving Native American themes as simply being American, and this perception directly affected the labeling of Gil’s identity, even though his blood quantum does not officially make him a tribal member. The perception is not dependent upon the “facts,” and in this case, the “facts” are not dependent upon the truth, which insists that Gil’s identity is most certainly that of an American Indian, an artist, and an American Indian artist.

Irene supports this understanding of layered identity throughout the novel. One moment in particular is a comparison she makes of herself to Gil. She recognizes that the awareness of their shared experiences, characteristics, and interests was an influential factor in the formation of their relationship: “We were hooked by likeness, or a likeness. Then my likeness. More symmetry: we were both raised by single mothers. We both hardly knew our fathers. Both mixed-bloods, Native, even had Cree and Chippewa blood in common. Both wanted children. Both arguers. Readers. Both drinkers” (173-74). All of these characteristics contributed to whom these characters saw themselves to be, and these qualities then became identifying features of their relationship. Erdrich not only examines the contribution of characteristics to the identity of each individual; she uses the relationship as an identifying element of Gil and Irene. The identities of husband and wife are equally explored, as the story sifts through a handful of positive distinctions and an ocean of negative manifestations. Noori states, “What they never come to realize is the need to find their individual identities in order to survive. What they spend the novel chasing instead is a combined identity as husband and wife” (94).

In addition to the examples provided by *Shadow Tag*’s characters, the complex nature of identity is also scrutinized through the acknowledgement of a false Native American stereotype, one that is tied to the fiction of 19th-century adventure books and 20th-century movies. The Native American characters in *Shadow Tag* are products of the society they interact with, and their hybrid identities are affected by the constant influence of their environment. Owens comments on the recognition of this trend found in many novels by Native Americans: “In literature by contemporary Indian authors, we find characters who constantly face this dilemma of an identity constructed within the

authoritative discourse of the non-Indian world. In order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world—in order to be seen at all—the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside” (*Mixedblood* 12-13). Riel believes in a fictional Indian hero that she aims to become, a belief that is a result from her participation in the non-Indian world. The popular portrait of the American Indian is still chained to a fallacious black-and-white John Wayne caricature. Erdrich addresses this phenomenon by having Riel, Irene’s daughter, idolize the fanciful invention referred to as the “old time Indians” (*Shadow* 101).

Riel’s naivety is explored through an assortment of conversations between Riel and her mother as she attempts to emulate the practices and skill sets that she believes, only slightly suggestive of the truth, to be representative of what a “real” Indian would possess (*Shadow* 114). Riel’s character will be discussed in further detail, but she highlights a trend that *Shadow Tag* demonstrates of identities created by outside perspectives and misinterpretations. Riel is frequently at odds with her father’s behavior, although rarely overtly and mostly hidden in her own thoughts. She feels that if she can become more “Indian,” she will be able to counter her father’s belligerent conduct and exaggerated reactions. Finding motivation from overhearing a conversation between her mother and father concerning the future of their relationship and the probable battle of who would gain custody, Riel senses that there is the possibility that she would be forced to leave her mother and live with her father, an outcome that she dreads. Contemplating her reaction to Gil’s next emotional or physical attack, she plans a response: “The next time her father lashed out, Riel would too. She’d bite, kick, scratch like a wildcat. A cougar. A thing unafraid. She would be what she was—an Indian, only a *real* one”

(114). Although the reader sympathizes with Riel's passion, her comparison is faulty. Riel has envisioned a strong response that is the product of an idealized stereotype. She feels that if she were a "real" Indian, she would react in a manner that would be courageous and punitive. The anger and fear she holds is universal, and the desire to physically defend herself from the attacker is not something that just being satisfactorily pure will enable her to do. The audience is not convinced that Riel's inability to recreate a "real Indian" response is anything indicative of her not having an authentic Indian identity. She is a young girl wanting to defend herself and her family from an abusive father, and just as Gil's American Indian identity is not to blame for his destructive behavior, Riel's lack of physical response is certainly not a product of her not being Indian "enough."

Erdrich pushes this notion of how stereotypes confuse identity by including Irene, the leading protagonist, as a guilty party in making the actions of earlier Native Americans seem mystical and free of error. After an enjoyable time ice skating on a local frozen lake, Riel asks, "What did the old time Indians do if they fell through the ice?" Wanting her daughter to find strength in her Native American ancestry, she claims, "They never fell through the ice. . . . There are many kinds of ice and they could look at the ice and they could tell immediately whether it would hold their weight" (*Shadow* 101). As if no Native Americans ever fell through the often deceptive layers of North American, frozen lake ice, Riel senses that her fear of falling through is a consequence of her not understanding the methods the "real" Indians employed: "How did they learn?" she replies (101). Adding discomfort to Riel's contemplation, Irene responds, "From each other. . . . Knowledge passed through the generations" (101). Riel is left with the

sense that she knows very little about surviving the difficulties of her environment because she lacks the connection and instruction from earlier generations. Irene supplies Riel with tidbits of instruction, but Riel is left to believe that she is inadequate in protecting herself because she lacks the prowess of her Native American ancestors. Erdrich presents Riel, as well as Irene and Gil to some extent, as believing in a myth that is propagated through a 21st-century misunderstanding of culturally unique populations, both current and of the past: they are simply human and not miraculous. Certain faculties result from generations of exposure to and experience with variables provided by the natural world, but this does not make a population supernatural and invincible. Riel and Irene's authentic Native American identities have little to do with their ability to stay afloat on thinning ice.

Although *Shadow Tag* is not exclusively a novel about identity, it maintains a constant focus on the challenges one faces in resolving personal expectations and appetites amidst external forces of coercion and control. For the Native American author, this turbulent junction of the internal versus the external is magnified by the addition of colliding worlds and cultures as is again discussed in Owens's *Mixedblood*: "I would suggest that the Native American novel is the quintessential postmodern frontier text, and the problem of identity at the center of virtually every Native American novel is the problem of internalized transculturation" (46). This problem lacks any foreseen solution. The lesson is one of endurance, learning to acknowledge the confluence of cultures and keeping the aspects of each identity, or at least the characteristics the individual admires, influential and relevant. When one culture overtakes another, however, the ability to recognize distinctions and maintain anchor identity characteristics becomes arduous.

David Mitchell, focusing on how cultural hegemony is handled in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, speaks to a function that many of Erdrich's characters serve: "More often than not, characters find themselves acting as instruments of their own oppression because they have been unwittingly coerced into incorporating dominant cultural beliefs and perspectives that have gradually replaced all but the most resistant and persistent vestiges of their Native heritage" (163). *Shadow Tag* does not break from this tradition but rather supplements the investigation of cultural hegemony with consideration of emotional oppression occurring in relationships, an interesting metaphor existing in the novel that compares the near-destruction of the Native American community with the destruction of the individual. Although the American Indian connection is frequently referenced, Irene's family often appears isolated and disconnected from any active community. Their associations are often a product of memory or contrived practice, but again, it is not up to me to measure how this distance affects any type of identity claim. The individual collects, recognizes, and manifests his or her connections to others.

CHAPTER V

Deeds and Endeavors

“By remaining still, in one position or another, for her husband, she had released a double into the world. It was impossible, now, to withdraw that reflection. Gil owned it. He had stepped on her shadow” (Erdrich 39).

As suggested earlier, Erdrich uses the intricacy of her characters to expose the faults of believing in fixed identities. The perplexing character of Gil, being both a target and a subjugator, confirms this conviction through his paternal despotism. He is the dominant oppressor in the household, and his suffocating tendencies represent restrictions on individual identity; every member of Gil’s family wants to escape the father and husband’s suffocating weight. Gil’s oppressive actions towards Irene and his children act as a metaphor for white imperialism. His behavior also works as evidence to support the belief that one’s deeds and endeavors call attention to characteristics of one’s identity more so than lineage, cultural symbols, or ethnic labels. Hegemony is a salient concept that can illuminate the analysis of Gil’s relationship with his family and the consequential effect this has on their identities. Using Gramsci’s definition of “hegemony as a cultural and institutional order,” Bradford R. Hogue argues that “Hegemony is important to discussions of identity and identity studies because it contributes to the formation and maintenance of individual and collective identities” (325). Gil is a hegemonic force in his house, exerting control over his children through physical and emotional violence and control over his wife through extortion and a more abstract, but equally successful, form of domination achieved via canvas and paint. Gil’s repressiveness is tied to *Shadow Tag*’s reflection on identity in multiple ways. Gil symbolizes the trends that are

responsible for much of the social stratification that affects a broad range of identities. Gil can be seen to represent the formation and maintenance of relationships of dominance, those occurring between individuals, communities, and political entities. Jan Pakulski, writing about complex inequality, states that “actual patterns of inequality are directly associated with how people socially construct their understandings of self-identity and others’ identities” (120). This violent and despairing antagonist interacts with his family on a daily basis as if he were a sling-shot pulled back, barely holding the tension until a violent release. This constant and heavy intimidation became another influence on his family’s identity; they were the victims of a bully father and husband, and the mechanisms enabling their emotional survival would engrain themselves into Irene and the children’s identities. The maltreatment and exhibition of inequality reaches its zenith when Gil rapes Irene. Gil’s conviction that he owns and commands the members of his family convinces Irene that his tyranny may have no end: “But maybe he is going to kill me, drown, me. Or maybe he will turn on the hair dryer and throw it in the tub. Maybe he will slice my wrists and stage my suicide” (*Shadow* 222). This “paranoia,” as she calls it, occurs immediately after Irene is raped. Gil has not only sexually assaulted his wife; he causes Irene to fear that her life may be in jeopardy. He symbolizes the vast array of agencies that can have a dramatic, even life-ending, effect on one’s being, an outcome that may have a much deeper influence on one’s identity than an influence that exists outside of experience. As *Shadow Tag* progresses, Gil becomes a growing metaphor for western colonialism and the accompanying atrocities that American Indians encountered for hundreds of years.

