

# Race and Gender in Louise Erdrich's "The Beet Queen"

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TO A NUMBER of reviewers and critics, Louise Erdrich's novel *The Beet Queen* is unusual in Native American literature because of its apparent silence on the issue of race. As Louis Owens has argued, the "excruciating quest for an Indian identity in late twentieth century American that haunts other fiction and poetry by Indian writers is simply not here" ("Acts" 55).<sup>1</sup> Certainly the most strident expression of this idea has been a review of the novel written by another Native American writer, Leslie Marmon Silko. Although she praises Erdrich's style, Silko attacks the novel for its failure to treat the social and political dimension of Native American concerns; the book, she argues, reduces society's problems to individual ones: "In this pristine world all misery, suffering, and loss are self-generated, just as conservative Republicans have been telling us for years" (10).<sup>2</sup> My purpose in this paper is to show that *The Beet Queen* does in fact speak to questions of Native American identity in important ways. Far from being silent on sociopolitical concerns, Erdrich sustains an examination of the relationship between two crucial issues, race and gender, throughout the novel.

At first glance, gender seems the more sharply foregrounded theme in *The Beet Queen*, for Erdrich details through a number of characters the price both women and men pay for defying society's gender expectations. Mary, for instance, with her "blunt ways" (66) and her smell "like white pepper from the sausage table" (66) where she works as town butcher, throughout the novel remains loveless and childless, without a consort to match her fantasies (79). A woman of almost mythic spiritual proportions, she finds in modern American society no channel for her

supernatural powers other than tarot cards and yarrow sticks. Similarly, Wallace (in many ways, the most maternal character in the book), comfortable in the traditional female role of midwife and host *extraordinaire* of children's birthday parties, must as a gay man in an intolerant society submerge his sexuality by masquerading as the grief-stricken lover of an unknown woman whose picture he displays.

While Erdrich chronicles the toll that defiance of gender norms takes on these characters, she reserves the direst fate for two characters in the book who come closest to fulfilling social definitions of ideal male and female. In her treatment of the white woman, Sita, who bases her identity on physical beauty and marriage, and Russell, the Native American male who strives for success through football and military exploits, Erdrich both critiques white America's ideals of masculinity and femininity and suggests underlying similarities between racial and gender oppression in American society. By juxtaposing chapters focusing on Sita and Russell and thus highlighting symbolic parallels between their situations, she shows that, despite the racial gulf that separates the two, they are similarly dehumanized, reduced to objects serving the interests of a society dominated by white males.

With marriage as her "dream" (76), Sita, as a young woman, plans to move to Fargo and become a model in a department store:

She imagined that she would also work behind the men's hat counter. There she would meet a young rising professional. They would marry. He would buy her a house near the county courthouse, on the street of railroad mansions not far from Island Park. Every winter she would walk down the hill to skate. She would wear powder blue tights and a short dress with puffs of rabbit fur at the sleeves, collar, and all around a flared hem that would lift as she twirled. (76)

Unable to imagine an independent identity for herself and weary of the "determination" (84) it takes to keep her twenty-two and a half-inch waist as she approaches thirty, she is convinced that the "only thing that would save [her], now, was to find the ideal husband" (84). However, marriage and the traditional conception of femaleness she brings to it, in fact, destroy her. The threat to selfhood that marriage poses for Sita is foreshadowed even

before her first wedding: although she is irritated that Jimmy calls her the names of his favourite desserts, she fails to see his increasing weight as evidence that she is being consumed.<sup>3</sup> As the skating image of herself in her fantasy foreshadows, she remains a child (she likes to be called "girl" [208] even as an older woman) in her relationship with both her husbands.

