The Wolf Who Ate Her Heart: The Canine-Woman Alliance in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich

By
Gina T Luy

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Gina T Luy presented on May 2, 2107

Dr. Debra Barker, PhD, Chair

Dr. John Mann, PhD

Dr. Heather Ann Moody, PhD

APPROVED

Dean of Graduate Studies
Abstract

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The fiction of Louise Erdrich contains a notable alliance between canines and female characters. It is an alliance that helps the women maintain a sense of matrilineal power as they resist colonial patriarchy. The canine alliance with the Ojibwe has its roots in oral tradition. In the fiction of Louise Erdrich, this alliance forms what Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor calls “survivance” because it rejects victimhood, fights cultural genocide, and allows for the continuance of the Ojibwe story. This connection between women and dogs has hitherto received little critical scholarship. The thesis includes an examination of the role of the canine in Ojibwe oral tradition, a review of scholarship concerning animals in the work of Louise Erdrich, and a new Indigenous Feminists reading of women, wolves, and dogs in Erdrich’s fiction.
Dedication

I have cerebral palsy, and when I was young, I fell quite frequently. My springer spaniel, Penny stood near me, licked my face, and allowed me to pull myself up on the strength of her spine. I dedicate this piece to all my dogs and their wolf ancestors.
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In Erdrich’s body of fiction, women and canines share a marrow-deep connection. This connection, though it is of notable profundity, has heretofore evaded much critical scholarship. Colonialism was supposed to deliver a death blow to the timber wolf and the Native American matriarch. Manifest Destiny and Jacksonian politics were fueled by colonial patriarchy. Colonial patriarchy, as I define it, is the systemic power structure that favors Caucasian, male superiority, and the domination of ecosystems. In pursuance of Manifest Destiny, settlers besieged the Great Lakes region with an onslaught of forged steel, gunpowder, and germs. The metal, in its saw-toothed variety ate through softwood forests. Forged steel decimated small mammal populations. Prejudice-laced bullets pierced the hearts and brains of the North American timber wolves, driving them to the edge of extinction. The Ojibwe were driven from their ancestral lands of the northern Great Lakes. As the settlers’ plow blades cut into the earth, wolf packs starved and Ojibwe women fought to keep their children alive. Jacksonian progress was purchased in Ojibwe blood and wolf blood alike, a profusion of which was spilled in the settling of the Great Lakes region. Ojibwe women, with their life-giving role, and wolves with their wild strength did not fit into the colonists’ narrow vision of the continent’s future. First Nations and the wolf were supposed to die in the bloody snow, leaving the settlers with a civilized landscape, a pristine land
free of war cries and predatory howls. However, this death-infused quietude was never fully accomplished. The wolf and the Ojibwe were supposed to fade into nothingness, but the story does not end this way. In Louise Erdrich’s stories, canine and Ojibwe brains still hold on to the old ways. The story endures and dogs and women tell it.

In The Painted Drum, an Ojibwe girl is devoured by a pack of starving wolves. The scene is wintry, every stomach desperate, and the snow bloody. In this terrible and tender meal, a young girl becomes part of a wolf—quite literally. No huntsman comes to split the wolf open to save the girl with a hyper-masculine display of steel. Later, the girl’s mother consumes the flesh of a wolf, the one who ate her daughter’s heart. Through a western lens, one might find this unspeakable, yet in Erdrich’s fiction, this is benign reciprocity. In Tracks and Four Souls, Fleur Pillager is fortified by a connection with her wolf relatives, and thus regains her land and herself. The women of The Antelope Woman are inexorably connected with the descendants of a dog named Sorrow who drank human milk. In the Birchbark House series, Old Tallow the hunter is sustained by her pack of dogs. The reservation dog and his wolf ancestors become the women’s helpmates and protectors. In the novels of Louise Erdrich Ojibwe womanhood never succumbs to the influences of colonial patriarchy. In Erdrich’s body of work, dogs and their wolf ancestors are connected to motherhood, womanhood, and oral tradition, and thusly to Ojibwe survival.

My intentions in this essay, then, are threefold. Firstly, I wish to illustrate that there is a basis for a woman-canine alliance in Ojibwe oral tradition. Secondly, I wish to illustrate that while many scholars have written of animals in Erdrich’s fiction, the canine has not received its due critical attention. Lastly, I endeavor to create a new feminist reading of Erdrich, one that subverts western wolf phobias. In this new reading, the canis genus and Ojibwe women emerge as warriors in the war against colonialism.
II) Barking and Beading: Woman and Dog in Ojibwe Oral Tradition

In a scene from The Antelope Woman, Almost Soup, the dog narrator expresses the interspecies connectivity in the design of the Ojibwe*: “Though I live the dog’s life and take on human sins, I am connected in the beadwork. I live in the beadwork too. The flowers are growing, the powerful vines. The pattern of her daughters’ souls is emerging” (195). The dog, who lives with a matriarchal family, positions himself as not only part of the story, but also as one of the storytellers: “I live in the beadwork too” is a narrator’s declaration of his own significance. He is not a dog in the servile way of the colonists. The dog is part of the design, and in this way, he becomes connected to the daughters’ souls. This soul-deep connectivity shall be explored further later in the discussion. However, Almost Soup’s role in the beading is of more immediate consequence: “We dogs know what the women are really doing when they are beading. They are sewing all of us into a pattern, into life beneath their hands” (184). Almost Soup, then, illustrates his spirituality, his consciousness, and his role in the life-story that is designed by women.

This scene of women, creation, and animal consciousness has its foundations in Ojibwe oral tradition. In Ojibway Heritage, Ojibwe writer Basil Johnston writes of Sky Woman, to whom the Ojibwe owe their existence. In the same text, Johnston exemplifies the weighty significance of the female in Ojibwe formation and tradition. Kitche Manitou, or Great Spirit, sends a male companion to Sky Woman. She then conceives twins, one of pure spirit-matter, the other of a physical nature. These twins have warring natures and eventually destroy each other, leaving Sky Woman alone. Kitche Manitou sends her another male concubine: “Again sky-woman conceives. As before, her consort leaves, but sky-woman remains content” (13). Sky Woman, then, is her own entity and a central figure in the creation of the Ojibwe world. The creation story of the Ojibwe, then prefigures female strength, unlike Eve, who is fashioned from Adam’s rib to be his subservient.
Johnston’s Sky Woman does not seek domination of the earth. Rather, the animals come to her aide willingly: “The water creatures observed what was happening in the heavens, sensed the weariness and pitied her. In their compassion, they sought ways to provide relief for her” (14). This compassion between women and animals beings, then, becomes the basis for the creation of an Ojibwe earth, and this compassion manifests itself in the exchange between women and animals in Erdrich’s fiction. While Sky Woman rests on turtle’s back, aquatic mammals try to dive to the sea’s floor to retrieve soil. Many animals perish in this attempt, but muskrat succeeds, and perhaps the *Birchbark Series*’ matriarch Victoria Muskrat is named after this valiant swimmer. Sky Woman then breathes life into the soil, which becomes the homeland of the Ojibwe (14).

The creation of the Ojibwe earth on the turtle’s back, then, germinates an intimate connection between the animal and the female: “The island home grew in its size. As the waters subsided, the animal beings brought grasses, flowers, trees, and food bearing plants to the skywoman. Into each, she infused her life-giving breath and they lived once more” (15). This connectivity between the animal peoples and Ojibwe women is a frequent manifestation in the fiction of Louise Erdrich. Notably, Blue Prairie Woman, survivor of an army raid, and the dog named Sorrow sit “breathing each other’s breath” as they wait to deliver Matilda Roy from the colonial farmhouse of her adoptive father, and take her back to the Ojibwe ways of her mother’s people.

After she gives birth to her second set of twins, Sky Woman depends upon the animal beings for her children’s sustenance: “The bears, wolves, foxes, and beaver brought food and drink” (16). The animals also provide for the children’s emotional well-being: “The squirrels, weasels, raccoons, and cats offered toys and games; the robins, sparrows, chickadees, and loons sang and danced in the air” (16). All of these animals appear at some point in Erdrich’s fiction. Apitchi, the Robin, is a name of a toddler. Chickadee is the name of a twin in *The Birchbark*
"House." The wolves keep the children of *The Painted Drum* warm by offering their fur for winter hoods. The canid connections in the novels have their roots here in the creation story.

In Johnston’s telling of the creation story, woman and animals are endowed with gifts and sentiments with which they nourish Ojibwe progeny. During winter famine, the animals offer their flesh to warm and fill the bellies of the Ojibwe youth. This snow months’ sacrifice occurs in both Johnston’s text and Erdrich’s fiction. During a winter famine, Sky woman and the animals are distraught to see the young Ojibwe go hungry: “The spirit woman was disconsolate, and the animals and birds were alarmed that the babies they had grown to love would die. The bear, fearing the death of the infants offered his life that they might live” (17). The bear’s flesh, then, becomes part of the Ojibwe children. Likewise, in *The Painted Drum*, three Ojibwe children are saved from hypothermia when they snuggle beneath a bearskin rug after losing their home in the midst of a North Dakota winter. Women in Erdrich’s fiction frequently turn to the animal world for the survival of their human posterity, notably when Blue Prairie woman must boil her dog and offer the soft flesh to her daughter in *The Antelope Woman*. The sacrament of flesh, then, becomes another way in which women and canids end up “breathing each other’s breath.” This interplay of bodies becomes a key element of survival as colonialism encroaches.
III) Grandparent Wolves: A Native Rejection of the Big Bad Wolf

American farmland was cultivated at the cost of interspecies blood. Lakota scholar Joseph Marshall III explores this cost in *On Behalf of the Wolf and the First Peoples*. Written in the early 1990s, the book is a contemporary to the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National park and the cinematic success of Michael Blake’s controversial *Dances With Wolves*. Marshall’s text is perhaps a Lakota-centered reaction to both. In the same time period, Native Peoples faced racially-tinged opposition in Indian gaming controversies, the Indian mascot debate, and the spearfishing Walleye Wars.” Marshall’s defense of the wolf and Indigenous populations of North America, then, is a timely one.

Marshall lays a foundation for a Native-wolf resistance to cultural genocide. In the book’s opening, Marshall recounts a boyhood dream in which he is visited by a grandfatherly gray wolf: “He came out of the dark line of trees and walked to the cool mountain stream, standing in a small eddy. He was big, gray, old, but still powerful. A breeze ruffled his gray coat. *He was magnificent* “[The italics are Marshall’s] (1). This welcoming wolf stands in stark contrast to the Eurocentric vision of a wolf in a child’s life, expressed in such tales as *Peter and the Wolf*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, or the infamous *Little Red Riding Hood* where the wolf is driven by troublesome desires of bloodlust. Rather, Marshall’s wolf is benign, an elder. The wolf does not look at the boy with bloodlust, but rather with ancestral protection: “*He lay down with his forepaws in the water and looked in my direction with old eyes that had seen much. The wisdom in them was easy to see. A slight smile of reassurance had passed through them*” (2). The wolf’s smile here is not anthropomorphic or evil as it is in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

The wolf, then, retains its natural canine qualities and does not slip into some perceived cartoon-villain version of himself. The old wolf, though, has suffered grievously as his territory has been colonized, and so he tells the boy Marshall of that suffering:

*The old warrior sighed. With narrowed eyes he tested the wind. Then he leaned forward and drank from the cold current. Sitting back, he stared off into the forest, but to some*
other place as well. His eyes reflected everything he saw. Suddenly, tipping back his head, he began to sing. Sharp and rhythmic barks at first. Then a long, high wail that died away softly. He sang again and again. (2)

Whereas children of European descent were taught to hear the evil in the wolf’s song, Marshall hears a sadness of great depth: “After he stopped, I said ‘Grandfather, that is a sad song.’ He stood. ‘Yes. It is the song of my people. It is the song of my life. It is the song of my death’” (2). The old wolf then departs to the forest, presumably to die. His final request, however, is that Marshall tell his story: “‘Sing my song,’ he pleaded with a tired voice. ‘Sing the song of my people. For I am afraid...’ His voice trailed off” (3). The wolf never finishes explaining the fear, but the presence of that fear gives him a consciousness, which the wolf is denied in Eurocentric tradition. The fear is larger than one of his own death. The wolf is accepting of that death. The wolf’s fear seems to be of extinction. He wants his people to live on earth and in memory.

The six-year-old’s brain is a rather literal interpreter, and so the young Marshall at first misconstrues the wolf’s meaning and emulates the wolf’s howl. To a Caucasian visitor, this behavior is aberrant: “I do recall now that one of the guests, an Episcopalian priest, did look at me as if seriously considering an exorcism. But he was a white man, and in his world the wolf was an evil thing” (3). In seeking to understand the howling, Marshall’s maternal grandfather helps interpret the dream, and in so doing, plants a seed of understanding in the boy’s mind:

My grandfather did not take dreams lightly. He coaxed me into revealing the one I had about the wolf. After I finished, he reminded me that the last wolf in our part of the reservation had been hunted down and killed in 1917, thirty four years before I heard one howl from across the river. Then he said ‘The wolf does not only want you to howl, he wants you to tell what happened to his people.’ (4)

Marshall asks, in boy curiosity, what happened to the wolf-people. His grandfather’s response illuminates some of the pain in wolf’s song: “‘Many of them were killed,’ my grandfather said.
‘Very many. They were driven from their home...just like we were. We Lakota, and other people like us’” (4-5). It is here that Marshall begins to understand that the history of displacement and disempowerment is a shared one. He equates the loss of wolves with the loss of Lakota warriors: “Somewhere between the age of ten and twelve I had to reconcile with the fact there were no wolves and no warriors in my world.”(14). This loss is hard for Marshall to bear, but it is not a defeating loss. Rather it leads to a life of scholarship and activism in defense of the wolf people and his own. Happily, there are warriors and wolves in Erdrich’s world. She creates women warriors who have comradeship with surviving wolves.

The most central lesson, then, is one of endurance. For both the wolf and Indigenous people, history is fraught with loss: “As a young man I learned the reason wolves and warriors no longer existed in my part of the world. The first peoples and the wolf had been driven to the brink of extinction by a new comer to Turtle Island—the European” (8). Erdrich’s Ojibwe characters are also driven to a great precipice of extinction, but they do not fall over its edge. The wolf and women brainchildren of Louise Erdrich continue their resistance, to exist on the page with defiant lungs, hearts, and brains. Like their real world counterparts, they continue to draw breaths of North American air. By weaving the wolves into her fiction, Erdrich celebrates their continued oxygenated existence. Though her fictional rendering of the wolf is similar to Marshall’s vision, it takes on its own Ojibwe, female-centered voice. In her fiction, Erdrich, like Marshall, continues to sing the wolf’s song.
IV) A Fang-Sized Hole in the Page: A Literature Review

Rand Valentine writes of the Ojibwe comradeship with wolves in his translation of “The Birth of Nenabozho.” Many scholars have written of Nenabozho’s connection to Nanapush, Erdrich’s trickster elder narrator. However, according to Valentine, Nenabozho would never have become the Ojibwe teacher or Nanapush’s namesake without the generosity of the canine spirit. Nenabozho runs with the wolves, and they end up living closely together, hearing each other’s thoughts and breathing the same air. Nenabozho is nourished by the marrow of bones, which the thoughtful wolf pack shares with him. This sharing of bone marrow with humans also appears in the fiction of Louise Erdrich when Old Tallow, a brave-hearted elder woman, is so nourished by a fur trapper’s pack of sled dogs in *The Birchbark* series. Ojibwe trickster, wolves, dogs, and a thunderous female character, then, find sustenance by sucking the marrow out of the bone. This connection, however, is quite different from Thoreau’s individualistic desire to “suck the marrow out of life.” The marrow in these Ojibwe stories becomes lifeblood, allowing for the continuance of the Ojibwe. This bone-deep, interspecies nourishment, however, has received little critical attention.