Erdrich has Gil demonstrate how one's actions and environment, as well as one's exposure to other people, are the most persuasive contributing factors to the compilation of variables that make up one's identity. Gil's Indian lineage has nothing to do with his iniquitous behavior, just as May's supportive and kind nature has nothing to do with her Indian lineage either. This isn't to suggest that lineage doesn't contribute to the novel's characters; their lineage affects physical characteristics, a collective history and community for which they feel a connection, and a source of unique experiences and memories largely associated with visiting the reservation. The complexity of identity is revealed when one begins to grasp that the substance of identity is fluid and not exclusively anchored to the past or to a genetic line. Erdrich pushes this understanding onto the reader by creating a novel that specifically employs Gil's conduct—while operating in the roles of husband, father, and artist—as the most significant contributor to the characterization of the novel's most prominent antagonist. Although Gil is the descendent of an American Indian father, he is never presented to the audience as being representative of the American Indian community but rather representative of a cruel and recalcitrant personality.

Gil's identity as an artist contributes most significantly to associations with colonialism and imperialism. Gil's identity as an artist relies almost exclusively on his paintings of Irene. In addition, the family's economic existence is solely dependent upon his success as an artist. The connection to the subjugation of the Native American people and the corresponding, seemingly invincible nature of Gil's artistic exploitation of Irene is suggested very early in the novel. The association never relents: "Her portrayals immediately evoked problems of exploitation, the indigenous body, the devouring

momentum of history” (*Shadow* 11). The irony of the frequent portrayal of Irene as a victim or a sexual object is that the art community interpreted the barbarous imagery as symbolic of the victimization of the American Indian—“. . . he thought that he had used her humiliation as something larger—as *the iconic suffering of a people*, one critic had said” (*Shadow* 36)—yet the reality is that the painter was painting the figurative outcomes of his own destructive deeds. Gil was not painting scenes of Irene as a casualty of the white belief in supremacy as much as he was painting Irene as a casualty of his affection: “He’d done a series of landscapes, huge canvases vast with light, swimming Albert Bierstadt or Hudson School replicas, in which she appeared raped, dismembered, dying of smallpox in graphic medical detail” (*Shadow* 30).

A unique facet of Irene and Gil’s relationship as painter and model is that Irene continues to voluntarily participate, except for occasions when she passes out intoxicated, despite her awareness that the painting is an extension of his desire to manipulate and control her. Irene is lucidly aware of her role in Gil’s paintings. She understands the objectification and virtual consumption that occurs when she sits for Gil. Responding to a woman’s comment suggesting that Irene and Gil are “the same kind of person,” Irene retorts, “No, . . . I’m just food” (*Shadow* 91). Irene even admits to a percentage of culpability in Gil’s motivation to seize her image on canvas. Writing in her blue notebook, she admits, “You are an unlucky thirteen years older than me. But here is the most telling thing: you wish to possess me. And my mistake: I loved you and let you think you could” (18). Gil is also not ignorant of the ramifications of his paintings, even as his certainty appears clouded by his addiction to paint. He questions himself regarding the possible consequences of his paintings: “Was he stealing something from her by

painting her? Was he making some sort of copy of her that resided in another dimension from the paintings?" (46). Even if only for a moment, Gil senses that his paintings of Irene somehow suggest parallels between his undertakings and those of the colonial powers that were the symbolic perpetrators of many of the events he depicts in paint. Adeptly avoiding the suggestion of the existence of absolutes, Erdrich uses Gil to highlight the multifarious nature all persons possess, which also sustains the correlation to identity.

Gil is unquestionably presented in a nefarious light, and he is clearly the most significant cause of pain and turmoil to his family. Nevertheless, Erdrich encourages the audience to see Gil as flawed rather than voluntarily evil. Several of his distressing deeds result from jealousy and depression. Although incredibly destructive to her well-being, Gil desperately desires his wife's affections. Sharing with Irene a troubled fantasy he has of their combined death, he concedes, "You don't know how much I love you, and I wish I didn't since you obviously don't want me to, but I do, and I wish it so much that one of my persistent fantasies is that when we die we are both cremated and our ashes are mixed together in one beautiful vase . . ." (*Shadow* 155). After Irene and the children have finally escaped Gil's emotional prison, largely thanks to his mental breakdown orchestrated by Irene, Irene acknowledges Gil's love, albeit broken and detrimental to the ill-fated recipients: "And how you loved us. Like crazy. In a mean way. But love is love. How all of that got mixed so that on the holiest of unholy nights I can call your confiscated number and whisper into the phone, Please don't kill yourself. Live on. Endure" (237). Gil's most acute failing was not that he did not know how to love; he simply loved in crippling ways.

Gil's identity as a father is shown to be fragile as Irene attempts to push Gil away from her. As part of her dual diary scheme, she attempts to convince Gil that he is not the father of their children, a growing suspicion that provides a source of significant emotional turmoil for Gil. He admits, "I don't think I'm the father of the children. I think that Irene let the truth slip out at our last session, or at our first session" (*Shadow* 201). A seemingly objective matter is made subjective by Irene's manipulation; one of Gil's foundational identity structures, that of the biological father of the children he has supported and loved, wavers through the power of a fictional story placed in a fictional diary that exists as a consequence of Gil's inability to set and abide by reasonable limits. This doubt and the uncertainty regarding the extent of Irene's deception began affecting his work and his strength: "But now he was losing confidence and control. His paintings were hiding from him because Irene was hiding something" (9).

One of the examples in which Erdrich directly addresses Native American identity concerns is through the telling of Gil's childhood and the death of his father. Even though Gil is recognized as a leading American Indian painter by the art community, a central aspect of his overall identity, Gil is unable to join a tribe and his status is uncertain: "Because Gil's father hadn't married Gil's mother, who was white, or had a chance to place his name on Gil's birth certificate, Gil could not be enrolled in any of his tribes, one of which at any rate suffered termination and reinstatement, hopelessly snarling the enrollment records" (*Shadow* 83). Gil is not officially identified by his father's tribe as a legitimate member, yet Gil became the face of modern American Indian art.

Erdrich continues to show the twists and turns of identity formation through referencing Gil's childhood and his attendance at his father's funeral, an event that was responsible for "Some of Gil's best childhood memories" (*Shadow* 83). Gil did not know his father or his father's family. He did not grow up within the Native American community; Gil had no exposure to the experiences that Irene participated in as a young girl visiting the reservation. He was raised on "*The Brady Bunch*, *All in the Family*, and *I Love Lucy*" (*Shadow* 92). Living in his mother's house and participating in her community, Gil did not know any other Indians except, as he would later claim, his father. His exposure to other Indians before his father's funeral included "quiet women in the grocery stores, who appeared and disappeared in the aisles, an occasional drunk person on the sidewalk, classmates with whom he did not associate, or an Indian on TV" (*Shadow* 84). Gil's father's funeral was the first opportunity for Gil to participate in the Native American community of his father. This introduction began when "A car with brown people suddenly appeared in the parking lot of the apartment building where Gil lived with his mother in Billings, Montana" (*Shadow* 83). Again, Gil was the son of an American Indian father, but he did not feel like this detail contributed to his identity until he was invited to interact with other American Indians.

Gil is a complex antagonist who serves multiple functions in *Shadow Tag*; one of the most important includes the necessary role of painful instigator that leads most of the other prominent characters to question their place and the direction in which their lives are trending. Gil's dysfunctional admiration and paralleling repression of Irene is marked by the variations in qualities of his paintings: "Some were starkly sexual, stirringly tender. Others were such cruel portrayals that her eyes smarted and her cheeks burned as

if she'd been slapped" (*Shadow* 31). Gil's attempts to correct himself and demonstrate his affection often lead to deeper rifts between Gil and Irene. Gil refuses to consider being separated from his family, even though Irene begs for distance. He is determined to create an ideal life for his family that he is simply unable to facilitate. Ultimately, he secures the family's ruin by choosing to end his own life, an ending that allows Irene to turn her back upon the separation that she had gained and join Gil in death. Irene has feared an outcome that involved Gil in her demise; she just didn't know that the dream she had experienced the night before their wedding had prophetic value in addition to the emotional turmoil that their relationship bred: "I dreamed that I was savagely attacked and pulled apart by wild dogs" (*Shadow* 18).

Gil's creation of Irene's double, the image that is forced to exist in a constant state of painted metaphor, illustrates the manufactured properties that contribute to overall identity. The notion that identities are created—not necessarily as the outcome of a conscious process—accepts that perception, behavior, and proximity have more to do with one's recognized identity than one's biological origins. Gil creates new identities for Irene every time he paints her into a scene, imprisoning each representation of his wife in a world of aesthetic, political, and sexual protest. Through this process, he seizes Irene slowly, owning her image more and more with each painting. Irene, fully aware of her complacency in this apparent capitulation, allows the paintings to continue to extract and alter her identity, despite her ability to stop participating. Margaret Noori sees this as an analogy for contemporary Native Americans: "Gil wanted to own her body, soul, and image. She was the commodity around which his world revolved. The secret of this

book, and of the lives of many Indians today, is that Irene could have taken back her identity” (96).

