

MATERNAL BODIES, OJIBWE HISTORIES, AND MATERIALITY IN THE NOVELS AND
MEMOIRS OF LOUISE ERDRICH

by

JODI BAIN MCCORMACK

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ABSTRACT

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Jodi Bain McCormack, MA

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Supervising Professor: Kenneth Roemer

This thesis examines uterine metaphors and birthing scenes in the novels and memoirs of Louise Erdrich. Specifically, it examines convergences between these images and material feminisms, as well as Ojibwe spirituality and ontology. Within these images and metaphors, Erdrich critiques personal, family and gender boundaries and also the nature/culture divide and even ideas which separate birth and death. It begins with actual birthing scenes in her texts, then moves to metaphors and similes which birth or maternity is implied. This thesis uses feminist theories by Alaimo, Harraway, Hekman and Irigaray and also science study scholars like Bruno Latour and Andrew Pickering. Additionally, it applies texts by Basil Johnston and Victor Barnouw which examine Ojibwe stories and spirituality. The thesis argues that within the convergences between material feminism and Ojibwe spirituality, Erdrich offers an interesting critique of Western ontology.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Maternal Bodies, Ojibwe Histories, and Materiality in the Novels and Memoirs of Louise Erdrich

How come we've got these bodies? They are frail supports for what we feel. There are times I get so hemmed in by my arms and legs I look forward to getting past them. As though death will set me free like a traveling cloud. I'll get past the ragged leaves that dead bum of my youth looked into. I'll be out there as a piece of endless body of the world feeling pleasures so much larger than skin and bones and blood. (Erdrich, Love Medicine 287)

Erdrich's canon encompasses all kinds of bodies: dying bodies, dead bodies, animal bodies, bodies of water, gestating bodies, birthing bodies, drunk bodies, deceptively agile aging nun's bodies, and even cars, houses and airplanes that behave like gestating bodies. While much has been made of Erdrich's literary corpus, gestating and birthing bodies in her texts have never been examined fully. I hope to provide one way to answer Lulu's Nanapush's question "How come we've got these [gestating] bodies?"

Introduction: Gestating Bodies and Materiality

In this thesis, I will examine birthing scenes and uterine images in the North Dakota Saga narratives of Louise Erdrich as well as The Blue Jay's Dance and The Books and Islands of Ojibwe Country. I will argue that within these images and birth scenes, Erdrich accesses a valuable critique of the effects of Euro-American patriarchal hegemony. Within the birthing scenes and womb images, I will examine how the womb, Ojibwe history and culture, and the surrounding ecology add to such a critique. This study is primary for four reasons. First, it is a unique endeavor. To date, no extensive examination of the corporeal images in Erdrich's texts

has been published. Erdrich has a prolific canon that ranges from poetry, to fiction, to nonfiction. Her texts are taught on college campuses across America (Jacobs, Approaches 4). Therefore, any study of these images can only aid understanding of her texts. Secondly, I will argue that these images link to a material feminist approach, which is currently being constructed and formed. Professors Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's Material Feminisms offers new ways to view materiality that illuminate Erdrich's uterine images and birthing scenes. These images are not stationary; but like the theories outlined in Material Feminisms, they are changing, and branch out into the surrounding ecology creating a complex critique of white patriarchal hegemony. Because this approach is new and offers an expansion of ideas of post modern feminists like Judith Butler and her breakthrough Gender Trouble, and corporeal approaches like those put forth by Elizabeth Grosz in Volatile Bodies, examining the links between Erdrich's texts new feminist ideas and paradigms is worthwhile. Thirdly, I will posit that a material feminist approach can help to fill the "indigenous feminist" void in Native American theory as identified by Paula Gunn Allen in "Kochinnenako in Academe" and by Shari Huhndorf in the PMLA.¹ Allen's germinal essay highlights the need for a tribal-feminist approach in obtaining the best possible reading of a story. She argues that combining feminism and tribalism "allows an otherwise overlooked insight into the complex interplay of factors" (2109). According to Huhndorf's essay, gender studies is the most neglected area of scholarship in Native American theory (1627). Erdrich's texts are fertile ground to begin filling this void. Finally, the womb images in Erdrich's texts are especially noteworthy because the womb has offered a salvation to Native Americans. Like all humanity, Native Americans are born of woman and womb. But, because of white European world-views, Native Americans were almost extinct in the 20th century (Ruoff 1). So many Native Americans were lost to diseases and war that their presence today is nothing short of miraculous. Erdrich is a survivor, as are all Native

¹ See also American Indian Quarterly's special section on Native Feminisms, and Coming to

Americans alive today. The importance of their very existence adds a poignancy to the images in her texts.

