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Liminal Femininity: Magical Realism and the Abject in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

ABSTRACT

The article examines the liminal nature of the two central female characters in Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks*. Despite appearing as opposites, Fleur and Pauline, members of the Chippewa tribe, are both portrayed as socially abject and victims of the inexorable social transformation brought about by American imperialism to establish patriarchy and capitalism. Enhanced through magical realism, their animality and monstrosity call attention to a liminal femininity trapped in a social order that seeks to subjugate it. The novel also considers female sexual agency and different modes of exerting and losing control in encounters defined by sexual objectification and the male gaze. Fleur's and Pauline's stories demonstrate how the female body becomes a site of colonial enterprise, which devalues, exploits, and nearly eradicates the Native American community, their culture, and philosophies.

Keywords: *Tracks,* Louise Erdrich, animality, feminism, magical realism

Liminalna ženskost: magični realizem in abjektno v romanu Louise Erdrich *Sledi*

POVZETEK

V članku raziskujem liminalni položaj dveh osrednjih ženskih likov v romanu *Sledi* Louise Erdrich. Čeprav se ob površinskem branju zdi, da sta si Fleur in Pauline diametralno nasprotni, ju natančnejša analiza postavi v položaj družbeno abjektnega in kot žrtvi neustavljivih družbenih sprememb, ki jih prinaša ameriški imperializem z namenom vzpostavitve patriarhata in kapitalizma. Animaličnost in pošastnost, obarvani z magičnim realizmom, opozarjata na liminalno ženskost, ujeto v družbeni red, ki si jo skuša podrediti. Roman obravnava različne primere uveljavljanja in izgube nadzora v odnosih, zaznamovanih s spolno objektifikacijo in moškim zrenjem. Zgodbi Fleur in Pauline prikazujeta, kako žensko telo postane mesto kolonialne nadvlade, ki razvrednoti, izkorišča in malodane izbriše staroselsko skupnost, njihovo kulturo in miselnost.

Ključne besede: *Sledi*, Louise Erdrich, animaličnost, feminizem, magični realizem

1 Introduction: Magical Realism and Native American Literature

In her works the Native American novelist Louise Erdrich draws on her own social position to address the intersections between the Native American community and the inexorable forces of American imperialism. The central subject of her novels is the social reality of women as experienced by liminal and abject characters engulfed by social change. *Tracks* takes place in the fictional town of Argus and the nearby reservation in North Dakota between 1912 and 1924. It examines the effects of the Dawes Act, land appropriation, community disintegration, and the conversion of Native Americans to Christianity. Erdrich gives a complex perspective by employing multiple narrators and magical realism.[1]

There is a recurring idea in literary studies concerning the inherent postcolonial potential of magical realism, a subversive quality whereby the periphery strikes back at the dominant centre and critiques its social policies and historical practices (see Slemon 1995; Aldama 2009; Faris 2004). Homi Bhabha's sentiment that magical realism "becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (1990, 7) has won widespread currency, associating this literary mode with marginalized and excluded social groups. It comes as no surprise then that Native American texts were soon included in the canon of magical realism, as they use this mode to challenge the hegemony of official historiography and give voice to individuals and groups who were violently purged from the official record (Reeds 2013, 173). American history, which from the imperialist point of view starts with the arrival of the Europeans in 1492, is made suspect by disrupting the usual temporality. By alternating between the realistic and fantastic, incorporating myths and traditional (including oral) narrative devices, Native American magical realist texts offer a revision of history and hold up a mirror to the dominant society.

Wendy B. Faris and Stephen Slemon were among the first to point out the potential of magical realism to present complementary views on history. The latter writes in the seminal essay "Magical Realism and Postcolonial Discourse" that magical realism offers a new lens on history (Slemon 1995, 414), while the former argues that it "registers a discourse of plurality" (Faris 2004, 144) and adds that "magical realist texts frequently assume antibureaucratic positions, using their magic against the established social order" (2004, 139). By injecting neofantastic elements into a realist narrative structure, the arbitrariness of hegemonic norms and ideologically convenient fictions of order are laid bare. The concepts of "reality" and "truth" become subject to other determinations and give rise to alternative forms of social experience.