CHAPTER VI

Descendants

“I only write real stories,” Riel said. “I stick to exactly the way things happen. If I imagine a weird thing, I write it under Unreal Thoughts.”

“Like what?”

“Like over there, living with the dogs on that island like a real Indian, surviving a terrorist attack” (Erdrich 102).

It would be difficult to ignore at least the situational truth behind the familiar idiom, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” There is a complexity to this statement that usually goes unnoticed. It goes without saying that simply being the recipient of an impressive structure of chromosomes does not make a duplicate. Recognizable similarities between parents and their offspring are defined as traits, and each child is the recipient of the same number of traits from each parent. The specific combination of traits that are passed on, however, is not a defined package that is repeated with every conception by the same pair of parents (“Generations”). This detail is the reason that siblings will have some shared characteristics but will not be identical unless they are the product of the same fertilized egg, as is the case with identical twins. As a result, some of the criteria which one may use to understand whom he or she “is” certainly comes from his or her parents, like hairline shape or freckles (“Inherited”). Even amongst a large family with many children, the unique combinations of traits allow for distinct and singular offspring. These physical attributes may be considered an element of one’s identity, but the significance of their contribution is largely a consequence of how others have incorporated these characteristics in the interaction with the individual. In this case,

the idiom holds more truth than we may originally grant it. The apple's similarity to the tree is not a corollary to the shared physical characteristics. An apple is quite distinct from a tree. The metaphorical similarity is a consequence of the apple being grown in such close proximity to the tree. Florian, Riel, and Stoney's identities are not defined by the traits they gained from Gil and Irene; the children's identities are largely formed by their proximity to such dysfunctional parents.

Florian, Irene and Gil's oldest son, is a young man characterized by his love for science and math, as well as the frequent recipient of physical and emotional abuse delivered by his father. Florian is too intelligent to simply dismiss his father's failings as the status quo for parenting, certainly not the more severe impulsiveness of the alcoholic episodes. As Irene reminds Gil early in the novel, "Florian is a genius, probably" (*Shadow* 34). Florian's brilliance adds to the complexity of his character and his relationship to the rest of his family. He is continually broken by Gil's anger and then put back together by the magnetism of numbers. Even the soothing care of his mother was replaced by the certainty of geometry: "Florian had been so attached to Irene that he had wept, every day for a month, when leaving for nursery school. He had wept until he found his second love—fractals" (*Shadow* 86). His faculties made his high school only partially relevant since "In fifth grade he'd finished high school math and now he went to the University of Minnesota every afternoon" (87). Florian's identity is undoubtedly influenced by his gifted intelligence; nevertheless, it is the interaction with others and their treatment of Florian, recognizing his superior intellect that affects him the most. Florian's appearance, ironically, is more similar to Gil's than any of the other children. Fitting, perhaps, since he was "named for his father, Gilbert Florian, and his grandfather

Florian LaRose” (*Shadow* 58). Adding to the complexity even more, Florian’s looks represent much of the polarity exhibited by so many elements transpiring within the family. As his mother admits, “Surprisingly in a boy so handsome, he could also seem a little goofy, bewildered, his glasses tilted or slipping” (85). Although a bright young pupil tied to physics and astronomy interests, unlike the pursuits most of his peers would be presumably concerned about, he also cared about his style and look, mostly marked by rock band names: “The jeans and black T-shirts were a kind of Florian uniform” (58 *Shadow*). The somber yet modish look matched the nature of his face, which “was faunlike” and “subtle with malice” (15). Florian readily complements *Shadow Tag*’s exploration of identity by being rather idiosyncratic except for the one thing he shares with too many other children: he is the victim of abuse. Unlike most 13-year-old boys, he attends the university for part of the day, drinks and smokes pot on occasion, and sees himself as “an unobserved particle,” an identity that he admits is “only hypothetical” (*Shadow* 190).

Florian’s contradicting elements stretch deep into the relationship with his father, also. He despises his father for the abuse, as well as the treatment that he observes the other members of his family receiving. Unlike formulas and theorems, the paintings of Irene confuse him, and the addiction he observes in his mother is saddening. Yet these circumstances only seem to deepen the blame he places on Gil. Even though Irene states, “Florian had never liked him, even from the beginning,” the boy still holds on to a ray of hope that the possibility for his father to become the father he wants exists (*Shadow* 85). Surprisingly, while suffering from the contusion that is growing on his forehead after one of Gil’s attacks, Florian succumbs to his father’s apology by informing Gil that Irene had

taken a picture of the bruise to keep as evidence. Florian so desperately wants the anger and disappointment in his father to be neutralized, even to the extent that he betrays his mother hoping that it will appease Gil. Later, after Irene in turn betrays the children by not letting go of Gil, both figuratively and literally, Florian attends to his lingering anger by becoming “addicted to everything he tried—booze, grass, cocaine, meth” (*Shadow* 248).

Irene informs Riel of the origins of her name to bolster her resilience to the emotional turmoil existent around her: “You’re named for a poet, said Irene, a poet whose visions of an Indian nation died in the bloody snow at a place called Batoche, in Canada. This is why you must be strong” (40). This connection to a “real” Indian, as Riel refers to the American Indians who lived many years ago before the advances of the modern age, inspires Riel to complement her identity with the characteristics that she feels exemplified earlier Indians. She is a product of the stereotyping and ignorance pervasive throughout non-Indian communities that is largely a result of the mythical “noble savage” caricature perpetuated by 20th-century Hollywood cinema. This belief that “real” Indians exist within a narrow range of identity parameters, the small collection of details that mark the fictional Indian stereotype, is limited by Irene’s more informed and experienced insight. Irene is encouraged by Riel’s interest, but she is only partially aware of the extent that Riel is pursuing an identity shift, one that Riel sees as being integral to her emotional and physical survival. She believes that her transformation into the type of Indian that she learned about in school will allow her to successfully fight off her father, Gil (*Shadow* 59).

Erdrich uses Riel to highlight the distinction between one simply born into an identity category and one who embraces a manifestation of that identity and the consequential collection of dynamic identity characteristics. Riel is certainly an American Indian, but her connection with the Indian community has largely been through an assortment of distant memories and information provided to her by her history books. She lacks the social and personal interaction that is so integral to a more satisfying identity formation. Although limited, Riel remembers events that she sees as supporting her Native American identity, those that involved the interaction with other Native Americans other than those in her immediate family. She recalls “powwows, visits to her grandmother, wakes, moments during ceremonies, times she’d put tobacco on the ground to pray with her mother” (59). Yet, despite these experiences, Riel feels like she must alter her behavior to better demonstrate her Indian distinctiveness. In the article, “Towards a Native American ‘Realism’: The Amphibious Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” Hans Bak sees this desire of many of Erdrich’s characters to reestablish their Indian identity as a consequence of Erdrich’s focus on the “human reality of her characters”: “Those of tribal descent may even be at an advantage if they can learn to reconnect themselves to a vanishing inheritance of sacred ceremonies, tribal wisdom, and a belief in the harmony and unity of all life” (146). Riel fears that she will be abandoned if a “sudden panic” ever hits Minneapolis, so her survival, she believes, is rooted in her ability to master the practices and skills that her ancestors from many years ago relied upon for their own survival (*Shadow* 116).

Riel’s acute desire to reconnect to the identity of her American Indian ancestors is partially fulfilled by her decision to “construct a memory chart.” An older Riel, acting as

one of *Shadow Tag*'s narrators, informs us that by "adding to the memory chart, she became aware of herself as an Indian, an American Indian, a Native person" (59). It is only through the synthesis of the memories of her past participation in actual events and relationships with other Native Americans that she begins to consider herself in some respects a "real" Indian. This desire to pull back from the melting pot effect of Americanization and return to a unique cultural foundation arises in past Erdrich novels. As Allan Chavkin reminds us in his article, "Vision and Revision in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," this focus was especially important in *Love Medicine*'s story, "The Island": "This theme of the importance of repudiating assimilation and returning to one's heritage is central to 'The Island,' which focuses on Lulu Nanapush as a young woman" (95). Riel's treatment of the island also reminds the Erdrich reader of Lulu as she seeks to return to the historical and natural landscape of her family to exorcise the conventions and habits forced upon her at the school for Indian children (Chavkin, "Vision" 98). She is not entirely convinced, however, due to the competing belief—a consequence of the hegemonic educational perspective, stocked with inaccuracies, that the American Indian is a historical artifact—that Indians "could survive in the wild . . . lived on buffalo, hunted with bows and arrows, never cried except when looking at the ruin white people had made of their land. Indians wore powwow clothes all of the time and could talk to animals" (*Shadow* 59). Erdrich demonstrates the toll that mythical stereotypes take on Native Americans of mixed descent in both their own interpretations of who they are, as well as how others view the legitimacy of identity claims. David Mitchell blames this "mystification" on the intentional and unintentional "devaluing and obstructing [of] people's access to cultural customs and native language" (163). He claims that this

cultural obstruction “fragments an oppressed group’s ability to perceive the world through meaningful, national forms” (163). Mitchell adds that “Consequently, the resulting loss gradually begins to sever a people from a coherent world view and forces them to occupy a sort of limbo that has no roots in their ancestral past or hegemonic present” (163).