Animals abound in Erdrich’s fiction—the bear, the crane, and the sad winter fish. Dogs make frequent appearances as well; they are most often symbiotically connected to an Ojibwe woman. Ojibwe critic Gerald Vizenor writes of Erdrich’s use of animals in his article “Creature Tropes in Native American Fiction”: “Erdrich names moose, pigs, bears, cats and other animals, but the most common authored animal in *Tracks* is the dog. The animal and dog are generic creations more often than not, and few animals are characters in a natural environment. The generic animal is a generic and literal simile” (676). According to Vizenor, animals in Erdrich’s fiction are figured as simple figurative language. They are used to describe people and events, but they lack their own consciousness and have been removed from their natural habitat. Thus, according to Vizenor, the animals in *Tracks* lack memorability and power. He contrasts this with other Native writer’s animals, such as Momaday’s bears, who exist in their native environment.
and have untamed appetites as well as maternal concerns (672). Momaday’s bears, then, play a central role in the narrative, an active part of a shared story. According to Vizenor, the most memorable animal character in Tracks is Lily, a terrier who snaps at Fleur Pillager from the lap of one of her rapists. Vizenor’s evaluation of Erdrich’s animals, however, comes early in her writing career. “Authored Animals” was published in 1995, predating the 1998 publication of The Antelope Wife, which introduces Almost Soup, the dog narrator, whose status as storyteller elevates the role of dog in Erdrich’s fiction. Almost Soup has a familial, spiritual connection to the women in the Antelope Wife and the rewrite The Antelope Woman. Almost Soup is anything but generic. A closer, more sustained analysis of the dog in Erdrich’s fiction will unearth a wealth of examples of sentient canine beings who struggle alongside Ojibwe women. Erdrich’s dogs indeed defy the Disney-like anthropomorphism that Vizenor denounces. Rather, the dogs and wolves become enmeshed in the lives of the tribe’s women, which enables them to resist with what Vizenor calls “Survivance.”

As Joe Marshall illustrates, the wolf and native people were not supposed to survive the colonial settlement of North America, but they did indeed. “Survivance” is one word for this continued existence. However, the continued breathing is only a part of Survivance. Survivance is a rejection of colonial authorship and a persistence of Indigenous stories. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Spokane/Coeur d’Alene author Sherman Alexie expressed a religious belief in stories because if one tells a story well enough no one ever dies. Ancestors and loved ones live on in stories. Gerald Vizenor expresses a similar belief in storytelling in Native Liberty Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance:

Theories of survivance are elusive by definition and in translation. The practices of survivance, are obvious and unmistakable in native stories. The nature of survivance creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilility, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical
absence, the domination of cultural simulations, and manifest manners. Native survivance is a continuance. (1)

In the fiction of Louise Erdrich, dogs and wolves aid in this continued Native narrative presence. The canines are powerful players, particularly in the women’s stories. Canines nourish the Ojibwe characters with their flesh, guide the women characters, and even tell some of these Indigenous stories themselves. Though Vizenor is sometimes critical of Erdrich, little has been written of how her work fits into his theory of Survivance, and less still has been written about how canines propel Erdrich’s authoring of Survivance.

An Indigenous feminist lens is of particular use when examining the canine symbiosis of Erdrich’s fiction. To do such a reading through a white feminist lens would be problematic. Therefore, an examination of the critical theory of Indigenous feminisms is necessary. MA Jaimes writes of the effects of colonial patriarchy upon Indigenous women. Jaimes argues, that unlike Western feminists, Native women are not seeking a rejection of “traditional” gender roles Gender roles were not disempowering for Native women in their Pre-Contact societies:

But what the sexist Western Europeans mistook as the subjugation of Native men to their women was actually the gender role dynamics of an egalitarian society that valued both men and women. It was Aristotle, according to Lewis Hanke (1959) who first wrote that all women as well as all children, slaves/ servants were to be the property of males heads of patriarchal households. (67)

Jaimes examines the Western roots of patriarchy, and she also places animals under its yoke. To a woman of European lineage, a return to traditional values may be a dissonance into this Aristotelian oppression. To the Ojibwe woman, however, a return to traditional values is a reclamation of the respect and autonomy that are ancestrally hers. Since the oppression of animals and women are linked to Western patriarchy, it makes sense for Erdrich to develop an inter-genus resistance to this Western patriarchy. *Canis Lupus* has suffered alongside Indigenous women at the hands of the colonial patriarch, and thus make an apt ally in the war against him.
The small void in the criticism of Erdrich’s fiction opens a space that can be filled with a sustained analysis of the sinewy women and canines of Erdrich’s literary resistance. The analysis of animals in Erdrich’s work, however, is not a new concept—the foundation has been laid. Joni Adamson Clarke, for instance remarks upon the ways in which Fleur Pillager is both human and animal, transforming from bear, to water monster, to wolf throughout the narrative (33). Clarke, however, centers around Fleur’s connection to the bear, her status as a “bear walker” (33). Clarke remarks that Fleur, who possesses many wolf-like characteristics, befriends Nanapush in much the same way that the wolves befriend Nenabozho in Vizenor’s translation (33). Here, however, the analysis of Fleur’s wolfish characteristics, is not sustained, nor is it framed as an Indigenous rejection of colonial patriarchy.

Critic Danel Olson comments upon Fleur’s “wolfish grin” as the character enacts revenge upon lumber baron John James Mauser for his destruction of Pillager forest in Four Souls, the sequel to Tracks (231). However, the analysis soon becomes problematic in its comparison of Fleur to the wolf villains and scorned women of Gothic literature. Moreover, no connection is made between Fleur and actual, living canine, nor does Olson analyze any other female character’s connection to the wolves. Olson’s analysis, then supports my own, but leaves space for it to unfurl.

Meldan Tanrisal provides a scholarly analysis of Ojibwe motherhood in “Mother and Child Relationships in the Novels of Louise Erdrich.” Tanrisal asserts that Erdrich’s women are the vertebrae of their community: “They are powerful women who counteract destruction” (72). However, there is no discussion of how animal beings assist Erdrich-authored mothers, as they assisted Sky Woman in her motherhood.

Nora Barker Barry dissects Fleur Pillager’s “Bear Identity.” She discusses the primacy of the bear on Ojibwe mythology, citing Johnston’s Ojibway Heritage. However, the wolf is mentioned only in passing in the article: “Strength is the bear’s most outstanding characteristic in this mythology, and the bear along with wolf and lynx is an important totem to warriors” (25).
Barry equates Fleur's Bear Clan identity with healing powers, and offers analysis of much of the bear imagery in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*. However, Fleur's "wolfish grin" is again mentioned only in passing. There is more to be mined here, as Fleur and her descendants often show wolf totem qualities as well.

In "Waiting Halfway in Each Other's Bodies: Kinship and Corporality in Louise Erdrich's 'Father's Milk,'" critic Maureen Riche offers an analysis of the mother dog and Fleur's ancestor, Blue Prairie Woman and motherhood: "... 'Father's Milk' sets into motion a kinship chain of men, women, children, dogs and deer, linking them across several generations" (48). Riche discusses the prevalence of the dog in Ojibwe oral tradition, and in the survival of Matilda Roy, which appears in "Father's Milk" and later in *The Antelope Wife* and its rewrite *The Antelope Woman*. Riche also does not read the canine-woman connectedness as a subversion of imposed colonial patriarchy. I should like to read the story as a subversion of settler patriarchy, and to contend that this canine-woman bond extends far beyond this singular story-thread.

Much of Louise Erdrich's fiction takes place in the wake of the colonial settlement of the Great Lakes region. Canid beings and Indigenous peoples suffered in this settlement. Their suffering is given considerable narrative space in Erdrich's fiction. Dogs suffered in the settling of the region as well. As trappers and other European settlers spread their Christianity, they also spread their vilification of the wolf and woman. Dogs toiled and begged for scrap. Native women were subjected to the influence of Euro-misogyny. Fictional Ojibwe women are subjected to this misogyny in Erdrich's texts. However, these women are fortified by their connection with canine beings, and are thus equipped to thwart this misogyny. Through this fang and fingernail alliance, an effective resistance is born. My intention here is to provide a close reading of this connection, which other critics have mentioned, but not scrutinized.
V)  Fleur Pillage’s Wolfish Grin: Wolf-Woman Resistance in *Tracks* and *Four Souls*

In *Tracks*, Fleur Pillager is a stronghold of Ojibwe womanhood, and she is infused with a wolf spirit. Much of the animal imagery in *Tracks* is in the form of figurative language, often simile. As Vizenor notes: “Louise Erdrich has used a style of tropes in *Tracks* that is closer to the literal or prosaic simile than to the obscure metaphors of motivation…” (“Authored Animals” 675). A trope, in creative writing is cliché, something to be avoided. Though the similes are literary technique and not the creation of a sentient animal character, they nonetheless are a source of empowerment, not just a atheistic device. Those moments when Erdrich employs animal imagery to describe Fleur Pillager occur in moments of resistance. The similes, then, become part of the resistance. In the midst of a dying winter, Nanapush retrieves Fleur Pillager from her family’s cabin that has become a colonial tomb:

So I was the one who broke the thin-scraped hide that made a window. I was the one who the one who lowered himself into the stinking silence, onto the floor. I was the one to find the old man and woman, your grandparents, the little brother and two sisters, stone cold and wrapped in gray horse blankets, their faces turned west. (*Tracks* 3)

The “stinking silence,” of course reeks of death. The “stone-cold” describes the heanness of late winter rigor mortises; thus one may find it easy to read this scene as a subzero defeat. However, it quickly becomes a testament of a wolfish girl’s bone-deep determination to live:

Then something in the corner knocked. I flung the door wide. It was the eldest daughter, Fleur, about seventeen years old then. She was so feverish, she had thrown off her covers, and now she huddled against the cold wood range. She was wild as a filthy wolf, a big boney girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan. (*Tracks* 3)

Sometimes non Native authors used animal imagery to dehumanize Native people. In the work of nineteenth century authors such as Fenimore Cooper and Lydia Child, such carnivorous imagery
may have been evidence of the author’s inability to see Fleur as human, but this is not a passage of sub-humanity. Fleur’s wolf wildness speaks of her desire to survive the tubercular illness that has nearly annihilated her family. Fleur, “wild as a filthy wolf” is feral in her sickness and grief. The filthiness is colonial in its origins. The European disease causes the squalor, and as soon as she is able, Fluer undergoes the purification of a cedar sweat lodge. In Erdrich’s prose, the “snarling” only accentuates the strength of a girl who will not be silenced by starvation, or death-cold, or consumptive air. With these “bursts of strength and snarling cries,” Fleur continues to sing the song of the wolf, of her people, those Pillagers who have died in gray horse blankets. Nonetheless, this is no death song, like the wolf’s in Joseph Marshall’s dream. At the end of this scene, the Pillager bloodline is very much alive in the form of a big-boned girl—strong and perseverant as a young wolf.

Fleur’s wolfish characteristics even assist her survival of a rape. The rape of Native women is symptomatic of colonial conquest, an ugly fact of Post-Columbian history. Fleur goes to work at a butcher shop in Argus, which is where she meets the men who become her rapists. Pauline, Track’s second narrator, notices Fleur’s wolfish qualities as she works alongside her. The men, however, fail to see the wolf in Fleur, an oversight that will aid in their demise: “They never looked into her sly brown eyes, or noticed her teeth, strong and sharp, and very white” (Tracks 18). Fluer’s patience is of a patient variety. She wins money in poker games, a card predator of sorts. She takes a slow and steady dollar per night from the men, with stalking precision. At these small moments of triumph, the lobo-look reappears: “Fleur threw out her arms and swept the money close grinning the same wolf grin that she’d used on me, the grin that had them” (Tracks 23). According to Basil Johnston, a quality of the wolf totem is perseverance (Ojibway Heritage 52), and Fleur exhibits that trait as she beats the men at their own game.

Ojibwe critic Lawrence Gross comments upon Fleur’s wolf qualities in “The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich’s Tracks: “The wolf-like grin she gives Pauline in asking for money to enter the card game with the male employees
reveals the self-assurance of a hunter about to dispatch easy prey” (51). Gross acknowledges that the wolf qualities give her strength, but later in the article he details how Fleur loses her power, beginning with the miscarriage of her first son (53). I, however, remain unconvinced of this Fluer’s disempowerment. The literary comparisons of Fleur to a wolf are an attempt to embody Fleur’s with the wolf’s best qualities. According to Basil Johnston, this reverence for animal traits is an important part of being Ojibwe: “As these animals were endowed with certain traits of character, so did the Anishnabeg endeavor to emulate the character, and make it part of themselves. Each animal symbolized an ideal to be sought, attained and perpetuated. Fleur perpetuates guardianship and perseverance, traits of the wolf. These traits allow Fleur to withstand colonialism assault on her womanhood.

With the rape scene, Erdrich creates a narrative subversion of the hunt and conquest. In his first attempt to overpower Fleur as she slips the hog, Lily is sullied by the angry sow: “She plunged at Lily’s thick waist and snatched a mouthful of shirt. She lunged again, caught him lower so that he grunted in pain and surprise” (Tracks 25). Lily tries to overpower a female of the species and ends up with his manhood caught in the jaws of a sow. Clearly, Lily lacks the hunting skills of a wolf. Fumbling, Lily cannot manage to overcome the sow, even with the help of forged metal: “He hurled the sow’s tight skull against an iron post, but instead of knocking her dead, he woke her from her dream” (Tracks 17). The sow is granted a consciousness, and she fights back, while Lily’s lardy form sinks further into the mud. Instead of a wolf sinking in his kill bite, Lily becomes the prey: “She sank her black fangs into his shoulder, clasping him, dancing him forward and backward through the pen” (Tracks 17). The sow forcefully penetrates Lily with her fangs, subverting his desires for violent sexual conquest. The sow also leads the dance, which subverts the male dominance of sexual predation. The “black fangs” of the sow are a wolfish image, one used in an act of guardianship of Fleur. Eventually, Lily becomes so entangled with the swine that the other men fail to see him as a man: “They went down and then came up, the same shape and then the same color until the men couldn’t tell one from the other in that light and
Fleur was able to vault the gates, hit gravel” (*Tracks* 26). With a Circe-like spell, Fleur is able to transform a man into a pig. This swine-fall seems to have a lasting effect on Lily’s flesh: “Lily was paler and softer than ever, as if his flesh had steamed on his bones” (*Tracks* 26). Lily is weakened by the experience and his flesh, which is supposed to be stronger than Fleur’s, becomes like pulled pork roast, falling off the bone. Fleur watches this degradation, her white teeth glinting in the moonlight.

The men eventually overpower Fleur and rape her in the smokehouse where she sleeps. The wolf totem cannot protect Fleur from the rape, nor does the mixed-blood Catholic convert, Pauline do anything to intercede. Perhaps, though, to stop the rape would be to deny history. The rape of Fleur is both physical and metaphorric, a symbol of the oppression and sexual violence that Native women have suffered at the hands of colonialism. The rape happens as the rape of the land happened, as the displacement and slaughter of the Ojibwe happened. Of greater significance is the fact that Fleur is a survivor of this rape. The narrative does not deny history, but Fleur Pillager refuses to live in a shadow of victimry. During the rape, as Pauline recalls, Fleur’s cries rise in Ojibwe, not the language of the colonizers: “Fleur’s hoarse breath so loud it filled me, her cry in the old language…” (*Tracks* 26). In the assault, itself, the men and not Fleur, are dehumanized. Lawrence Gross agrees that paradoxically, the rape ultimately ends up disempowering the men: “The men rape her, which merely sets the scene for Fleur to display her abilities at magic” (52). Gross agrees that this is a scene of empowerment for Fleur, but he does not examine the wolf qualities in her resistance of sexual conquest.

