

**The Abode of Evil: the Female Body
and Biopolitical Domination in Louise
Erdrich's *Tracks***

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Abstract

The female body in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* is a space for Biopolitical domination. Pauline and Fleur, the two leading female figures in Erdrich's account, reflect the core of this domination. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach that combines body theories derived from anthropology, biopolitics and feminist criticism, the paper investigates Erdrich's depiction of Pauline's and Fleur's bodies as symbols of both irrational evil and resilient survival. Pauline and Fleur stand as representatives of barrenness versus fertility, sorcery versus healing, domination versus co-existence, and resistance versus assimilation. The paper deals with the female body as a site of biopolitics which include dynamics of demonization and social expulsion. In the light of Foucault's theory of regulating the human body, the paper also explores how Erdrich depicts the female body as a site of religious mortification, abject maternity, violence and frustrated sexuality. Through presenting the female body as an evil spot, Erdrich transforms the Native American crisis to a symbolic embodiment of universal human dilemma.

Key Words: Evil, Native American, Female Body, Sexuality, Demonization, Abject, Foucault, Religious Mortification.

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It is always the body that is at issue- the body and its forces, their utility and docility, their distribution and their submission... power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.

Michel Foucault¹

Tracks (1988) is Louise Erdrich's third novel, published after *Love Medicine* (1984) and *The Beat Queen* (1986). The events of the novel, however, predate the setting of the first two works, and extend between The Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887 and the Flathead Allotment Act². Under these acts, the Native tribes were forced to give up their collective ownership of the land and turn this into private property of individuals in return for American citizenships. The individual owners had to pay taxes to the white government as the only way to preserve their now -divided land. This entailed abandonment of hunting and turning to cultivating land, which was originally all natural forests (Stookey, 70-72). The historical and political setting of *Tracks*

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 25-30.

² For a full version of the Flathead Act see http://leg.mt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2013-2014/Water-Policy/Meetings/March-2014/1904-Flathead_Allotment_Act.pdf

marks a departure from Erdrich's earlier works in which, according to Herman, "the relationship between family and history remains more or less undeveloped beyond the construction of family trees" (Herman, 61). Erdrich's ambivalent political commitment triggered different assessments. In the "Silko- Erdrich controversy", for incident, the native American novelist Leslie Silko classified Erdrich as a 'post modern' writer whose "self referential writing reflects the isolation and alienation of the individual who shares nothing in common with other human beings but language and is light years away from shared or communal experience" (Silko, 179). According to Silko, Erdrich was detached from the immediate national cause of her race, and lacked the immediate sense of the needs and demands of the Native American people. Similarly, Gloria Bird sees that even in *Tracks*; Erdrich complies with colonial, stereotypical presentation of the Native American. Bird's claim is based on the observation that the solitary "representations of the characters in the novel ... aligns it closely to the construct of savagism: that Fleur Pillager, her cousin Moses, Pauline and Nanapush are all the last of their respective bloodlines is a manifestation of "The Vanishing Red Man" syndrome" which is typically cherished by the colonial discourse (Bird 42). Other critics read Erdrich's work differently, however. Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski, for example, attests that "the fiction of Louise Erdrich although not set directly on the Turtle Mountain Reservation, is based solidly on the facts of that area in North Dakota and on its Native American History" (40). Susan Castillo finds that "with the publication of *Tracks*, it seems safe to affirm that any doubts about Erdrich's commitment to the portrayal of extratextual reality have been put to rest" (22, 1991). Gerald Vizenor sees that Erdrich revises "tribal history" in the form of "multiple readings" and "offers a communal experience, but the connection between

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her texts and the actual world has to be rethought and reevaluated" (Qtd. in Quennet, 11). Even Herman in *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature* sees that "the families [in *Tracks*] are crafted conspicuously as historically contingent and readily mutate into social, political, historical and/or cultural signs" (61). Those who accept, or reject, Erdrich's political attitude in *Tracks*, however, fail to recognize the link Erdrich establishes between the political experience of the Natives and her depiction of their perception and reaction to the female body. This correspondence has already been observed by Shari Huhndorf, but only in relation to native theatre. In *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, Huhndorf explains that one way of expressing political commitment is by exposing "the material processes of conquest" and how colonialism "manages" the body and the sexuality of the native female (Huhndorf, 106). By the same token, Tanner recognizes this link, but only from the perspective of rape and violence. Tanner does not discuss sexuality as a positive, healing and regenerative energy and how it stands in dialectical opposition to colonial depiction of indigenous sexuality as savage, violent and dangerous (Tanner, 115).