This distancing from the cultural realities of a community is largely a consequence of the dispersion of a population from a geographical center which would be marked by frequent exposure to like individuals, as happens with many Native Americans who move from the reservation to urban environments that offer the hope of better economic conditions. Riel’s family rarely visits American Indian communities or participates in associated events, and until Irene’s meeting of her half-sister, May, they were predominantly an insular Native American entity existing alone. Concerning biracial identity, David L. Brunnsma writes, “Multiracial people’s diverse racial identities are negotiated in social interaction; founded in racialized experiences; sown in familial and institutional socialization; differentially embedded within racialized social spaces and places” (64). Once Irene and Gil are dead, Riel and her brothers are raised by May and May’s partner, Bobbi, along with more “brothers, sisters, [and] twenty cousins” (*Shadow* 248). The increased exposure to and interaction with many more Native Americans “turned out to be a good thing,” as Riel thinks because it allowed her to reinterpret her Indian identity through a more realistic and contemporary lens: “I also found that the old-time Indians are us, still going to sundances, ceremonies, talking in the old language and even using the old skills if we feel like it, not making a big deal” (248-49). So, as addressed earlier, the enrichment of one’s understanding of his or her identity is largely a

consequence of the application of behaviors, practices, and customs unique to the identity type. Riel was born a Native American, but she did not feel “real” until she saw through the haze of false or antiquated stereotypes and learned what it meant to be an Indian as a result of being accepted into a family and community of Native Americans. Richard Jenkins supports Riel’s conclusions by explaining the importance of socialization to identity creation and maintenance:

Human beings learn all that they know and most of what they can do directly *from*, or indirectly during dealings *with*, other humans (and this does not refer just to socialization in childhood and youth, nor does it ignore individual creativity and innovation). Identities are no different, and are definitively social: Their production and reproduction depends on interaction with other humans, with some of whom they will be in some senses shared.” (767)

Riel’s immediate family does not provide the social and cultural exposure that she will later find in the larger, extended community introduced to her by May. Riel acknowledges amidst her early efforts to redefine her Native American identity that “Her family, meanwhile, had forgotten their heritage” (*Shadow* 119).

Before the enlightenment that occurs as a result of living with a new family of American Indians, as well as participating in their customs and activities, Riel’s identity crisis not only includes her evaluation of the legitimacy of her Indian ties; she is also deeply concerned with the fortitude of her emotional strength and the potential for Riel to grow into a respectable opponent for anyone seeking to do harm to her or her siblings. This desire to be able to defend herself arises out of the fear she has of her father and the

frustration she feels at her inability to strike back after his attacks. Riel believes that to “get the better of him,” she must learn how to “take away his power” (*Shadow* 62). To do this, she decides that she must learn from the stoicism exhibited during the “training of young Mandan warriors,” a gruesome process as reported in one of the books Riel takes from her mother’s bedside. Riel becomes determined to “not be just a Native person, an American Indian, an Ojibwe or a Dakota or a Cree, but a person of example” (*Shadow* 62). To achieve this status, she believes that she must “become a girl of depth, strength, cunning, and truth” (*Shadow* 62).

As mentioned earlier, Riel is “certain that, when disaster struck, she would be the one left behind” (*Shadow* 116). The list that Riel provides is partially reasonable, partially preposterous; nevertheless, her fearful expectations are completely sincere. Bombs, asteroids, pandemics, and falling airplanes, although unlikely, are at least plausible, especially when considering real events of the last decade (*Shadow* 116). However, Riel’s youth is still a principal attribute of her identity, even with her troublesome concerns and actions. She adds that the threats to Minneapolis also include “a vampire uprising” and “Indian killers or born-again Nazis” (116). Any of these events, as Riel is convinced, would cause her family to leave her amongst the city’s forgotten. This, she adds, is because she is the “quiet one” (117). Riel’s hushed existence is not a consequence of timidity, she claims; it is purposeful as evidenced in that “She blended into her surroundings” (*Shadow* 117). Riel was aware of which spots in the floor and which doors would make noise. She intended, or at least excused, this approach as making her more like a Native American: “She never crept or hid. She walked upright, barefooted, silent with an Indian art” (*Shadow* 117). The stealth is not

meant to allow Riel to escape from her father; it, as is the self-targeted beatings, is intended to make her a more formidable opponent: “Yet when her father got angry, she did not always take advantage of her knowledge and vanish. She tried to make herself breathe. She tried to make herself think. Sometimes she chose, like the dogs, to walk toward his anger” (*Shadow* 117). The identity that Riel was striving for was not just that of an “old-time Indian on TV” (119); Riel wants to become a warrior.

To thoroughly transform herself, Riel admits to engaging in a collection of painful exercises intended to toughen her responses to distressing stimuli and increase her threshold for pain. These preparatory measures match one of her apparently central tenets: “The first thing about being prepared is to take the future seriously” (*Shadow* 116). The future, as far as Riel is concerned, will involve her solo survival crusade in the face of near Armageddon or the manifestation of her “newly honed senses” (116), a “surprise attack” against her father (117). One of these outcomes involved gathering and creating supplies, stashed and kept ready in “an old pink Workout Barbie bag” (118). The other possibility, the one that this 11-year-old seems more intent on bringing to fruition, involves a sad course of abusive preparation: “she was hardening herself to blows. At night, she struck herself with a ruler. She slapped her own face. She stood in painful positions, held her breath underwater in the bathtub, pulled her hair, and raised bruises on her legs” (118). Riel is hurting herself so that no one else can. If she finds herself unable to carry out the revengeful attack, Riel, as she hopes, will at least be able to resist the involuntary flinching that occurs whenever Gil raises his hands. Riel regards her flinching as not only advertising weakness but also eliciting additional strikes, as Gil confirms when he hits Riel’s face as retribution for her flinching when he attempts to

brush snow from her hair. Following Gil's ironic and irrational blow, her determination finds a foundation as she recovers from her dissatisfaction that she did not act in a way that one of the Indians in one of Irene's books would have acted: "Some Indian, she thought, but she was only temporarily dejected. After all, she had just begun" (*Shadow* 63). Riel then embarks on the quest to transform her identity from the young victim to a woman of power. Riel firmly establishes that her actions in response to her father's cruelty contribute to how she values herself as a person. Her identity will have less to do with her decision to let her hair "grow long so that she could put it into braids" and more to do with the memorialized strength she attempts to emulate from her poet namesake. Again, *Shadow Tag* questions the notion that identity is only a consequence of birth; identity is more of a consequence of whom we choose to become as we progress through our lives. Riel's choice, although softened by realistic constraints like "the courage yet to pierce her skin," not only reflects her envy of the sturdiness and resilience of the Mandan warriors, but demonstrates a passion to do whatever necessary to break free from the destructive magnetism that Gil and Irene emit (*Shadow* 117). Riel looks to the past so she might survive the future. The appreciation the audience has for this relationship between the family's past and future only fully materializes at the discovery that Irene does not share the role of narrator with an omniscient, disconnected author. The older Riel's participation in the writing of the story connects the growing identity of her youth with the knowledge and maturity of the older graduate student.

Few of Riel's maltreatments and survival preparations are discovered by her parents. Irene's alcoholism allows her to numb her emotions, as well as provides a means to evade the concern a parent has for the physical welfare of her children. Florian's

bruised head appears to engender Irene's attention more as a point of evidence to later use against Gil than it is because of a sympathetic mother's concern for her injured son. Riel's prediction of the abandonment, which supposedly would result from a natural disaster or national security breach, is symbolic of the desertion she and the other children encounter at home. The moments in the novel that show Irene or Gil exhibiting model parental behavior are few, and this most certainly has an effect on the children. Florian partially fills the void left by his parent's distracted attention by drinking and smoking marijuana. Stoney draws his parents into a present, two-dimensional world. The children's collective identity is one affected by an absence of parental solicitude, a fact that sometimes pulls the siblings together for comfort and exchanged commiseration in Florian's bed when their parents fight drunkenly in the other room. Riel's self-inflicted harm is only one of the multiple secrets the children keep from their parents: "In the daylight the children never mentioned sleeping in Florian's bed, or holding one another's hands" (*Shadow* 80). This practice of providing a kindred demonstration of love and comfort to one another in place of their parents' expected but absent care will provide familiarity and equanimity during the severest extent of parental dearth after the children later witness their mother chase Gil into a cold and wet communal grave. Sadly, despite the appearance that Irene fought to free herself from the dysfunctional relationship with Gil, she first began her plunge into the dark cold waters on the day she allowed Gil to first capture her image in paint.

CHAPTER VII

I America

“She was strong and had an offhand self-confidence about her body. She thought she could do anything. She was an excellent swimmer” (Erdrich 8).

The irony of the above description of Irene causes the novel’s repeat reader, during a moment of physical and literary alliance, discomfort. The uneasiness comes at the moment when one feels herself or himself begin the first cellular movements that might multiply and grow into a smile; however, this instance is fleeting because the reader immediately remembers that the underlying ironic humor results from the fact that the novel’s protagonist—albeit troubled, addicted, and manipulative—elicits pity and sympathy, especially within the last 30 pages of the novel, but tragically spoils her unrelenting efforts that center around her desire to leave her abusive husband. Irene, the “excellent swimmer,” enters the frigid Madeline Island surf to save Gil from his self-imposed, murky-water grave (*Shadow* 8). She joins Gil forever, and if she thought that “she could do anything,” including escape her husband’s wicked grip, as well as save him from himself, she presumably realizes that she has misjudged herself only after it is dismally too late (8).

