LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 7 September, 2026

MOTHERHOOD AND THE EARTH: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF REPRODUCTIVE ANXIETY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S TRACKS (1988)

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23037388

Keywords

Article History
Received: 01 June 2026
Accepted: 23 August 2026
Published: 10 September 2026

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Abstract

This paper examines Louise Erdrich's novel Tracks (1988) focusing on motherhood and the earth through the lens of ecofeminism. It explores the loss of land and how it is connected to fear, pain, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood among the Anishinaabe people in the novel. Ecofeminism argues that men's treatment of women has been similar to their treatment and exploitation of nature. The thinking processes of Nature and Women have been exploited, manipulated, and suppressed. Fleur Pillager is the character, the land, and the mother in Tracks. Her body also suffers the agony, fear, and loss of childbirth by the time her land is being taken away from her by white loggers and government men. It is the same with Pauline Puyat, who has a fear of her own body and who attempts to reject her own daughter. This paper examines the novel in detail and locates examples of this connection between land and body in the text. The theory applied in the study is ecofeminism, strongly supported by the work of Vandana Shiva, which examines the impact of male-dominant control systems on women and nature. The paper concludes that Erdrich does not depict motherhood as "soft and easy. Instead, she makes it a part of anxiety, risk, and survival - like the land itself, which is being attacked. This reading offers another perspective on the study of Tracks: beyond the fear of losing land, it includes the fear of losing one's own body and child. The conclusions draw the reader and scholar to a deeper understanding of the impact of colonial history on land and water, as well as the most private aspects of a woman's life: her body and her motherhood.

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich explores the challenges of being both a mother and an ecologist, confronts reproductive anxiety, and addresses the loss of the land. The theme of motherhood and the earth has been intertwined in human consciousness since ancient times. In many cultures, the earth has been described as a mother, a source of life and sustenance for children, and a place for the dead. Meanwhile, the very process of becoming a mother has been considered natural, connected with soil, water, and the seasons. As Ecofeminist writers have pointed out, this ancient association between women and Mother Earth is not merely a matter

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of faith or poetry. It also reflects a shared history of control. Women and nature, both in the past and in modern times, have been treated as resources to be utilized, owned, and controlled by others (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Warren (2000) argues that this cooperative attitude has nothing to do with women being closer to soil or water than men, but rather with the same ideologies that enabled people to control land and women's bodies.

In stories of colonization, this connection of motherhood to earth becomes particularly evident and particularly painful. Once the colonial power has seized the land, it does not stop with the soil. It extends beyond food and water, beyond medicine, beyond birth and care, beyond the soil and water that nourish these. The Dawes Act of 1887, which apportioned communal Native American land into individual private units, contributed to significant increases in child mortality rates among American Indian communities, as revealed by historical research, which also determined that approximately two-thirds of all tribal land was lost by 1934 at the end of the Act (Miller et al., 2025). Loss of children's lives went hand-in-hand with land loss; not one after the other, but together as one wound. This historical fact provides a strong basis for an ecofeminist approach to reading texts that emerge from this history of land and motherhood, because it shows that this is not only a literary construct. It was a real-life situation for Native women in the early 1900s.

Reproductive anxiety – the fear and danger which can be associated with pregnancy, birth and the raising of a child – is one of the most obvious locations in fiction where the connection of motherhood and the earth may be explored. A pregnant body is a body that is inextricably connected to the land, food, water and shelter, because the health of a mother and her unborn child are dependent on the land's capacity to provide food, water and shelter. If land is seized, poisoned, or removed, the risk does not stay outside the house. It enters the mother's womb. This paper examines just such a transposition, from land to body, in one salient passage of American literature.

