

## LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE MASTER BUTCHERS SINGING CLUB*, OR THE CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN ETHNICITY

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After the success of National Book Award finalist *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), Louise Erdrich, of Chippewa<sup>1</sup> and German American descent, leads us back to the immigrant side of her heritage in her eighth novel. Published in 2003, *The Master Butchers Singing Club* takes place in the years between the two World Wars, then beyond to 1954, and it deals with the migrant experience and the meeting of the Old World with the New. Although all of Erdrich's works are political in a more or less direct way, *The Master Butcher* shows a notably solid historical texture, including not only some Native American references like the Ghost Dance or the massacre of Wounded Knee, but also, and more significantly, the wars in Europe and their implications for the Americans. The novel is a good example of the articulation of American ethnicity in terms broader than the Native American identity that predominates in Erdrich's other works, which problematizes the Native American category and any strict labels of ethnic definition in general. In fact, even though most of the critical references to Erdrich's texts have concentrated on the articulation of Native elements, and on those novels where the Native component is more outstanding, Erdrich has repeatedly expressed her claim to be considered not just a Native writer but an American writer capable of articulating the complexity

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<sup>1</sup> Out of the three terms that designate this Native American tribe located on the two sides of the American-Canadian border, Chippewa and Ojibwe are originally Western, whereas Anishinabe is the way the people belonging to this group traditionally referred to themselves. Although the three can be found in Erdrich's references, I use the one that most commonly appears in her writing.

and richness of the American experience. As she confirms with *The Master Butchers Singing Club*, Erdrich's vision of ethnic and cultural relations at a time when the interactive forces of nationalism and globalization urgently need redefinition have also made her a contemporary writer of worldly resonances.

In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors notes the ambiguity inherent in the concept of ethnicity, which is used, on the one hand, to refer to the distinctive elements of a particular race or nation, acting as a defining category parallel to age, sex, religion or class, and according to which all individuals with no exception belong to an ethnic group (24-25). In clear contrast with this usage, ethnicity also keeps its original meaning related to paganism, it refers to power relations and is interpreted «as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as not fully American» (25), therefore, as a quality of all groups except for the dominant. Following Sollors, I argue that it is preferable to adopt the first definition of ethnicity, according to which all cultural groups, dominant or not, are ethnic, which involves the inclusion of Westerners together with *indians* and other peoples like African-Americans or Chicanos (36-39). This is the only way that the articulation of *white* identity can be critically examined in the same terms in which it is done with the *indian*, as both the result and cause of a process of construction, so that the interdependence of the two categories is outlined and the relationship between the people defined through them can be critically revised.<sup>2</sup> The conception of American ethnicity has as its roots, in Sollors' words, the ambiguity and tension between the forces of consent and descent, or «the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral» (5-6). At the core of the American national character is «a denial of legitimacy and privilege based exclusively on descent» and a preference of the «classic American idea of newcomers' rebirth into a forward-looking culture of consent» (4). Hence, Americans usually define themselves in terms of consent, overcoming hereditary relations and links to Europe, whereas the *indians* are interpreted as symbolizing descent, incapable of assimilating and forgetting their nature. America is therefore a new republic opposed to old European aristocratic legitimacy and to the *indians'* inherited rights to the land, which brings about ambiguous definitions in relation to

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<sup>2</sup> The representation of *indian* in italics echoes Vizenor's intention to outline «linguistic usage and ethnocentric semantic blunders» (xiv), which I extend to the term *white* in order to stress an understanding of ethnicity that involves all groups including the Western. A note of attention on the use of generalisations needs to be included here. The binary opposition that separates the Western from the Native world obviously risks erasing obvious differences and silencing pervading dialogues between the great diversity of nations, cultures and languages that make up both groups. However, they do respond to an existing perception of reality, constructing images and organising meanings that people resort to for self and other-identification. In this work, they are therefore used as a compound of questionable presuppositions that facilitate the study of both cultural groups and their interactions. As for the relationship between *white/indian* and Western/Native, and even though the implications –political correctness aside– of using either pair are essentially the same, for they are both constructed on a border of difference, I intend to emphasize the discursive construction in the italicised *white/indian* and the subsequent response to such a construction in Western/Native, although I also argue that the relation between the two dichotomies is not one of alternation but of revisionist dialogue.

each of them: according to Manifest Destiny ideology, the new empire is defined as compatible to Europe and opposed to the *indians* in the civilizing mission over savagism, whereas, when the immigrants search for some roots in the American land, they establish a connection to the *indians* in order to acquire a symbolic legitimacy in the new continent.