Many postcolonial and ethnic texts are haunted by an oppressive sense of historical time and engage with the monstrous trauma of history. This recalls "the relation between historical consciousness and traumatic memory, the problem of how to represent what is experienced

[1] Louise Erdrich's use of magical realism is examined in, for example, Begoña Simal's *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures* (2009), Wendy B. Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Nature* (2004), and Lois Parkinson Zamora's *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fictions of the Americas* (1997).

as 'unspeakable'" (Brogan 1998, 63). Magical realism is related to trauma narrative because it "carries the potential to respond sensitively yet productively to the issue of traumatic experience, enabling such experience to take its place within representation" (Adams 2011, 174). Fragmented temporality, repetition, literalization,[2] the neofantastic, and shifts in focalization all accommodate an articulation of trauma, which defies direct translation into narrative, but is instead bound to remain, partly at least, outside of it, ineffable and unrepresentable. The narrative devices of trauma narrative thus coincide with those of magical realism, which can "shake the ossified categories of truth, reality and history" and "create a space beyond authoritative discourse where the unrepresentable can be expressed" (Bowers 2004, 77).

To understand *Tracks* one needs to understand the historical and political context of the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, which dramatically disrupted the Native social structures and forced a transition into a capitalist and patriarchal social system (Chang 2010, 78). The act called for tribal land to be divided into individual plots with the goal of encouraging small farmsteads. Plot size depended on age, marital status, etc. The Native Americans who accepted this division became US citizens (Britannica 2019). Land that was not divided among the Native population was available for purchase to non-Native settlers. A significant share of tribal land was thus broken up and lost. The resulting degradation (nomadic communities had the most problems conforming) was further exacerbated by illness, poverty, and poor living conditions in general (Britannica 2019). The political proponents of land allotment justified the act on the basis of idealized notions of freedom and individual ownership, where in fact they took advantage of "their colonial authority to enforce a rigid racial and gender inequality" (Chang 2010, 78). In addition to expropriation driven by greed, the Dawes Allotment Act served to politically undermine tribal authority. By granting citizenship, it sought to incorporate the Native population formally and legally into the socio-political system of the United States (2010, 79). The change in legislation facilitated a forced legal assimilation of the Native population, land appropriation, and a grievous repudiation of the tribal social order.

Plot allotment and the regulation of farmsteads reinforced class and gender norms of the white-centric patriarchal society (Chang 2010, 124). Private ownership reduced communal family structures to the nuclear family. As Paula Gunn Allen explains, Christianization, Christian Native American boarding schools, forced displacement, the prohibition of ceremonies, and the systematic elimination of Native languages attended and magnified the processes underpinned by land laws (1992, 195). The colonial enterprise, she writes, engendered "a progressive shift from gynocentric, egalitarian, ritual-based social systems to secularized structures closely imitative of the European patriarchal system" (1992, 195). Gender balance was eroded by enforcing capitalist patriarchal institutions and values. Even

[2] Literalization is a magical realist device whereby the metaphorical is made physically manifest. Hegerfeldt describes it as "a movement from the abstract to the concrete, from the figurative to the literal, from the word to the thing" (2002, 68) and focuses on the literalization of the metaphor, the transmutation of abstract nouns into physical presences, materialization of memories, and psychological states in the form of ghosts and other spectres. In other words, the intangible and the phenomenal become the tangible and the material. Magical realism thus endows metaphorical and empirical descriptions of reality with a strange equality (2002, 56).

if we consider that precolonial indigenous communities were less culturally homogenous than we tended to allow and that the position of women in these communities is somewhat idealized and in line with the myth of the noble savage who lives in tune with nature, the fact cannot be overlooked that some tribes were organized in ways that were in stark contrast to the hierarchical binarism of Western patriarchy.

2 Monstrous and Animalistic Women

Faris points out that Erdrich brings together Native and Christian narrative traditions, signalling attention to the nexuses between different worlds and the spiritual powers drawn from mythology and religion (2004, 208). It is precisely myth and the fusion of profane and sacred time that Jasna Vombek sees as underpinning the magical realism in Erdrich's novels (2004, 50). The temporal structure of the novel echoes its thematic concerns, as it stages a collision of two cultural principles. This can also be seen in the chapter titles, which comprise the year, denoting chronological time, and season in the Chippewa language and in English, denoting circular time. The centre of *Tracks* is Fleur, even though she does not have a narrative voice of her own. Her story is related through two points of view – Nanapush, a tribal elder, and Pauline, a zealous Christian of Native and white origins, who take turns in narrating the chapters. Much like its temporality, the novel is a combination of oral narration, related to traditional storytelling, and writing, related to official records. Interspersed between the two is a second-person narration, as Nanapush directly addresses Fleur's daughter Lulu (and in turn the reader), reinforcing the oral tradition in the novel. The innovative interchange of temporality and narrative voices contributes to a complex narrative structure in which the position of an entire community and cultural tradition is articulated. In addition to the double temporality, the novel plays on the juxtaposition of different discourses, and "by blending mythologies, and by blending myth with realism" (Rosenthal 2003, 23) rejects any kind of reductionism. Into this complex interplay of historical, social, mythical, and colonial forces Erdrich places two monstrous and animalistic female figures – Fleur and Pauline – who, each in their own way, face the social changes enforced by capitalist patriarchy.