The paper invites serious reflections on the ability of fiction to illuminate the employment of the female body in periods of political transition. The paper attempts to prove that the colonial endeavor to intimidate the natives so as to accept, and later participate, in the process of demonizing native land and culture is preceded by a biological assault of the female body. The paper seeks to examine Erdrich's *Tracks* in the light of the proposition that settlers impose their power over the native bodies, turning them to the 'docile bodies'. Many colonized nations demonize the female body exposed to sexual harassment, stigmatizing this body as evil, and

justifying whatever brutality that is taken against it. In many assaults undertaken against women, the reaction of the traditional conservative public is to hold the female victims responsible for the incidents. In the mean time, violence undertaken against women in the domestic boundaries of the family is neglected, while aggression against women by strangers may be tolerated if the victim is morally blemished. The condemnation of the victim is in reality a community response in which both sexes participated. Gender abuse is not therefore the sole motivation for this attack. This paper seeks to trace in Erdirch's *Tracks* the impact of colonial biopolitics upon a given community, in this case the Native Americans, so that the Native community would tolerate, and even participate in, hostile, and aggressive treatment of the non-conforming female bodies as if they were aliens, evil, or non-human. According to Foucault, there are two ways to control the human body; the first, termed 'thanatopolitics', lies in the possession of the authority to impose death penalty, and the second, 'biopolitics', refers to the ability to sustain that body by means of food, health nourishment, and medical care. The latter method dominates the modern age which witnessed a 'foundational shift from a punitive pain into a ubiquitous process of social regulatory surveillance'³. Subsequent theories provided considerable variations of Foucault's argument; Agamben, for example, finds that thanatopolitics force a condition of 'living-dead' through expulsion strategies that regard resistant groups as outlawed, vulnerable and unprotected 'bare life'.⁴ Hardt and Negri add that modern

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25-30.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.

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biopolitics execute body regulation through a strategy of 'immanence' in which power remains invisible while the subjects of the subdued society are pushed to pursue the objectives of power networks as if it is out of their own accord.⁵ In all cases, as Gabriele Von Bruck suggests, the outcome is a 'bodily discipline that produces exemplary, identifiable political subjects'⁶ who are programmed to carry out an elaborate process of exclusion, stigmatization, and dehumanization which chases the non-conforming bodies out of the social group.

Control over the body in the above accounts is nevertheless sexless. They neglect the role gender plays in the regulation and confinement of the human body. Several studies have worked therefore to develop Foucault's corporal theories through examining the premises of the feminist corporeality, feminist theology, and non-western feminist cultural studies. One central issue in this respect is that of nature. European views, as Carolyn Merchant documents in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, long imagined nature as 'a subordinate and passive female to be controlled and dissected through experiment, and to be cast away outside the domain of subjectivity, rationality and agency'.⁷ Christianity and

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 23-4.

⁶ Gabriele Von Bruck, 'Naturalizing, Neutralizing Women's Bodies: "The Headscarf Affair" and the Politics of Representation', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15, 2008: 57.

⁷ Quoted in Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as a Feminist Space* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 2.

Catholic attitudes in particular, also regarded female corporeality as inferior.⁸ De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states that ‘the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile other, is precisely woman. In [women] the Christian finds incarnated the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil’.⁹ The female body is depicted as a ‘sexually voracious monster’ which is ‘devouring, hungering, and voracious, without restraint, always wanting’¹⁰. However, in Native American faith, women and nature are regarded in a totally different light. As Sylvia Marcos in ‘Mesoamerican Women’s Indigenous Spirituality’ suggests, ‘the feminine and the masculine exist... in a spiritual “community” which expands to include, through personification and immanence, interconnectedness between the natural, the supernatural realms and the humans. This brings about the basic characteristic of the body in this faith, which is “permeability” or “porosity” that allows the female body to interact and fuse with the earth and with other creatures’¹¹. The advent of the

⁸ Michael S. Patton, ‘Suffering and Damage in Catholic Sexuality’, *Journal of Religion and Health* 27 (Summer 1988): 131.

⁹ Simon De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010),199.

¹⁰ Emma Domínguez-Rue, ‘Sins of the Flesh: Anorexia, Eroticism and the Female Vampire in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*’, *Journal of Gender Studies* 19 (September 2010): 297–308.