Within the generality of Sollors' approach to ethnicity as consent and descent, Erdrich's novel reflects on the differential integration of women and men into the national project of the definition of ethnicity, as well as to the interrelations between gender, ethnicity, and nation. Critic Marie Cornelia has noted that *The Master Butcher* «is a family saga, a tale of immigrant experience, a young woman's coming of age story and a mystery of sorts, but it is as a study of shifting and fluid identities» that she mainly considers it in her article. Indeed, those readers familiar with Erdrich's work will soon realise that the novel goes back in time to articulate a previous stage in the construction of American ethnicity that will then continue in *The Beet Queen* (1986), a move that emphasizes the dynamic component of identity, which is in constant re/vision. Erdrich's *The Master Butcher* reflects on the articulation of ethnicity in direct relation to gender, emphasizing the interdependence of nation and narration, and the configuration of ethnic and cultural identity as a negotiation of transnational and local variables.

The center of the narrative is taken by Fidelis Waldvogel, the German master butcher –a figure inspired by Erdrich's own grandfather– who, after fighting in the first war, emigrates to America with a suitcase full of what will be his means of survival: his butcher knives. Settling down in Argus, North Dakota, with his wife Eva and their four boys, Fidelis will struggle for a living in America all his life, and he is also the founder of a singing club where the men in town sing songs from their different countries of origin. Fidelis' story is a good example of the arbitrariness of borders of all kinds, as the very beginning of the novel already shows: «When he woke in Germany in late November of the year 1918, he was only a few centimeters away from becoming French on Clemenceau and Wilson's redrawn map, a fact that mattered nothing compared to what there might be to eat» (*MBSC* 1). In this sentence Erdrich summarizes one of the main points made in the book: the nature of boundaries is to a great extent due to chance, it is clearly a construction, and it is not half as important as surviving, which has a lot to do with how the discourse of immigration is articulated. Fidelis is recurrently described, especially in those first few pages, as motionless and moving, as having strong roots and an urgent need to travel, a dynamic that will define him all his life: when he returns home from the war, Fidelis goes through a process of rebirth in his childhood bed, which he soon abandons when he realises that he should emigrate to America to work for a living. Staying and leaving are also directly associated to the life and death cycle embodied in Fidelis' complex personality: the ability to kill that he has successfully resorted to during the war will grant his survival again as he transforms slaughtering into a graceful occupation, for, being a butcher, he believes «there was an art to a proper killing» (8).

Once in America, chance will continue to determine a person's location and their subsequent definition in political terms: Fidelis settles down in Argus just because that is the place where he runs out of money in his journey westwards, and this accidental event will mark his and his family's destiny as Midwesterners. Fidelis now lives in a new country «where Germans were Germans regardless of their regional origins» (*MBSC* 8). Obviously, back in Germany there is no such thing as a unified German identity, but a far from homogeneous compound of groups who conceive of themselves as different to those from other regions. However, ethnicity travels and is constantly reconstructed, there is a need for generalizations and, therefore, America will treat her immigrants in a simplified, often essentialized way, that is, in terms of their common German descent. Erdrich constantly reflects on the ambiguities of such a construction of ethnicity, and on the way immigrants gradually become Americans. After an incident with a dog and encouraged by competition in their common trade, Fidelis protagonizes an episode of strong antagonism with butcher Pete Kozka –a Polish American who also appears in *The Beet Queen* and *Tracks*– and «[f]or a time, the two butcher shops divided the town between them, just as the Catholic and Lutheran churches did» (*MBSC* 42). Soon, though, Fidelis starts «what was to become a town institution» (42), his singing club, which in America does not need to be segregated by profession like it was in Germany, and this will be the end of his enmity with Pete Kozka. The image of harmony embodied in the singing club, however, is often contrasted to the persistence of animosity, confrontation, and evil in general, for every once in a while

the town would be reminded that even though it was populated by an army of decent people, even though a majority counted themselves pious churchgoers, even though Argus prided itself on civic participation, it was not immune. Strub's Funerary stood flourishing, a testament to the fact that death liked Argus just as much as anywhere else. And evil, though it was not condoned by the city council, flourished nonetheless, here and there, in surprising and secret pockets. (43-44)

Death and violence are very real effects of antagonism, a variation of which has to be dealt with at a broader group level once World War II starts in Europe. The mixture of voices of different nationalities that composes the singing club, including German American, Polish American, Native American and the more established Americans, is in danger of becoming a smaller-scale reflection of the European war unless its members clearly redefine themselves as Americans. Hence, German songs eventually have to be replaced by American patriotic songs, and the Germans in Argus change their names from Schmidt to Smith, from Buchers to Book, they hang «American flags by their doorways or in their windows,» and they speak «as much English as they knew» (335). These symbols are a clear example of assimilation to the American national identity, or consent and rejection of the ties of descent, and it is worth pointing out not just the practicality of the move, but also the constructed nature of the meanings resulting from it.