While Sita's story in isolation highlights gender oppression, Erdrich goes further to draw parallels between her fate and Russell's.<sup>4</sup> Similarities between white treatment of women and Native Americans are starkly drawn in the description of Sita's first marriage. In Erdrich's telling revision of a theme from white folklore—the white woman's kidnapping and ravishment by "savage Indians," Sita is "kidnap[ped]" (97) by the groom's male relatives as a joke. As this fact and Sita's stricken look of "surrender" (97) imply, marriage represents, for Sita, not self-fulfilment but loss of autonomy. Erdrich further illustrates how marriage echoes the treatment of Native Americans when the men, uncertain where to leave her, finally, with a stroke of "genius" (99), decide to dump her on the reservation, a grimly appropriate place to symbolize her fate. Like Russell, who is present in the bar where Sita takes refuge, and who later returns to the reservation after his usefulness as football star and war hero is exhausted, Sita is, as a woman, as imprisoned in the institution of marriage as he is, because of his race, on the reservation. Sita's degradation is unmistakable beneath the humour in the kidnapping scene—when wind turns her dress inside out and blows her through the door, she enters the bar not as a human being but as "a sudden explosion of white net, a rolling ball of it" (100). As happens often, she loses her voice (98, 99, 100), reduced to "muffled and inhuman croaking" (100).

For Russell, too, the success society offers involves self-destruction. Although with his picture in the papers as football star and his war medals in the state museum, he achieves masculine "success" beyond what he could expect as an Indian, Celestine, early in the novel, grimly forecasts the emptiness of that apparent achievement: "People say he is one Indian who won't go downhill in life but have success, and he does, later, depending on how you look at it" (44). Ironically, for both Sita

and Russell, the symbols of their status as ideal male and female—Sita's garnet necklace and Russell's war medals, which both wear with pride throughout the novel—are, in fact, stark emblems of their enslavement.

For both characters, the attempt to emulate the gender ideals of white culture results in profound dehumanization; in different ways (Sita as sex object and Russell as cannon fodder), both have social value only as bodies and receive approval only through physical sacrifice. The scene of Sita as a young girl bearing her new breasts in hopes of receiving affection and affirmation (35) is reenacted throughout her life, first as she works as a model and later as she struggles to preserve her fragile physical beauty. This pivotal scene in Sita's life (she remembers it years later as she prepares to commit suicide [288]) takes place, significantly, in a cemetery. Dancing on the graves after Celestine rejects her, Sita simultaneously enters the world of female sexuality and spiritual death. Russell's physical sacrifice is even more graphic: "getting shot apart is what [Russell] live[s] for all his life" (111). Behind the accolade accorded him as "North Dakota's most-decorated hero" is, as his sister recognizes, a drama of objectification: "Now he must wait until some statehouse official scores the other veterans, counting up their wounds on a paper tablet, and figures out who gave away the most flesh" (111).

Physical mutilation mirrors the psychic and emotional fragmentation both characters experience. After fighting in war after war, Russell becomes covered with "scars and stripes" (112), Erdrich's satirical comment on his misplaced patriotism. "Mapp[ed]" (70) like the land of his ancestors, he is exploited as a natural resource, his wounds "ridged like a gullied field," his body "plowed like a tractor gone haywire" (74-75). Despite "heroic" efforts, like Russell, Sita becomes a physical wreck in seeking the perfect body (300); she "ends up looking stuffed and preserved" (112). Both ultimately appear scarcely human. Just as Russell's face, which looks "all sewn together" (118), seems freakish with its "claw marks, angry and long, even running past his temples and parting his hair crooked" (70), Sita's face becomes "cavernous" and "wrinkled" (245), distorted "into a Halloween mask, witchlike and gruesome" (120).

The physical destruction and dehumanization both characters suffer is also paralleled in mental deterioration. The debilitating "nervous" disorders both endure—Sita's drug dependency and mental breakdown, Russell's alcoholism and stroke—reflect the spiritual deaths preceding their literal ones at the end of the novel (both are, in fact, described as "stiffs" [71, 293] and associated with death imagery throughout the novel). Further, both become paralyzed (Sita first emotionally [207] and then later when injured [283]). As both characters become increasingly debilitated, they lose their powers of self-expression: when they break out of the silence that often characterizes them (98, 203, 205), no one understands Sita's "jammed-up sentences" (207) or Russell's "shattered vowels" (196). Voiceless "puppets" (121) and "robots" (121), both characters remain dependent for their identities on external sources. Not surprisingly, Erdrich describes both as rootless—Sita is like a blossom on a tree, "the same frail kind of beauty that could be broken off a tree by any passing boy and discarded, cast away when the fragrance died" (21) and Russell "like a tree half uprooted in a wind" (203).