¹¹ Sylvia Marcos, ‘Mesoamerican Women’s Indigenous Spirituality’. *JFSR* 25:2 (2009): 43.

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White settlers, however, negatively affected the Native Americans' reverence for female values, turning it into an aggressive patriarchal reaction that demonizes and abuses the female body.

Erdrich translates this shift towards patriarchal system as an effort to distort the territorial features of the female body of the land. *Tracks* opens on the site of the lake, the habitat of the Pillagers, the native clan in possession of magical powers. 'The purpose was to measure the lake'¹²; this is how Nanapush, one of the two principle narrators of *Tracks* describes white activities to circumscribe the area which 'was not ordinary land to buy and sell'¹³. It was the residing place of "Misshepeshu", the protective and fierce water deity. The position of the paper is to show that Fleur, who stands for Native resistance in the narrative, not only faces the challenge of losing the land, but also of losing her daughter, Lulu, who is about to marry a Morrissey, a fully assimilated clan member with a shameful record of selling the land. To Nanapush, Lulu's marriage is an enactment of the rape of Fleur and her land, which took place several years ago. Only this time it is legalized, with the consent of the seduced female victim. The part of the novel narrated by Nanapush draws attention to the process through which the female body, whether that of Fleur, Lulu, or the native land, became the site for victimization.

The reasons given to justify this assault are efforts against sorcery, immoral voyeurism, and paganism. Agamben suggests that control over 'bare life' happens by 'the inauguration of a space that is deprived of the protection of

¹² Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Perennial, 1988), 8.

¹³ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 175.

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the law'¹⁴. Foucault finds that this exclusion is frequently accompanied by a complicated process of demonization which guarantees that the 'stigmatized entity' remains within the reach and control of society, as a category deprived of human attributes and representing the abnormal, or the monstrous.¹⁵ Furthermore, the settlers regarded the pagan world as an inferior feminized 'other' that Christianity transformed and converted'¹⁶. This pretext was frequently used to give a moral support to, and justification of, colonial plans for expansion that targeted removing native communities from areas chosen by whites for settlement'¹⁷. In *Tracks* a complete 'ontological crime' takes place, distorting the corporeal singularity of a living body of the land¹⁸: In this context the assault of land is justified by a demonizing campaign transforming "Misshepesu", the monster deity of

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol 1. An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979), 1659.

¹⁶ Gillian Walker, 'Fragments from a Journal Reflections on Celibacy and the Role of Women in the Church', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 5 (2004):90.

¹⁷ Joane Nagel, 'Ethnicity and Sexuality', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 107-133, Viewed 01/01/2012 .

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/223439>>.

¹⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Horroism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grovo Press, 2007).

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the lake, from an underwater protector¹⁹ to a source of sexual violence and evil revenge. The lake monster is portrayed as capable of seduction, leading to one brutal consequence, that of rape:

Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child... you will be fascinated, cannot move. He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts. He holds you under. He's a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning; the death a Chippewa cannot survive²⁰

The harmony between masculine and feminine is thus replaced by patriarch, religious struggle between deity and devil: 'He's a devil, that one, love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur'²¹.

Arnold Joseph Toynbee illustrated that European settlers viewed the natives 'as flora and fauna, something infra human... they did not possess ordinary human rights'.²² A systematic termination ensues, comprising bio elimination 'spotted sickness', physical removal 'exile', legalizing colonial presence through 'the treaty', and the 'storm of government papers', and spatial confinement 'on the

¹⁹ Selwyn Dewdney, *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibway*, (Calgary: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 128-129.

²⁰ *Tracks*, 11.

²¹ *Tracks*, 12.

²² Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *A Study of History* (vol. 1), (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 37.

reservation, where we were forced close together'²³. 'A new sickness swept down... This disease was different from the pox and fever; for it came on slow...whole families... lay ill and helpless in its breath'²⁴. A biological war was waged against the natives who were regarded as 'pests'. Starvation is another tool against the surviving natives. Deficiency of food leads to a willingness to accept fate.²⁵ Scenes of physical starvation contrast with the fatness of the conforming bodies that yield to White authority.