Because Erdrich has a prolific canon that is widely embraced inside and outside the academy, there is an ample amount of scholarship concerning her work. In Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich, editors Greg Sarris, Connie A. Jacobs, and James R. Giles have compiled extensive bibliographies and essays for American literature instructors regarding Erdrich's work. The book outlines critical approaches to her texts as well as her Ojibwe heritage and how it can be traced in her novels. However, it does not contain any lengthy study of womb images in her texts. Connie A. Jacobs wrote The Novels of Louise Erdrich: Stories of her People. Jacobs comes very close to examining Erdrich's womb images and the connection to her text, arguing that Fleur's bear human transformation has some relation to "Ojibwa's term for first menstruation, 'going to be a bear'"; however, she stops short there (Jacobs 157). Hertha Wong's Love Medicine: A Casebook, offers an interesting examination of the text. Although she does examine some aspects of feminism, the essays do not examine the uterine images and birthing metaphors. In fact, Allan Chavkin's essay in the text examining the two editions of Love Medicine makes no mention of how the additions to the second text both have lengthy womb images. His focus is authorial control over the text. Hertha Wong also has written an essay, "Adoptive Mothers and Thrown-Away Children in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" in Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities edited by Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy. In this essay, Wong argues that patriarchal hegemony has disrupted the paradigm of peace among mothers and children in traditional Ojibwe practices, and this disruption has led to instances of inadequate mothering in Erdrich's texts. She examines scenes of mothering and memories of maternity within; however, she does not examine the images of Marie gestating Zelda and Gordie. Other books written about her texts

include: Peter G. Beidler and Gay Barton's A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich and Allan Chavkin's The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich. Beidler and Barton have created an extensive categorization of Erdrich's texts, and as such, they also have categorized the labor scenes. However, they do not take the analysis any further, nor do they extrapolate any meaning from the detailed labor scenes, nor do they catalogue the metaphors or symbolic birth/gestation scenes. Chavkin and Chavkin's book, Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, contains interviews with Erdrich and Dorris primarily discussing their collaboration. Although Erdrich discusses maternity to a very small degree in the interviews, she shies away from discussing her children or her experience as a mother at length in any of the Chavkin and Chavkin interviews. In Feminist Readings of Native American Literature: Coming to Voice, Kathleen Donovan does not address Erdrich's texts, although she does examine other Native American women writers like Joy Harjo and Paula Gunn Allen.

Two articles published in Studies in American Indian Literature come very close to discussing materiality in Erdrich's womb and uterine images. In "Blurs, Blends, Berdaches: Gender Mixings in the Novels of Louise Erdrich," Julie Barak explores the role of the trickster character Nanapush and his symbolic gestation of Lulu Nanapush in Tracks. She examines the role of storytelling in the exchange more than the actual corporeal images. Mary Chapman's "'The Belly of this Story': Storytelling and Symbolic Birth in Native American Fiction," examines how men in Erdrich's texts as well as other Native American texts can use corporeal language to create. And, while both Barak and Chapman identify corporeal images and discuss how they relate to Native American theory, neither examines nor links it to a material feminist approach. Further investigation of the critical novels and articles reveal a gap in the identification and examination of the birth images and uterine metaphors. The special issue of SAIL (9.1) on Love Medicine makes no mention of materiality or of the significance of the birth images and womb metaphors in the text, nor does it note that the major scenes added in the second edition

contain these images. In SAIL (3.4)², Jeanne Smith's article "Transpersonal Selfhood" examines Lipsha's rebirth at the end of Love Medicine. Smith links his gestation of the Mauser baby to his search for identity. Essays in the spring 1992 edition of SAIL (4.1)³ do not trace the possibilities brought forth in these images. One of the articles does outline Fleur and Lulu's relationship with the Missupeshu, but the article doesn't link this bloodline to Lipsha Morrissey, nor his possible gestation by the water monster in Bingo Palace. Also of note is the June 2008 edition of American Indian Quarterly (60.2) which focuses on Native Feminisms, but makes no mention of Erdrich or her womb images. The lack of attention to wombs and materiality is puzzling, and strongly suggests that this study is overdue.