Irene’s character, more than any other in *Shadow Tag*, leads the reader to question the belief that there is an objectivity or static nature regarding identity. She is the coil in which Erdrich charges the audience to interpret the individual through multiple lenses, those that are generally put in place through the actions and behaviors of the individual. As discussed earlier, Irene’s family exists in the growing sphere of hybridity, tied to their Native American origins through vanishing memories, popular television and movies,

and an assortment of books exhibiting varying degrees of reliability. The family's day-to-day identities are largely colored with the average stories of urban, late-20th-century Americans, with perhaps a few extra drops of pain and dysfunctional parenting added in to darken the hues. To accompany this contemporary mode, Irene is acutely dissatisfied with her marriage, a discontent that is largely the consequence of Gil's abusive behavior to both Irene and their children.

The story of the dissolving and dysfunctional marriage facilitates one of the novel's most obvious investigations into the complexity of identity and the fallacy of believing we objectively know one another. This is achieved through the incorporation of Irene's two journals, one genuinely kept to document Irene's sentiments and experiences (the blue notebook) and another intended to mislead Gil about Irene's fidelity and authenticity (the red diary). These journals fulfill the trend that Erdrich commonly employs by allowing comment and evaluation by the characters regarding the events that are unfolding. James Cihlar, writing in a review of *Shadow Tag*, adds that "The plot is relatively linear, consisting largely of omniscient narrative fragments describing Irene's thoughts and actions. However, external textual elements inform and interrupt this narrative, as in Erdrich's previous novels, here in the form of diary excerpts" (219). The discourse arising from the diaries, which is directed at *Shadow Tag*'s reader more than an act of Irene confiding in herself, acts as a defense; Irene can report the egregious acts of her husband and nullify any judgments placed upon her that may result from the lies she conjures for Gil's consumption.

The metaphor that the diaries offer in terms of the multilayered and equivocal aspects of identity is strengthened even more with the recognition that the "third person

in the writing,” the narrator “with the gift of omniscience,” is an older Riel (*Shadow* 251). She “put it all together,” including the diaries and other resources that record the family’s physical and emotional movements. The audience does not learn of Riel’s authorial collusion until the very end, two pages before the last page of the book. Our assumptions as to the identity of the narrator turn out to be fallacious; Riel has compiled, edited, and written for both her father and her mother. Even the identity of the narrator is fluid and indiscernible until the narrator herself provides the details describing the events and conditions that took place as the children grew and entered adulthood. The lawyer who assisted with the dissemination of Irene and Gil’s estate unintentionally provides Riel the authority to become the family storyteller by informing Riel, “Your mother told me that this should be given to you when you turned twenty-one” (*Shadow* 250). The safe-deposit box and its contents become the impetus for Riel’s shift into her new—and for a significant time for the reader, secret—identity as family historian and audience tour guide.

Irene’s selection of Riel to be the recipient of the diaries and the stories, and for that matter, the material that the audience is led to acknowledge as being the most trustworthy, demonstrates Irene’s desire for her experiences and accounts to become history by the creation of a narrative. Irene ironically uses this belief to her advantage when she, in reference to a claim of infidelity, claims, “History is two things, after all. To have meaning, history must consist of both occurrence and narrative. If she never told, if the two of them never talked about it, there was no narrative” (*Shadow* 105). This notion is also tied to considerations of identity as Cihlar suggests: “Irene is kidding herself, of course, but this line speaks to the fragmentation of the self, the displacement of

identity, that comes from storytelling, particularly when our stories are co-opted, as in Gil's paintings of Irene, or Catlin's paintings of Native Americans" (220-21). In this case and at the time, Irene is attempting to appease her concerns by labeling an affair as "meaningless" because it lacks any admission or formal reporting (*Shadow* 105). This changes, however, when Riel puts the story to paper and the broken reality of the crumbling family structure is made permanent through both "occurrence" and Riel's "narrative" (*Shadow* 105). By securing Riel's awareness of the journals, Irene provides the tools to make the events unavoidably historical and no longer "meaningless" (*Shadow* 105).

Irene's character is tangled in an equation of multiple influences, an identity impossible to categorize with any one label. The sum of genealogical hybridity, early exposure to the reservation community, urban Minneapolis living, a strong academic attachment, and a colored history of relationships and encounters cannot be calculated to provide a static point of reference. As with all identities, the contributing factors change, some lessening in effect and some strengthening due to varying levels of interaction, desire, and commitment. Irene, as with all people, began the formation of her self-awareness as a child. A significant influence was her mother, in addition to the vacancy left by an uncommitted father, Calvin American Horse, who had been absent for years and fathered other children, including May: "He traveled constantly, giving lectures, holding ceremonies. He was part Dakota and had spent time in prison after Wounded Knee" (*Shadow* 92). Irene's mother, Winnie Jane, was an English instructor and "a homeschooler, an AIM activist, a ceremonialist, a keeper of journals, and gravely thoughtful" (*Shadow* 92).

Qualitative judgments are difficult for *Shadow Tag*'s audience to make due to the nature of the descriptions regarding Irene's time being raised by her mother, but one should find it informative to consider the assortment of experiences Irene faced as a child. Early on, Irene was made very aware of her Native American heritage: "Her mother had dragged her to everything Ojibwe. She learned the histories of the reservations before she had learned the Pledge of Allegiance" (*Shadow* 92). In addition to the American Indian influences, Irene listened to recordings of Shakespeare's plays, including the tragedies of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* (92), which had a considerable influence, especially since there was no television to accompany her during a "carefully reared middle-class" childhood (91). Another noteworthy contribution to Irene's experiences apparently took place during the years before meeting Gil; Irene claims to have had a girlfriend, or at least she informs May of this in an attempt to break an "uncomfortable silence" (69). True or not, May responds to Irene's admission by labeling her "a has-be-an," perhaps suggesting that Irene's encounter with another female was not as influential as Irene assumes. Either way, Irene sees the relationship as having some sort of lasting effect, even if only present as a memory. Irene never reports that her life was difficult or exceptionally unique, yet Gil expresses his opinion that Irene's life had been troubled before his arrival. Despite Gil's assumption that Irene's upbringing was hard on her—"You were carted to every AIM event. Your mom had a hundred boyfriends" (35)—, Irene claims at one point to have enjoyed her youth. She readily admits, "I liked my childhood" (35).

It would be difficult to argue that Irene's relationship with Gil and the consequential ripples that move through other aspects of her life as a result do not make

the most significant impacts on the central character as she progresses throughout the novel. Irene is largely defined by both her hate and her love for her husband. Her desire to free herself from Gil's psychological internment is unrelenting, but she allows moments of affection to surface, even if they are subtle or manipulative. At times, the opposition and discontent grew to be too much: "There were times that Irene and Gil grew so exhausted with the struggle that they simply walked out of their trenches and embraced over the heads of their children. King's X was declared" (*Shadow* 141). Even near the end of the novel, despite Gil's egregious behavior to Irene and their children, she holds on to the desire for Gil not to hurt or kill himself as he is recovering from his mental breakdown. She pleads into the phone, "Live on. Live on. I am the nurse and I bring you this cup of warm broth and I am telling you drink it" (238). The tension and the pain that both characters exhibit drive much of the considerations involving *Shadow Tag's* occupation with identity; the choices Irene and Gil make, and the behaviors each of them display, have the greatest effect on how the audience perceives each of these characters personally.

Irene's occupational talents exist in the realm of academia. Although progress on her dissertation is presumably slowed due to the distractions presented by her decomposing marriage and self-destructive alcoholism, Irene frequently finds herself contemplating the subject of her dissertation, George Catlin, a "nineteenth-century painter of Native Americana" (*Shadow* 7). As we are informed early in the novel, Irene was at one time an impressive intellectual, but her commitments and attention changed as she took on the role of motherhood: "Before the children, she had published several pieces that were considered brilliant; she was a very promising scholar" (7). Although

Irene's identity is complemented by her study and expertise of art history, the relationship she has with art that contributes most to how she is regarded by the audience and other characters, including Gil, is that of the sitting model, the permanent target of Gil's paintings.

Irene has been a reoccurring element and the central focus of Gil's paintings for many years. Her image became symbolic for considerations spanning from the Native American experience to the exploited sexuality and violence enveloping the victims of prostitution. She "had been the subject of his paintings in all of her incarnations—thin and virginal, a girl, then womanly, pregnant, naked, demurely posed or frankly pornographic" (*Shadow* 8). Gil's use of her likeness became a metaphor for the imprisonment that Irene felt living as Gil's wife. Entombed in the iconography and near-permanency of Gil's paintings, Irene's identity was engineered through Gil's choice of context and detail. As often occurred with George Catlin, the subjects of the paintings became extra-dimensional detainees, employed not through any sense of loyalty to the individuals being painted, but rather a sense that the purpose envisioned by the author asserts the right to manipulate and exploit the identity of the model. The similarities between Gil and Catlin are not coincidental: "So it was, the images stole their subjects and, for the rest of the world, became more real, until it seemed they were the only things left" (*Shadow* 141). Gil's paintings operate as a viewfinder into the complexity and difficulty surrounding Gil and Irene's relationship, as well as the resulting impact on Irene's identity. Irene is left to counter the effect that the paintings have in regard to defining who she is through Gil's and his audience's eyes: "An art dealer had called her

pantherlike and Gil had repeated this for weeks, amused, but Irene had liked to think of herself as alluring in her silence, rather than awkward and tongue-tied” (*Shadow* 20). Irene’s relationship with her husband was destructive for both of the participants, in addition to the detrimental consequences felt by the children. As mentioned earlier, the origins of their love rested upon a foundation of dysfunction and need: “They were both raised by single mothers and their bond was deeply understood at first—they would be parents to each other as well as lovers. It had worked until they became real parents” (*Shadow* 56). This dependency that Irene and Gil both shared may by some be perceived as endearing in the beginning, but when children were brought into the family dynamic, both Irene and Gil were required to mask the extent of dependency so to put forth to others and themselves that they were perfectly capable of the maturity necessary for parenting. Gil explains one of the consequences of their inability to take this necessary maturity into the evolution of their marriage. In reference to the roots of their calamitous alcoholism, Gil explains that he blames both Irene and the artistic process for his addiction:

“He was pretty sure she had married him for his art and then slowly found that his art was no fun to live with. His talent was not him; his talent made him boring, as a person, and he drank too much at night because the concentrations of his day exhausted him. But then, increasingly, so did she – drink too much *and* exhaust him.” (*Shadow* 13)

The reliance of Gil’s paintings on Irene’s presence and participation emphasizes the unhealthy dependency both characters have for one another. Irene spoke about and demonstrated a desire to break free from Gil, but her efforts were laborious and

inefficient. She was able to force him from the house and push him to a mental collapse, but ultimately she tied herself to him eternally. Others recognized the complete circuit as well: “The person would smile as if to encourage Irene in the fantasy that she was separate in some way from her husband” (*Shadow* 91). Irene’s identity, as discussed earlier, was deeply affected by the extent of her emotional interdependency with her husband. This compulsion and vulnerability essentially came to be her downfall. Riel points this out as only one of the children could. Speaking of her mother, Riel makes the charge that “She died because she could not let go of him. But she should have let go, for us” (233).

In many ways, the couple acted as magnets pushed together at their opposite poles. Both are magnets and have the potential to join together, but due to their position, they repel one another. As Cihlar notes, “*Shadow Tag* is about the eternal sparring between two artistic approaches. Irene describes the difference in terms of cultural references. Gil was raised on sitcoms while Irene was raised on Shakespeare—he’s sentiment, she’s tragedy. Ideology begins at home, in landscape, in childhood” (221). As with ideology, identity begins at home as well. Irene, as with all of the characters, is the culmination of both her past and the present. The elements of identity that are planted in us as children are only as permanent as our effort to maintain them; current influences may complement or eradicate earlier characteristics, a consequence of an assortment of factors including similarity, frequency, preference, and social interaction. As with Irene, this often leads to patchwork identity compositions that reliably act as counter-arguments to narrow stereotypes.

Assumptions drawn from stereotyping are easily discredited by any close investigation of an individual because the number of possible shaping variables, especially available in the 21st-century, is so great. Commonalities may still exist amongst similar “types” of people, but they only act in singular dimensions or lateral slices, for example. Stereotypes persuade individuals to believe that a community of people who share one identifiable characteristic must also then exhibit or maintain an identical collection of other characteristics. May and Irene are both Native American women who share the same father, yet they are demonstrably unique from one another due to the other innumerable factors that construct each of their identities. Irene acts as a foil to any tendency an audience member may feel to fall into the trap of stereotyping our protagonist. As David Moore points out in his article "Myth, History, and Identity in Silko and Young Bear," Erdrich is not the only author to counter the assumptions that spring from misleading stereotypes. Moore connects the occurrence of stereotypes directly to the Native American experience, as well as the question of objectively labeling identities, and the consequential focus stereotypes receive from Native American artists:

The historical pressure of centuries of stereotypes can translate psychologically into nostalgia for a past that was created by those stereotypes. It can translate politically for American Indians into policies of tribal enrollment based on blood quantum rather than on traditional kinship systems. Bureaucratic definitions of tribal membership, in turn, can inflict their own psychic wounds, splitting families by quantitative rather than culturally qualitative measures. The treatment of such afflictions is much of the subject of Native American artists. (375)

Irene, Gil, and the children are directly affected and influenced by misconceptions of identity as a result of the entrenched presence of stereotypes. Also, the reliability of stereotypes is easily discounted when one examines the concept through the lens of postmodernism, a lens which Erdrich has been at least loosely associated with. Postmodernism informs us that there is no “fixed” identity other than the recognition that all persons are individually remarkable and distinctive. In "Identity, Commodification, and Consumer Culture," Robert Dunn ties this understanding to similar considerations: “We find an image of a ‘fluid’ self characterized by fragmentation, discontinuity, and a dissolution of boundaries between inner and outer worlds” (113). The characters of *Shadow Tag* are highly fragmented and the products of a vast number of influences, both internal and external. Erdrich pushes her audience to become acutely familiar with Irene, more so than any other character, so we can get a sense of the incalculable factors that have come together to create the identity that she inhabits. Irene is a Native American, but she is also a woman, a mother, a city resident, well educated, married, an alcoholic, a scholar, and a collection of other labels that sit upon one another to summarize the attributes of *Shadow Tag*'s central character.

CHAPTER VIII

Painting Erdrich

“I could save anyone, said Irene. I would throw myself flat down on the ice and grab your hands. Or I would plunge beneath the ice to pull you out.” (Erdrich 101).

Louise Erdrich does not write in a manner that can easily be construed as pontification, even though there is a consequential didacticism that often lingers amidst her narratives of family, place, and belonging. It seems unfeasible to write about the space where Native American prevalence suffered the fate of subduction by the overwhelming weight of the white imperialistic wave without at least a moralizing innuendo. So, multiple meta-messages exist within Erdrich’s writing, and it takes a reader who is willing to look behind a layer of disguising narrative to discover them. The messages may not be immediately overt, but one does not need to dig deep to find them. As this thesis has identified, one of the prevailing themes of *Shadow Tag* is the untethered and indefinite nature of identity. I believe that Erdrich’s view of identity can be reliably assumed based upon the manner in which identity is treated in the novel, as well as other clues in her writing and others’ study of the author and her work. It would be difficult to disagree with the observation that the most prevalent manifestation of identity that is considered due to the setting and characters of most of Erdrich’s novels is that of the Native American contribution.

As discussed earlier, there is a disconnect between the scholarship surrounding identity and the political employment of qualifiers that intend to define identity. As Louis Owens asserts, “nothing in the world today is more complex, difficult, disputed, divisive, or so highly charged with dynamic energies as the question of ‘Indianness’”

(*Mixedblood* 154). The consequences of a “false” claim alone are not severe enough to drive the debate; the suspicion that benefits and advantages may wrongly be dispersed to the “undeserving,” those not Indian-enough, is the most combustible fuel for the identity fire. If resources are handed out and the resources are limited, then it is understandable, at least, that the concern exists. Joane Nagel addresses the relationship that the Native American identity debate has with the dissemination of various forms of resources and assistance:

Individual American Indian ethnicity is at least as problematic as that of other American ethnic groups, in part because of wide variability in the criteria and standards of proof of Indian ancestry and Indianess. Again, the doubts and suspicions seem greatest when ethnically tied resources are at stake, and when benefits are seen to accrue to individuals who claim Indian ancestry or special Indian knowledge. (92)

Although investigating the concept of identity, *Shadow Tag* refrains from directly commenting upon the above relationship. Although it may be difficult to separate a discussion regarding the qualification and judgment of Native American identity from the effects caused by the monetary success of Indian casinos, Erdrich’s inspection of identity is focused on something more profound, the notion of identity for all of humanity, and the lens of the American Indian experience just happens to be what is most familiar to her.

Closely tied to the evolving nature of how we define ourselves and how others interpret the manner in which we communicate those definitions, the literary arts explore identity better than most venues. Despite a long history of creation, reflection, and

analysis, literature has reliably evaded all-inclusive and all-encompassing theories. The critical lens exists, but it is constantly expanded or reinvented to include new perspectives and styles. Perhaps this similarity with the prevaricating nature of identity further enables the art form's frequent ruminations concerning the wildly misinterpreted concept. A logical conclusion would then be to assume that an author as gifted and celebrated as Louise Erdrich might put forth an examination of identity that is more than worthy of consideration. In *Shadow Tag*, this rationality is substantiated, to say the least.

To state the obvious, Erdrich has made a remarkable impression on both audiences and critics. Hans Bak adds that "No other American writer of part-Indian descent was ever laureled so profusely or canonized so early" (145). Although true, the admission can be disappointing in terms of the qualification. Erdrich's skill is not dependent upon her being of "part-Indian descent," but the classification narrows the pool of candidates for the category of comparison. For a fan, one wants to only look within Erdrich's work to defend her exceptionalism and strength as a writer. Many readers would like to see Erdrich esteemed not only when compared to other Native American authors but all contemporary authors as well. Her credentials certainly support the opinion that she is extraordinary. *Plague of Doves*, the novel immediately preceding *Shadow Tag*, resulted in the recognition as Pulitzer Prize Finalist, in addition to being awarded the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. *Love Medicine* received a National Book Critics Circle Award, and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* was a National Book Award finalist. None of these recognitions are limited to authors of Native American descent. This fact is fitting since Erdrich does not wish to be seen only as an American Indian author. Alan R. Velie calls attention to Erdrich's sentiments by

writing, “Simon Ortiz (Acoma) and Geary Hobson (Quapaw, Cherokee) have claimed that works by Indians constitute a separate literature, while Sherman Alexie (Spokane, Coeur D’Alene) and Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe) insist they don’t want to be pigeon-holed that narrowly, claiming that they would rather be considered American writers” (29). This debate adds to the understanding that choice plays a notable part in identification, the “type” of author one prefers to be. As a result of the authors’ stated preferences, the audience will include these leanings in their interpretations of the writers’ identities. The announcement of how one wants to be regarded can significantly affect the manner in which he or she is understood and categorized by others.