Erdrich addresses the question of liminality through Fleur and Pauline, both of whom she casts as socially abject. Fleur holds a special place in the story since she is the only member of the Pillager family besides her cousin to have survived a sinister epidemic that nearly exterminated the native population. She is saved from the clutches of sickness and brought back to life by Nanapush, which creates a familial bond between them. The Pillager name is also associated with Misshepeshu, a lake spirit that dwells in the waters of Lake Matchimanito on the sacred lands of the Pillager family, as well as with ancient knowledge and powers: "[T]hey knew the secret ways to cure or kill" (Erdrich 2004, 2). Many have read Fleur as an embodiment of the (literary) trickster, an ambivalent figure that contains within itself a number of contradictions and eludes rigid definition (see Rosenthal 2003; Smith 1997; Vombek 2004). It enables the intertwining of two worlds and perspectives, and as such also indirectly recalls the inherent characteristics of magical realism. The trickster is attended by duality, elusiveness, and ambivalence. Its use endows the text with a freedom and openness, which has proven to be a particularly useful tool in the hands of feminist authors. As Smith recognizes, women writers employ female tricksters to expose and transform the sexism of

their male counterparts, which gained currency especially after the concomitant enforcement of the Dawes Act and the ideology of the nuclear family. In doing so, these authors present a different historical and social perspective (Smith 1997, 22). The trickster is an effective literary strategy for feminist writers because it allows them to problematize both patriarchal domination and the loss of communal or national identity. By using a female trickster, "Erdrich resists stereotypical representation of Native women by making her trickster figures cross back and forth between the discourses of different cultures, thereby pointing out that gender is never an a-historic or essential quality, but is dependent on cultural [or rather social] contexts" (Rosenthal 2003, 17). Fleur exemplifies the ambivalence of the literary trickster and combines it with elements from Native American mythology and card skills. Moreover, she represents a most dramatic version of the trickster because it not only revives the traditional myth, but also offers a never-before-seen representation enriched with new symbolism. The connection between myth and animality plants her firmly in the realm of the abject, making her at once an object of fascination and fear in the eyes of the community.

After the death of her family, Fleur chooses to live alone on the remote shores of Lake Matchimanito, an act of independence which, in the framework of standard gender norms, disturbs and disrupts the social order. She leads a wholly unconventional life: "She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about" (Erdrich 2004, 12). Nanapush also recognizes her ambivalent position when he says that on the one hand Fleur keeps the water spirit in check, but on the other unsettles the area around the lake (2004, 35). Fleur enters the space of myth through the lake and the spirit dwelling there. People believe that she is bespoken to Misshepeshu: "Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself" (2004, 11). Erdrich leaves Fleur's representation incomplete and mysterious. At times her association with the lake spirit gives way to the idea that Fleur is herself the liminal monster of lake Machimanito, hinted at by her composite body: her hips are described as "fishlike, slippery, narrow", her teeth "strong and sharp and very white", "her fifth toes were missing" (2004, 18), and her skin is likened to "lakeweed" (2004, 22).

The myth of Misshepeshu is informed by the animal symbolism from different Chippewa stories – such as that of the bear and wolf – and so we read about Fleur's bear-like sounds and coughs (Erdrich 2004, 12) and the famous Pillager wolf grin (2004, 19, 23, 88). Her animality is also emphasized with the neofantastic when Fleur shapeshifts into an animal mid-hunt: "[She] 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" (2004, 12). Fleur's animality is put in a mythical context and harkens back to the Native American oral tradition. She uses her powers to fight the unjust appropriation of land and sustain the traditional way of life, yet ultimately her struggles lead only to a Pyrrhic sort of victory. As we shall see later, Fleur is at once a benevolent mother and the destructive monster of Lake Matchimanito, an object of sexuality and vengeful fury. By transforming traditional stories, Erdrich associates the symbolism of the bear, the wolf, and Misshespeshu with female strength and endurance. At the same time, the contradictions of Fleur's actions and the shifts in her powers preclude an excessive mythologization of her

character (Rosenthal 2003, 141–42). Granted, the transformation of symbols from traditional myths and stories is a viable position from which to examine female empowerment, but also one that can quickly turn into its opposite. Most authors see Fleur as a preeminent figure of female power, in large part also due to her monstrousness and animality, but a closer reading reveals the deep-rooted workings of colonization that position Native American subjects within the space of the colonial gaze and the appropriation of the female body.