The community of the reservation divides into a minority still clinging to native tradition (The Pillagers), and an assimilated majority (Lazarres and Morrisseys) who long realized, like Pauline, that 'to hang back was to perish'²⁶. Though adherence to the past was, to many, not only futile but fatal, this majority still suffered guilt accompanied by a formidable fear of the possible revenge of the gods they deserted, the spirits they betrayed, and the monsters they angered. The existence of the resisting minority remains in this context an irritating reminder, a nuisance. They disturb the complacency of those who surrendered, with a result of stirring a constant guilt. Demonization extends to include those monster-like people, shamans who insist on the old ways and resist the new ones. It is a classification that applies to Fleur Pillager who is not converted to Catholicism, and who is in possession of supernatural and magical powers, 'the secret way to cure or kill'²⁷. Fleur is demonized as the

²³ *Tracks*, 2

²⁴ *Tracks*, 2

²⁵ Albert Somit, 'Biopolitics', *British Journal of Political Science*, 2 (Apr., 1972): 223.

²⁶ *Tracks*, 14.

²⁷ *Tracks*, 2.

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devouring 'femme fatale', a mixture of witch and predator who posits a threat to the mixed blood and the colonized who worked as guides to the White mappers. Indeed, Fleur is excluded from her community. The first chapter opens with her body freezing and fatally ill; yet the society refuses to rescue her, and she is left in her cabin among dead corpses. Only Nanapush hurries to save her while the tribe police refuses even to touch her. Fleur's presence is thus transformed into a source of alarm and pain; she turns evil:

Some say she kept the finger of a child in her pocket and ... she laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough²⁸.

Even though Fleur's physicality is very visible, it is presented in a context of enigmatic supernatural powers. As a shaman, her corporeal reality spells out the horror of the abject and the monstrous:

Fleur's shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow... Her glossy braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work, held in and half-tamed. But only half. I could tell, but the others never noticed. They never looked into her sly brown eyes or noticed her teeth, strong and sharp and very white. Her legs were bare, and since she padded in bead worked moccasins they never knew she'd

²⁸ *Tracks*, 12.

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drowned. They were blinded; they were stupid; they only saw her in the flesh.²⁹

Pauline's apprehensions are influenced by a rhetoric linking the female body with sin, and subsequently with evil. Gillian Walker explains that in Catholic hagiography, a woman is damned by her "body" which is a source of sin and temptation. Even her menstrual bleeding is associated with "pollution."³⁰ Rosalva Loreto Lopez in her article 'The Devil, Women, and the Body in 17th C Puebla Convents' adds that women's sinful body is connected with animalistic stature that if a woman goes astray, her body assumes 'a more animal – like quality'³¹. Instigating women antagonism, Fleur nevertheless lures the men: 'she was so hard to determine and yet available, that even the dried-out and bent ones around the store could see enough to light a slow fuse in their dreams'³². The men of the reservation entertain a complex reaction towards Fleur. They are enchanted by the corporeal-supernatural combination that Fleur posits. Her body is a mixture of awe and attraction. Her wild animalistic nature contrasts with the stale and tamed physicality of the colonized female.

Fleur's rape is a confused hilarious scene in which white workers attack not only Fleur's a body, but also her mind; they 'could not believe... that a woman could be smart

²⁹ *Tracks*, 18.

³⁰ Gillian Walker, 'Fragments from a Journal Reflections on Celibacy and the Role of Women in the Church'. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 5 (2004): 81-101.

³¹ Rosalva Loreto Lopez 'The Devil, Women, and the Body in 17th Century Puebla Convents', *The Americas* 59:2 (October 2002): 181-199.

³² *Tracks*, 55.

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enough to play cards'³³. The reaction of the reservation to Fleur's rape never materializes; they never offer consolidation to Fleur in its aftermath, being only curious to know if she is with a child. This attitude raises the question of how far the people of the reservation consider Fleur as belonging to their community. Fleur is subject to a double 'border demarcation', as Kelly rightly explains, by both white and native communities. Both groups consider Fleur 'outside the population ... of different 'race', [or an] unhealthy element of the 'race'.³⁴ Fleur's rape is not viewed as a crime. Decent sexual behavior, and moral obligations are preserved only to 'members within the group while the same group could be very hostile to people outside the group'; Fleur in this context remains largely an outsider.³⁵ Fleur's physicality challenges patriarchal classification which limits the function of the female body to reproducing and subservience.³⁶ In this context rape becomes a symbol of 'classified as mistakes and sins, such representing the abnormal, or the monstrous', and deprived of any protection of the law.³⁷

The more significant percussions of the rape of Fleur, however, remain those befalling Pauline. The rape of Fleur is the first sexual experience to which Pauline is exposed. Pauline identifies with what happened to Fleur: 'I was witness when the men slapped Fleur's mouth, beat her, entered and rode her. *I felt all. My shrieks poured from her mouth and my*

³³ *Tracks*, 21.