Louise Erdrich is a leading Native American author of the past half century. She is Ojibwe (Anishinaabe or Chippewa) and her work frequently focuses on the same families and the same land in North Dakota. Her novel Tracks (Erdrich, 1988) is set in one small Anishinaabe community (1912-1924), when the government was dividing up the land, selling it off parcel by parcel to lumber companies and white settlers; sickness, hunger, and cold were taking their tolls, too. This narrative is told through two voices: the voice of an older man, Nanapush, who still clings to the older ways of life; and the voice of a young mixed-blood woman, Pauline Puyat, who yearns to lose her Native side and become white and Catholic. The story revolves around a young woman who has a close connection with the lake named Matchimanito and the spirit residing in it, Misshepeshu. For Fleur, loss is a dual experience in this novel. She gives up her land to white lumber companies and government agents, and she also experiences pain, fear, and danger related to pregnancy and childbirth. The story is full of both types of loss, each occurring simultaneously, as though they are the same loss.

In this paper, I will propose that Tracks is a painting of the female body and a painting of the land. The land is divided off and sold and measured by the outside men, and the bodies of the women in the story are equally divided off, sold, and measured. It is not a minor element in the novel—one of the most profound motifs in the entire narrative. To study this pattern, this paper draws on ecofeminist philosophy, which treats nature and women as objects to be owned and controlled by the same system of power. This lens serves as a way to understand how childbirth, blood, fear, and the body are used to reflect what the colonial land policy was doing as it was taking away Anishinaabe land at the same time. This is set from the outset in the opening pages of the novel. The narrator, Nanabush, recounts to his granddaughter Lulu all the sickness, and that his people "started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 1). Although

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much had already been lost due to disease and hunger, he continues, "the earth is inexhaustible and so is luck and so were our people once" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 1). These early lines weld together two types of survival: the survival of the people, the survival of the land, and foreshadow a story where bodies and land rise and fall together. In this paper, this promise is taken seriously and followed throughout the novel, with special focus on the times when motherhood is a place of terror, not comfort.

Research Problem

The loss of Anishinaabe land due to the United States government policy is a topic of many Tracks studies (Değirmenci, 2018; Peterson, 1994). Many other studies describe Fleur Pillager as a strong, magical woman whose connection to the natural world and old Ojibwe beliefs is also significant (Markasović, 2023). However, few studies bring the two readings together in a close and careful manner. Few books ask the question, 'How does the fear of pregnancy and childbirth in the novel relate to the fear of losing land? This paper addresses the lack of overlap between body studies and land studies in reading Tracks. There are several scenes of women becoming pregnant, giving birth, and losing their child in the novel, and these scenes are full of pain, blood, fear, and danger. Meanwhile, the novel provides long stretches of cutting down trees, measuring land by strangers, and disturbing water. In this paper, I address both types of scenes as a single problem, and I consider the link between them a clue to Erdrich's understanding of the price of colonization for Native women.

Research Questions

1. How does *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich relate loss of Anishinaabe land to fear and danger of motherhood and childbirth?
2. How does the nature of Fleur Pillager illustrate the connection between women's bodies and nature?
3. Pauline Puyat's character demonstrates a fear of motherhood due to the rejection of her Native identity and her relationship with the land.
4. How might an ecofeminist reading contribute to the understanding of the reproductive anxiety in the novel?

Significance of the Study

This study is important for a couple of reasons. First, it provides a close reading of a significant novel that combines two fields of literary study: ecocriticism and feminist criticism. Second, it brings into focus the body, blood, and fear in Tracks, which previous studies have mentioned but not always centered in their analysis. Third, in this paper, the reader and even the student may be able to gain insight into a much broader truth about colonial history. A government can take land from a people, but it does not take only soil and trees. It also gets into the deepest and most personal aspects of life, such as the terror experienced by a mother when she is contemplating the life and death of her child. This paper demonstrates Erdrich's connection of the female body to the land, and it allows the reader to view literature as a means of understanding history more humanly and deeply. The results of this study may also apply to other Native American women writers, as many incorporate the body and the land into their writing as well.

Literature Review

Many researchers have written about Tracks from various angles, and this paper examines some of the most beneficial studies. Markasović (2023) did an extensive analysis of two female characters in the novel, Fleur

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Pillager and Lulu Nanapush, from an ecofeminist perspective. This paper concluded that the novel illustrates a direct connection between the degradation of nature and the degradation of women, and suggested that Fleur represents and defends nature. At the same time, her daughter Lulu loses her connection to nature over the years as she has been away at government school. This study shares a similar theme with the present paper, but it focuses mainly on Fleur and Lulu as protectors of nature as a whole. It does not extensively examine the fear and pain of pregnancy as an independent theme.