Fleur can also be read as a stereotypical colonial representation of the wild Native woman who struggles against the capitalist machine to preserve the sacred lands of her tribal family in tune with nature and traditional forces. While she ultimately emerges as the moral victor, she is hounded off her land, since the social order has changed so drastically as to deny the continued existence of a dangerous revolutionary tied to the past. Fleur's actions can thus be read wholly in terms of a predetermined scenario that follows the figure of the "vanishing Indian" known from colonial writing. The opening of the novel seems to confirm this with a wistful and romanticized image presented by Nanapush that is fuelled by a dangerous trope – "the last Indian syndrome":

> We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. […] By then, we thought disaster must surely have spent its force […]. [A] new sickness swept down. The consumption […]. This disease was different from the pox and fever, for it came on slow. The outcome, however, was just as certain. […] I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. […] I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (Erdrich 2004, 1–2)

Tracks does not accommodate a black-and-white reading, though, as Erdrich uses stereotypes in order to confront them and to have the reader question their own definitions. Female empowerment in her novels needs to be considered on a number of levels and through different female characters. To fully apprehend the social reality that Erdrich portrays, it is necessary to look at Fleur's doppelganger Pauline. At first it seems that the novel pitches the two characters in direct opposition to each other. As we have noted earlier, Fleur is commonly held up as an exemplar of the strength and resistance of Native women. Pauline, by contrast, is a sinister renegade who renounces her heritage and embraces Christianity with open arms, making it her life's mission to convert her tribe. Their ostensible opposition is quickly dismantled, however, since there is a significant intersection between the two characters. Erdrich uses their different but essentially similar stories to articulate the business of constructing a social order under the auspices of the capitalist patriarchy as it is enacted on their bodies. Fleur and Pauline demonstrate how the female body becomes a site of colonial domination and thus bears witness to the systemic social transition that sought to eradicate social structures that were at odds with capitalist patriarchy.

Pauline is placed in a distinctly marginal position in the dialogical narrative with Nanapush. The many contradictions in her account qualify her as an unreliable narrator. Several authors argue that her efforts to strip herself of her Native American identity by becoming a zealous Christian make Pauline the negative counterpart to Nanapush and the primary antagonist of the novel (Rosenthal 2003, 129). Such interpretations might be too simplistic, however, as

they downplay the social and colonial underpinnings of her marginalized position. Pauline's abject social status is obvious. Nanapush calls her "the crow of the reservation" (Erdrich 2004, 54), that is, a carrion eater fond of filth. She can find no place for herself on the reservation, and she is mostly ignored or avoided altogether. Morace argues that Pauline is a powerful abject heroine and points out her obsession with her unattractiveness, which she believes makes her invisible to others, and so resigns herself to a life of voyeurism and alienation, and embraces her role as a "midwife" of death (1999, 51). On the reservation she takes care of the dying and prepares the dead for their eternal rest. The corpse, according to Kristeva, is an extreme case of abjection when the subject is expunged entirely and transformed into an object which threatens to engulf everything, "[i]t is death infecting life" (1982, 3–4). Pauline becomes closely associated with death, which instils in her a sense of peace, intimacy, and superiority: "[I] entered each house where death was about to come, and then made death welcome […] I handled the dead until the cold feel of their skin was a comfort, until I no longer bothered to bathe once I left that cabin but touched others with the same hands, passed death on" (Erdrich 2004, 69). She becomes the abject, transgressing boundaries with every touch and seeping into society. When people see her, they immediately wonder who has died, and Pauline says of herself: "I was a midwife that they hailed down with both interest and dread, I was their own fate" (2004, 75). In one of the novel's instances of literalization, Pauline severs the thread that binds the sick woman she is watching over to the world of the living: "I put my fingers in the air between us, and I cut where the rope was frayed down to string. […] I stood when she was gone" (2004, 68). Pauline undergoes a rebirth after this encounter with death. In a neofantastic manner she figuratively and literally rises above the others and is found the following morning high up in a tree (2004, 68). Entering the space of the abject changes how she understands her own social position and endows her with a notion of superiority. Pauline and Fleur are both figured as the socially abject. However, as we shall see later, Pauline at times seems to muster more agency than Fleur, who is in danger of being reduced to the stereotype of the wild Native woman.