The tornado that hits Argus after Fleur’s rape bears an eerie resemblance to the Big Bad Wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*. Pauline recalls the event as a manifestation of Fleur’s anger: “The odd cloud became a fat snout that nosed along the earth and sniffled, jabbed, picked at things, sucked them up, blew them apart, rooted around as if it were following a certain scent, then stopped behind us at the butcher shop and bored down like a drill” (*Tracks* 28). Like the wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*, the tornado concentrates its breath on the house it wishes to destroy. Unlike
the wolf in the fairytale, however, this breath has the fury to blow down the Euro-masonry of the smokehouse to a “reddish sand” (Tracks 29). The rest of Argus is left untouched by the storm. Only the rapists are caught in its wake, frozen to death in the icehouse, curled under animal furs that refuse to keep them warm. Fleur’s wolf magic empowers her. The men try to treat her like an animal, but her wolf qualities thwart their intentions. Instead, this wolf-magic allows her to walk away from the wreckage, a big-boned girl, whose white teeth spread in a wolfish grin of Survivance.

In Tracks, Fleur’s wolfish characteristics are very much tied to her motherhood. Her daughter Lulu inherits her mother’s wolf-like beauty: “She had Fluer’s coarse, quick-growing hair. Sheer black. She got her teeth early. She got teeth early, pointed to them with her fat, alert fingers, seemed proud of their sharpness and number” (Tracks 70). Lulu’s teeth are sharp and very white, like her mothers. She possesses the wolf grin, which is a trait that she will eventually pass on to her own grandchild in Love Medicine. Lulu, like Fleur becomes a strong female character who scares some with her strength, and this strength is connected to the wolf qualities that are her matrilineal heritage.

These wolf-like traits empower Lulu and protect her from the cultural whitewashing of colonialism. Lulu is sent to a government boarding school, but the school does not break her wolf spirit. In “Games of Silence: Indian Boarding Schools in Louise Erdrich’s novels, Miriam Schacht discusses the coercive effects of the schools: “However, boarding schools had extremely disruptive effects on Native communities and many researchers suggest that American Indian communities continue to show dysfunctions that can be traced back to the trauma of child removal and boarding school experience…” (63). Lulu’s Ojibwe identity is still very much present on her bus ride home. In Love Medicine, Lulu becomes a narrator, and so is able to tell the story of how she came home from the school: “I watched my own face float over the grass, traveling alongside me in the dust of the bus window, and I grinned, showed my teeth. They could not cage me anymore “(69). The imagery here is animalistic, of course with Lulu barring
her teeth at the window and being caged. Nonetheless, the feral canine imagery does nothing to
dehumanize Lulu. On the contrary, it shows that the dehumanization has not worked. The wolf
grin becomes an empowering part of Lulu’s “own face,” which she sees floating over the land as
she returns to her land. The showing of the teeth is not some non-Native author’s description of
Lulu as savage. Rather, it is a moment of self-actualization and emancipation.

Lulu Nanapush returns to her grandparents with her wolf spirit intact, running back to
them in a wolf pup act of subversion. Nanapush is Lulu’s cultural grandfather, and he recalls how
she came back to him: “Your knees were scabbed from the punishment of scrubbing long
sidewalks, and knobbed from kneeling hours on broomsticks” (Tracks 226). The boarding school
has left its scars, has tried to supplicate Lulu, but a wolf’s spirit is not easily broken. The canid
mouth is still determined, wild: “But your grin was as bold s your mother’s, white with anger that
vanished when you saw us waiting” (Tracks 226). The maternal grandparents play a profound
role in the Ojibwe’s formative years. Returning to the arms of her adoptive mother, Lulu returns
to her mother’s elders, and she is home, which is why the anger dissipates. The school has tried to
break Lulu’s wild movement, which is at first apparent in her gate: “You went up on your toes
and tried to walk prim as you’ve been taught” (Tracks 226). The wolf, or the wild girl, will not be
kinesthetically controlled: “Halfway across, you could not contain yourself and sprang forward
Lulu. We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the
fierce, dry wind” (Tracks 23). The movement of Lulu as she returns to her grandparents is like
that of a young wolf. She “sprang” forward in a wild motion; the colonial attempts to tame her
has not worked. The “rush” that Lulu creates with her primal movement is rush of wolffish breath
like the tornado that occurs after her mother’s rape years before. However, here the “fierce wind”
is restorative, an emotional release in which the child and the elders brace together.

Fluer’s wolffish traits often manifest themselves in displays of fierce motherhood. Lulu
feels like an abandoned puppy, and for a while, refuses to call Fleur “mother.” Fleur leaves Lulu
behind to pursue revenge against John James Mauser, the lumber baron who has robbed Fleur of
her Pillager land. Ojibwe critic As Nanapush explains it, leaving Lulu is an act of wolf-hearted sacrifice: “No, she did not give her first child away. It was not as they insist. Fleur merely took the girl odd to hide her the way a wolf hides a pup when she must do battle to protect her standing or to confront danger” (Four Souls 73). Fleur is away because she is fighting to maintain herself, and regain her land. Without her status as a strong woman and her connectedness to the land, she cannot be a good mother for Lulu. The leaving is not a selfish act, but an act of sacrifice. It nearly kills Fleur to leave her child, but she must hide her young and fight.

Fleur Pillager’s inner-wolf surfaces many time in her commission of revenge against John James Mauser, the lumber baron who has stripped and stolen her land. Lawrence Gross is critical of Fleur for her acts of vengeance, claiming that it leads to her loss of power: “Yet for all her strength, by the end of Tracks she is divested of what matters most in Anishinabee life: community, children, and the land. Her ultimate failure speaks to the short comings of using great blessings to do great harm” (51). While I agree with Gross that Fleur seems displaced, I cannot agree that her power has been lost. Fleur, with her wolf perseverance, has a plan one that allows her to regain her status and land, and eventually her role as mother.

With a close reading of Fleur’s canine influence in Four Souls, I intend to illustrate that Fleur that Fluer’s power lives on. The intensity and frequency of the canine references increases in Four Souls, as does Fleur’s power, which is fueled by wolf qualities. To approach a buffalo herd, Plains hunters sometimes wore the skin of a wolf, for the herd had little to fear from a lone wolf. In this way, makes her way into the Twin Cities to hunt the Mauser family. She takes on some of the wolf’s physical traits, but she also shares a nonphysical connection with timber wolves who once populated Ojibwe territory. Returning to On Behalf of the Wolf and the First Peoples, Joseph Marshall writes of the lessons that First Peoples were able to lean from the wolf:

As a hunter the wolf had no equal—with his keen eyesight, unimaginably sharp sense of smell, sharp teeth and powerful jaws. Those were formidable weapons, but the first people saw that they were of little use without endurance, patience, and perseverance. These were
even more important weapons of the wolf and they were qualities the first people could
develop in themselves. Also the first people saw the wolf as warrior because he defended
his family and his home regardless of the strength of his enemy or the odds he had to face.

This was another lesson learned from the wolf. (6)

Fleur develops all of these qualities of the wolf on her sojourn to the cities. She approaches
revenge with incredible patience and perseverance. Mauser and his army of lumberjacks are
certainly a formidable enemy. The Dawes Act and Allotment led to the clear-cutting of
innumerable acres of forest, and so her crusade for revenge, Fleur is also taking on the mammoth
enemy of the United States government and its anti-Indian policies. Yet like the wolf, she defends
her family and her home. First, she saws through the trunks of her trees, once it becomes clear
that the lumberjacks are coming for them. The trees then are blown down by a wolf-like huff and
puff of the air, which Fleur is working with her magic. The wolf look again appears on her face as
she unleashes the wind: “The earth jumped and the shudder plucked nerves in the bodies of the
men who milled about, whining softly to each other like nervous cattle. They bit their lips,
glanced over their shoulders at Fleur who bared her teeth in a wide smile that frightened even
those who did not understand the smiles of Pillagers” (Tracks 223). The men are reduced to
cattle, and they become trapped under the very trees they planned to plunder. It is difficult for me
to read this scene, with Fluer’s “bared teeth” and “wide smile” and believe that she has been
divested of her power as Gross asserts. In this deforestation scene, Fleur robs the men of their
ability to clear cut. Her power here is a feminist subversion of the Big Bad Wolf; what is blown
down here is colonial patriarchy.

In Four Souls, the canine strengthens Fluer’s mind and body so that she can fight her
powerful enemy, Mauser. In a moment of great need, she draws sustenance from a dog: “She
wore her makizinan to shreds, then stole a pair of boots off the porch of a farmhouse, strangling a
fat dog to do it. She skinned the dog, boiled and ate it, leaving only the bones behind, sucked
hollow” (Four Souls 2). For Fleur, this is not an act of animal cruelty, but one of bone-deep
necessity. The wolf is a totem of the warrior. Fleur is a warrior. Basil Johnston writes of the Dog Feat in *Ojibway Ceremonies*: “It was an act of courage to see a dog killed and then to eat its flesh” (69). The killing of the farmer’s dog, and the eating of its flesh are acts of courage on Fleur’s part. She needs to kill the dog—to get the boots—to cover her feet—to fill her stomach and fortify her blood. Like Nenabozho from Valentine’s translation, she sucks the marrow from the bones. The dog, then becomes part of Fleur, a sacrifice to the reclamation of sacred land. In addition, the farmer’s boots, stolen in the bark-less moments after the dog’s death, allow her to keep walking the hundreds of miles to where John James Mauser has built a decadent home out of the bodies of her trees. Her progression on this journey is recounted as that of a skilled predator: “She was following his trail” (*Four Souls* 2). Nourished by the fat dog’s marrow, she tracks Mauser while garnering matrilineal strength: “She sang her mother’s song, low then louder until her heart strengthened” (*Four Souls* 3). Perhaps this song had howling notes.

When Fleur sees the Mauser mansion, she approaches it with predatory patience: “But then, behind the warm shadow of her fingers, there passed a haunted, white wolf grin” (*Four Souls* 3). Fleur’s grin is empowering. Fleur refuses to be cut down by a woodsman’s axe. On the contrary, it is Fleur who will do the slashing, as Nanapush notes: “...[W]e guessed that she had followed her trees, and from that we grew convinced that she was determined to cut down the man who took them” (*Four Souls* 4). Mauser is a great enemy, but Fleur’s connections to the wolf will allow her to overtake him. Fleur enters the house as a laundress, but the wolf is waiting below the surface.

The wolf power exudes from Fleur as soon as she enters his house, having taken a deceptively submissive job as a laundress. Polly Elizabeth, Mauser’s sister-in-law, and the White woman narrator of sections of *Four Souls*, senses something canine about Fleur, but she underestimates the strength of it. She dehumanizes Fleur when sizing up her suitability for a laundress position at the mansion: “Perhaps it is true that Indians are unintelligible, to the civilized mind, I mean, as far removed in habit of thought and behavior as wild wolves from bred hounds” (*Four Souls* 14-15).
In this dismissive comment, Polly misses the wolf’s power in Fleur, the cunning, the planning, the visceral instinct to fight for one’s own. The only lack of understanding in this passive is Polly’s, a lapse for which Mauser will soon pay. Though Polly doesn’t understand it, the wolf connection seems to emanate from Fleur, especially at the eye:

"The pupil so dark it matched the iris. The gaze a steady beam that shook the air between us."

With a steady beam that shook the air between us with a subtle motion. It was a curious feeling, almost as though I’d gazed upon by a predator and assessed. Through a strong cage. As Mother would have, I turned and swept out the massive door expecting her to follow, her in her wood-smoked tatters with her piteous bundle. (*Four Souls* 15)

For a moment, Polly is close to appreciating Fleur’s predatory power. Fleur’s gaze is a “steady beam.” The Ojibwe woman is looking at the rich White woman with a staring intensity, straight in the eyes. Among wolves, this is a challenge. Fleur’s eyes on unapologetically dark in their Non-Aryan beauty. When Polly senses Fleur’s strength, she must immediately weaken it by adding the phrase “Through a strong cage.” This phrase both domesticates and animalizes Fleur. Polly, though also a victim of patriarchy, fails to feel any alliance with this strong woman.

Instead, she pities her, calls the earth-toned dress “wood smoked tatters” and turns her back on her in the oversized threshold of Mauser’s patriarchal palace. But Fleur, like her daughter Lulu, will not be caged, her white, wolf grin is just waiting to flash again.

Mauser himself has a wolf reputation because he has engaged in the sexual conquest of Native women. Nanapush is very much aware of Mauser’s predatory past with Ojibwe women. Mauser got his hands on Ojibwe pine by using young Ojibwe women. His empire, then, is based upon womanizing as much as it is clearcutting. According to Nanapush:

"I could have told her that Mauser got his start where he ended up—with the trees. I could have told her how he took advantage of one loophole and then another. How, in his earliest days, handsome and clever, he had married young Ojibwe girls straight out of boarding schools, applied for their allotment lands they had inherited. Once their trees were gone he
had abandoned his young wives, one after the next. Stumps and big bellies is all he left behind. (*Four Souls* 15)

These young women were Fleur’s contemporaries. Mauser has preyed upon this women, but Fleur subverts the norms of sexual conquest by preying upon Mauser. Fleur’s wolf-grinning revenge upon Mauser, then, is retribution, not just for the timber money, but for ways in which Native women have suffered under a Patriarchal system—subsuming marriage, loss of land and resources and the resulting powerless that came from being a landless woman in a country that was now obsessed with maleness and the owning of land. Fleur’s hunting of Mauser, then is reclamation of some of the power that her ancestors enjoyed in a Pre-Allotment world. Fleur seeks some restitution for the “stumps and big bellies.”

Fleur is patient, and learns every sound and smell of the house. She stalks Mauser at night, falls asleep standing up outside his doorway. Nocturnally, she takes on some of the qualities of a sleeping wolf: “Slumped in that grand hallway with her face tipped back, unguarded exquisitely molded over the stern bones, her eyes up-slanted, the better perfection of her lips stuck half open, she breathed an even, gurgling gnash” (*Four Souls* 29). Mauser, too picks on the canine nuances of the sleeping Fleur: “[P]erhaps, the thought, one of his old hunting dogs had been mistakenly left out of his plush kennel and might catch cold on the floor” (*Four Souls* 28). Mauser becomes transfixed by the wild beauty of her sleep and lets his guard down: “Like a child reaching into the lake and pulling out a fish... like a dog biting randomly and hauling from the air a rump steak, she got her prize” (*Four Souls* 29). The biting dog imagery here solidifies the canine connection in Fleur’s power. Mauser is demoted to the status of meat, a “rump steak.” It is a reversal of the objectification in which women are viewed as pieces of meat, and Native people and wolves are slaughtered to fuel ranching and its prized red meat. Though she is lovely and sleeping, Fleur harnesses all the prowess in this scene.
Fleur's eventual domination of Mauser in the bedroom is feminine-powered subversion of the Big Bad Wolf trope. In this scene, Fleur is able subvert the sexual colonialism that Mauser has imposed on so many of her tribeswomen:

Fleur edged soundlessly close to the bed, and as he turned in his sleep, frowning sensing her proximity, she nestled close to him as a snake to a warm rock. His frown changed to a dreamy smile. She gently coaxed his head to the pillow of her breast. He groaned happily in his dream and she put her knife to his throat. She woke him by breathing into his ear.

'I have come to kill you.' (*Four Souls* 44)

Stealthily, the colonized woman becomes the juggernaut. Fleur is predatory in many ways in this scene—her ability to move with agility in the dark, her sensuous prowess, her killer-knowledge that leads her right to his jugular. However, despite the predatory imagery, and even her serpentine grace, Fleur is not the fairy tale villain here. She is very much a woman, fully human, and profoundly wronged, yet she rejects victimry and completely alters the situation, putting herself in the position of power. Her wolf totem qualities help her to accomplish this turn.

Fleur, however, does not kill Mauser; she dominates him. Mauser becomes servile, and canine in a different, more derogatory way as he says: "'My spirit is meant to be your g'dai, your animal, to do with as you wish, let live or kill!'" (*Four Souls* 46). When Mauser calls himself canine though, he is diminished, while for Fleur the canine is a fount of power. For too long, Native people were depicted as being at the mercy of the Whitman. Indian agents cheated them. Fenimore Cooper made them disappear. Teachers beat the Indian out of them. Men in black robes stole their souls. In this scene, however, the wealthy Caucasian patriarch is at the mercy of the Native woman with the white, wolf teeth. Mauser is in a precarious state, facing atonement for his sins. Instead of his head being on a chopping block, however, it rests on a breast. The blade, however, is nonetheless keen. Mauser himself senses Fleur's wolfishness: "So when Mauser bared his heart and throat he knew, perhaps the wolf in her couldn't kill him on instinct and the
woman in her could not destroy him out of sheer intrigue” (Four Souls 73). She could kill him, actually, but that might be too swift, a misuse of her powers.