The link with the Old World is not only present in relation to the immigrant characters' past, but it will remain strong and complicated into the future in spite of their efforts at consented assimilation. After having been sent back to Germany for an education, Fidelis' two younger sons Erich and his twin Emil will fight the war on the German side, whereas the other two, Franz and Markus, remain on the American side. This event offers a good reflection on the construction of Western ethnicity, for characters place themselves on a different side of a constructed border depending on their life circumstances, and it is precisely those circumstances that will determine their choices. Of the two twins, only Erich survives the war and becomes a prisoner of the Americans, but when his American family finds out and tries to save him, he turns his back on them, that is, he rejects his descent in favour of the identity he has consented to adopt for himself. After his fierce training and several years of formation in Germany, Erich «had become in his deepest person thoroughly German. Or what he thought of as German. That is, he'd replaced his childhood with a new wash of purity. Belief, death loyalty, hatred of the weak. He lived simply, by one great consuming oath» (*MBSC* 352). As a result of this choice determined by his particular circumstances,

Erich's fanaticism was that of the culturally insecure. He'd struggled to be a German, and not even captivity was going to destroy what he'd gone through when shipped off to Ludwigsruhe. Erich's new father was a boundary on a map, a feeling for a certain song, a scrap of forest, a street. It was a romance as enduring as the spilled blood of his brother or the longing of Fidelis or the pains of this war. It was an idea that kept him walking through the prison gates. (364)

Louise Erdrich constantly underlines the constructed, even arbitrary nature of such limiting ideologies, and she simultaneously presents the severe consequences of the oppositional borders placed between groups of people, which determine both the confrontation of members of the same family and death at a large scale.

Moreover, Erdrich is making a further point with strong implications in the contemporary globalized world. As Dalia Kandiyoti argues in her article «Multiplicity and its Discontents,» there is a sense in much of today's criticism that «the double or multiple attachment afforded by diasporic modes and sensibilities lead not to disunity, diffusion, and treason, as nationalist discourses would maintain, but to a gainful multiplicity of perspectives, languages, and knowledges» (10). It is true that Erdrich, not just in *The Master Butchers Singing Club* but in her works as a whole, argues for the need to embrace hybridity and double consciousness, overcoming fixed borders of essentialized definitions.<sup>3</sup> However, the notion of transnationalism should

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<sup>3</sup> Among the works that outline this aspect of Erdrich's fiction, thus overcoming the boundaries of simple ethnic categorization that predominates in the criticism on her work, are the articles by Claudia Egerer and Catherine Rainwater, and the volume by Martínez Falquina, *Ceremonias Postindias*.

not be romanticised, just like hybridity or the borderlands should not make us forget the reality of difference construction and its effects, positive and negative alike.<sup>4</sup> The discourse of immigration as transnationalism in *The Master Butcher* combines rupture, fragmentation, and loss, together with wholeness, continuity, and renewal.

On the other hand, within the general struggles involved in the immigrant search for belonging,

[a]s subjects who are often in a supplemental or adjunct relationship to reigning definitions of national, ethnic, and racial formations, women may face particular challenges in terms of diasporic belonging, with its implications of multiple associations, each of which may define femaleness in hierarchical and restrictive terms. (Walby 7)