3 The Female Body as a Site of Colonial Domination

Readings that characterize Fleur exclusively as a strong and independent woman ultimately prove to be too simplistic. One such reading, for example, exalts the sexual power that Fleur wields and concludes that she is "always the hunter and never the prey" (Van Dyke 1999, 133), exercising absolute control over her relationships with men. On a closer reading, Fleur's sexual agency is increasingly at odds with a social order in which women are merely objects for male exchange, despite their ostensible empowerment. This is one of several pernicious changes brought about by a systemic transition from communal to individual ownership and the rise of the nuclear family as the normative ideal, endorsed and encouraged by the Dawes Act, Christianization, school indoctrination, and the introduction of capitalism. To win Fleur's affection, her suitor Eli turns to her surrogate father Nanapush for guidance. Though he initially advises Eli to "find [himself] a tame woman", Nanapush ultimately concedes that Fleur needs a man: "[S]he has to be harnessed. […] Eli was the young man to do it" (Erdrich 2004, 45). Fleur is seen as a woman in need of taming, which is to say in need of a man to subdue and subjugate her. The father figure symbolically delivers the female object into the hands of another man. Immediately after this exchange we learn that Eli has been successful.

Fleur is completely omitted from this process, reduced to a pliable object that can and must be brought under control. Her sexuality is not part of her empowerment, as Van Dyke claims. Rather, Fleur is excluded from it. Female sexuality exists solely for men's pleasure, as Eli's mother reveals to Nanapush: "Who learned my Eli to make love standing up! Who learned him to have a woman against a tree in clear daylight" (2004, 48).

Fleur's eroticism is in stark contrast to Pauline's invisibility: "I was fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible […] to the men […]. I blended into the stained brown walls" (Erdrich 2004, 15–16). In the defining male gaze Pauline is framed as an absence, a negation, and it is within this sexual politics that she becomes the gazing subject. As Cornell puts it, Pauline "takes up a position that in a male authored order belongs solely to men: she demands the equality of continuing gaze, the privilege of being a constitutive subject" (1992, 52). Compared to Fleur, Pauline has a narrative voice in the story, making her a subject with agency over her own narration and observations about the world. If Fleur is an object of male lust, Pauline claims the right to gaze for herself and under her conditions by confronting the objectifying male gaze: "With her clothes gone, I saw all the bones pushing at my flesh. I tried to shut my eyes, but couldn't keep them closed, feeling that if I did not hold his gaze he could look at me any way he wanted" (Erdrich 2004, 73). In her sexual liaison with Napoleon, a man from the reservation, she meets his gaze and, as Cornell recognizes, refuses to be turned into an abstraction. This turns Napoleon's lust into scorn and the sexual act is thus disrupted (1992, 55). As Pauline does not submit and wilfully asserts her right to gaze, she challenges the male position of power and drives the relationship to an abrupt end: "So we pressed together with our eyes open, staring like adversaries, but we did not go through with it after all. He stopped for some reason, nothing we said or did but like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison in its food" (Erdrich 2004, 73).

In the following episode Pauline again takes charge of the situation. Because she is jealous of the relationship between Fleur and Eli and because Eli rejects her advances, Pauline devises a fiendish plan to have his body indirectly. She chooses Sophie as her victim, a young girl whom Pauline lives with on the reservation and has some measure of influence over. The whole affair culminates in a moment of ultimate instrumentalization, as Pauline makes Eli and Sophie her puppets: "They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits" (Erdrich 2004, 84). Pauline uses a love potion, psychological manipulation, and clever planning to excite lust in Sophie and Eli and indulge her own voyeuristic proclivities. She orchestrates the sexual act, at first only observing it entranced but later inhabiting Sophie's body: "[Pauline] entered [Sophie] and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself" (2004, 83). Eli and Sophie's instrumentalization is underscored by the phrase "cut from puppet strings" (2004, 84), when Pauline finally allows them to stop. Pauline therefore maintains the control over her sexuality here as well, albeit in an insidious and perverse manner. She consciously withdraws from the masculine world of female erotization, where she has no place due to the constitutive male gaze, and affirms her own agency – Pauline is a subject with desires rather than an object of desire.