As creations of American society, both Sita and Russell symbolically inhabit a white male world with little space for females and Native Americans. Just as Russell winds up on the reservation created by whites, Sita spends her last days in the basement recreation room of her house, a distinctly male preserve filled with memorabilia signifying the personalities of her husbands—Jimmy's stereo equipment and beer lamps (one "a silhouette of a stagecoach pulled by horses that flee silently around and around alit screen of mountains and desert cacti," another "of a canoe endlessly revolving in a blue lake" [283]) and Louis's short wave radio sets. In this room, a "monument to both of [her husbands] and to neither one" (281), Sita sleeps on the pool table, a kind of centerpiece in this masculine world. As always, Sita misunderstands her position as a female in a male-dominated world. Having moved her possessions in, she has the illusion of ownership—"It is mine now" (281)—and power, imagining "all that [she] could do by remote control" (282):

From here, I can turn on the television if I want. The face of the Morning Hostess might be flipping in a blur, but I can stabilize her

with one twist. Headphones are at my elbow. I can push on the stereo power, the radio. I can listen to 8-track tapes, or, in silence, watch the brightly lit dials and barometers slide and flicker. I can operate the light control to dim or illuminate the imitation Tiffany overhead. I can turn on all of the beer lamps and watch them. (282-83)

Sita is, despite her fantasies, merely another object in this world, more like a ruined piece of electronics equipment, with the "nerve connections" in her brain "short[ed] out" (283), than an empowered human being. Just as she has mistaken marriage as the route to identity, she here confuses residence in a male world with meaningful power in it. Rather than becoming more alive in the home of her dreams, Sita resides in a house of death, a home with a lawn of grass like that in cemeteries (148) in a town built on Indian burial grounds (278). Sita is spiritually buried there, "swathed in covers that have absorbed an earthen smell from the basement air" (282). In more ways than one, Sita's death follows the shape of her life. Celestine and Mary find her dead outside her house, her body snagged on a broken branch and held up by her garnet necklace. She dies as frustrated as she has lived, her lips "set in exasperation, as if she had just been about to say something and found out her voice was snatched in death" (291).

Parallels between Russell and Sita culminate in the parade, the piece of Americana that concludes the novel. Through a bizarre set of circumstances (Sita mistakenly enters the parade as a corpse), both Russell and she, icons of American masculinity and femininity, ride in the parade with the Beet Queen and her court. Significantly, both appear in the symbols of their gender aspirations—Sita in a white dress and her garnet necklace, with a "white leatherette purse in her lap" (294); Russell in his uniform with medals pinned in a "bright pattern over his heart" (298) and a rifle in his lap. Both parade before the crowd as mindless, passive bodies, the dead Sita propped in Mary's truck (emblazoned with its name, House of Meats), and the paraplegic Russell propped up and strapped into a wheelchair. Just as Sita is buried in a male world, Russell ends up in a symbolically white one. Seemingly the centrepiece in this tribute to American military exploits, he is (as his physical condition starkly betrays) actually one of its victims.<sup>5</sup> Like Sita, he is also buried on foreign turf, set

on the float amidst a "field of graves . . . plastic grass and red poppies[,] [a] plain white cross . . . planted at his feet" (299).