After she marries Mauser, Minneapolis elites call her squaw behind her back. Once, though a man has the audacity to do so in front of her. This only happens one. The man then feels a predatory presence in the room, as if he’s been cornered by a wolf:

It was his sense, he thoughtfully remarked that having addressed her as a squaw he stood in sudden danger of evisceration. It happened (he said he was quite innocent of ill intentions) as they stood by the buffet table where a huge rare roast stood pink and luscious with the carving knife temporarily abandoned by the server. He was suddenly aware how close that handle of that knife lay to the wife of John James Mauser. It was it was nothing he could quantify. She did not pick up that knife or even make one gesture toward it with her fingers. Yet the air between them itched (Four Souls 61)

Squaw, of course, is a hyper-sexualized racial slur, a verbal dehumanization of Native women. But this man, at the moment, is the one is disempowered and apparently feels very close to being disemboweled as well. She doesn’t pick up the Whiteman’s knife. She doesn’t need to, the Indian-hating misogynist can feel the threat in the air. In a Whiteman’s story itching fingers meant a urge to strike a woman. In Romeo and Juliet, Lord Capulet says “My fingers itch!,” declaring his desire to brutalize the will out of his disobedient daughter. However, the “itching air” in this case is Fleur’s and the man finds himself in an unaccustomed state of intimidation. Fleur is menacing in this scene, standing before bloody meat with her wolf-like beauty. Fleur thwarts this racial-sexual hate speak. No one dares to call her squaw again. Polly never used the word again in her narration, citing the danger: “I am not interested in risking evisceration, you can be sure” (Four Souls). No one, no matter his or her White privilege calls the Alpha female “squaw.”

Sometimes Pillager women share use their canine qualities to subdue her oppressors; sometimes, they use them in displays of fierce motherhood. Fleur’s grandmother was named
Under the Ground, a name she was given after she buried herself to beat death, and breathed through a narrow rawhide roll: “At the loss of her own mother from the welted sickness, she decided to go after death itself, and so had herself buried alive in a birch-bark covering. Connected only to the upper world by a breathing straw, she went down into the earth” (Foul Souls). Rawhide was useful material for fashioning many objects. It was also something that dogs chewed upon. Digging, and with rawhide her mouth, the girl imbues certain dog-like qualities. However, far from being degrading, the passage gives her power. The elders dig her up, themselves given canine attributes as they do so: “It was on the fifth dawn that they uncovered, gently, scooping out the earth with their old paws” (Four Souls 50). Thus she is given the name Under the Ground, and becomes a healer as the people battle the strange Whiteman’s viruses that had been devastating the tribe.

She also becomes a mother in her forties to Anaquot (Cloud), who will later become Fleur’s mother. The mother and daughter live in traditional ways, with connectedness to the land and to canines: “They had a garden of squash and beans, and some wild brown chickens, a dog, a stand of chokecherries and a slough where occasionally Under the Ground took her shotgun and blasted down a duck for her daughter’s supper” (Four Souls). Ojibwe women traditionally grew squash and beans, which help support their status as providers in the tribe. The chokecherry stand of course, has grown from the splotch of blood that their ancestor spilled when she was giving birth on what would become Mauser’s plot of land. They own a dog together, mother and child. When Anaquot gets an influenza, her mother builds a purifying fire and the women sleep near it.:” By morning, Under the Ground’s eyes burnt and her own limbs loosened, and she slept curled around her daughter in terror” (Four Souls 52). The image of the two curling around each other in the warmth of the fire is distinctly matriarchal and canine... if one considers puppies drawing to their mother for heat-source and protection. Under the Ground has a visceral, mother wolf desire to cure her daughter: “You heal by taking on the pain of others, by swallowing the sharp bone and vomiting the sickness in your own blood” (Four Souls 52). The “sharp bone” swallowing
gives a canine definition to sickness. And in pack-like devotion, it is swallowed by another, in an animalistic act of altruism.

Fleur later swallows the metaphorical “sharp bone” when Polly gives her whiskey, a homeopathic preventative for miscarriage: “I gave her the remedy my books had recommended for the stoppage of an early derangement of the womb. Perhaps she had never drunk the stuff before. She took a huge gulp and choked on the fire” (65). Fleur will do anything to keep from losing another baby, even though its father is her enemy. She swallows the firewater. The fetus is not miscarried, but Fleur now has alcohol in her blood and will suffer terribly from its stomach-wrenching sickness. Fleur, too, is willing to “swallow the sharp bone” and “vomit the sickness” in her own blood, in an act of self-destruction and fierce motherhood.

Fleur’s acts are those of a woman-wolf-warrior. Fleur sucks the marrow from the sharp bone, she swallows the sharp bone for her unborn child. Fleur, like a mother wolf is a fount of birth fluids and strong blood. She subverts the wild woman archetype and thwarts the power of a womanizing lumber baron. Her power is of the wolf totem, a totem of warriors, and oh, what big teeth she has.
VI) "This is the One Who Ate My Heart:" Wolf-Woman Need in *The Painted Drum*

In *The Painted Drum*, women and wolves suffer from the toxins of colonialism, but they never succumb to these effects. They grow stronger under the weight of it, and impart this strength to their daughters in a sinewy loop of X chromosomes that reaches back to the formation of Turtle Island, and forward to new centuries. The painted drum follows the origins of an artisan drum, tracing its creation back to the tragic death of a young girl.

Fleur Pillager’s origins are recorded in the *Painted Drum*. She was born in the woods, deep in winter, in a patch of earth that the Ojibwe shared with a pack of rib-thin gray wolves. Fleur was conceived when her mother, Anaquot had a too-hot affair with a trapper named Simon Jack. While Fleur is still a newborn, Anaquot leaves her husband to travel to the other side of the reservation and live with Simon Jack. Anaquot takes baby Fleur and the older daughter (whose name the narrator never speaks) with her. The little boy is left behind in the snow, to be raised by his father. The boy, desperate to remain with his mother, chases after the wagon, but his boy-lung’s can’t handle running in snow, so he passes out on hard surface of it. Just as he loses consciousness, he sees gray shadows bounding in between the trees. He thinks that they are spirits, but they are very much creature of flesh. The father comes back and finds passed out, but safe in the snow. He also finds forensic evidence of something else:

The tracks of the shadows were wolves, and in those times when our guns had taken all of their for furs and hides to sell, wolves were bold and had abandoned the old agreement between themselves and the first humans. For a time, until we understood and let the game increase, they hunted us. Shawaano bounded forward when he saw the tracks. He could see where the pack, desperate, had tried to slash the tendons of the horses’ legs. Next, where they’d leapt for the back of the wagon, and he hurried on to where the wagon, and he hurried on to where the trail gave out onto the broad empty ice of the lake. There, he saw what he saw, scattered, and the ravens only, attending to the bitter small
leavings of the wolves. (The Painted Drum 111)

The wolves, their stomachs groaning, have made a meal of Anaquot’s oldest daughter and despair. In a story that is told through a White farmers lens, the wolves would have been far more sinister. The wolves are only hunting the Ojibwe because the fur trade has dissipated the game population. In the absence of deer, or fat raccoons, or rabbits, there is nothing left to eat. The wolf people are starving, and whenever a people starve, desperate acts are sure to follow. The wolves are drawn to this wagon not by greed or bloodlust or wickedness. Their empty stomachs are talking to them: “Eat or die. Eat or die. Eat or Die.” Not wanting to die, the wolves eat. They eat a little girl, and then the ravens pick the leftovers from the snow. No posse of hunters goes off to shoot the wolves. No one poisons them. Even in this hard-winter scene of child’s blood and bones, there is no blame. The way to prevent wolf attacks from recurring is to “understand and let the game increase.” Tragic as this scene is, after it, the Ojibwe family and the wolf pack are inexorably connected in spirit and body matter.

The girl has given herself to the wolves, and in so doing has saved the rest of her family. Later, Bernard Shaawano the narrator, who is also the nephew of the little girl, describes the scene not as one of carnage, but of one of reciprocity and altruism:

The other thing I said to [the girl’s brother] was in the form of a question. Have you ever considered, I asked him, given how your sister was and brave, that she looked at the whole situation? She saw the wolves were only hungry, she saw their need was only need. She knew you were back there, alone in the snow. She saw baby she loved would not live without a mother, and only the uncle knew the way. (The Painted Drum 117)

The wolves are only desirous of life. Their urge to hunt comes from no darker place than hunger. It has nothing to do with greed or deviation: “their need was only need.” In the same way, her family needs the broad-backed strength of the horses, map-mindedness of the uncle, or the life-giving lactation of the mother. The little girl sees with a lucidity that allows her to recognize that her humanity connects her to the wolves instead of placing her above them. Every emotion
sensation and emotion felt by the wolf people in this moment is also felt by the human people: cold, hunger, desperation, love of the pack. The people survive, and the horses, and the wolves.

The girl’s death represents a defiance of colonialized thought:

The girl’s death represents a defiance of colonial visions of the world:

She saw clearly that one person on the wagon had to offer themselves, or they would all die. And in that moment of knowledge, don’t you think being who she was, of the old sort of Anishinaabeg, who thinks of the good of the people first, she jumped, my father, n’deydey, brother to that little girl, don’t you think she lifted her shawl and flew?

(The Painted Drum 117)

This scene interrupts several Western tropes of evil wolves, passive women, and warlike Natives. Gone is the passivity of the Noble Savage. In Shaawno’s version of the story, his great-aunt makes a conscientious decision. She leaves the wagon of her own free will. She is not thrown, nor is she torn from her seat. She “lifts her shawl” and “flies.” With the sacrifice of the girl’s flesh, the Pillager clan lives on. The baby grows up to be the powerful medicine woman who avenges the sacred ground of Machimanito. The Ojibwe word “n’ dey’dey” means father, but because that word is in Ojibwe, it means that an Anglican version of fatherhood or patriarchy has not entirely taken hold of the family. The girl, with her proactive jump, becomes a feminine symbol of native resistance. Her people will not die from the wolf attack. Her people will not see the wolves as evil things. By giving her body, the girl saves the wolves from starvation, and in satiating the wolves’ hunger, she is saving the rest of her family. This girl dies in defense of the wolf and the First Peoples, which also happens to be the Title of Joseph Marshall’s book.

In an author’s note at the end of the novel, Erdrich further addresses “The Shawl’s” origins:

What happened to the girl in the beginning of “The Shawl” is based on the experience of an elderly man who told this story to Tobasonakwut. I thank him for trusting me with the story. The There are other very similar folk tales; one appears in Willa Cather’s My Antonia. So I
can only conclude that all stories exist in continuum and that this actually happened. Yet I also think that the story runs counter to real facts about the shyness and politic avoidance that wolves show to humans. I’ve tried to stay true to both. (The Painted Drum 277)

Tobasonakwut is an Ojibwe activist, also Erdrich’s life partner and the father of her youngest daughter. The story, then originates as oral tradition, and it is represented in the novel such, passed down from father to son, though the story is about a girl’s bravery rather than a boy’s. Erdrich’s note about the “shyness” and “politic” avoidance that wolves show to humans reifies the point that the wolves in this story are not bloodthirsty in a Western sense, just desperate for life. When there is more game to eat in the story, the wolves in the novel return to their “shy” nonviolent relationship with the people.

Erdrich’s oral—traditional version of the girl’s sacrifice to the wolves, however, is markedly different from Willa Cather’s. Cather presents a version of the story bridal version of the wolf sacrifice story. Cather is presenting a scene that is conducive to feminist critique, but it is also full of the European tradition of wolf-hating. My Antonia, the story begins with a death rattle. Pavel, a prairie-ravaged Russian immigrant, tells the story on his deathbed as a destructive, canine wind blows across the Great Plains:

Each gust as it bore down, rattled the panes, and swelled off like the others. They made me think of defeated armies, retreating; or of ghosts who were trying desperately to get in for shelter, and then went moaning on. Presently, in one of those sobbing intervals between the blasts the coyotes tuned up their whining howl; one, two, three the all together ---to tell us winter was coming. This sound brought an answer from the bed—a long complaining cry—as if Pavel were having bad dreams or were waking to some old misery.

(Cather 37)

Here the connection between the people is present, but unlike in Erdrich’s work, it is not life-affirming or maternal in nature. The coyote cries only give supporting vocals to a killing wind a broken man’s death throes. The coyote is revered among many Native peoples across North
America, as is evident in Laguna Pueblo Leslie Marmon Silko’s poetry and the writings of Cherokee scholar Paula Gunn Allen. Erdrich herself using Coyotes as trickster figures in her stories, such as in “The Red Convertible.” However, here in Cather’s text, the coyote brings about a chilling sound and nothing of his intelligence or cunning consciousness is brought to light. The coyotes’ howls, do, however, remind the dying Pavel of the darkest evening of his life. In the expiring man’s brain, the howling brings up images of the deep-seeded Euro-fear he feels for wild canine: “‘He is scared of the wolves’, Antonia whispered to me. ‘In his country there are very many, and they eat men and women’” (Cather 37). To Russian Pavel, the wolves represent a foul presence, one he associates with a bloody death.

In Erdrich’s storyline, a girl’s sacrifice saves the rest of her family and saves the wolves from starvation. No such salvation is present in Cather’s version. The groom sees his family beset upon by the wolves, and for a moment entertains the notion of jumping down to aid them, but he does not. And in this way, the Ojibwe girl shows a fortitude and selflessness that is not present in Cather’s story. Instead, the My Antonia scene presents a merciless act of misogyny. In his fear, Pavel has no problem sacrificing a woman: “He called to the groom that they must lighten—and pointed to the bride. The young man cursed him and held her tighter. Pavel tried to drag her away. In the struggle the groom rose. Pavel knocked him over the sledge and threw the girl after him” (Cather 40). The girl in this scene is clad in a symbol of patriarchy, her wedding gown, while the girl in Ojibwe story is traditionally dressed, her blanket aiding her in her jump from the wagon. The girl in The Painted Drum demonstrates determined self-actualization, while the bride in My Antonia is positioned in a power struggle between two men. In The Painted Drum, the spirit of the little girl continues to speak to her mother. In My Antonia, however, a maternal link is broken during the wolf incident” They were run out of their village. Pavel’s own mother would not look at him. They went away to strange towns, but when people learned where they came from, they were always asked if they knew the two men who had fed the bride to the wolves” (Cather 41). The wolves and the men end up being demonized and the maternal and community
bonds are broken in this Pioneer version of the story. In Erdrich’s Native version, however, the maternal bond continues. The pack and the people endure.

As a caretaker at the hospital, Bernard Shaaawano, one of the narrators in *The Painted Drum*, talks to an elder about the wolves, and thus is able to appreciate how sentient they are and how deeply connected to his bloodline:

There was an old man who wanted to be with the wolves and know their thoughts. He went out on the ice and sang to them and asked them to sink their teeth into his heart. I guess the singing kept him warm enough so he lived out there for three days and nights. On the fourth day, the wolves finally came to him, or rather, he realized that he had been looking straight at them and only when they were ready had they let themselves be seen.

(*The Painted Drum* 119)

The wolves do not sink their teeth into the elder’s heart muscle. After the little girl in “The Shawl” chapter of the story had been eaten, the Ojibwe understood and let the game increase, so the wolves are no longer famine-crazed. It seems, though, that the wolves sink their teeth into the man’s heart in a far more innocuous way. He never forgets the encounter; his heart is taken by the wolves figuratively:

“Oh sure,” he said, I found out they think like us. They were watching me, but I was I was watching them, too. I was hungrier than they were. They had just eaten. They were full. One yawned. Another started playing hockey with a piece of ice.”

I couldn’t believe that.