Equally interesting is the gap in feminist studies and its material linkage to Native American texts and histories. Alaimo alone makes the Native American connection in her essay and introduction in Material Feminisms. Paula Gunn Allen's The Sacred Hoop does approach Native American religion and beliefs from a gynocratic point of view. Her interpretations and conclusions have been strongly critiqued because of her dogged assertion that Native American religions are based primarily in gynocratic traditions. Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born offers an examination of motherhood in Western societies as well as motherhood in indigenous societies. She begins to grapple with the differences between motherhood in America and motherhood before America. Other feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Luce Irigaray do not mention Native Americans in their feminist critiques. Women as well as American Indians have suffered an essentialist trope which situates them as wild—women for their ability to reproduce and Native Americans for their closeness to nature—and thus needing to be tamed by oppression. Alaimo's Undomesticated Ground offers an interesting examination of the importance of nature to feminist theory, and this intersection's relationship to

² A special issue on Louise Erdrich, part 1.

³ A special issue on Louise Erdrich, part 2.

Native American theory. Alaimo advocates a return to nature as a possible critique of Euro-American hegemony, instead of fearing nature's linkage to essential tropes about women and Native Americans.

Erdrich's fiction and memoirs offer a complex glimpse into a world where Ojibwe history foregrounds the lives of the characters, and even her own life as it is recorded in her memoirs The Blue Jay's Dance and Islands and Books of Ojibwe Country. According to Alaimo and Hekman, a material feminist approach examines the convergences of feminism, history, culture and the environment (7). In her books, convergences like this occur: bears break into birthing scenes and facilitate safe deliveries; Missupeshu, the water monster, possibly impregnates Fleur and helps gestate Lipsha after he is thrown in a slough; males gestate infants and children and save their lives; and prison walls, old farm houses, trunks of cars, and McMansions give birth to characters. In an interview with Mother Jones magazine, Erdrich says she writes in a "big tangle of relationships" in a nonlinear way, and that ultimately these relationships and ideas create a "quilt, a crazy quilt" (102). With this tangle in mind, I have chosen a material feminist approach to examine the tangle of relationships and to view the womb and birth imagery delicately stitched in the "crazy quilt" of her narratives. This approach works best for many reasons. First, in Material Feminisms, Alaimo and Hekman argue that physical bodies can "beckon us toward a more complex understanding of how the personal, the political, and the material are braided together" (16). Erdrich's textual bodies do this by braiding together femininity, her Ojibwe history, and nature. Within this approach, the braid of history and birthing narratives can be examined. Her texts are classified as Native American texts, and even she acknowledges in The Blue Jay's Dance that the Ojibwe world view is closest to her own belief (26). According to Alaimo and Hekman, "material feminists explore the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology and the 'environment,' *without privileging* any one of these elements" (*italics mine* 7). This equality when examining the Ojibwe history and cultures

and the feminist nature of these images provides an opportunity to gain the best possible critique. Craig Womack argues for a tribal approach to Native American literature in Red on Red. He argues that the blank in Native theories for approaching texts comes from “not looking enough at our home cultures” (13). I agree that it would be insufficient to examine the birthing scenes and womb images out of this Ojibwe context. And, to that end, I will cite observations recorded by Basil Johnston, Howard Anderson, and Victor Barnouw concerning Ojibwe history, culture and spirituality.