Pauline's deception breaks off the relationship between Fleur and Eli. Fleur consistently rejects Eli's apologies, which Van Dyke sees as an expression of her sexual power, arguing that by

ignoring his pleas she is disciplining and keeping him in check (1999, 133). However, any agency she might appear to muster is grievously undermined, even trivialized, in the same manner as at the beginning of the novel. Eli receives advice from Nanapush on how to work himself back into Fleur's good graces, which is what finally happens. Fleur is reduced to an object once more, all that is needed for her submission are knowledge and cunning. Though both Fleur and Pauline are presented as the abject, their position in the realm of sexual objectification is different. The seemingly empowered Fleur is firmly planted in the framework of male domination and sexual gaze, while Pauline takes up a position beyond it. Yet Pauline's empowerment is only temporary, since in her desire to fit in during a time of inexorable social transformation she willingly and wholeheartedly submits to the patriarchal gaze of religion. Her body becomes a key site of colonial dominion, which seeks in various ways and through various means to subjugate, assimilate, and even wipe out the Native community.

If Fleur mounts an open assault on the forces of colonialism and patriarchy, Pauline acts otherwise. In the desire to empower herself, in part due to her marginalized position in the tribal community, she clings to the colonists' religion – Christianity. Ironically, Christian monasticism turns away Native women despite the doctrine of love and equality at its core (Erdrich 2004, 138), thereby facilitating white domination and racial segregation. The institutional infantilization of Natives, justified by the Christian notion that they are in need of help and enlightenment, caused the traditional tribal systems to disintegrate and thus played a part in the colonial enterprise. Pauline understands well that Christian equality is underpinned by whiteness and takes her fanaticism to a radical level of self-loathing, having convinced herself that God revealed to her that she has not a drop of Native blood, despite her looks (Erdrich 2004, 137). That self-denial and transformation are at the core of the Christian calling is also reflected in the practice of assuming a new name upon taking one's vows. Pauline thus becomes Sister Leopolda. Both names hint at her warped character, Morace points out, "Her names suggest her perverted nature, the one a reminder of a misogynist saint (his loathing for women transformed into her self-loathing), the other (from *Love Medicine*) an echo of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and index of her masochistic (and later sadistic) personality" (1999, 51). Pauline willingly subjects her body to a masochistic version of Christianity in an effort to prove her unshakable faith and at the same time efface all bodily signifiers linking her to the Native people. Her attempts to purge her body of unwhiteness through drastic means such as inflicting pain on herself and depriving herself of food instil in her a sense of superiority and she makes it her mission to save the tribal community from the devil that she sees embodied in the lake monster Misshepeshu and indirectly also in Fleur. In one of the novel's neofantastic episodes, Pauline decides to deal with the lake monster once and for all and then enter a convent. She confronts Misshepeshu on the lake shore, using a rosary to strangle the devil, but it turns out to be her ex-lover Napoleon. She feels no remorse, since she is convinced that she destroyed Misshepeshu and with it the Native community on the reservation (which Erdrich's subsequent novels disprove). Pauline is no doubt a controversial character, at once characterized as "death's bony whore" (Erdrich 2004, 86) and a saint (2004, 164). Her body and actions recall the violence of Christianization, which brings about destruction and death under the pretence of love and egalitarianism. Pauline's abused and tortured body becomes a living reminder of the institutional indoctrination, which was one of the primary mechanisms of colonization and the deliberate near eradication of Native Americans.

4 Conclusion

In *Tracks* Louise Erdrich portrays with sensitive precision the inexorable disintegration of the Native community driven by the imperialist forces of capitalism and patriarchy. The complexity of social change that violently inscribes itself upon the female body and circumscribes her agency in the community is articulated through Fleur and Pauline, who are less opposites of each other than strugglers against the same forces that push them into a marginalized and silenced position. They both dwell in a liminal social space, the margins, the abject. As the "midwife of death" Pauline keeps crossing into the realm of the dead, while Fleur enters a mythical space through the lake monster Misshepeshu. Enhanced through the use of magical realism, their animality and monstrosity function as a clever trope that makes us recognize a liminal femininity trapped in a social order that sought to violently subjugate it. Unfortunately, the struggle against social inequality and white domination in some instances turns into a reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, and colonization. The collective enforcing of gender inequality in some parts of the text takes its toll, and the subversive potential occasionally turns out to be a non-transcended binarism.

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