“It’s true,” he insisted. “They play with things. They like to play with those big black birds, those ravens. (*The Painted Drum* 119)

This image of the wolves shows their complexity, their range of emotions, their consciousness.

The reader, then, is not left with a graphic image of the wolves’ unspeakable meal and the girl’s grisly death. The image of the wolves on this lake is lighthearted. The wolves themselves are curious children in this passage, batting a piece of ice around sportingly, playing with their fellow
meat eaters, the ravens. The girl was eaten by the pack’s forerunners, but the end result is life, biodiversity play. It is a steadfast rejection of the Western vilification of the wolf, an empowerment of the girl, and an interconnectedness of hearts that can only be summed up in the word “reciprocity.”

In Western literature, beginning with the Old Testament, the wolf is demonized, disconnected from the earth’s other forms of life. This is not so in The Painted Drum. Erdrich’s fictional elder recognizes that the wolf has a role in the biosphere, and even a consciousness about that role:

Sometimes the ravens get the wolves to hunt for them. I’ve seen it where the ravens get the wolves to hunt for them. I’ve seen it where the ravens come back and tell the wolves where there is something to kill and eat. I thought if the raven and wolf can get along, perhaps the man and the wolf can get along too. But I couldn’t stay out there long enough to test that out. (The Painted Drum 119)

The raven, too, is often vilified in Western literature, a gothic symbol of torment and death, as in Poe’s “The Raven:” “Take thy beak from out my heart.” Here, however, they are playmates, helpmates, interspecies communicators, which is a departure from the way the White Patriarchs of Dark Romanticism wrote about them. The ravens also “attend” to the leavings of the wolves after the girl is killed, which provides another picture of reciprocity. Girl, wolf, and raven intermingle on a spiritual and molecular level—all three species transcending colonialism’s myopic view of them.

The wolves are also long-suffering, brought to the brink by colonialism’s tools, which is something else that the elder discusses with Bernard Shaawano:

I spoke to the wolf, asking my own questions. Wolf, I said, your people are hunted from the air and poisoned from the earth and killed on sight and you are outbred and stuffed in cages and almost wiped out. How is it that you go on living with such sorrow? How do you go on without turning around and destroying yourselves, as so many of us Anishinaabeg have
done under similar circumstances? (The Painted Drum 120)

Here the wolves’ colonial persecution becomes intertwined with the Ojibwe’s. The poisoning, killing and outbreeding are all tools of conquest that the Native people have outlived. The stuffing into cages is connected to Post-Jacksonian confinement to reservations and institutional boarding schools. The wolves, like the Ojibwe are not supposed to exist anymore, but they do exist. Every wolf life, every Ojibwe existence is in defiance of the Anglo-Patriarchal power structure that tried to render them extinct. However, what the Ojibwe can learn from the wolf is to withstand. The wolf has a reply to the elder’s existential question: “We live because we live.” He did not ask questions. He did not give reasons. And I understood him. The wolves accept the life they are given. They do not look around them and wish for a different life, or shorten their lives resenting the humans, or even fear them anymore than is appropriate…” (The Painted Drum 121).

The wolf’s resistance, then, is to keep drawing breath with his or her wolf lungs, to keep filling the wolf stomach, to play with a piece of ice or a flock of ravens, to gnaw deep and eat the marrow from the center of the bone. When he first goes onto the ice, the elder is considering suicide, but he changes his mind after “talking” to the wolves. Instead, he lives on, expending his body on traditional dance: “When I opened his shirt I saw across his back and shoulders the regular, deep, violet-brown scars of a sundancer who pulled buffalo skulls” (The Painted Drum 121). By continuing to exist and partaking of traditional dance, the elder shucks off the weight of colonialism and instead pulls the weight of the buffalo skull. This is a prime example of the type of resistance Gerald Vizenor calls “survivance.”

Bernard Shaawano’s narration, though a male voice, is a rejection of colonized thought because it rejects the vilification of wolves. His discussions with the elder who talks to wolves are also a rejection of patriarchy in the Western sense. The connection with the wolves is maternal in its foundations, but it is not limited to women. Because Ojibwe culture values both genders equally, Erdrich gives male characters a connection with wolves as well. Bernard Shaawano, however, narrates his way back to the matriarchal when the story turns back to Fleur, who thanks
to her sister’s sacrifice, drew in sustenance from her mother’s breastmilk and thus became the resistant Ojibwe girl with the wolf’s grin: “The baby who was saved that day grew up and lived a long life, and as a young man I went to sit with her sometimes. Her name was Fleur Pillager” (*The Painted Drum* 123). Fleur, of course has her own wolf connections, ones that help her resist and survive to achieve the status of Ojibwe elder.

The girl’s mother is also connected to the wolves later in the text. When Anaquot travels to the home of Simon Jack, her lover and the father of Fleur, she finds that he is already married to Ziiwan’aage or Wolverine. These two women should be bitter foes, at least in a patriarchal system that pits one woman against another. However, this is not the case for Ziiwan’aage and Anaquot. Instead, they band together, concentrating their energy of the survival of their remaining children, Fleur included. As it turns out, a wolf helps them in this endeavor:

One day, when Ziiwan’aage returned from walking the children to school, she was hauling a dead wolf behind her on a toboggan she’d improvised from tree bark and some vines. It was the biggest wolf either of the women had ever seen. The fur was a light glossy gray and the brush of its tail than a grown man’s arm. The creature’s face was clam and almost smiling. Anaquot placed tobacco on its throat and all four paws. It could well have been one of the wolves that killed her daughter. That pack was known here and it was mostly grays. (*The Painted Drum* 146)

This scene is at once empowering to the women and respectful of the wolf. Ziiwan’aage subverts the woman as victim of the wolf trope by taking control and shooting the wolf, by engineering a toboggan to pull its body. This killing, though is not one of bravado or hate. Ziiwan’aage is a hunter in her husband’s absence, and they have need, a need that at the time, the old wolf can fill. The creature’s death was swift, and it body serene and smiling, a wolf grin that baby Fleur will one day demonstrate.

Despite the fact that this wolf may have killed and eaten her older daughter, Anaquot holds no hatred for it. Such hate would be pointless—its need was only need. Instead of cursing
the animal, she places tobacco on its paws and the very throat that may have swallowed her
daughter. She does this in respect for the wolf’s spirit, and to thank it for giving its life. This act
emblematic of the Ojibwe reverence for the wolf people, and it spits in the face of the Europeans’
irrational hatred of the wolf. The gray, glossy-coated wolf is also very similar in description to
one of the wolves who speaks to Shaawano’s elder years later, perhaps it is an ancestor. When
she stares into the face of this wolf, Anaquot feels a connection to her deceased daughter, and is
so connected to her unborn descendants whose lives are also intertwined with the wolves’.

The women plan to use every part of the old wolf. Thus their need is only need and the death of
the wolf has nothing to do with greed, dominance, or vengeance as such a killing would have in
the Whiteman’s world. The wolf’s death even seems to connect it to the women and their
suffering:

The bullet had drilled the heart. When Anaquot saw the wound, she put her fingers into the
blood and before she knew what she was doing she had put her fingers into her mouth.

Some old women say that by tasting wolf blood you will know the shape of things, but
Anaquot had never known that to be true. The blood tasted like any other blood, but

Sharper. (The Painted Drum146)

The image of the bullet drilling the heart brings to mind a swift death, but to Anaquot, it
is a reminder of her leaden-hearted suffering, of the aortic-deep pain of losing a child. Anaquot
tastes the blood, but her bloodthirst is not the evil type associated with storybook wolves, nor it
the vengeful thirst of Anglo ranchers who wanted to stain the earth with wolf blood. Hers is a
primordial, maternal yearning for her daughter. When she was eaten, the daughter’s blood
mingled with the wolf’s. With this sharp taste, the daughter’s blood becomes reunited with the
mothers’ body as their blood was united in the womb. Anaquot even hears her daughter’s voice,
“This is the one who ate my heart, mother [The italics are Erdrich’s]. By tasting the heart’s blood
of the wolf who ate her daughter’s heart, Anaquot is reunited with her daughter’s heart. It’s a
reunion of sorts.
The wolf gives the women his flesh to eat and his fur to keep their children warm. The two women, who ought to have been bitter rivals, come together over the body of the great, gray wolf. They discuss the spirit of Anaquot’s daughter, who they agree will never leave. Her heart has become part of the wolf’s heart, which has been tasted by her mother. She is back in her mother’s blood. The need and blood of mother, daughter, and wolf comingle in a sorrowful, but insistent chemical equation of life.

Right after this realization, they turn their attention to wolf again because its life has also been given, so it must be skinned and used:

They both stared at the carcass of the wolf. After a while Anaquot said “We will make hoods and mitts for the children, fur on the inside to keep them warm.” Without another word, the two set to work, disposed of the wolf perfectly, and set its bones to boil on the stove. That night, they ate the creature whose meat was bitter. (The Painted Drum147 )

Once she sees the wolf’s fur warming the other children, Anaquot stops shaking and becomes deft worker, utilizing every part of the life the wolf has given to feed and clothe the living children, and to bring the dead daughter back to her to mingle with her living body. The meat is bitter, then at the end of this passage because of the shared between the wolf and the women. Bitterness can also denote strong medicine, as Anaquot well knows because she is a healer and was teaching the daughter the art before her death. And, the wolf’s bitter taste us medicinal as Anaquot accepts that her daughter is near her and in her...girl, wolf, ghost, sharp blood, soft songs and whispers will continue from mother to mother and wolf to wolf. They will sing each other’s songs like Marshall’s In Defense of the Wolf and the First Peoples.

The two women are correct when they agree that she will never really leave because her bones become part of a sacred drum. Her father, Old Shaawano, does not understand everything about her daughter’s death. He mistakenly thinks infanticide, that his wife had thrown the girl to the wolves. He too has a desire to reconnect with daughter, although he expresses this desire in a much more violent, masculine wish: “A knife would cut his heart out fine. Just fine. He would
throw his offending heart to the ravens, yelling. “Here have that too!” But Old Shaawano finds that his suicidal ambitions are thwarted by his daughter and the pack of wolves who ate her:

He saw his little girl. She was alive and whole once again. She came into Shaawano’s house through the western door and stood before him in the fringed, brown plaid shawl. Her eyes, so beautifully slanted and dark, shone with a fervent love that seemed to flow straight into him. The painful terror frozen in chest turned to water. Then she spoke. “I know where they put the trees for the drum,” his daughter told him. “Many years ago they cut the logs and put them in the water down near Berry Point. A hundred years later they took them out to dry and set them up on a rock wash under a cliff. Now that wood is ready

“For making a drum.” (The Painted Drum 155)

For the Ojibwe the drum is a sacred thing, a living thing. After all, it has a heartbeat. When the Ojibwe die, they travel west to the afterlife, which is why the girl appears to her father in the western door. The father is able to see the “fervent love” in his daughter’s eyes. In the European tradition, the father is to possess the daughter, but that is not at all what is happening in this scene. The daughter takes the lead role and is persuasive with her father, a subversion of patriarchal fatherhood. The girl is caretaking the father, keeping him from destroying his life with the Euro-plague of alcoholism:

Afterward, my grandfather lay on the rough boards of his floor, for how long he did not know. Tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes and ran down the sides of his face and puddled in his ears. His girl had visited from the other side of life, but though he wanted desperately to join her, he knew that her visit was meant expressly to give him a reason not to die yet. She had given him a task that was meant to keep him here upon the earth.

(The Painted Drum 154)

The wolves took only what they needed from the girl. Her body went into their stomachs, but her spirit remained intact, empowered. The tears that flow down the father’s face are cleansing, a
rebirth of sorts, in a rush of saltwater. She gives her father new life in this scene, just as she gave new life to the wolves. By reappearing to her father, she subverts the White-authored archetype of the vanishing Indian. The girl, brave in life, and bold in death, empowers the disempowered women and children in the history of her people because she is both. She empowers the wolves with body, empowers her parents with her ghostly presence, and empowers herself with her steadfast devotion to tribalism and explicit rejection of the settlers' notion of self-preservation.

The girl adds to request for the drum: “We are waiting to sing with you” (The Painted Drum 155). The we in this case is ambiguous. However, it is, I believe an interspecies “we,” ancestors and wolves singing each other’s song as they do in In Defense of the Wolf and the First Peoples. The wolf pack even aids in the creation of the drum, as they lead Shaawano to the sacred cedar: “This wood was being cured in a special place, where it would grow in strength and resonance. From each generation, certain men and women had been chosen to look after the wood, to visit and talk to it, to catch it up on local history and smoke the pipe with it” (The Painted Drum 156). Though the father makes the drum, he seeks the drum making knowledge from an eccentric tribeswoman. She shares this knowledge with him while he drinks fragrant tea from a woman’s cup: “And the tea in it, he found when he sipped, was flavored with that cinnamon he’d smelled in the doorway. It had a very good taste and Shaawano remembered that tea wasn’t always bitter and hard to swallow the way he made his” (The Painted Drum 158). Here the knowledge of the drum is placed in a smooth, feminine exchange. Shaawano, then owes the making of it to the strange woman, to her and the wolves.

The wolves help Shaawano find the sacred cedar to make the drum, thus helping him honor his daughter. In a way, it is as if the pack is giving the girl back to the tribe after they have consumed her flesh. On his way to find the drum wood, Shaawano reflects upon his connection with the wolves, a connection that stems back to his daughter:

As they were falling asleep, my grandfather heard a far-off pack of wolves raise their howl. For a long time the wolves spoke of all they’d seen and felt and eaten
that day. Shaawano stayed awake listening. He had never blamed the wolves for what they had never gone to war with them. The wolves had only acted according to their natures. (The Painted Drum 109)

Shaawano’s refusal to go to war with the wolves is a rejection of European-inspired patriarch. It is a rebuff of the Whiteman’s war with the wolves. The wolves speaking to each other grants them a consciousness, an emotional presence that is cemented with the word “felt.” Because he does not make war with the wolves, Shaawano is able to hear them, and thus they guide him to the sacred cedar, distracting him from his self-destructive alcohol consumption. The sacred cedar itself is a rejection of the White woodsman who used his ax to split the wolf in two: “Those great trees had been struck down by lightning, it was said. They had never been touched by a whiteman’s ax” (The Painted Drum 169). Shaawano’s wolf-guided pilgrimage, then, is rejection of European steel and its biting effect on the Ojibwe and the wolves. It was, after all over-trapping of prey that led the wolves to famine, which made them see the little girl as food.

According to Ojibway Heritage, cedar was revered for its medicinal properties. It could clear the lungs, and part of the living bark could stop a hemorrhage (Johnston 42). Perhaps Shaawano’s quest then, is also one of purification and self-healing as well as a way to connect himself to his daughter.

The wolves continue to guide Shaawano the next morning, staying with him until he finds the ancestral cedar that will form the “Little Girl Drum” for which the chapter is named:

A wolf was watching from the leaves, huge and gray. Its yellow eyes burned with an ancient calm but its tongue stuck sideways between its teeth, as a dog’s sometimes will so that along with inscrutable menace it also looked just plain goofy. The others turned to see what he had laughed at but the wolf was gone, only a few disturbed leaves quivered. Through these leaves my grandfather Shaawano saw where they must go. (The Painted Drum 170-171)
This passage describes the complexity with which the narrator views the wolf. His predatory strength is obvious "menace." But the word "menace" here does not describe the wolf with Anglican dismissiveness. He is also a source of humor with his tongue stuck doglike between his teeth—"goofy" even. So Shaawano laughs. The laughter is an affirmation of life and a childlike vision that further connects the father to the spirit of the child. The wolf with the burning yellow eyes of an "ancient calm" then guides the would-be drum maker to the source of the instrument—the lightning-felled, life-affirming cedar wood. When he finally finds them, Shaawano finds himself in embraced by wood, which has womanly characteristics: "My grandfather leaned against the great logs and leaned against the curve of wood" (The Painted Drum 171). Often trees are represented in Western literature as something phallic, or their felling as a symbol of man’s domination. Here the cedar takes on the cure of a woman’s body and provides a resting place, and it is from this distinctly feminine wood that Shaawano will craft the "Little Girl Drum."