Accordingly, Erdrich pays a special attention to gender in her novel about the immigrant struggle to belong in a new land and to construct a new identity. Besides the male self and other definition in relation to war, the female experiences of women's work, friendship and motherhood, both biological and adoptive, are also described in detail. The main female characters are Eva Waldvogel, Fidelis' first wife, who comes from Germany after him with their four sons, and especially Delphine Watzka, who provides some interesting reflections on motherhood and national identity. Delphine is an American woman of uncertain origin who befriends Eva and will, after her death, become Fidelis' second wife and an adoptive mother to his children. Delphine never knew her mother and this loss «had made Delphine strong, but also caused her to live as a damaged person, a searcher with a hopeless quest, a practical-minded woman with a streak of dismay» (*MBSC* 345). She tries to fill that void with female companionship like her childhood friend Clarisse, and Eva Waldvogel, the butcher's wife. It is when she enters Eva's kitchen and tells her part of her story that Delphine finds some sort of rest from her previous life as a wanderer. From that moment onwards, the two women's relationship will be accompanied by their common work at the butcher's house and shop, by cooking and baking and taking care of the children. Even though in constant search for roots herself, Delphine is consistently described as a balancing character; strong and hardworking, she provides a sense of security to the people around her, especially men. She is the one to take care of her drunken father all his life; she also establishes a family-like relationship with Cyprian Lazarre, a homosexual Native American with whom Delphine's initial romantic expectations are frustrated. For a while, Cyprian and Delphine do a balancing trick in a vaudeville act together: Delphine's strong stomach is the base on which Cyprian balances on a number of chairs, a very symbolic image of Delphine's link to the land and its pull. She is gravity and solidity, but Cyprian is an in-between

<sup>4</sup> For a critical discussion of these and other terms of ethnic definition in relation to gender and Native American identity, see Martínez Falquina *Indias y fronteras*.

figure whose fate is not to stay and start a family, so they eventually separate and Delphine settles down in Argus for good.

Fundamental to Delphine's characterization is the issue of motherhood, which is typically related to the construction of identity and to nationalism. Absent mothers, a recurrent theme in Erdrich's fiction,<sup>5</sup> symbolize a broken relationship to the past by directly representing a person's descent. Delphine has been denied that link and she becomes a self-made woman who embodies American values of autonomy and evolution through hard work. During all her life she believes she is the daughter of town drunkard Roy Watzka and his mysteriously disappeared beloved Minnie. At his deathbed, Roy tells Delphine the story of her mother, a mixedblood Cree and French who witnessed the tragedy of Wounded Knee. Roy portrays Minnie as an outstanding Native American woman Delphine will be proud to be related to. She is, however, just a surrogate mother, for as only we readers find out at the end of the novel, Minnie is actually Step-and-a-Half, a restless Native who lives selling other people's trash, and who found the newborn Delphine in an Argus outhouse after she was abandoned by her biological mother. Step-and-a-Half leaves the baby with Roy and helps him bring her up in the distance, without Delphine knowing, whereas Delphine's blood mother ends up an obese and decadent woman. What is significant in this story about mothers and daughters is that Delphine does have a biological mother nearby, and a woman that she knows but who cruelly abandoned her as a child. Step-and-a-Half saves Delphine's life and years later, Roy gives her a link to a mother that will relate her to the American land and to the stories of its original inhabitants, an idea that has been a typical American search for centuries.<sup>6</sup> This link is not really biological but symbolic, but its value for Delphine is undeniable: not only does biology mean death for her, but thanks to her freedom from those destructive ties and to her father's story, Delphine will become a strong person capable of establishing lasting, consent relations around her, especially for Fidelis and his family of immigrants. Even more ironically, Erdrich has her establish a lifelong friendship relationship with Mazarine, a girl she becomes very fond of and who is actually her biological sister. Neither of them knows or will know of this, a further affirmation of the value of consent relations of affinity to create family as opposed to those of blood ties.

Delphine is the woman who most significantly represents the articulation of American ethnicity in the novel. According to Anthias and Yuval-Davies, there are five major ways in which women are involved in ethnic and national processes:

1. as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
2. as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;

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<sup>5</sup> Among the many references to the issue of motherhood in Erdrich's previous work are the articles by Meldan Tanrisal, Julie Tharp and Hertha Wong.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of examples of this tendency, see Sollors, especially 102-130.



3. as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
4. as signifiers of ethnic/national differences –as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
5. as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles. (in Walby 236-37)