In Tracks, Rehman, Mukhi, and Sumaira (2021) closely examined the spatial trouble of pregnant bodies. In this work, she contended that Fleur's body is being pushed out of public space and subjected to shame and strangeness by the other members of the reservation community. The study incorporated theories of how a pregnant body disrupts the notion of a settled self, from writers Tim Cresswell and Iris Marion Young. It serves as background information, but does not fully relate the pregnant body to the broader loss of land by the Pillagers; this is not enough.

In a paper titled 'Environmental performativity', Ahmad, Ahmad, and Javed (2021) have made a comparison between Tracks and Toni Morrison's Beloved. In this work, it was argued that women and nature are victims of the same form of degradation within an economy with a foundation in man's supremacy over women and over nature. The study juxtaposed Erdrich's novel with an African American novel to broaden the discussion on race, gender, and nature. This comparison is helpful, but because it examines two novels at the same time, it cannot pay as much attention to the close, detailed examination of individual scenes as a paper that examines only one novel.

While there is little exploration of motherhood in the novel, Değirmenci (2018) explored it from a different perspective: the land and colonial history. This study sheds light on how the loss of tribal land under government policies affects the memory and identity of the Anishinaabe peoples, and how Erdrich fights to preserve memory and identity through the art of storytelling. This sort of research is very historical, yet it mostly ignores the feminine body as a focal point, focusing instead on the body itself.

A study by Manjuria and Logarajan (2023) directly linked the deprivation of Fleur's land to the deprivation of her motherhood because the government policy requires Fleur to believe that it means the loss of her daughter Lulu, as well, because she has to give up her daughter Lulu to the government school when the land is taken from her. This study aligns more closely with the theme of this paper, which juxtaposes land and motherhood as two losses in one. This study, however, focuses primarily on plot and family relationships and does not closely examine the language Erdrich employs in birth scenes (blood, pain, fear, breaking apart, etc.).

In addition to literary criticism, historical research also provides background for this paper. Miller et al. (2025) examined the Dawes Act of 1887, a government policy that fragmented tribal lands into smaller parcels owned by individuals. They concluded that it caused the deaths of Native children and the loss of approximately two-thirds of all tribal land by the end of the Dawes Act in 1934. Previous historical research has revealed that the Dawes Act was only directed to handing land over to men, the head of the household, while women were not to receive land under the Act, thus undermining the older status of women as keepers of land and food in many Native societies. This historical fact is strong evidence that colonial law was not gender-blind. It was very direct to women and to women as mothers and providers, which is what Erdrich seems to be addressing with Fleur.

Research Gap

This review clearly identifies a gap. Many studies broadly associate Tracks with 'ecofeminism' (Markasović, 2023), and some studies associate Fleur's loss of motherhood with the loss of her land (Manjuria & Logarajan,

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2023). However, very few studies examine the novel's pregnancy scenes and then read the novel word for word alongside scenes of land loss, tree-cutting, and the disturbance of the waters. Although both women's stories appear in the same novel and share the same historical context, virtually no work reads Pauline Puyat's fear of her own body and her denial of her own daughter in the same vein as Fleur's story, which is an ecofeminist one. This paper aims to fill this gap. It juxtaposes the textual descriptions of birth, blood, and body fear with the textual descriptions of land loss, tree cutting, and water disturbance. It reads the two texts, Fleur and Pauline, as two different but connected responses to the same colonial pressure on the female body and the land.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with close reading of the texts. Louise Erdrich's novel Tracks (1988) is the primary source for this paper. The paper reads through the entire novel, giving special consideration to scenes involving pregnancy, birth, blood, fear of the body, the land, trees, and water. These scenes are collected, categorized, and arranged sequentially to clarify the body/land relationship. The paper does not attempt to run a number or survey to test a theory. Rather, it follows a literary-analysis approach: the reader reads the text carefully and supports each claim with textual evidence from the novel. In this study, the primary data is a collection of sentences based on page references, as the focus is on grasping meaning within the text, not on the opinions of outside readers or outside books.