The decoration of the drum will solidify this daughter-wolf-cedar connection. It will tell the story of how the drum was made, and the little girl in some sense, lives on in that story. As Shaawano hears his daughter’s voice once more, he envisions how he will paint the face of the drum:

As my grandfather paddled into that dazzling moment then, he heard a little girl’s voice calling from shore. From the south there was a clap of thunder. From the west, a stiff breeze blew. My grandfather put his hand up to the wind and the sun struck his hand a bright, startling red. He thought of the wolves and of the one that had watched him. He saw pictures. There they were. Little girl. Hand. Wolf. The bowl of reflecting water cut in half by the yellow strip of light would be the design on the head of the drum. All was still in the four directions. He saw the whole thing in his mind. (The Painted Drum 175-176)

The image of the little girl, along with the wolf’s image become connected on the head of the drum. The father has a vision of the drum, a sacred object. The drum has a heartbeat of sorts,
which means that the Ojibwe regard it as a living being. Thus the little girl is given a continued presence in the land of the living, and is pictorially and spiritually connected with the gray wolf who had also “spoken” to her father. The stiff breeze blowing from the west is connected with the daughter’s breath. When they die, the Ojibwe walk west to the afterlife to join their ancestors.

The wind from the west, then, is a daughterly gesture and a connection to the old ones and the old ways. The red hand, besides being the sunlit limb of the father, is emblematic of a warrior glove, which according to Erdrich, would have been painted red. The boys in *The Antelope Woman* set about learning the ways of the warriors: “They pestered Asin and Bagakaapi about warrior ways, learned that a war party was signaled to assemble by a deadly symbolic red glove. They carefully sewed one out of tanned deerhide, dyed it with mashed cranberries…” (*The Antelope Woman* 52).

The red hand, then, is emblematic of the warrior spirit, which in this case is also feminine and wolf-infused. The drum, then, is ultimately an act of what Gerald Vizenor later calls survivance. It is a rejection of the Whiteman’s ax, his supposed supremacy, and his vilification of the wolf. Toxic masculinity is thus neutralized, and in the formation of the design, there comes an artful alliance of warrior, woman, and wolf.

The little girl’s bones become part of the drum, which makes her connection to it and the wolves deathless. As he is about to fashion the moose hide to the cedar, Shaawano is once again visited by his daughter: “She stood before him in a bell-shaped dress, and said, “I’ll tune the drum. Put me inside, Deydey. There I’ll be content”” (*The Painted Drum*). *Deydey* is the Ojibwe word for father, and the words utterance in itself is a rejection of colonial patriarchy, forming a more matrilineal, less possessive vision of fatherhood. At first, the father decides to feminize the drum itself in honor of his daughter: “His little girl had loved ribbons. He decided that he would trim the drum’s skirt with ribbons” (*The Painted Drum*). The drum, then begins to become the Little Girl Drum, made of wolf, cedar, girl, and resistance. The bones that the wolves left will soon be encased in the drum. These bones give the drum its effeminate and clear voice: “That little girl’s bones gave the drum its voice” (*The Painted Drum* 179). The wolves leave the bones
so that the little girl be become a continuance of Ojibwe personhood in the sacred interior of a drum.

Generations later, “Little Girl Drum,” saves the lives of three Ojibwe children. Impoverished by twentieth century colonialism, the children find themselves alone and hungry. They start a wood fire in the house when the heating oil runs out, and their frame house burns down around them. The sound of the drum leads them to the home of Bernard Shaawano, a descendant of the little girl who gave herself to the wolves. The drum, owes its voice to the little girl’s bones, left by the wolves: “But the drum was loud, insistent, a full noise that made her jumpy inside” (The Painted Drum 217). The children at this point are starving, their mother taken away by alcoholism. They have only had cough syrup and a stale Snickers Bar. They are cold, hungry, and desperate as the wolf pack from earlier in the story. The little girl who was their long-ago tribeswoman saves them as well:

[Shwanee] lifted her head and shook off the snow. That sound was coming from just outside the ditch. A fast, rolling beat. It drew her staggering to her feet. On her back, nestled close in the shell of nylon and down, her brother stirred. Alice didn’t move, but Shawnee lifted her anyway, dragged her by her hood and her hair. The drum grew louder, showing a way out, beating her around a tree and then a rock and over solid ground, all in the dark. Roused by the drum whenever she almost quit, Shawnee went on until she bumped into a flat wall. She moved along it and felt a window. She beat on the window so hard with mitted and frozen fists that it shattered, and then she bawled like a little dog right outside the door. (The Painted Drum 217)

The wolves give the women the strength to resist against incredible odds. Both the wolves and the Ojibwe resist the consuming jaws of colonialism. They live. They eat. They keep moving in the snow. Shawnee “bawls like a little dog.” The tribe lives on in shawls and snowsuits, through poverty and alcoholism, and displacement. They resist. They survive. They eat each other’s hearts
without out possessiveness or animosity. An interspecies, intergenerational survivance emerges from the hunger, blood, and bones of wolves and a little girl.
VII) The Story of Milk and Sorrow: *The Antelope Woman*

*The Antelope Wife*, published in 1998, is a novel about the mythical Antelope Woman, who is connected to a family of Ojibwe. The Antelope Woman began her life as an infant in an isolated Ojibwe village. Her mother ties her to the back of a dog to help her escape an army raid in which the village is nearly destroyed. Erdrich published a rewrite of the book in 2016, with the title changing to *Antelope Woman*. I have chosen to examine *The Antelope Woman* here because its canine characters are more prevalent, and its women stronger. The women of *The Antelope Woman* survive many of colonialisms attempts at cultural genocide, and they do so with the help of canine helpers.

Milk is mammalian life. In *The Antelope Woman*, the Ojibwe survive off of its spiritual and nutritional sustenance. Women and dogs draw together in a milk-fed resistance in which they thwart the murderous politics of Jacksonian patriarchy. *The Antelope Woman* is a rewrite of a novel that was originally published in 1998 as *The Antelope Wife*. By replacing the word “wife” with “woman” in the title, Erdrich empowers her female characters. Notably, the role of canines is amplified in this new version of the story. The dogs have forged an even stronger link with the women.

The dogs suffer alongside the Ojibwe during a Blue Coat Massacre, and ultimately survive it with them. Scranton Roy finds himself an Indian Fighter in the mist of great carnage: “The village his company encountered was peaceful, then not. In the chaos of groaning horses, dogs screaming...the feral quiet of the children” (*The Antelope Woman* 4). Scranton Roy, clad in his Union Blue dyed wool, is a villain in the novel’s opening, a willing participant in the hate spurred atrocity: “And the sudden contempt he felt for them all. Unexpected, the frigid hate. The pleasure in raising, aiming” (*The Antelope Wife* 4). The band of Ojibwe is mistaken for starving Dakota who had the audacity to hostilely resist their starvation. There is no call for this hate, and in feeling it, Scranton Roy rejects his Quaker upbringing and the gentle soul of his poet mother. He asserts his “manhood” when an old woman runs at him with a rock as he is shooting at her
grandchildren, two of whom he kills. The death of the grandmother represents the coldblooded phallic violence of American colonialism: “Eager, he bayoneted an old woman who set upon him with no other weapon put a stone picked from the ground” (The Antelope Wife 5). The bayonet is a close killing, personal, and so Scranton Roy finds that he cannot avoid the woman’s eyes as he takes her life.

In a move that mirrors the sexualized violence of colonialism, he stabs her grandmotherly flesh” She was built like the broken sacks of hay he’d used for practice, but her body closed fast around the instrument. He braced himself against her to pull free, set his boot between her legs to tug the blade from her stomach…” (The Antelope Woman 5). Roy plants his boot between the woman’s legs in an act of sexual conquest. This not the first stomach wound, hunger or steel induced, that an Ojibwe has suffered at the hands of the Blue Coats.

In her death throes, the woman gains the upper hand in this situation, with the help of a dog. In the midst of his fraternal violence, Scranton Roy is drawn into a moment that is almost womblike: “His glare was drawn into hers and he sank with it into the dark unaccompanied moment before his birth” (The Antelope Woman 5). The scene of death, ironically becomes a birth scene: “In a groan of heat and blood she cried a word that would reverberate in his mind until the last moment of his life. He yanked his bayonet out with a huge cry, and began to run” (The Antelope Woman 5). The word that she cries ends up being nearly untranslatable, but the closet phrase in English is “Everlasting Rainbow.” Scranton Roy carves this phrase phonetically on his arm, never learns its meaning, but is forever haunted by it. Eventually, the word drives him mad with guilt and he takes his own life. As a spirit, the old woman returns to her great-great granddaughter to be given as a traditional name for a 20th century descendant. As she is giving this name, the grandmother’s spirit recalls the moment of her death: “I saw the soldier shoot at children and I ran at him with a stone. But he killed me on the end of his gun. Not so easy, however, because I stared at him in his eyes. I stared him back in time, to when he was defenseless, before his birth. And then I put my spirit into him as best I could” (The Antelope
Woman 262). The death scene then, becomes feminized. Scranton, everyone really was born in “a
groan of heat and blood.” This scene, then, is life-giving, as well as life taking.

A dog becomes the vessel through which life continues, the life that is supposed to be
snuffed out with Roy’s bayonet: “That was when he saw the dog, a loping dirt-brown cur, circle
the camp, twice with the child on its back and set off into open space” (The Antelope Woman 5).
The dog carries the child on her back in a cradleboard, as its mother would. The antelope have
appeared to her mother in a dream and warned her of the coming of the Blue Coats. Thus she has
devised an escape for her child on the back of a dog, to which she ties the carefully beaded
cradleboard. Thus motherhood, Ojibwe custom, canine devotion, and motherhood are all bound
together on the spine of an earth-brown dog. The weight is heavy, the scene terrifying, but the
dog is steadfast in its devotion to these Ojibwe women: “From time to time, as the day went on,
the dog paused to rest, stretched patient beneath its burden” (The Antelope Woman 5). The dog,
carries the weight of the child the way a woman would, whether that child is in a cradleboard on
her back or still in her womb, the weight of its survival rests upon her spine.

Thus Scranton Roy’s role as a murderer ends with the sight of a patient dog:

Dakota, a dog bearing upon its back a frame-board dikinaagan enclosing a child in
moss and velvet embroideries of beads, was frightened into the vast carcass of the
world west of the Otter Tail River. A cavalry soldier spurred to human response by
the sight of the dog, the strapped-on child, vanishing into the distance, followed
and did not return. (The Antelope Woman 1).

The dog, then, in bearing forth the young Ojibwe girl, also helps re-humanize Scranton Roy by
removing him from the scene in which he is a monster of Barbaric proportions. The dog, also sets
the storyline in motion, a complicated web of characters unfurls from the dog’s burden.

In the text few sections of the novel, Scranton Roy undergoes an incredible
metamorphosis in which he changes from Indian Fighter to surrogate Ojibwe mother, guided
every step by the Ojibwe dog. Following her trail, Scranton Roy becomes intertwined with the
dog: “As night fixed upon them, man and dog were close enough to hear each other breathing and, so in that rhythm, both slept” (*The Antelope Woman* 6). Quite recently, Scranton Roy was causing the screams of women and dogs. Now he falls asleep to the tranquil sound of their breathing. The dog’s breath, in this instance, is life...humanity.

The dog leads him ever closer to the earth, a connection that a subscription to Jacksonian patriarchy would require him to deny. Roy follows the dog, slowly gaining its trust: “Accepting tidbits and bones, the dog was alert, suspicious. Roy could not touch it until he thought to wash himself all over and approach naked to diminish his whiteman’s scent” (*The Antelope Woman* 6). The washing is a rebirth of sorts, the stain and smell of the sins he’s just committed. Shedding the uniform removes his symbol and acceptance of White power. Thus he approaches the baby in a more natural, vulnerable state.

Roy cleans and swaddles the baby, but he finds that he is unable to quell her hunger. Her screams of need reverberate through the prairie. Moved by her desperation, Roy does something that is self-emasculating: “Roy opened his shirt and put her to his nipple” (*The Antelope Woman* 7). The baby’s desire to live causes her to accept it: “She seized him. Inhaled him. Her suck was fierce” (*The Antelope Woman* 7). At first this is uncomfortable: “His whole body was astonished, most of all the inoffensive nipple he’d never appreciated, until, in spite of the pain, it served to gain him peace” (*The Antelope Woman* 7). The dog is still there to witness and encourage this action: “As he sat there, the child holding part of him in her mouth, he looked around to see if there be any witness to this act which seemed to him strange as anything that had happened in this sky-filled land. Of course there was only the dog. Contended, freed, it lolled appreciatively near” (*The Antelope Woman* 7). The dog stays near Roy, and Roy provides for the dog as well when he is able to fell a buffalo bull: “He fleshed the hide, dried the meat, seared the brains, stored the berries, stored the pounded fat and berries in the gut, made use of every bone and scrap of flesh even to the horns, carved into spoons, and the eyeballs, tossed to the dog” (*The Antelope Woman* 8). Scranton Roy uses every part of the buffalo, performing many tasks that were traditionally
women's work in the tribe, thus rejecting the wasteful, hyper-masculine of overhunting. The dog partakes in the feast, and by eating the eyes, the dog connects to Scranton Roy and facilitates his respectful use of the bison. Scranton Roy is further feminized with his nursing gesture results in inexplicable lactation: "He put his hand to his chest and then tasted a thin blue drop of his own, watery, appalling, God-given milk" (*The Antelope Woman* 9). When Scranton Roy is a Union Soldier, he brings death. When he is guided by a dog and reconnected to the eco-feminine, he becomes a fount of milk and hope.

The dog cannot stop the entire force of the cavalry, but she saves one girl from the massacre, and resurrects something human in a hate-seething chest. The old grandmother's spirit visits her progeny many years later, describing this scene with the dog a victory for the Ojibwe: "I looked at the distance. Over his shoulder, I saw the dog running off with my baby granddaughter, the dikinaagan strapped on its back. Oh, I was happy. They were getting away. I was filled with joy and nothing hurt me" (*The Antelope Women* 262). A dog with a cradleboard tied to its back escapes liquidation, saves a baby, and empowers an elder.

The mother of the baby who rode to life on the back of a dog also survives the raid. Since the baby is gone, she develops mastitis. Blue Prairie Woman is full of infection and sorrow: "At night, for the first month after that day, her breasts grew pale and hard, and her milk impacted, spoiling in her, leaking out under her burnt clothes so that she smelled of sour milk and fire" (*The Antelope Woman* 15). This image of spoiling breast milk appears in many postcolonial texts, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It is an illustration of the colonialists' destruction of Native motherhood. However, in this case, this image of toxicity is again subverted by a dog: "An old midwife gave her a new puppy and she put it to her breasts (*The Antelope Woman* 15). The cure is effective, and it lends a powerful example of the bond between dog and woman in the book: "Holding to her nipple the tiny wet muzzle, cradling the needy bit of fur, she cried. All that night the tiny dog mercifully drew off the shooting pains in her breasts and at dawn, drowsy and comfortable, she finally cuddled the sweet-fleshed puppy to her, breathed its salty odor, and
slept” (*The Antelope Woman* 15). The small puppy and the knowledge of the midwife make a soothing compound, capable of drawing poison and pain from a woman.