Delphine is not a biological mother, so her definition of identity will be centered in consent and not descent. Significantly, she becomes the interpreter of her adopted son Markus' «resurrection from the earth» (*MBSC* 339) after he is accidentally buried alive, an incident which helps the child come to terms with the death of his mother Eva and accept his adoption by Delphine and the American land. As for the second aspect in Anthias and Yuval-Davies' definition, Delphine is basically an integrative character who does not reproduce but overcomes ethnic and national boundaries: she marries a German after having lived with a Native American and her role is that of relating people from different origins. Her creation of a new American family with Fidelis is an example of the overlapping of the personal and the political, for when they marry they are more than individuals, they are also representatives of their respective nations of origin coming together: «It would seem for months afterward that there had been a great collision, that two glaciers had through slow force smashed together, at last, and buckled» (306). In relation to point three, Delphine does participate in the ideological reproduction of the American culture and its values: she is the one to teach Fidelis' sons and even Fidelis himself the way certain things are done in America, often predicating with her own example. As for point four, Delphine fundamentally signifies American difference as consent, and of American discourse as inclusive of peoples' individualities. Finally, she participates in economic struggles, at an individual level at first, and in the small growing town later. However, her relationship to militarism is one of rejection: Delphine knows that Fidelis is deeply damaged from his participation in the first war, and she tries to prevent his two elder sons to join in the second. Although once she understands that they have to follow their own way, she becomes completely supportive. Delphine still believes that war and the confrontational ideologies leading to it are not the way to make any real progress. Her participation in the articulation of American identity, therefore, is not defined in oppositional but integrative terms, and as she defends individual differences she also stresses relation.

In contrast to the figure of Delphine, Eva, mother of four children, who speaks with a strong German accent and misses the «Old World Quality» that she has left behind (*MBSC* 95), does not survive in the New World but painfully dies of cancer several years after her arrival. Fidelis' sister Tante does not adapt to America and after her failure to work and go up in the world as she expected, she goes back to Germany, taking her younger nephews with her. Delphine's childhood friend Clarisse, a more settled American, eventually has to leave the town after murdering an obsessive



man who was constantly harrassing her, and her struggle for independence from this male power costs her prosperous job as a funerary practitioner, an unconventional position for a woman that she will not be able to keep. In contrast to these characters, Delphine's struggle and hard work will confirm her as a survivor in the Midwestern town of Argus and as an embodiment of American national values: she starts off being the daughter of a poor drunkard, but she survives the hard years of the Depression and makes progress in the butcher shop and in a new plant shop she starts after Fidelis' death, becoming a respected worker in the town in the process.

Another significant aspect of the articulation of ethnicity and the different stages of nation formation in *The Master Butchers Singing Club* is the presence of two Native American characters, Step-and-a-Half and Cyprian Lazarre. It is worth pointing out that, although America was supposedly a democracy in the 1840s when *white* men won suffrage, characters like Step-and-a-Half or Cyprian would not be able to vote and would be strongly marginalized until at least the 1960s. As has already been outlined, Step-and-a-Half is a living history of terrible events that originated in the Western-Native confrontation, and as a result she is fated to constantly walk in order not to stop and hear her own memories, an experience that serves her her name. Cyprian Lazarre is also a marginal figure in both his homosexuality and mixedblood ethnicity. He is *métis*, a descendant of Chippewa peoples mixed with the French, and he claims the famous leader Louis Riel as an ancestor. It is Midwestern America in the 1920s, and as Cyprian knows, being an *indian* is not a small thing to admit in Argus, so, for a while, Delphine is the only one who knows about his ethnic origin. The fact that the two Native characters have a special link to Delphine confirms her as the key figure that integrates different individuals and ethnicities.

After he leaves Argus, Cyprian starts another performance with his lover, a Jew from Lithuania, and at first they perceive each other as different and unknown: Cyprian mentions that «I was a real curiosity to him at first,» and similarly, his reaction to his new friend is of curiosity towards the other, for «[t]here's no Jews on the reservation» (*MBSC* 317). Ethnicity usually involves the definition of the other as different, which entails the articulation of a boundary, but in this particular situation, two people who are doubly considered other –because of their ethnic origin and sexual orientation– are perfectly capable of overcoming their differences and working and living together. Cyprian's relationship to Fidelis is more complex, nevertheless. Even though they both sing in the club together, the growing animosity between them, originating in their common love for Delphine, leads them to fight each other violently. Instead of justifying their mutual dislike as a result of their feelings for Delphine, they find a more acceptable excuse in the fact that they fought the first war on opposite sides. The personal and the political come together in these characters' confrontation, but when Fidelis' son Markus is buried alive and Cyprian saves him, Fidelis has no option but to forgive him. War at a smaller or larger scale, Erdrich argues, is not as important as day-to-day survival.