Although they are the ostensible objects of the town's admiration, it is bitterly ironic that no one notices Sita's death or Russell's near-deadly stroke during the procession. In fact, both characters—mute and completely immobilized—receive unqualified approval. The townspeople, for instance, assume Sita was "someone important, an alderwoman or the governor's wife" (296), and her long-lost cousin thinks she looks better than ever (321). While Russell is amused that "the town he'd lived in and the members of the American Legion were solemnly saluting a dead Indian" (300), Erdrich's message is much more serious. Just as Nector's experience with the movies in *Love Medicine* proves to him the white man's belief that "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (91), Russell's presence in the parade starkly demonstrates the dependency and spiritual death American society offers as success to Native Americans. In this episode, Erdrich develops this idea about racial oppression further to suggest that in white American culture, the only "good woman" is also lifeless.

At a time when the interrelations between race and gender concern many American women writers of colour, Erdrich, as a Native American herself, offers an interesting perspective on racial and gender oppression in *The Beet Queen* by uncovering similarities between the fates of white women and men of colour. Even though Sita consistently makes "fun of [Russell] for being an Indian, and he is always glad to see her taken down a notch" (44), Erdrich suggests not only their unacknowledged affinities, but also their profound mistake in seeing one another as the enemy. Erdrich's novel is, however, not only the story of self-destruction for white women and Native American men. In the two female characters of Native American descent focussed on in the novel, Celestine and Dot, she offers a more positive alternative to the fates of Russell and Sita. Although Celestine and Dot are offered the same female roles that strangle Adelaide and Sita, both are able to forge more independent and powerful identities of their own.

Celestine, who could be Russell's twin "but for his scars" (133), physically does not seem a candidate for Sita's fate. A big "six-

footer" (332), who is "not pretty" (125) but "handsome like a man" (67), she nevertheless has been imbued with the same myths about women's fulfillment. As she watches Sita play the coquette with a man, she wonders:

Will I ever smile, flush, offer a tidbit of food? Are these things that Sita feels, these pleasures I have read about in books, the sort of feelings I might experience? It has never happened yet, although I've known men. Perhaps, I think, I'm too much like them, too strong or imposing when I square my shoulders, too eager to take control. (125)

Although Celestine intuitively senses that female strength and traditional love relationships may be incompatible, she feels the lure of romance and, in her relationship with Karl, faces the same temptation to passivity and self-annihilation that Sita experiences in her marriages. While Erdrich injects substantial humour into her descriptions of the love affair between Karl and Celestine—their first passionate encounter takes place on the floor of the butcher shop, for instance—she finally depicts that relationship as a dangerous trap for Celestine.

At first, Celestine tries hard to play the female lover role as she has learned it should be played. Karl's initial sexual overtures make her think of "Sita testing vegetables. Now it seems as though something is happening to me. I turn around to look at Karl. His eyes are burning holes and he tries to look right through me if he can. This is, indeed, the way men behave in the world of romance" (127). The fact that he is "slightly smaller than [Celestine], and also Mary's brother" (127) are simply the first clues that the reality of sex and the myth of seduction do not match. Not only does Karl make his first moves before "the glances, the adoration, the many conversations [that Sita thinks] must happen" first (128), but the physical experience itself fails to match her expectations: "He steps in front of me and hugs me to himself, draws my face down to his face. I am supposed to taste a burning sweetness on his lips, but his mouth is hard as metal" (128). Karl's unusual behaviour brings to light more discrepancies between reality and fantasy. When he turns abruptly from making love to displaying his knifewares, Celestine becomes increasingly aware of the absurdity of the myth: "So, I think, this is what happens after the burning kiss, when the music roars.



Imagine. The lovers are trapped together in a deserted mansion. His lips descend. She touches his magnificent thews" (130). As Karl keeps cutting pennies into perfect spirals, Celestine "decide[s] that I have now seen what love is about" (130). She learns more about the banality of love when she returns to Karl late one night after work: "It is time, now, for Karl to break down with his confession that I am a slow-burning fuse in his loins. A hair trigger. I am a name he cannot silence. A dream that never burst" (132). The conversation that follows is hardly so romantic:

"Oh well . . ." he says.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"Nothing." (132)