The dog who drank Blue Prairie Woman’s milk took on the name of Sorrow, and she continued to be woman’s ally: “The dog nursed on human milk grew up coyote gray and clever, a light-boned, loping bitch who followed Blue Prairie Woman everywhere” (*The Antelope Woman* 19). The relationship between Blue Prairie Woman and Sorrow is symbiotic, not hierarchical. The Ojibwe woman does not try to domesticate, dominate, or disempower the dog in any sort of a Western fashion:

Became her second thought, lay outside the door when she slept, just within the outer flap when it rained, though not in. Never actually inside a human dwelling. Huge with pups or thin from feeding them, teats dragging, the dog still followed. Close and quiet as her shadow, it lived within touch of her, although they never actually did touch after the dog drew from Blue Prairie Woman’s soaked and swollen nipples the heat, the night milk, the overpowering sorrow. (*The Antelope Woman* 19)

The dog and Blue Prairie woman have a sympathetic relationship. They drink in each other’s sorrows. Both woman and dog sacrifice and suffer for the survival of their offspring Blue Prairie Woman suffers profound depression and shooting pains in her breasts after evacuating her nursing baby to save her life. The dog bears a patient burden as well, swelling with pups and then becoming rib bone thin as she nurses them. This connection, wrapped up in emotion, fertility, and milk is deeply feminine in its nature. Sorrow and Blue Prairie Woman, then, embody a rejection of the man and dog trope, where man is master and dog is property. Sorrow is not a pet, which would explain why Blue Prairie woman does not pet her and they don’t touch. Dog and woman coexist and cooperate. The dog, of course, waits and watches: “Always there, jumping up at the
approach of a stranger, guarding her in the dusk, alert for a handout, living patiently on bits of hide, guts, offal, the dog waited” (*The Antelope Woman* 19).

Sorrow the Dog accompanies her ally off into the wilds of the Plains to search for the missing daughter, the one whom the brown dog had carried away during the Blue Coat raid: “And was ready when Blue Prairie Woman set down her babies with their grandmother and started walking west, following at long last the endless invisible trail of her daughter’s flight” (*The Antelope Woman* 19). After roving for years, they find Scranton Roy’s chicken farm where he has raised the missing daughter, acting as her adoptive father. Woman and dog reclaim “Matilda” as the child is now called from her Euro-pastoral existence. It is again a task of patience, a quality which both Blue Prairie Woman and Sorrow possess in great quantities: “All day in thin grass, the dog, the woman sunlight moving across them, breathed each other’s air, slept by turns, waited” (*The Antelope Woman* 20).

Blue Prairie Woman retrieves her daughter, and sets out to bring her daughter back to her band of Ojibwe. The dog Sorrow, of course, follows. There had been sickness at Scranton Roy’s farm. His wife had just suffered from the “mottled skin sickness,” which may be smallpox. The daughter, Matilda has immunities, but her birth mother does not. Thus Blue Prairie Woman contracts the Whiteman’s virus: “Hotter, hotter first confused and then dreadfully clear when she sees, opening before her, the western door (*The Antelope Woman* 23). As she feels the fever coming on, Blue Prairie woman believes that she will not survive the virus. She sees herself going through the western door, traveling the Ojibwe road to the afterlife. Looking up at the sky, she sees what she must do: “She must act at once if her daughter is to survive her. The clouds are pure stratus. The sky is a raft of milk. The coyote gray dog sits patiently near” (*The Antelope Woman* 53). The raft of milk is a lifeline. It is a connection to the dog, to the time years back when a small pup drew the poison out of her breast. This dog who was raised on human milk can return the favor. The clouds connect the child, the mother, and the once-suckling puppy is a milky web of survival. The dog dies quickly, with purpose: “First time she has touched dog since it
drank from her the milk of sorrow. She drags the dog to her. Soft bones, soft muzzle then. Though old thing now" (The Antelope Woman 23). The dog drank Blue Prairie Woman’s breastmilk, which then became part of her. Thus by using the dog’s flesh as food for her daughter, Blue Prairie Woman is able to in some way nurse her daughter once again. The dog’s “soft bones” and “soft muzzle” have turned tough, showing the long and arduous journey that the two have shared. The dog seems to understand. She offers no struggle. Perhaps this what she has been patiently waiting for all along.

Blue Prairie Woman then cooks a beautiful and terrible stew out of the dog named Sorrow:

Blue Prairie Woman holds the dog close underneath one arm, and then, knife in hand, draws her clever blade across the beating throat. Slices its stiff moan in half and collects in the berry-filled makak its gurgle of dark blood. Blue Prairie Woman then stretches the dog out, skins and guts it, cuts off her head, and lowers the chopped carcass into a deep birch-bark birch-bark container…. Tending the fire carefully, weakening she boils the dog. (The Antelope Woman 24)

The passage is difficult to read, but at each juncture, Blue Prairie Woman shows reverence to the dog. Sorrow’s blood is collected in a traditional birch-bark container, joined with berries, reconnecting her to the Ojibwe women who made it, and the sweetness of the berries. Blue Prairie Woman is preparing food for her child in a traditional way, a way of cooking, a way of living that is supposed to be gone. The traditional ways are still very much alive in this scene and intertwined with dog and women. After she boils the dog she tries to entice her daughter to eat: “When it is done, the meat softened, shredding off the bones, she tips the gray meat, brown meat, onto a birch tray. Steam rises, the fragrance of the meat is faintly sweet. Quietly, she gestures to her daughter. Prods the cracked oval pads off the cooked paws. Offers them to her” (The Antelope Woman 24). The sweet-smelling meat is a return to the soft, sweet puppy who relieved Blue Prairie Woman’s pain. The offering of the paws is an offering to share the long journey that
Sorrow and Blue Prairie Woman have shared. The paws that have followed the mother for years will now become part of the daughter. Steam is purification, such as in medicinal sweat baths. This nourishing, berry-scented, heart-wrenching meal is the last thing that Blue Prairie Woman can offer to her daughter, the last thing that the dog named Sorrow has to give to the women.

Matilda witnesses her mother’s virulent death, but lives on: “She sings her mother’s song, holding her mother’s hand in one hand and eating the dog with the other hand” (The Antelope Woman 24). Matilda sings a literal song, but she also continues her mother’s story, sings her song in a symbolic way, like Joseph Marshall does for the wolf. Mother, daughter, and dog are connected spiritually and molecularly. Matilda, nourished by the stew of Sorrow, becomes the original Antelope Woman: “The antelope emerge from the band of light at the world’s edge. A small herd of sixteen or twenty flickers into view. Fascinated, they poise to watch the girl’s hand in its white sleeve sip. Feed herself. Dip. They step closer…” (The Antelope Woman 25). The Antelope Woman becomes a story and a symbol of wild strength, running with the antelope, wearing only her mother’s blue beads. The story continues, and the dead woman and dog are part of that story. Nothing is over.

Erdrich’s novels are polyphonic. There are many voices, each adding to the story. In The Antelope Wife, a dog becomes one of these storytellers. By giving the dog the power of narration, Erdrich solidifies his consciousness, and allows him an honored place in the women’s stories. Almost Soup partakes in oral tradition, and in the process, discusses the ancestral connection between the Ojibwe and the canine: “After all, I was the son of a blend of dogs stretching back to the beginning of time on this continent. We sprang up here. We had no need to cross on any land bridge. We know who we are. Us, we are descended of Original Dog” (The Antelope Woman 74). Almost Soup declares dog-people’s status as First People. They are connected to Turtle Island through creation, like the Ojibwe themselves. Almost Soup credits his survivance to his mother and the strength of her bloodlines: “I think about her lots, and also about my ancestor, the dog named Sorrow who drank a human’s milk. I think about her because I know it was the first dog’s
mercy and the hand-me-down wit of the second that saved my life that time they were boiling
sacred soup” (The Antelope Woman 74). Almost Soup shares with his ancestors a cleverness and
a deep-seeded devotion to the Ojibwe women. He knows that a girl will save his life when he is in
a gunnysack awaiting his fate: “The bag loosens and a grandma draws me forth and just quick,
because I’m smart, desperate, and connected with my ancestors, I look for the nearest girl child in
bunch around me. I spot her. I pick her out” (The Antelope Wife 76). Almost Soup recognizes that
there is an ancestral bond between the dogs and the women of this tribe, that he can find an ally in
the arms of a girl. It works.

The girl wants the puppy and she gets him: “And just like that I’m in the most heavenly
of places. Soft, strong girl arms. I’m carried off to be petted and with, fed scraps, dragged around
in a baby carriage made of an old shoe box, dressed in the clothing of tiny brothers and sisters”
(The Antelope Woman 77-78). The role of doll may seem demeaning, anthropomorphic.
However, Basil Johnston notes the importance of the doll in an Ojibwe girl’s upbringing:

When the boys at age seven or thereabouts received their first bows and arrows, the
girls received a wooden doll carved either by her father or grandfather. The doll
was not only a toy but a means of training as well. Through talking and telling
stories to the doll, a girl acquired the art of storytelling and a mastery of language,
faculties that would serve her later in life as a teacher. (Johnston 124)

In a way, Almost Soup is given to a girl by a grandfather. He speaks up on her behalf as they are
making the soup: “‘Give her that little dog,’ says a grandpa now, his grandpa heart swelling up.
‘She wants that dog. So give her that little dog.’” (The Antelope Woman 77). Almost Soup learns
about oral tradition from this girl, which is why the reader gets parts of the story from the “real
dog’s mouth” (The Antelope Woman 77). Thus the power of oral tradition is shared between girl
and dog, resulting in the telling of some of the novel’s most crucial moments in a dog’s voice.
Almost Soup leaves the reservation, following a woman. He, in his dog-knowledge understands the caustic effects of government Indian programs, but like the Ojibwe, he will not succumb to them:

There was a wave of giving up, and then a new government policy designed in the kindest way possible to make things worse. It was called Relocation and helped Indians move to cities all over the country. Helped them move away from their land. Helped them move away from their dogs. But don’t worry. We followed them down to Gakaabikaang, Minneapolis, Place of the Falls. (The Antelope Woman 79)

The language here mirrors the hypocrisy of US Indian programs that did tremendous harm to Native people while claiming to “help” them. The word “help” is repeated three times in the passage, but no one is helped. Relocation was yet another attempt to whitewash Native cultures and undermine Native sovereignty. Erdrich puts these words in a dog’s mouth because he is ally in the fight against their effect. Almost Soup makes his way to the Cities because he has heard that Sweetheart Calico is there, and he needs to watch over the descendant of Matilda or the Antelope Woman. The Whiteman “helps” the Indians by separating them from their dogs. Given the ghastly history of US Indian policy, one could conclude that the very aim of this policy is to weaken Native people. One way to this, according to Almost Soup, is to separate them from their dogs. The dogs, though resist this separate and follow their people. Almost Soup’s purpose, it seems, is to guard Ojibwe women, whether they be reservation women or urban.

Almost Soup follows Sweetheart Calico to the city to protect her from the city’s colonial influences and the oppression of her kidnapper. Sweetheart Calico is the great-granddaughter of Blue Prairie Woman, who nursed the pup named Sorrow. Sweetheart Calico is granddaughter of Matilda, who was tied in her cradleboard to the back of the brown dog, and later ran free with the antelope. Thus Sweetheart Calico is an Antelope Woman. Klaus Shawno sees her at a powwow and thinks her beautiful, and he then, in his foolishness kidnap her. Almost Soup knows this is
no good, so with his dog wit, he stows away to the city to watch over Sweetheart Calico. Klaus, though an Ojibwe man, at times tries to possess Sweetheart Calico, tying her up, naming her after European trade goods, the flowered fabric he uses to tie her to his wrist. Klaus wants to possess Sweetheart Calico in a way that is contrary to her matriarchal heritage and more in line with colonial patriarchy. Klaus Shawno expresses this desire in his section of the narration: “I adore her. I’ll do anything for her. Anything except let her go” (The Antelope Woman 92). Almost Soup understands Klaus’s possessive tenancies, and he fears the repercussions: “I was brought down to this place by the theft of Sweetheart Calico. We dogs sensed that danger and chaos in her form could threaten the twins” (The Antelope Woman 178). He doesn’t like Klaus, and is reluctant a to hand the narration over to him: “I must give the story over to one particular descendant, Klaus, a man whom we dogs have failed to shape” (The Antelope Wife 79). After his first night with her, Klaus believes he has subdued Sweetheart Calico: “Day of Klaus half awake and tied to his own bed by Sweetheart Calico and thinking in his dreams that he hears the clatter of her hooves[...] and believing when he opens his eyes his sheets will be covered with her inky cloven erotic tracks” (The Antelope Woman 108). Klaus, however, is mistaken. He has been tied up by her, so she has managed to subvert the power balance. While Klaus is dreaming of domination, Sweetheart Calico has other ideas: “Actually, she is outside playing with her new dog” (The Antelope Woman 108). When Klaus tries to play master to Almost Soup, that doesn’t work either: “And it growled when he took the rope out last night. Forget about locking me in the bathroom, its look said. I’ll shit on the floor. Then it growled worse and worse until he handed the rope to Sweetheart Calico” (The Antelope Woman 109). Almost Soup is not interested in being man’s best friend, nor is he about to tolerate anyone who is trying to disempower the Antelope Woman.

Cally and Deanna, twins, are also girl descendants of Blue Prairie Woman. The twins immediately feel a connection to Sweetheart Calico and her dog when Klaus brings them to the city. Almost Soup’s roots go back to the dog named Sorrow, just as Sweetheart Calico’s roots go back to Blue Prairie Woman: “It isn’t a very good-looking dog. Couldn’t be called any one
particular breed of dog. Yet a sympathy for humans shines out of its eyes and the girls fall instantly in love, not knowing that this very dog is the fourth dog of the fourth litter or the forty-fourth daughter of the dog named Sorrow” (*The Antelope Woman* 110). The number four is sacred to the Ojibwe, and thus this dog with all the fours in his lineage is numerically significant. According to Bad River Ojibwe scholar Dr. Patty Loew, PhD the Ojibwe connection to sacred lands goes back to the number four as well: “According to oral tradition, their original homes were in the Great Lakes region, where long ago the Creator, Gichi-manidoo, had placed them on the last of the Four Worlds he created” (Lowe 59). In a 19th century petition, the Clan Chiefs represented the sacred rice beds off of Lake Superior with four small ovals (Lowe 66). The walleye spawned when the water was about forty-four degrees, and then through spearfishing, the Ojibwe were able to harvest them from the lakes (Lowe 66). The four-legged Almost Soup also becomes quite pivotal to this band of Ojibwe.

Cally, Deanna, and Sweetheart Calico play with Almost Soup while Klaus slinks off to take a shower. The women and the dog come together, while the kidnapper and would-be patriarch is again marginalized:

They join in running and playing tag with the dog and with the woman whose great-grandmother on her human side slit the throat of that ancestor dog and boiled its meat so that her daughter would have the strength to travel into the blue west, wearing the same blue west, wearing the same blue beads that Sweetheart Calico hides now as she leaps away from the dog, laughing that wild and silent laugh. She screams noiselessly, even as poor Klaus, whom she has freed to go to work that morning, creeps into the apartment…(*The Antelope Woman* 111)

The city lawn scene is freeing, joyful, a tangle of blue beads and strange dog and woman. Relocation has failed. Klaus’s attempt to be a patriarch as also failed. The matrilineal strength, both human and dog is too strong for urban assimilation attempts.
Almost Soup’s connection to the twins Cally and Deanna only deepens. The girls envision a world in which an alliance with the dog is all they need:

They’d rather make the word over in girl image. The world would be only girls and animals and no boys or disappointing grown-ups except perhaps their mother visits bringing favorite food once every two weeks and long hugs but I could last month, says Cally.

“Nobody mean can live on our planet,” says Deanna.

“And the dog will be our brother.”

“We won’t take husbands.”

“Obviously.” (The Antelope Woman 112)

This imaginary “girl’s world” is free of animosity and domination. There is only motherhood, sisterhood, brotherhood with dogs and favorite foods. In their little girls’ vision, the twins are rejecting the patriarchal world while embracing their alliance with the dog.

Almost Soup protects Deanna and Cally just as the animals do in Basil Johnston’s version of the Sky Woman creation story. The twins follow Sweetheart Calico as she wanders around Minneapolis. Sweetheart Calico does not belong in the city; Klaus has unleashed danger by bringing her there, but Almost Soup won’t let any harm come to the girls:

The girls take jackets anyway because they do not trust the warm sun and they follow Sweetheart down the lumpy old sidewalk with the trees bulging up out of the earth. They run past her through the swing sets, monkey bars and a field of grass, where they find half an old Frisbee. They toss it awkwardly to the dog, who gamely chases after it as if he is doing them a favor. Which he is. He is worried about where they are going.