A material feminist approach advocates a return to the material reality of women’s bodies while rejecting the essentialism that equates weakness with the ability to gestate and give birth. According to Alaimo and Hekman, “Women have bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure. We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit” (4). Because the womb images and birthing scenes are common in the North Dakota Saga as well as her memoirs, there is a danger of returning to an essentialist view of women that wrongly asserts that motherhood is the only natural way for a woman to view herself and her environment. Within a material feminist approach, the images can be examined and mined for meaning while rejecting the trope that a woman has value in Western society because of her womb’s resources: babies. Also, a material feminist approach acknowledges that bodies are socially constructed, but rejects the “anti-essentialist female body snatcher” view of post modernism (Zita 786). In fact, material feminists argue that the body can be a source of inspiration and a muse for women without the body becoming the very definition of femininity. Alaimo and Hekman argue, “Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substances from consideration” (4). Alaimo also argues that this bodily form is not always perfect, and is permeable to the environment and toxins surrounding it. Within this “transcorporeal” body (a term Alaimo has coined), a greater critique of the negative physical realities of western patriarchal hegemony can

gestate to create a strong critique of such truths. According to Alaimo, “Crucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from this literal “contact zone” between human corporeality and more than human nature” (238). I hope to show how Erdrich’s textual bodies exemplify this contact zone, and within this transcorporeal space Alaimo has identified, they join the critique of patriarchal hegemony. Therefore, the return to physical bodies material feminist offer is crucial to this examination of womb metaphors and birthing scenes.

As I earlier suggested, material feminism is not about boundaries, but rather a transgression of binaries and boundaries to access the best possible critiques. Of particular note are boundaries between humans and extrahuman life and things. Nancy Tuana has argued that “what is often desperately need is at the intersection between things and people...between experiences and bodies” (189). I will argue that Erdrich advocates intersection between people and nonhuman animals, life and death, and even animate and inanimate. Material feminism has begun the theoretical work of examining these transgressions and intersections. I want to apply this material work to Erdrich’s texts and begin to examine the mixing of wombs, Native American theory, and the surrounding ecology to critique Euro-American ontology and epistemology. I hope to argue that Erdrich’s transgression of boundaries and mixing of ways of being and knowing create a strong critique that can only add to Native American Theory as well as Material Feminist theory.

Finally, material feminists seem to privilege a view of nature that overlaps with Native American ideas of nature. This relationship is explored in Alaimo’s Undomesticated Ground. According to Alaimo, Leslie Marmon Silko among other women writers are wary of viewing nature as a screen, and “search for ways to write nature that do not place it as a back drop to anthropocentric tales” (Alaimo 37). I will argue that for Erdrich, nature isn’t merely a backdrop to maternal scenes, rather the womb images and birthing scenes branch out and intertwine themselves with nature, ripping a gaping hole in the nature as a backdrop trope. Donna

Haraway further critiques Euro-American views of nature, animals and women in “Otherworldly conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms.” She argues that animals and women have suffered similarly at the hands of patriarchal hegemony. “But the kind of “not subject, not human, therefore object” that animals are made to be is also not unlike the status occupied by women within patriarchal logics and histories” (175). In other words, in the same way that women were denied agency, so are animals now. Material feminists argue that a change in understanding of nature is necessary and compulsory to avoid a further demise of our planet. This understanding is especially poignant because American Indians were seen as “animals” in the past. This resulted in moving an entire race of people onto reservations. For Erdrich, animals and even rocks are nature and thus should be understood to have characteristics not unlike humans. In The Books and Islands of Ojibwe Country, she said that once she realized rocks were animate, she began to wonder if she picked a rock up, or if it placed itself in her hand (86). Rocks are so revered according to Erdrich they are called “grandfather” (86). According to Victor Barnow, “The Ojibwe have a reciprocal relationship with nature”(56). Haraway seems to advocate for this type of relationship in Material Feminism. She argues, “We have to strike up a coherent conversation where humans are not the measure of all things” (174). Perhaps this coherent conversation might start by acknowledging a stone as “grandfather” and wondering how it came to rest in one’s human hands instead of wondering how on earth we can crush it to produce energy, or items for consumption or sale. At any rate, I believe examining the convergences between Ojibwe views of nature, material feminist views on nature, and how they are braided together within the womb images and birthing scenes of Erdrich’s texts is a worthwhile study.