It is not just Karl's inadequacy as a lover that troubles Celestine (although she notes that "In the love magazines, when passion holds sway, men don't fall down and roll on the floor and lay there like dead" [134]). From the beginning she senses that female passivity is part of experience as scripted: "He is fighting me for the upper hand, straining down with all his might, but I am more than equal to his weight-lifting arms and thrashing legs. I could throw him to the side" (128). Celestine knows her own strength but she "grow[s] curious" (128) and initially suppresses her power. Although she stays for awhile to satisfy her curiosity, the relationship quickly "get[s] too predictable" for Celestine's taste (134). She gradually comes to see Karl's presence as an invasion: "I am tired of coming home to Karl's heavy breathing and even his touch has begun to oppress me" (135). As she realizes, the problem is not Karl as an individual, but the spiritual drain involved in the kind of relationship they share:

"It's not you," I tell him. "I don't want to get married. With you around I get no sleep. I'm tired all the time. All day I'm giving the wrong change and I don't have any dreams. I'm the kind of person that likes having dreams. Now I have to see you every morning when I wake up and I forget if I dreamed anything or even slept at all, because right away you're on me with your hot breath." (136)

Aware that the relationship is dehumanizing—she feels like "some kind of animal . . . [a] big stupid heifer" (136), Celestine rejects Karl's marriage proposal. Having arrived at a view similar

to that of Mary who “look[s] on the married girls the way a wild dog might look through the window at tame ones, envying the regularity of their lives but also despising the low pleasure they get from the master’s touch” (69), Celestine refuses to become a slave for some measure of security. Thus, unlike Sita and Russell, who both remain rootless, Celestine emerges from the novel whole, “more solid than the tree Karl had embraced before he vanished” (143).

Like her mother, Dot seems an unlikely character to follow in the footsteps of Adelaide or Sita. Even as a baby, prompt to use her voice in protest (174), she is not stereotypically feminine or passive:

In her shopping-cart stroller she exercised to exhaustion, bouncing for hours to develop her leg muscles. She hated lying on her back and when put that way immediately flipped over to assume a wrestler’s crouch. Sleep, which she resisted, did not come upon her gently but felled her in odd positions. Draped over the side of the cart or packed in its corner, she seemed to have fallen in battle. But it was only a momentary surrender. She woke, demanding food, and when set free exploded in an astonishing fast creep that took her across a room in seconds. (180)

Appropriately cast in the school play as Joseph rather than Mary (216), Dot is a tough and fearless child. As she grows older and the pressures to conform grow stronger, she still remains far from the ideal middle-class female, her face “vivid in its rouge and orange cake,” her hair “cut in a long shag that looked like a flattened mane” (257), her feminine image destroyed by her “powerful” neck (257). Her dreams reflect her confusion about her identity. She alternatively imagines that

She would live by the ocean like a movie star, or disappear like her Aunt Mary, who told Dot she’d hitched a boxcar. Dot would own a fried-chicken chain. She would drive trucks, bull-dozers, fly off forever like her grandmother Adelaide. She would travel the world and seek knowledge, or live up north on the reservation with her uncles Russell and Eli. She’d put the shot in the state track, from there to the Olympics (302-03).

As a young woman, Dot is at a crossroads in developing her sense of self. The role offered her at the end of the novel—that of Beet Queen—is, of course, a traditional female one involving