The theoretical framework used in this paper is based on ecofeminism, and the primary contribution comes from the research of Vandana Shiva, a renowned Indian scholar and activist whose work extensively examines the harm done to women and nature in modern systems of power. In her popular book, Ecofeminism, along with Maria Mies, Shiva has argued that women are connected with the earth through their work as farmers, food, water, and birth, and the same greed and control that is affecting the earth is also affecting their status inside society (Mies & Shiva, 1993). New modes of regulating land, seeds, and bodies also tend to view women as resources, like soil and forests are viewed as resources for industry (Mies & Shiva, 1993). This idea dovetails neatly into what happens to Fleur Pillager in Tracks, as another group of white officials and lumber companies view her as a problem that must be taken off her land, just like the trees on her land are a problem that must be taken off her land.

Following the Shiva framework, this paper views land and the body as two interconnected sites, both subjected to the same outside power trying to control, measure, and appropriate them. The data collection step uses a very simple method. All passages dealing with pregnancy/childbirth/motherhood and fear of the body were found, as were all passages about logging, selling land, allotment, and water. These passages were then read side by side, guided by ecofeminist theory, to match each moment of the body theme with a similar moment of the land theme. This approach allows the paper to use the actual words of Erdrich's text rather than solely the voice of the outside critic, maintaining a strong and stable position within Tracks while also deriving meaning from a clear, well-defined theoretical position.

Textual Analysis

This section examines closely Tracks, one scene at a time, to illustrate Erdrich's association of body with land. The analysis follows the novel chronologically, starting with the early loss of their land, the discovery of Fleur's affinity with water, her pregnancy, the birth of her daughter, the cutting down of the trees, and the final loss of her land.

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Fleur Pillager is way into the lake named Matchimanito and the spirit that resides in it, Misshepeshu, from the opening pages of the novel. The community fears him as it claims he will drown young men attempting to come to get close to Fleur. The narrator tells the reader that the spirit is "love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11), and that he can transform himself into something handsome—even though he can transform into something ugly too, where he will "sprout horns, fangs, claws, fins" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11) and drag a person down under. The community has a lake in which no other Chippewa is said to have ever survived a near drowning, after which it is said that the community regarded her as the water spirit's wife.

This early connection between Fleur and the lake is significant, as it gives the lake a level of importance similar to Fleur from the start of the story. She is not just a woman who resides close to water. Her very fate, fear, and survival are stamped into the lake itself. This bond with the water increases at the same time that outsiders are entering onto Pillager land to measure the lake itself for sale, walking upon the fresh graves of Pillagers, while they plot out "the deepest water where the lake monster, Misshepeshu, hid himself and waited," as Nanapush says (Erdrich, 1988, p. 8). Fleur's spirit connection is in the same lake that outsiders are measuring and preparing for sale. The relationship between water and land established at the beginning of the novel repeats throughout, and, in a way, the same relationship is established between Fleur's body and her life.

The Birth House: The First Pregnancy and the Bear

The first sign of the pregnancy comes when Nanapush hears Eli's story about his time alone with Fleur in the woods. Nanapush tells us that she was pregnant, “From the way he described her actions I was sure she was pregnant, I am familiar with the signs” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 44). Shortly thereafter, Margaret Kashpaw sees the same symptoms and concludes that “Fleur Pillager was pregnant, and would give birth in the spring” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 52). From this early stage, the pregnancy is viewed less as a private blessing and more as a matter of gossip and danger, measured and judged by others from the outside, akin to how outside men view, measure, and judge the land.

The birth scene is one of the most amazing scenes in this novel. Just when Fleur is giving birth, a wild bear crawls into the cabin. When Nanapush's Fleur sees the bear in the house, she is terrified, “and so impressed by him and his power that she raised herself on top of the blankets and gave birth” (p. 60 Erdrich 1988). The birth, that is, is not in peace. It occurs when you are at your most vulnerable, when a wild animal is standing over the mother and child. Following the birth, Fleur is so motionless and lifeless that all in the room think that she has perished, but finally the baby cried” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 60); it is only then that Fleur begins to breathe once more. This scene depicts birth – a moment just on the brink between life and death – and the random, elemental force of the natural world through the body of the bear, the same body that is also the instrument of birth.