In spite of the often trivial or coincidental origins of confrontation, the construction of borders does determine death, as episodes like the two world wars

and Wounded Knee confirm, and the negotiation of the personal and the political has a lot to do with the relationship between the local and the transnational. The space in which *The Master Butchers Singing Club* takes place is the imaginary town of Argus, a location familiar to readers of Erdrich's novels which is set near a Chippewa reservation in North Dakota. Together, Argus and the fictional reservation –named Little No Horse in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*– are a scenario that represents Frederick Jackson Turner's idea of the frontier, a place of composite nationality where both European immigrants and Native Americans are americanized. The Midwestern landscape is given a primordial role in the novel; it is home to Delphine, who feels «comforted by the horizon all around [her]» (*MBSC* 21), and it also becomes home to Fidelis, although he at first sees it as a defenceless place, the wind welcoming him on his arrival «with a vast indifference he found both unbearable and comforting» (13). Some characters are mainly roamers, like Step-and-a-Half and Cyprian, but at some point they all touch base in Argus. Most of them start off traveling, like Delphine and Fidelis, and finally settle down in Argus for good, although the link, physical or symbolic, with the outside world is never obscured: besides their constant relation to Germany, Fidelis and Delphine travel there for a visit once, strengthening their links to land and people. This combination of here and not here, of staying and leaving is what defines the americanization experience as a dynamic process where the local and the transnational are both emphasized, and where borders are not fixed but unstable, and constantly reconstructed.

The key image to understand this idea that sustains the whole novel is the combination of chaos and order as related to land and song. The garden behind Fidelis' shop is a feminine space that symbolizes the American land and its dynamic wilderness. In it, Delphine understands «how a woman's attention could succeed in making sense of man's blind chaos, and yet women needed their own wildness» (*MBSC* 109). The garden that was originally Eva's and which Delphine inherits is a messy jungle full of weeds, vines and the bones of dead animals that Eva buried and the dogs unburied, and it contains «the tiny deaths and the huge deaths, all the swirl and complexity of life, one feeding on the other» (370). There is, however, an order in that chaos that both Eva and Delphine explicitly try to figure out, a pattern made up of connections, for all the events, their own lives are conceived of as «[a] script emblematic of a greater whole» (370). As Eva understands before she dies, «[t]he plan knows the huge thing, and it accounts for the little fingernail» (118). This helps her reinterpret her imminent death as part of a design where nothing or nobody really dies, as she tells her children not to take it too hard, because «“death is only part of things bigger than we can imagine. . . . [y]ou will see that your mother is of the design. And I will always be made of things, and things will always be made of me. Nothing can get rid of me because I am already included in the pattern”» (370-71).

Besides this typically feminine connection to the land and each element's role in the bigger scheme of things, the song motive is also an integrative factor

that makes sense of chaos, uniting not only the men who participate in the singing club but also the dead and living alike, the here and there, past and present. The dead, as Step-and-a-Half ponders in the last few pages of the novel, are just one song away from the living, so the past lives in the present and into the future, and those dead in their homes in Argus, in Wounded Knee or the World Wars, are all part of the bigger scheme that, expressed in stories, makes up a group identity on a particular landscape, just as different languages and cultures are all united in song:

Foolish ballads, strict anthems, German sailor's songs and the paddling songs of voyageurs, patriotic American songs. Other times, Cree lullabies, sweat lodge summons, lost ghost dance songs, counting rhymes, and hymns to the snow. Our songs travel the earth. We sing to one another. Not a single note is ever lost and no song is original. They all come from the same place and go back to a time when only the stones howled. (*MBSC* 388)

This image illustrates the articulation of a national identity as a chorus of voices in constant interaction and change, a concept that resonates with Homi Bhabha's idea of the nation as an ambivalent, transitional social reality which subverts the evolutionary narrative of historical community, in such a way that

the ambivalent, antagonistic perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production. (4)

*The Master Butchers Singing Club* deals with different levels of boundaries that are consistently subverted and reinscribed in integrative terms, including those between individuals, ethnic groups and countries. The other is never an absolute other in spite of any efforts to construct it as completely different, an observation that provides a more realistic vision of personal and political antagonism and relation. If the idea of the nation is recognized as ambivalent, containing self and other, the local and the transnational, the nationalistic ideologies originating from it will necessarily have to be ambivalent too, and their articulation must be recognized as a contingent process that can and should be radically questioned. Together with these ideas, Erdrich shows the effects of several levels of opposition construction so that the tangible consequences of what originates as a discursive construction are not forgotten, and it is precisely by means of such double revisionist perspective that she successfully accounts for the wholeness of the multicultural experience and the real nature of American ethnicity.

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