objectification and circumscription of female strengths. Accepting that role would ally Dot with the other defeated females in the novel, Adelaide and Sita, a fact Celestine vaguely recognizes when she thinks of Dot on the stage as another of the "frothy confections . . . like magazine models or mannequins in store windows" (325). However, like her mother, Dot breaks out of the constricting definition of female presented to her. Even dressed in her absurdly confining and immobilizing costume, Dot is "electric, tense with life" (310); she walks "bold with purpose" (310), "her head lowered like a bull's" (322). She frees herself by repeating—but with important differences—Adelaide's flight. Unlike Adelaide who wants to escape reality by flying into a romantic fantasy of female dependency on a man, Dot, "vault[ing] in[to the plane] without a hand up, or permission" (327), embarks not on an unproductive escape but on a journey of independent self-definition. Writing her name, "Queen Wallacette" rather than "The Beet Queen" or even "Dot," she seeds the clouds with her new female identity. Her triumph is ultimately not simply a personal one or even a singularly female one, for it brings the rain that ends the symbolic social drought devastating the whole community. Further, the promise of renewal and fertility contained in this act has a specifically Native American referent. Native American spiritual revival is symbolically suggested in the descriptions of Russell, associated with the desiccated land throughout the novel and with thirst at its end (Dot is the only person to notice Russell's need for water during the parade [331]). Dot's act not only offers a female rebirth but an Indian one as well; the rain she brings will symbolically revive Russell, the "lines in his face, deep and brown, jagged, running sideways . . . like the dry earth" (335).

In important ways, Dot ends the novel not as an American beauty queen, but as a female power allied with traditional Native American ones. Erdrich has suggested this aspect of Dot's heritage much earlier in the novel, in a hauntingly beautiful image Erdrich has described as "the real heart of the book" (Owens, *Other Destinies* 211). As Celestine feeds the infant Dot late one night, she notices

in the fine moonlit floss of her baby's hair, a tiny white spider making its nest.

It was a delicate thing, close to transparent, with long sheer legs. It moved so quickly that it seemed to vibrate, throwing out invisible strings and catching them, weaving its own tensile strand. Celestine watched as it began to happen. A web was forming, a complicated house, that Celestine could not bring herself to destroy. (176)

As Owens has suggested, Erdrich here offers a "fleeting suggestion of Spiderwoman's web of creation and connection" (211) to suggest Dot's power. In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen stresses the importance of this "quintessential spirit" (13) who "weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection" (11): "To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization" (11). By rejecting white America's myths of femininity and tapping into more powerful Native American ones, Dot, like Erdrich, points the way toward more fruitful, independent gender and racial identities than those the society offers either Sita or Russell.

#### NOTES

- 1 Owens repeats this sentiment in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*: "Indian identity is not . . . at the heart of the novel, and cultural conflict here is never explicit; there is no overt racism, no jagged sense of lost Indian culture or identity" (206). It is also a view expressed about other of Erdrich's novels. Matchie, for instance, has suggested that *Love Medicine* is "different from so much of Native American literature in that it is not polemic—there is no ax to grind, no major indictment of white society" (478).
- 2 In a thoughtful response to Silko, Perez Castillo argues that Silko's attack involves "a restrictive view of ethnicity and an essentialist, logocentric concept of textual representation" (285). She concludes that "the cultural ambivalence reflected in *The Beet Queen* may be mimetic in character, mirroring the fragmented ontological landscape in which many Native Americans exist today, shuttling between radically diverse realities" (288-89). Another insightful treatment of the issue of identity in the novel is that offered by Ann Rayson. She describes *The Beet Queen* as "a novel of the interior life of 'the other'—the orphan, the homosexual, the bisexual, the Indian, the mixed-blood, the disfigured, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unattractive. . . . The central core of the novel concerns the psychological and sociological consequences of having a mixed or indeterminate identity" (Rayson 33).
- 3 Unable to interpret her own situation, Sita mistakes other women as the danger to her. She sees Mary and Celestine as enemies and the old woman in the mental ward as the vampire in her life (208-12).

- 4 Erdrich reinforces the gender dimension of Sita's story by alluding to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic story of female oppression, "The Yellow Wallpaper." Like the female protagonist in that story, Sita is imprisoned in a yellow room when she becomes ill, one that makes her "sick to her stomach" and prevents her from sleeping (207). Both rooms symbolize the imprisonment of the female characters in confining female roles.
- 5 Henry Lamartine, Jr., who kills himself in *Love Medicine*, suffers a similar fate: "He is less a victim of reservation life than of a war that is not of his own making. The Indian brave no longer fights for his own land and good but in a foreign war in which he has no stake" (Flavin 60).

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