Margaret also uses the language of the earth and the body in her care for Fleur after her birth. She packs "wormwood and moss" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 60) between Fleur's legs, wraps her in blankets heated with heated stones, and attempts to get raspberry leaf tea into her until she awakens and lives. The very ground and the stones of the land become the tools to revive Fleur from the verge of death after she has given birth. The novel does not differentiate between the healing of the land and the health of the mother's body. They are portrayed as healing as one, making them very similar to the ecofeminist notion of women's bodies and the natural world being fated for the same and the same mode of care.

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The Second Pregnancy: The Threatened Loss and Plant Medicine

The second time Fleur becomes pregnant, later in the novel, it poses a more direct threat. One night she sees blood in what is called a "small brilliant patch" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 155). She drops the metal tub in the yard, and there is a trail of blood that leads to the house, where Fleur is wrapped in blankets with her daughter Lulu beside her. Fleur shouts for a plant, and Pauline is quite clear, "Too soon. Alder stops it" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 155). In this brief, pressing moment, the life of the unborn child hangs in the balance of the use of a herb plucked for its use right off the land, an herb picked and preserved from the woods that the loggers are working to clear.

Pauline has gone to fetch the plant and admits that while "the use of this herb for 'bleeding problems' was 'common enough' " (Erdrich, 1988, p. 156), she cannot describe the plant in her fear and haste; she panics and flips over jars of acorns, wheat, and lake rice. This tiny detail is important because it illustrates in one brief moment the land and the lake that holds everything necessary to sustain a pregnancy, to maintain a minor household, to pass on food knowledge, and to keep the food supply going: all of these are dependent on the same piece of land and the same lake. When this land bearing these plants is sold, cut and cleared, this whole system of care for a mother's body is jeopardized.

Pauline's Pregnancy: Body Fear

Where Fleur's story exemplifies a mother's battle, perhaps something she fights with her entire might to protect her child, Pauline Puyat's pregnancy demonstrates more of the opposite—a tormented, painful fear of her own body, fear of her own child. In a long, dry summer, as her body changes during her pregnancy, Pauline almost feels trapped by the earth: "The earth hardened. I swelled so tight that I could hardly lift my arms" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 134). The body, and the earth that is dry in the summer, are all hard and all swollen and all under strain in the very same breath.

When she finally starts contractions, Pauline does not want her baby to be born. She is aware that, if she bears a child, she will be lonelier, "an outcast, a thing set aside for God's use, a human whom no other human could touch" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 135). Through sheer will, she attempts to stop the birth, even to the dismal end of telling herself she has "decided to die, and let the child too" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 135). Finally, Bernadette has to secure Pauline's arms and legs to the bed frame and use a tool consisting of two iron spoons to remove the child by using force. After the child is born, Pauline reasons, "She is marked by the devil's thumbs" (p. 136), and turns away, not holding her or feeding her. She says to Bernadette, "You keep Marie" (136), and she leaves the child completely behind (Erdrich, 1988, p. 136).

This scene is the opposite of the bear birth scene in Fleur's chapter of the novel. Fleur battles through fear and danger to give birth to her daughter. At the same time, Pauline fights against the act of birth itself since she has already decided to turn her back on her Native identity, and her body's connection to the natural and spiritual world that Fleur embodies. In this context, then, Pauline's aversion to motherhood cannot be divorced from her denial of her Native identity. It is a rejection that is a part of the same rejection. Isolated from the land, old stories, and spirit world of her people, Pauline also turns her back on any sense of comfort with her body and her own child, which aligns with the ecofeminist notion that distancing oneself from nature results in a wounded relationship with one's own body.

Not even Nanapush, not a woman, makes the reader of this novel one of the most direct statements in the whole novel that's motherhood with the earth. He watches Lulu as she almost freezes in the snow, and as he cares for her, he thinks of his own children, who all died; in the terrible times, the evils he does not speak of, when the earth swallowed back all he had to love, he gave birth in loss (Erdrich, 1988, p. 167). Here Nanapush

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describes giving birth as the very image of his pain, and the earth as the force that devours children, whom it gave birth to. This line embodies Erdrich's vision of how giving birth to life is intricately connected to the land, which can also carry off death. This theme of motherhood and earth is echoed throughout the novel, but never more strongly than in its mothers.