Sweetheart Calico always gets lost. He laps all the water he comes across. Pees everywhere he can. He does his best to leave a trail[…].

(The Antelope Woman 172)
Almost Soup is a guardian. The twins, though are missing overnight. Rozin, their mother is frantic, but Almost Soup brings them back to her unscathed: “There was a thick layer of newspaper down on the ground, so they curled up because they couldn’t walk further and the dog curled with them to keep them warm you should have heard he growled a horrible growl if anyone came near the bush” (The Antelope Woman 178). This experience is recounted in a an excited run-on sentence, in the voice of the girls who are happy to be home in their mother’s kitchen.

Almost Soup has brought them back safely. Rozin is deeply grateful. She makes an offering to the dog: “As Rozin watches them, her being fills. She gets up and walks to the refrigerator. She takes out a pound of hamburger, which is all the meat she has, unwraps the meat and puts it on a plate on the floor. The dog comes over, inhales the meat. Laps fresh water from the bowl she sets beside it” (The Antelope Woman 179). Rozin gives the dog “all the meat she has” because he has brought back her daughters, and just the sight of them “fills her being.” The scene is an affirmation of life and reciprocity. Reflecting on the actions of the dog, Rozin thinks of the interconnections of spirits as she calls her mother and aunt to tell them that the girls have been found. Rozin searches for the words of gratitude that she feels for the dog who has brought her children back to her:

The words call the spirits by name from each direction, from the sky, from the earth, from the night, from the day, from the sun, from the moon, from the winds, the flock of birds, from the solitary birds, from the clans, from the animals that give themselves as food or are sent to delight us, or to help us like the dog, from the rivers, from the lakes, from the rain, from the water in the mother’s body and the water in the snow, from the stars and the mysterious place the stars came from, and the fire, the original fire. (The Antelope Woman 178).

Original Fire is also the title of one of Erdrich’s poetry collections, but in this passage it also connects everything, the dog sent to help or delight, Great Lake water and amniotic fluid, and
matrilineal. It is a connection of life and of what is scared to the Ojibwe, and the dogs brings it all home, sets it before Rozin’s feet on the linoleum floor. In this way, Rozin thanks Almost Soup for protecting her children. The city is a showcase of colonialism and full of dangers. Almost Soup takes on the guardian role of the wolf totem in protecting the girls and bringing them back to their mother.

This isn’t the last time Almost Soup will save the twins, and the twins are sacred, a connection to their twin ancestors and Sky Woman. When he saves one set of twins, he saves the Ojibwe in a way. His connection to the urban Indian women in this book is an inheritance: “There I lived among my relatives, who all descended in some manner from the dog named Sorrow, who was nursed by Blue Prairie Woman and bequeathed to us our eternal protective connection, the devotion of Sorrow’s descendants to her own” (The Antelope Woman 179). The children of holocaust survivors write of a genetic pain, an inheritance of sorrow that is passed on to oppressed people. However, with this heritance of Sorrow, the inheritance becomes empowering and matriarchal, nourishing instead of holocaustic. Even in the city, this connection is not lost, and Almost Soup’s guardianship continues the tradition: “I have the dog skills of ages in my blood” (The Antelope Woman 179).

These skills behoove Almost Soup when he fends off a black-hearted virus from the twins. Almost Soup envisions death as a canine foe. He senses it approaching when the twins contract a violent strain of influenza:

Visiting their grandmas for Christmas, it happened. One foul night in a blizzard they got sick with a fever and a cough. It worsened, worsened until I senses the presence of the black dog. We all know the black dog. That is, death. He smells like iron cold. Sparks fly from his fur. He is the one who drags the creaking cart made of sticks. We have all heard the wheels groan as they turned, and hoped keep on past our house. But on that cold late winter night, up north, he stopped. I heard his hound breath, felt the heat of his lungs of steam and fire. (The Antelope Woman
According to Almost Soup, dogs and humans share a fear of death, but more importantly, they share an anti-viral drive to live. Almost Soup isn’t going to let his girls die in some sad winter scene, no bloody snow on his watch, no bodies for a “creaking cart.” Almost Soup wards off these images of cold and iron-rigor. In fact, he senses the illness before the human mothers are able: “It is only later when the girls wake, flushed in their first misery, that anyone except me even knows that they are sick” (The Antelope Woman 189). The danger is real as their temperatures gain heat: “Their fevers shoot up abruptly to an identical 103. That temperature is normal for a dog, but danger zone for the girls. Rozin takes the steel bowl and washcloth. She wrings the cloth reluctantly, sloppily, and bathes down the fever, wiping slow across her daughters’ arms and throats. Faster, faster! I think desperately, whining” (The Antelope Woman 189). This combination of desperate dog thoughts and whines and the motherly gesture of the cool washcloth shows a alliance of minds, focused on the eradication of the virus. Almost Soup is hypervigilant: “I am constant. Under the couch, I keep faith and keep watch” (The Antelope Woman 190).

The struggle against this virus is intergenerational, timeless. The grandmothers labor alongside their daughter and the dog:

They’ll get dehydrated, Rozin says. Now Giizis comes in from outdoors, from the old lean-to where she’s been searching through rolls and bags of bark for the best slippery elm, the strongest sage to boil to make a healing steam. Noodin goes back out and all morning they hear her shovel or the regular fall of her ax as she builds up the woodpile. I go out to encourage and guard her. (The Antelope Woman 190)

The old grandmother, Noodin, demonstrates immense strength, chopping wood and shoveling snow. Almost Soup, as always is protective, and Giizis uses traditional medicines. Dog, tradition, and fierce motherhood. Almost Soup looks back for strength when the struggle intensifies: “Cally
is shrinking, thinning, hardening on her bones, Deanna is coughing in explosive spasms that shake the springs just over my head. Weeping tiredly. Cranky. Then they lose the energy to fight and grow too meek. I lick the hand that hangs over the edge of the couch. I call upon my ancestors and their old ones for help” (The Antelope Woman 191). When the girls lose their strength, the dog’s strength takes over. The women and the dog fight together, calling upon their ancestors.

The struggle culminates when Cally’s virus becomes even more assaultive. She has a seizure, bleeds frighteningly: “Rozin’s voice is deep, from a place in her body I have never heard. Cally. She calls her daughter back from a far-off tunnel path. Cally’s mouth opens and she vomits blood into Rozin’s hands, into a towel she holds beneath her daughter’s mouth” (The Antelope Woman 198). The coughing up blood here is similar to Blue Prairie Woman’s viral death. It is another spoiling of a nursing scene, like Blue Prairie Woman’s mastitis. European viruses had a catastrophic effect on Native peoples, wiping out families and decimating tribes. However, on this night, in this blizzard, with this dog’s protection, the virus does not win. It’s a strike back. Deanna and Cally make it to the IHS hospital because the women have chopped wood, boiled teas, wiped the brows, and caught the blood in their hands. Almost Soup, too, has done his part, which he reveals once the girls are recovering and rehydrated: “It is then, in the hospital room, halfway asleep, that Rozin feels me put her daughters’ lives inside of them again. Unknown to her, I have taken their lives with me to keep them safe” (The Antelope Woman 194).

In the original version of this story from The Antelope Wife is also life-affirming, but perhaps less so. In the first version, only Cally is saved by Almost Soup. In The Antelope Wife, Deanna is killed by carbon monoxide poisoning, a causality of her father’s drunken war against himself. In Antelope Woman, Almost Soup is given more power as a narrator, more power as a protector. The dog is even at Sweetheart Calico’s heels when she is finely set free. As Klaus walks with Sweetheart Calico for a last time, a dog skeleton from behind an abandoned shed is resurrected “That dead dog comes alive and is her dog. Coyote gray, grinning, and slobbering, it
trots just behind" (The Antelope Woman 275). Klaus undoes the calico and lets Sweetheart Calico go:

Confused, broken inside, shaking her head, she stumbles over the uneven ground.

The dog stays right at her heels. As she walks west, she begins to sing, Klaus watches her.

The land is so flat. She is perfectly in focus. He can see her slender back, quick legs, once or twice a staggering leap, a fall, an attempt to run. Klaus thinks that she might turn around but she keeps moving until she is a white needle, quivering, then a dark flock on the western band. (The Antelope Woman 276)

Sweetheart Calico is at first confused by her freedom, stumbling in it. However, with the dog at her heels, she becomes more graceful, more gazelle-like in her movements. More antelope.

Sweetheart Calico is a name given to her by a man. It is colonial, a piece of mercantile goods. She sheds the physical bound when Klaus unwraps the cloth from her wrist. Sweetheart Calico has become Antelope Woman once again, running west with a dog at her heals. The dog is always there when the women of this novel triumph.
VIII) Old Tallow and the Marrow of Life: Women and Dogs in *The Porcupine Year*.

In the feast of strong characters and language that is Louise Erdrich’s fiction, Old Tallow is perhaps the most noteworthy, and the woman most connected to the canine. Old Tallow is an elder woman who wears a patchwork coat of trade cloth and animal skins of variant colors. She is a skilled hunter with a warrior heart. Old Tallow unfurls over the course of the first three books in *The Birchbark Book* series, which is sort of an Ojibwe answer to the *Little House on the Prairie* series. Old Tallow, being brave, saves the protagonist from a smallpox epidemic by returning to the island of the dead. All the inhabitants of a Lake Superior island have died from the disease, except for an infant girl who later becomes known as Omakayas or “Little Frog.” Omakayas is adopted by Tallow’s band, who live on the sacred Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker. At the end of the second book, the band is pushed west, forced to leave their island for White settlers. Tallow comes along, and brings her pack of dogs. The descendants of these dogs become the North Dakota Plains dogs that accompany the Ojibwe in Erdrich’s later-set fiction.

The canine woman connection is most prevalent in the third book, *The Porcupine Year*. Omakayas comes of age in this installment, which culminates in the final chapter, “The Woman Lodge.” The woman lodge marks the onset of Omakayas’s menses. According to Basil Johnston, this would be a significant event in a woman’s life: “For a girl the attainment of womanhood was the most singular event in her life; it was the greatest of gifts” (Johnston 124). The lodge itself is constructed of birchbark, made by her grandmother, Nokomis who will be her only visitor while she fasts and prays for four days. No men were allowed near the lodge, which according to Johnston is a source of empowerment: “And because the gift was intended for women alone, there were to be no men. The gift was denied to men ever to remain a mystery, sealed and closed” (Johnston 125). In the Woman Lodge, Nokomis shares the story of Old Tallow: “If there were a name for the story, it would be The Girl Who Lived with the Dogs.” ( *The Porcupine Year* 170).
Because this story is told by a grandmother, and further yet told in a Woman’s lodge, the telling of the story itself connects dogs and women with the sacred act of storytelling.

Old Tallow, as it turns out is a survivor of smallpox: “After the sickness, everything her family owned was burned. She had nothing left. Some unscrupulous person sold her to a voyageur, a manguer de lard named Charette who was so evil no other men would work with him” (The Porcupine Year 171). Old Tallow, of course, was not always the woman’s name. At first, she was Light Moving in the Leaves. Light Moving in the Leaves saw herself subjugated to a French fur trapper who dehumanized her. He beat her and made her sleep and outside with the dogs who pulled his trapping gear: “Hungry, she fought over the bones. In no time, she grew quick as any dog at snapping food from the air. And instead of being crushed under the weight of the packs, she grew stronger that summer, until she could carry what a man does. And she was still a young girl” (The Porcupine Year 172). The fur trapper tries to possess and weaken the girl, but it has the opposite effect. She is still very much a young girl, but now she is one who can carry the weight of a man. The abuse, though intensifies, but her connection to the dogs grows stronger: “But then the dogs began to accept her. They taught her to crack the bones Charette threw them and to eat the marrow. When he found her doing this, Charette laughed, gave her a blow that made her skull ring and called her Tallow” (The Porcupine Year 172). Tallow sucks the marrow from the bones and grows strong. Though Charette means the name Tallow to be derogatory, it ends being a source of empowerment, symbolic of the girl’s deep resolution to live. The marrow also connects Old Tallow to oral tradition because Rand Valentine describes the trickster Nenabozho eating marrow from bones shared by a wolf pack.

The fur trapper’s abuse continues: “He gave her a thin blanket and ignored her icy moans. She was just a girl. He was tired of her and hoped she would die” (The Porcupine Year 174).

Tallow’s suffering at this point is an illustration of the way colonialism demeaned Native women in sexual conquest or servitude. The conquest is not complete, however: “She did not die. The
dogs curled around her and kept her warm” (The Porcupine Year 174). Eventually, Tallow revolts:

Then there came a day, a strange day. This was the day Tallow understood that the weight she’d carried had become the weight of life itself. She understood her own strength. She looked at Charette when he threw her a bone and realized that she was free. She caught the bone in the air with one hand, stood up, and stilled him in her gaze. She walked toward him. As if in a dream, he stumbled backwards. The dogs had risen. They had lined up alongside her as a pack does its leader. (The Porcupine Year 175)

The girl who had grown strong under the weight of the fur trade’s greed becomes the Alpha. She overtakes the beatings and the abuse of Charette and his colonialist infrastructure with her own army… a fighting, and fiercely loving band of dogs. A young Ojibwe woman hears this on her first night as a woman, and it is an inheritance of survivance. For generations upon generations, the dogs become part of the women’s struggle to survive.
IX) Conclusion

Settlers wanted the Great Lakes region, and so they took it. Guns and blue-coated soldiers, as well as European germs aided in the taking. The Ojibwe were displaced by this settlement. The losses are too great to be described on paper, though Erdrich gives some profoundly effective images of this loss. Wolves suffered in the wake of Manifest destiny. The wolves and the Natives were an obstacle to the “civilization” of the North American continent.

In Little House on the Prairie, wolves and natives are portrayed as enemies to the pioneer spirit. Laura, the young pioneer protagonist describes encounters with Plains peoples in racialized terms when some Native men come into the little house: “Those Indians were dirty and scowling and mean. They acted as if the house belonged to them” (Wilder 232). Laura Ingalls Wilder became a symbol for the American pioneer spirit, and for many children, her story was the story of the settling of America. With the Birchbark House series, Erdrich creates an alternative view, one in which Natives wronged by the settlement of their land. Also in The Little House on the Prairie, wolves are seen as a threat, circling the little house: “Their howls shuddered through the house and filled the moonlight and quavered away across the vast silence of the prairie” (Wilder 98). This howl is frightening, and very different from the howl Joseph Marshall hears in his dreams. The Ingalls family soon hears what they think are war cries: “That night was worst of all. The drums were louder and the yells were louder and fiercer. All up and down the creek war-cries answered war-cries...” (Wilder 297). The howls of wolves and the beating of drum with Native song become noises of danger, something to be silenced. Erdrich creates a fictional world that is contrary to this. The wolves are intelligent and live in agreement with the Ojibwe. The drum in The Painted Drum saves a little girl from hypothermia rather than terrifying her. The drum also connects the girl who sacrificed herself to the wolves back to her father. The wolf himself brings the little girl back to her mother when she tastes the blood from his heart. In Erdrich’s fiction, the wolf is not something to be silenced.
The wolf people were also displaced and depleted by the settlers’ possession of the land. The colonization, however, is not complete. Wolves were supposed to die out during the great nineteenth century holocaust in which farmers and ranchers sought to rid the continent of them. They did not die out, however. Some wolves remain wild, defiant in their continued existence. Despite their grievous losses, the Ojibwe live on as well. Ojibwe women continue to give birth, feed their children, and resist oppression.

Wolves and their dog relatives guard and fortify the Ojibwe as they fight the colonialization of their land, children, and culture. They give them their wolfish grins, they give them their bodies, and their milk-mouthed mercy. They give them their death gurgles and their bullet-drilled hearts. The women’s struggle becomes the wolf’s struggle. It is a winning struggle because women, wolves, and dogs continue to thrive on the pages of Erdrich’s fiction.
X) Works Cited


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