Although Erdrich should be viewed, as she prefers, within the category of American authors, her connection to the Native American experience cannot be ignored. Erdrich’s desire to be seen as an American author does not suggest that she seeks to remove herself from her characters and their experiences. She is an American author just as she is also an American Indian author, a female author, a contemporary author, and any other classification appropriate to the characteristics that Erdrich presents. Since she celebrates her Native American identity in her writing, it is fair to also study her writing through this lens.

Throughout Erdrich’s works, she focuses on characters and settings that are inescapably tied to the American Indian experience and the community’s history of being involuntarily subjugated by hegemonic forces. As Kathleen Brogan explains in “Haunted by History: Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” “Erdrich has explicitly linked her vocation as writer to her identity as survivor of a nearly annihilated culture” (169). Reservations, although largely the geographic scraps of this subjugation, frequently provide the setting

for Erdrich's stories and act as symbolic "safe-zones" where Native American characters can pursue the cultural practices and behavior that often mark the American Indian identity. In *Shadow Tag*, Irene remembers the reservation as the source of her Native American frame of mind, one that is not authenticated by the blood-quantum of the inhabitants but rather the memories of her experiences and the interaction with others in that community. This relationship to the reservation is a common manifestation in Native American literature. Meredith K. James highlights how this relationship between the reservation and the narrative influences the discussion regarding identity:

Native American literature as a whole not only contributes to the ongoing literary debates of American identity, but also reflects a crisis of identity among Native Americans brought on by a long history of physical and cultural genocide. As I mention in the book, only 20% of Native Americans live on reservations, yet it seems like the vast majority of Native novels focus on reservations. [. . .] In order for characters to resolve their identity issues, it is necessary for them to return to the concept of resurrecting a national, sovereign homeland. (87)

Through the clear connection she makes between life on the reservation—the events, the practices, the social connections—and the Native American identity, Erdrich demonstrates that identity is much more than the answer to a lineage equation; the attention is placed on how one lives rather than one's biological origin. The similarities between Irene and Erdrich's contemplations of the significance of reservation involvement are notable. Like Irene, Erdrich never lived on a reservation, but routinely

visited family there (Bak 150). Both character and author alike connect their sense of who they are to how they were raised as children.

Erdrich's mixed lineage may also provide some insight into the author's thoughts regarding the creation and makeup of identity. Although Erdrich's stories generally include consideration of more Native American motifs than German motifs, Erdrich never seems to attack or remove herself from the association with the portion of her European ancestry. She writes against oppressive individuals and oppressive power structures. Erdrich refrains, not surprisingly so, from assigning a specific share of guilt to a cultural subgroup. She understands that she is the culmination of influences that arose from both parental lines. The sum of her identity is not the consequence of an equation that measures which family members she spent the most time with but rather which collection of customs and history she felt most comfortable writing about. Including consideration of the reservation experience touched upon in the previous paragraph, Hans Bak speaks to the influence of both families:

Nor was she ever a resident at the reservation, but regularly visited her grandparents there, to listen to stories of reservation life and tribal history that had a strong impact on an impressionable, sensitive mind. Such stories were counterbalanced by those told by her German-American father, by all accounts a fabulous storyteller, stories about life in a multi-ethnic North Dakota community during the Depression. In line with her mixed-blood background and the dual cultural orientation of the stories, her fiction straddles two cultural perspectives and is informed with a dual generic orientation. (150)

Erdrich's fiction does not "straddle" her cultural influences because her blood quantum coerces her to do so; the interaction with her family and the authorial choices necessary to produce the writing that she so profoundly produces guides her.

As mentioned previously, Erdrich also uses her characters to provide insight into the nature and complexity of identity. In addition to the significance of Irene's story as already stated, there are several moments that seem inescapably tied to an assumption one may make regarding Erdrich's sentiments. Irene exhibits an assortment of identity traits that highlight many of her roles including mother, wife, Native American, urbanite, and academic. Identity extremes are symbolized through the depictions of Irene in Gil's paintings. Although Gil is not a detached observer, he paints Irene as if she is a metaphor for many of the character types humans are forced to occupy. Erdrich writes about Irene allowing Gil to "paint her on all fours, looking beaten once, another time snarling like a dog and bleeding, menstruating. In other paintings she was a goddess, breasts tipped with golden fire. Or a creature from the Eden of this continent, covered with moss and leaves" (*Shadow* 30). Irene is the model for the generic individual who represents the conditions imposed upon him or her by oppressive and hegemonic powers, dysfunctional marriages, or simply the realities placed upon them by their immediate choices. Irene's painted identity, that at times may overtake the reality of her contemporary Minnesotan life, demonstrates the numerous identities one is culpable of being attached to based upon an assortment of conditions and negative pressures. The variable is the behavior of the subject or the behavior of those impacting and interpreting the subject.

Erdrich often writes about the consequences of behavior, both American Indian and Euro-American; one's general behavior, like identity, can change. Notable shifts in

behavior can suggest recognizable shifts in identity. Riel may provide some of the most perceivable clues as to the nature of Erdrich's sentiments regarding behavior and the transformational nature of identity. Riel is quite aware that she cannot alter the genetic contributions of her lineage; she is, after all, Native American by birth. Nevertheless, she is not satisfied with the separation she feels from the characteristics of the stereotypical pre-20th-century American Indian. Riel believes that she must master a collection of skills and experiences to rightfully consider herself an Indian: "She had learned that they could survive in the wild, that they lived on buffalo, hunted with bows and arrows, never cried except when looking at the ruin white people had made of their land. Indians wore powwow clothes all of the time and could talk to animals" (*Shadow* 59).

Erdrich is not suggesting, of course, that these ridiculous stereotypes are the markers of a "legitimate" Indian. These characteristics do, however, highlight the relationship between perceptions of identity and the behaviors one exhibits. And, since identity is married to perception, the individual will better occupy an identity if he or she participates in the behaviors that he or she sees as representational of that identity type. So Riel wonders at first why she cannot perform these feats if she is truly Native American. She "had to wonder why she couldn't do any of these things" (*Shadow* 59). In response to her uncertainty, Riel decides that "Maybe she could train herself. It could come in handy to be an Indian, after all" (59). Riel chooses to engage in the behaviors that she feels will be useful to her as an American Indian, one who is redefining herself to fit the identity that she has defined. This identity choice does not reflect, however, Riel's truest desires. Her decision to be like an "old-time ancestor" was driven by her desire to defend herself from her father's abuse (*Shadow* 65). Ultimately, when Gil suggests that

he will accompany his daughter to events that oppose the war in Iraq, she feels like she can lower her defenses and admits that instead of learning the behaviors that she feels exemplify a Native American, she would prefer to “instead ask for high-heeled shoes, a longboard, or maybe a real skateboard, and a helmet not with pink Hawaiian flowers on it, but a black one with a winged skull in a circle of fire” (65). Riel learns that it is better to just be herself, which in turn makes her no less of an American Indian than if she learned to “talk to animals” (59).

Other Erdrich characters from earlier novels may also guide our assumptions regarding Erdrich’s thoughts on identity. Many of her most memorable protagonists and antagonists demonstrate an independence to define for themselves the identities they wish to exhibit. The cultural and geographic environment certainly has a clear effect, but the individuals, many who also descend from mixed-blood lineages, decide how deeply they embrace the cultural norms and expectations of the community in which they participate. For most of Erdrich’s main characters, identity is not one category or another; it is an overlapping, multi-dimensional model that allows the character to place an identity marker in the middle of the intersections. In the article “The Problem(s) of (Anishinaabe) History in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich: Voices and Contexts,” James Stripes refers to the characters’ ability to maintain a personalized identity amidst the many, as well as immense, competing forces: “Nanapush, Pauline, Eli, Nector, Marie and other characters in Erdrich’s writing fashion their identities in the cultural borderlands. Their divergent perspectives in *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Beet Queen* reflect some of the complexities in the responses of tribal peoples to the colonial encounter” (29). Plenty of

material exists for the benefit of multiple dissertations regarding the occurrence of considerations of identity when looking at Erdrich's work apart from *Shadow Tag*.

A compelling relationship exists between the poststructuralist perspective regarding the power of language and the recurring theme in Native American literature concerning the power of words. Contributing to the topic of agency in the *Encyclopedia of Identity*, Jonathan Wyatt emphasizes that poststructuralism supports the understanding that "Discourse and language are never neutral or transparent methods of communication" (20). This suggests that words have a weight and influence outside of the raw functionality of communicating needs and observations. Collectively, language systems are responsible for the creation of "truth" as much as they offer a means to commune with others about where truths may actually prevail. The connection to Native American literature occurs within this recognition of the power of language. Owens refers to this capability by stating, "Traditional Native American stories tell us that words are powerful and sacred, that words bring into being and compel and order the world. Words are powerful creators, and they can be powerful destroyers" (*Mixedblood* 213). As Erdrich demonstrates in *Shadow Tag*, the operating discourse of the individual, community, and history exert considerable pressure on the manifestations of identity. The notion of an objective and pure identity cannot subsist within a community, either local or global, built through the application of language. Wyatt ties the volatile condition of identity with the theoretical view: "Poststructuralism, through its concern with language, discourse, knowledge, subjectivity, and power, introduces doubt to the notion of the autonomous individual: Identity is unstable, relational, multiple, and decentered. There is no essential self, no core" (20). *Shadow Tag* furthers this view by

illustrating the effects of various and competing discourses on the behaviors of its characters.