The most powerful and unambiguous connection of body and land occurs near the very end of the novel, when lumber crews come to finally chop down the remaining trees around Fleur's cabin and sever her from her land. The reader has already been told that Fleur sawed into the base of all the trees around her house in the night, just so they could stand, but they would all be easily knocked down if they were not. Nanapush is awestruck: "A forest stood about me, lightly held... Each tree was sawed through at its base" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 223). As the wind does finally pick up, the trees crash down around the lumber crew, crushing the men who came to cut down the trees, and leaving Fleur standing unharmed amidst the chaos.

On the last time she stands, Fleur loads a small cart with items from her life on the land—the "weed wrapped stones from the lake bottom, bundles of roots" and most impressively, the "umbrella that had shaded her baby" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 224). The natural world, the stones and roots of the lake and forest, are densely jammed together, along with the most intimate of objects associated with her child, the baby's umbrella. The novel closes as Fleur leaves the land forever, pulling the small cart by herself, and the loss of land is juxtaposed with the memory of motherhood, which she carries with her in the same small cart.

In retrospect, Nanapush provides one last, piercing contrast between the old and the new way of life: the living land and the press-paper and triplicate paperwork of government (Erdrich, 1988, p. 225). A tribe of pressed trees is a phrase that summarizes the entire argument of this paper in a couple of words. Trees are left as paper, in place of living beings who once fed bodies and entertained spirits on Pillager land, and who once separated families and took children to government schools. The same colonial system squashes both the living land and the living mother, and Erdrich invites her reader to feel this loss as one wound, not two.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have seen how Louise Erdrich has created a strong, deep connection between motherhood and the land in Tracks. A loss of land and the threat of childbirth are intertwined in the character of Fleur Pillager, as if they were two aspects of the same event viewed from two perspectives. At the very edge of life and death, next to a wild bear, Fleur has her first birth. Her second pregnancy is saved only by plant medicine that the lumber companies try to remove from the land that she is located on. In contrast, Pauline Puyat's fear of the body and fear of motherhood spring directly from her rejection of Native identity and her turning away from the land and old ways. This connection is strong throughout the novel, not just in its female characters, as even the older man, Nanapush, is not only bereaved of his own children, but of what he gave up to become a father, as he describes his grief as the earth devouring what it gave.

Drawing on the theory of ecofeminism and the work of Vandana Shiva (Mies & Shiva, 1993), this paper has claimed that Tracks demonstrates how both women and the land are living in a state of oppression and deprivation by the same system of colonialism—one which involves control, measurement, and the removal of women. The novel's mention of the cutting of trees and land sale does not set itself apart from the other birth scenes of hardship and fear. Together, they form one lost image that Erdrich offers her reader. The paper has also highlighted the lack of research that has explored both phenomena – land loss and motherhood – side by side, which is largely because many previous studies examined them as two distinct phenomena without paying close attention to the actual language of the texts (Değirmenci, 2018; Markasović,

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2023; Manjuria & Logarajan, 2023). This paper has attempted to bridge part of that divide by juxtaposing real lines from the novel about blood, birth, fear, trees, and water.

A repetition of the same themes of body and earth–such as Erdrich's theme of the family which is juxtaposed against the living body and the earth of her previous novels–may be present in her later novels, which could be explored in future studies, specifically Future Home of the Living God (Erdrich, 2017), where Erdrich's themes of a family's living body and the earth are repeated. It would also be interesting to compare Erdrich's portraits of motherhood and land with other Native American women writers to determine whether this pattern appears throughout Native American literature, or whether Erdrich's approach to portraying the Anishinaabe is unique. One thing is certain from this study: motherhood in Tracks is not easy, simple, or safe. It is presented as a battle inextricably intertwined with the survival of the land itself, and by reading the novel through this lens, the reader can experience, viscerally, the impact of colonial harm on Native women's bodies, families, and lives.

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LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
LJLLR
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 7 September, 2026

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