The Plan

I will begin with the actual birthing scenes in her texts, as well as scenes where insinuated rebirths or actual birth offer salvation or signify feminine power. In this way, I hope to

set up a baseline for the womb images, and to show how Erdrich demonstrates female gestation as powerful instead of as a weakness. It is important to begin with these images. First, Euro-American patriarchy sees female gestation qualities as denoting weakness. Robbie Davis-Floyd argues that “the female body is viewed as abnormal, unpredictable, and an inherently defective machine” (53). Erdrich contradicts this. Also, it is important to begin here because the uterine metaphors and birthing scenes have never been examined in full. These scenes will lay the ground work for the more metaphorical scenes, which will follow. I have categorized the actual scenes as transgression of personal boundaries. I will examine how Erdrich transgresses personal boundaries and basic Western understandings of birth, gender and the gestating body. Within this transgression, Erdrich critiques these past understandings and offers new ways to view maternity and the personal relationships therein. She also taps into long-held feminist concept that gender is fluid by allowing men to metaphorically gestate infants—a boundary that has never been biologically transgressed. Catherine Rainwater acknowledges that Erdrich “deconstructs...gender norms” (275). I will argue that within the deconstructions, she seeks to redefine notions of family and gender, by accessing the bi-gender characteristics of the Ojibwe trickster character Nanabozo, who shares characteristics with both male and female characters. The second section will examine how Erdrich transgresses boundaries between people and the surrounding ecology and environment. I will highlight the metaphorical turn in her texts which endows womb-like characteristics to entities who receive no agency. In this turn, science studies and theories by Andrew Pickering and Bruno Latour will help illuminate her texts. The final section will examine transgressions of life and death within the womb. For the Ojibwe, life and death is a thin line that trickster characters and others can cross and recross. Also, for the Ojibwe birth and death are on the same continuum. In Western epistemologies, life and death is a boundary that is very clear, with few if any ever recrossing between the two domains. To understand death in hospitals and societies, humans are hooked

up to computers which clearly indicate “life” or “death.” For Erdrich, this boundary is much more fluid, a topic Alaimo discusses in the section, “Toxic Bodies” and Bost addresses in her essay “From Race/Sex/Ect. To Glucose, Feeding Tube, and Mourning” in Material Feminisms.

The Baseline: Erdrich’s Powerfully Pregnant Corpus

The transgression of Western viewpoints of women, infants and gestation is important and defining to this study. For Erdrich the female ability to reproduce and care for others is an indication of power and not weakness. In fact, Erdrich argues that the female biology can be a source of inspiration.. Adrienne Rich’s experience as a mother prompted her to write Of Woman Born. She argues that “female biology—the diffuse, intense sexuality radiating out from the clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina...the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body has much more radical implication than we have yet come to appreciate” (39). According to Rich, a woman’s power as it manifests in childbirth should be revered; she rejects returning to the patriarchal view of this ability (85). Hippocrates viewed the womb and gestation as prison-like, arguing that the maturing fetus was forced to abandon the dark cavern...and to search for a way out (Adams 9). Freud, too, argued that dreams “which are frequently full of anxiety and often have for content the traversing of narrow spaces, or staying long in the water, are based upon fantasies concerning intra-uterine life, the sojourn in the mother’s womb” (Freud 435). For Freud, woman was nothing more than a holding vessel that launched man’s sojourn early in life, and later a catalyst for his fetishes. Lynne Huffer critiques this view in her book Maternal Pasts, Feminists Futures. She argues woman “becomes a performance of nature, an act of the maternal event of copulation, pregnancy, and birth...that in fact never really happened” (61). Erdrich, like Huffer and Rich, sees this “performance of nature” differently than Hippocrates.

Erdrich’s Ojibwe heritage has set up a different paradigm which situates a woman’s ability to give life as the beginning of the world. According to a retelling of Ojibwe creation

stories by Basil Johnston,⁴ the Ojibwe have numerous stories about the beginning of the world, including one about Nokomis, in which Nokomis decides to give birth so she won't be alone (36). Nokomis's birthing story denotes the beginning of the Ojibwe people. In another creation story, Sky Woman asks Kitche Manitou to dispel her loneliness, so he sends a companion who leaves her before she gives birth. Her gestating body eventually comes to rest on the back of a turtle. Then, she asks some animals to retrieve earth, so she can make a home on the turtle's back where she can rear her children. Thus the gestating female body and subsequent impending birth becomes the impetus for the creation of earth. According to the retelling, the animals bring gifts to Sky Woman, who "infuses each with her life-giving breath" (37). According to Johnston, Ojibwe "Women were fulfilled by giving life through the first mother" (37). While this is an essential view of women, it is important that the Ojibwe see the ability to gestate and create as a positive attribute.