³⁴ M.G.E. Kelly, 'International Biopolitics', *Theoria* (June 2010):5.

³⁵ Larry Arnhart, 'Biopolitical Science', *Politics and the Life Sciences* 29 (March 2010):27.

³⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25-30.

³⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1659.

*blood from her wounds*³⁸ (My Italics). To her it is a traumatic experience not only because of its violence which was unbearable for a very young girl to watch, but also because it shatters fantasies about compatible assimilation within the white society. Physical assault would be the typical disciplinary punishment the colonizer imposes on female natives who dare aspire to equality. Subconsciously, however, Pauline starts to hate her corporeal vulnerability. However, body hatred conflicts with survival, resulting in complicated thanatopolitics that Pauline inflicts upon other female bodies, who serve as surrogates. In a ritualistic incarnation into the body of the dying Mary Pepe, a girl of Pauline's age, Pauline terminates her own fragility through taking Mary's life. This is how Pauline severs her own physicality and sexual pleasure, away from her. 'I [was] surprised at how light I felt, as though I'd been cut free as well'³⁹.

Cast away and expelled, Pauline decides to respond to the advances of the drink addict Napoleon, but the whole episode is a disappointment, utterly devoid of pleasure: 'I hadn't liked the weight of Napoleon's hands, their hardened palms. I hadn't liked seeing myself naked, plucked and skinned'⁴⁰. This is when Pauline shifts from the evil of Fleur, which is only a defense mechanism against assault, to initiate a revengeful settling of scores, for actual or imagined emotional and psychological grievances. While Nanapush acknowledges that Pauline shares the evil potential with Fleur, he admits that Pauline is far more enigmatic and dangerous: 'She was different'; 'an unknown mixture of ingredients': 'we never knew what to call her... or how to think when she was

³⁸ *Tracks*, 66.

³⁹ *Tracks*, 66.

⁴⁰ *Tracks*, 74.

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around⁴¹. Pauline's advances towards Eli were frustrated, so she uses love medicine to lure him and Sophie; hate increases: 'I both turned from him and desired him, in hate'⁴². She decides to use love medicine against him in revenge, a point which is considered a breaking of 'a Chippewa moray that saw love medicine as a ... sneak attack on human will. Furthermore, poorly executed love medicine' was considered the ugliest sorcery and the explanation of rape⁴³. The person who is more hurt, however, is Sophie. Pauline uses Sophie's body in a fashion that is even more brutal than that of Fleur's rapists, for in the case of Fleur, she was able to resist; the attack was against her body but could not control her free will. Conversely, Sophie is the completely innocent victim, actually a child, who never gets to know how she ever got entangled in that mesh of hatred in the first place. Pauline never regrets, but only feels sorry for Sophie's suffering the aftermath of seduction, holding Eli responsible for invading the body of a helpless virgin. For Pauline, it is a duplication of the predicament of Virgin Mary, who was not consulted before she received the grace of God: [She] did not want him... [She was] frightened at the touch of his hand upon her mind... She wept, pinned full weight to the earth, known in the brain and known in the flesh, and planted like dirt'.⁴⁴ Pauline accepts Catholic rituals of bodily abnegation, but refuses to consider that as a preparation for another incident of patriarchal dominance and female victimization.

⁴¹ *Tracks*, 39.

⁴² *Tracks*, 77.

⁴³ Ruth Landes, *Ojibway Religion and the Midewiwin*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 65.

⁴⁴ *Tracks*, 95.

Kenneth Burke explains that the mystical strategy comes to the fore at 'times of general hesitancy. The mystic can compensate for his own doubts about human purpose by submerging in some vision of a universal, transcendent purpose with which he would identify'.⁴⁵ Likewise Pauline, who cannot find for herself a place in either world, starts a long journey of body mortification based on the aspiration to be as close to a man's biology as possible. Similar to the nuns who 'fast so vigorously that menstrual bleeding ceased, their breasts shriveled and their withered bodies, no longer recognizable as female'⁴⁶, Pauline mortifies her body through starvation, confinement of movement, sleeping only on her back, 'put[ing] burrs in the armpits of clothes and screw grass in... stockings and nettles in ... neckband' wearing 'potato sacks under my woolen gown', putting her shoes in the wrong way, and refusing herself a bath, suffering a ranking smell and torturing herself through limiting her times of visiting the bathroom.⁴⁷ Pauline undertakes these measures in the hope of reaching an autonomous status that helps her to be independent. But as she achieves that, she starts to look down upon all others who do not follow suit.