The consequences of certain identity classifications do explicitly rise to the surface of *Shadow Tag*'s text periodically, and when they do, they are often tied to Gil and his paintings. Gil was warned not to incorporate Indians as his subjects. A fellow painter saw this as inviting the label of "an American Indian artist," and thought Gil would never be able to break from the confines of the title (*Shadow* 37). This example of an assigned identity acts as a metaphor to show how much the perception of others can limit, or at a minimum affect, one's confidence in defining who one is for oneself. Soon after the narrator informs us of this, a reason is suggested as to why "Blacks can be postracial, maybe" and Indians cannot: "Indians are stuck in Plains culture 1892" (37). The historical, as well as expired, collective image—again a result of society's antiquated perceptions—tends to force Native Americans into stereotypes that suffocate true expressions of personal identity. The narrator's excuse for this is that "Real Indians are so complex and various that they frustrate classification" (37). So, the result is that society takes the "easy" way out, and instead of updating perceptions to align with the contemporary conditions and experiences of the American Indian, society descends into the practice of identifying an entire population through the lens of an outdated, and often historically inaccurate, stereotype.

Erdich also uses Gil to briefly highlight circumstances mentioned earlier that have arisen as a consequence of using blood quantum to confirm claims of identity, especially in reference to the distribution of tribal or other governmental resources. The narrator uses Gil's insubstantial blood quantum as evidence that "Irene must have loved

him very much to have his children” since he “had no casino per cap and had to live by his art” (*Shadow* 13). The suggestion that “Native women,” many of whom are dependent upon tribal, state, or federal resources due to the consequences of poverty, cannot freely choose to marry without considering governmental proclamations of identity is deeply concerning (13). In addition to the acknowledgement that women interested in being mothers may entertain considerations of the father’s genes, the narrator adds that Native American women “are extremely discriminating about the men they have their children with [. . .] because of tribal enrollment issues and government treaty-right benefits, which extend even to eventual college preference” (*Shadow* 13). If Irene’s friendship, attraction, and intimacy with Gil were not reliable filters for choosing a favorable husband, then one could not have real faith in a selection process that ignores some and entertains others on the basis of a blood test. The consequences of tying benefits to the outcome of an “identity test” are so severe that they may have and may still influence Native American women to marry individuals who will not be ideal partners. This situation can be linked to the argument that Joane Nagel makes in concerning the tangible repercussions occurring from ethnicity identification: “The truth is embedded in the common sociological fact: while ethnicity is socially and politically constructed, and is thus arbitrary, variable, and constantly negotiated, it is no less real in its consequences” (96). Although blood quantum may inform us of the lineage of one’s genes, it does little to define ethnicity and even less to define the ideal husband.

Few statements are as supportive of the belief that Erdrich sees identity as unstable and adaptable as that made by Kathleen Brogan as she directly quotes Erdrich in her article, “Haunted by History: Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*”:

[Erdrich] sees the shaping of ethnic identity as a process of interrogation and revision: “You look back and say, ‘Who am I from?’ You must question. You must make certain choices. You’re able to.” Erdrich’s emphasis on the necessity of questioning and the possibility of choice defines tradition not as a changeless essence, but as imaginative construction, built from but not limited to the familiar materials of a people’s cultural treasury. (171-72)

Identity is married to the consequence of choice and the experiences that emerge as a result of taking one path over another. An identity defined by others is nothing more than an unreliable image stemming from a narrow slice of observation and interpretations. And, as Irene informs us, “The image is not the person [. . .] or even the shadow of a person” (*Shadow* 31).

CHAPTER IX

Identity Dissolved

“I’m not leaving. You’re not leaving, said Gil. No one here gets out alive” (Erdrich 199).

Gil’s reference to “just a line from a song” is prophetically accurate; nevertheless, he intends to speak figuratively rather than intending to proclaim Irene’s and his demise (*Shadow* 199). Nevertheless and true to the song, neither Gil nor Irene “gets out alive” (199). Many metaphors can be assumed regarding Irene’s sacrificial plunge into the frigid waters to rescue Gil. Ironically, just moments before Gil walks into the water, he recognizes that “This was the best moment of his life” (*Shadow* 243). Even after this realization, his efforts to swim as far out as he could were certainly suicidal: “He’d go as far as he could. A few minutes of swimming should be enough to drop his body temperature to a level from which he could not recover” (243). His intentions presumably shift, or at least his actions change purpose, when Irene calls his name. Irene’s voice presumably motivates Gil to return to shore, but “no matter how hard he kicked,” his efforts were useless (244). So Irene, unable to watch Gil drown, attempts to reach him herself. But as Riel exclaims, “[Irene] died because she could not let go of him. But she should have let go, for us” (250). Although Gil and Irene lose their lives, Gil’s quip fails to fully predict the family’s survival since the children are left on the shore watching over their parents’ hydrous grave. The children add to their identities the weight of now being parentless, an experience that appears to affect each of them differently.

It is a questionable endeavor for the living to attempt to rank in order of favorability ways in which one might want to die. Variables that only the dead may discover amongst the last few moments of life are certain to exist. Despite this, it is difficult to think of drowning as anything but agonizing, at least until unconsciousness takes over. The fight to reach or stay at the surface is so vigorous and consuming that lifeguards are taught specific techniques not to be latched on to and dragged to the bottom. Potentially, even loved ones may involuntarily suffer a tandem death because the body's fight for air is so narrowly focused. If true in Irene and Gil's case, the last moments of their lives were as violent and selfish as many of their days together in marriage. As noted earlier and outlined by Alan Chavkin, Erdrich's "The Island" can contribute to our understanding of the significance of this type of demise:

As the novel makes clear, the worst death for a Chippewa is drowning, for according to traditional Chippewa belief, the victim becomes a wretched ghost who can never find peace but is forced to wander forever. The water imagery of the novel implies that surviving in this world is a matter of not sinking but staying afloat despite all of life's trials and tribulations. ("Vision" 96)

It is hard not to assume that Chavkin's description of the novel's implication of "staying afloat" was not directed at *Shadow Tag*—although written almost ten years earlier—since the poignancy is so fitting for Gil and Irene.

Riel, Florian, and Stoney's identities were not imprisoned by the dysfunction of their family; the stereotypes taught to them in school; nor the tones in their skin, eyes, and hair. Each child was partially influenced by these variables, but they do not lead to

identity absolutes. “Identity, whether on the basis of ethnicity, gender, or other factors,” as Timothy J. Brown reports, “should be seen as a dynamic and active process of identification rather than a reflection of some fixed or innate character” (189). Although the passing of Irene and Gil would presumably be agonizing for the three children, they have already lived with only partially-“present” parents marked by Gil’s time in the studio and the abusive nature he exhibited when he was around, as well as Irene’s alcohol-numbed attention and her extended focus on duping Gil into believing that his identity as a biological parent, the father of the three children, is fictional. The children will add new experiences to their identity lexicon, and as a result, their identities will continue to develop and transform, just like all Native American communities have been forced to do over time.

Erdrich specifically addresses identity in *Shadow Tag*, albeit not likely occupying her entire purpose for writing the novel. But the commentary regarding the fluidity and evolution that identities undergo is too obvious to be ignored. Identity, as addressed in other novels also, is an extremely important topic for Native Americans to continue to discuss. Due to an assortment of factors addressed earlier, expectations concerning identity threaten true exhibitions of identity markers and risk being replaced by a loyalty to stereotypes. As Meredith James states, this is a common concern in much of American Indian literature: “Native American literature as a whole not only contributes to the ongoing literary debates of American identity, but also reflects a crisis of identity among Native Americans brought on by a long history of physical and cultural genocide” (87).

One of the last considerations of identity in the novel occurs when the audience is informed that Riel has been operating in the role of chief editor, composing the overall

work as “the one with the gift of omniscience,” including excerpts from Irene’s Red Diary, Blue Notebook, and other documents (*Shadow* 251). As Riel admits, the complete composition is her master’s thesis. This revelation is learned by the reader only in the last few pages of *Shadow Tag*, an admission that highlights Erdrich’s knack at directing literary subterfuge aimed squarely at assumptions regarding identity. The reader does not suspect that Riel is the narrator and that Irene’s voice is present only as a collection of notes and diary entries. The identity that the audience assumes is in control of the story is actually no longer present; Irene and all of her experiences and characteristics of identity died long before the story was spliced together. Just as James Cihlar writes, “*Shadow Tag* is a collection of puzzle pieces Erdrich asks readers to solve” (220). The greatest puzzle in both *Shadow Tag* and the audience’s reality is the one that will continue to evade deciphering: identity is too impenetrable, too varied, too tangled, and too alive to be understood as a percentage noted on a test or a simple preference listed on a census. Identity, especially that of Native American identity, is as Margaret Noori describes, “Like the game of shadow tag, [. . .] something to chase and guard” (93).

Louise Erdrich is certainly one of the most important authors of our time. Chavkin recognizes that “it is clear that she has written some of the most significant American novels of the twentieth-century and that her substantial body of work represents a permanent contribution to American literature” (*Chippewa* 7); this commendation preceded the publication of *Plague of Doves*, *Shadow Tag*, and *The Round House*, as well as several other remarkable novels. Erdrich has only confirmed Chavkin’s declaration with an astounding display of narrative craftsmanship and

characters that linger in the reader's consciousness long after the book is returned to the shelf.

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