Pauline detests her vulnerability, her physical impotence, her bodily temptation, and finally her maternity as a projection of abject sin. Becoming a nun is Pauline's chance to be rid of all those *inferior* connotations associated with her female body. She repeatedly fails, nevertheless, a condition which

⁴⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969), 331.

⁴⁶ Gillian Walker, 'Fragments from a Journal Reflections on Celibacy and the Role of Women in the Church'. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 5 (2004): 81-101.

⁴⁷ *Tracks*, 152.

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increases her body hatred but never culminates in actual suicide. Instead, high instinctual survival transforms hate into energy to commit homicide. Pauline demonizes the other that she holds responsible for her failures. She fails because 'Christ' is 'weak, tame, new comer that has no foothold or sway in this land'⁴⁸, and not because she is sensuous or greedy. She fails because of the evil spell of Satan or because of the sway the monster of the lake. The next step then would be to defeat that 'objectified' source of temptation. Pauline thus frees her body from being the battle ground for conflicting evils and desires, which is the traditional Catholic image, and moves towards setting herself free from female meekness; By peeling off old skin, she addresses 'God not as a penitent, with humility, but rather as a dangerous lion that had burst into a ring of pale and fainting believers'⁴⁹. Pauline's body fattens as she prepares herself to a final fight with the lake monster. As Cornell rightly suggests, 'when she confronts him, she is not an object, a representation of the lack he desires, but an equal subject: they meet as god to god'⁵⁰. Pauline gives up her female status and assumes a new identity of 'a young man'⁵¹. She used to cover her hair and body with layers of clothes, but now she strips herself naked in confrontation with her tempter: 'I approached the low and rippling fire, on fire myself, naked in my own flesh, and finally with no shield or weapon to confront him but the rosary I gripped'⁵². Pauline undergoes a transformation which


⁴⁸ *Tracks*, 195.

⁴⁹ *Tracks*, 196.

⁵⁰ Daniel Cornell, 'Woman Looking: Revis(ion)ing Pauline's Subject Position in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*', *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 4 (Spring 1992): 59.

⁵¹ *Tracks*, 201.

⁵² *Tracks*, 201.

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goes beyond the frailty of the female body and becomes
'ready and strong as a young man'. She is now the opposite of
Fleur.

But Fleur undergoes a change herself. From the outside, Fleur's body fulfills the traditional combination of sinewy, manly physicality and the vigorously sexual female capable of both pleasure and reproduction. Discrepancy exists, however, between the essence of Fleur's corporeality and how this essence is interpreted by society. Erdrich provides only outer 'impressions' of the most prominent manifestations of Fleur as she struggles to keep the land, and to be consistently the embodiment of resilience, always capable of healing and regeneration. To fully grasp Fleur's reactions, we should not overlook the symbolic dimension: Fleur's gestures are "events" in their own right. Her body movement determines her reactions: She gains her magic powers through a ritualistic drowning in the lake; she communicates through sickness, and silence. Fleur's body speaks its own unique language. When these qualities fail to preserve for Fleur her child, her land, and her magical visions, Fleur's bodily harmony collapses, and she attempts suicide. The attempt fails, but the shattering of her corporeal autonomy continues. Fleur's once very prominent body withers away and gradually dwells into invisibility. This is a stage of reverse bodily consciousness after which Fleur actually disappears. On the final scene, her evil is conducted in absence. By making the forest trees fall upon the colonized natives and the white settlers alike, Fleur conducts a suicidal attack that destroys both the aggressors, and the land. For the first time, Fleur initiates, and not only

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struggles against, violence, even at the price of her own destruction.

Through depicting the female body as a symbol of evil, Erdrich presents in *Tracks* elemental aspects within a colonized Native American context. To point out the complexity and multifaceted potential of such symbols, this transdisciplinary study attempted a reading of the novel that applies the premises of body theories, biopolitics and feminist corporeality to understand similar reactions that still take place in our world today. Without imposing a monopoly of interpretation, *Tracks* clarifies the confusion of reading the assault on female bodies as a 'domestic' event, and explains that it corresponds to universal biopolitical demarcation. The female body is set apart from the rest of the population, and then put under a systematic process of demonization and exclusion, which justified physical assaults and detentions later on. Erdrich's *Tracks* is a good example of the demonization used against the female body.

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