The Ojibwe creation story contrasts the Judeo-Christian creation story in one version of Genesis, in which man is first, and through man woman is created. Woman is subsequently cursed with a painful childbirth because of her transgression in the garden. Rich describes this view as "The mother bear(ing) the weight of Eve's transgression (is thus the first offender, the polluted one, the polluter)" (44). For the Ojibwe, and perhaps for Erdrich, Sky Woman is the catalyst for populating the earth, and as such, all women are honored for giving life. A study by Dodgson and Struthers also notes that the Ojibwe "worldview is quite different than the European based mainstream American world view" (56). According to this study, which examined traditional breastfeeding practices among the Ojibwe, "women are considered particularly powerful during their menstrual cycle...and women come into their real power during the postmenopausal period. Thus, grandmothers were considered wise and powerful" (57). The Ojibwe have a very different epistemology about femininity, which denotes power in their

⁴ This particular retelling by Johnston is in a religious dialogue recorded by Howard Anderson.

menstruating, aging and even pregnant bodies. This is quite different than patriarchal views, which see woman through Eve the transgressor and polluter of mankind paradigm.

The womb and power to gestate is also important to indigenous tribes for tribal survival purposes, a point made by Patricia Hill Collins in her essay "Shifting the Center" in Representations of Motherhood. She argues that "The children of women of color have no assurances" of their children's physical survival (61). She cites a study on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in the 1970s, in which 38 percent of all pregnancies resulted in miscarriages before the fifth month because of contaminated water supplies (61). This dismal record could surely be applied to other tribes, including the Ojibwe. Survival is a theme Erdrich capitalizes on in The Last Report of Miracles at Little No Horse. The story, which begins on page 95, finds a group of Ojibwe on the edge of decimation due to European diseases. "The spirit killed so many of us that when the dead were counted it was found that we survivors numbered less than a quarter of our camp." LaVonne Brown Ruoff confirms that American Indians were almost extinct at the end of the twentieth century (1). According to The Last Report of Miracles at Little No Horse:

A wiser woman, strong and powerful, stood upright and spoke...There were some who looked shocked, who protested, who were surprised that she would exhort the women to make babies in their sorrow, to order the men to stand up their wiinagag, to endeavor to valiantly procreate until they dropped. But, as she had always been a faithful and virtuous woman they listened to her...She argued that the Creator gave his people the Ojibwe a special love skill that they could always use in times of crisis...That very night, she picked the strongest and handsomest young man left among the people. That young man, Mirage was his name, did a lot of work, but the women kept him fed and warm and they all got pregnant. (Erdrich 95-96)

Gestative powers directly become a salvation to the diminishing Ojibwe tribe. In no way does this characteristic limit a woman's power or position in Ojibwe society, both real and

represented in The Last Report of Miracles at Little No Horse. Instead, the womb offers a salvation and a way to ameliorate the illness which has decimated the tribe. The theme of survival is important to all American Indian literature, as Dr. Kenneth Roemer acknowledges. He argues “One of the hallmarks of the best American Indian writing is an unflinching awareness of the impact of tragic losses and a persistent articulation, even celebration, of the good stories of survival” (12). Erdrich celebrates female reproduction as an articulation of this survival. Ironically, Erdrich allows men to have access to this gestative power. Gestation as a locus of power and inspiration frequently occurs in Erdrich’s canon, and especially in The Blue Jay’s Dance. Erdrich argues that that “Women are strong, strong, terribly strong. We don’t know how strong we are until we’re pushing out our babies. We are too often treated like babies having babies when we should be in training, like novices to a high priesthood, like serious applicants for the space program” (12). According to Rich, other indigenous peoples—the Zuni—also viewed the gestating body as a source of power and not weakness. Rich argues that the power “was not over others, but a transforming power, was the truly significant and essential power” (99). Erdrich acknowledges a similar view of this saving, transforming power in Four Souls, when Nanapush speaks to the tribe while wearing a dress Margaret has painstakingly created using no tools or materials touched by a white man. He says that while wearing this dress, a feminine power speaks to him, and argues that the very earth he walks on identifies with the female power to reproduce:

You are walking on my beautiful body. And I allow it—not because you are a human and not because you are a man—but because you were *born of woman*. I, the earth, respect a woman’s pain as it is freely given to the service of life...Hear me out, you poor, split creature! Poor man, decorated with a knob and a couple of balls! You’re only here on my patience and on the patience of women. What would you do, the earth asked me laughingly, if all women of the world closed their legs to men? Die out, that’s

what. So with my generous nature. I have given you all that you have. You owe your life to me....I turned to my relatives, my people, and opened my arms wide. "What have we given her? (156 italics mine)

Ironically, this critique is conveyed by a man—although, as I will later discuss, he is a man who has the power to gestate and nurture others. The earth argues that if women did not have babies, humanity would die out. This is a biological truth that has long been ignored by Euro-American patriarchy. The Ojibwe creation stories give proper honor to women for their life-giving power. The Ojibwe, as well as other indigenous American tribes, have witnessed the horror of the world with a dramatically declining population. In this way, Nanapush's speech shows how "Bodies signify differently in a culture that values communal interdependence and divine intervention more than individuals" (Bost 346). Nanapush directly appeals to the tribe while speaking for the body of mother earth. Mother Earth gains her authority to offer such a critique because of the power located in the feminine ability to reproduce. A world view which honors women for their gestation and birth giving characteristics is foreign to Euro-American patriarchy and some feminists. And, the Ojibwe tribe Nanapush is addressing has begun to see the earth more as a subject than as an entity with agency. Nanapush begins to call the tribe back to the communal interdependence by invoking the body of a woman and its relation to earth. This critique is an excellent example of how Erdrich channels the body of woman and her reproductive abilities as well as her Ojibwe heritage to critique Euro-American hegemony. According to Alaimo and Hekman, material feminists examine the "convergence of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology and the environment without privileging any one of these elements" (Material Feminisms 7). Erdrich via Nanapush, has explored and critiqued the interaction of a patriarchal culture on nature and biology. In this way Erdrich "beckons us to a deeper understanding" of the life giving and sustaining abilities women possess (Alaimo and Hekman Material Feminisms 16).

Erdrich argues that “Birth is intensely spiritual and physical all at once...There is no giving up this physical prayer” (The Blue Jay’s Dance 44). For Erdrich, this physical prayer reveals inner strength in a person. The concept that the body—especially the female body giving birth—should offer inspiration and be a source of salvation and strength, directly contradicts paradigms like Freud and Hippocrates, and even Plato. According to Elizabeth Grosz in Volatile Bodies, Plato argued that “the body is the betrayal of and a prison for the soul, reason, or mind...it is evident for Plato that reason should rule over the body” (5). Further, “Plato imagined maternity as mere housing, receptacle of nurse of being rather than coproducer” (5). Because of such negative views of body and maternity, some feminists like Judith Butler and others have retreated from the body, giving the female body to patriarchal hegemony in trying to escape the truth that “The woman’s body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (Rich 55). By leaving the body, these feminists also leave the *erected* patriarchy. But, for Erdrich, the body—especially the gestating human body, can be a source for salvation and inspiration. In this way, they transgress the negative views of the body in search of a “new settlement, a new way of understanding the relationship between discourse and matter” (Alaimo and Hekman 6). Other examples of Erdrich’s views abound in her text. In Tales of Burning Love, Anna Schlick saves her daughter Eleanor in two womb-like spaces. In the first, Eleanor is trapped in a burning house. Anna, a former trapeze artist, literally walks a tight rope to save her. Once she is secure, and they jump out the window headed for safety, “As you fall, there is time to think. Curled as I was against her stomach, I was not startled by the cries of the crowd or the looming faces...I slowly wondered what would happen if we missed the blanket, or bounced out of it. Then I forgot fear...I heard the beat of her heart in my ears—loud as thunder, long as the roll on the drums” (216). Eleanor remains curled against her mother’s stomach, and can only hear the beat of her heart as they head toward the blanket which will cushion their fall from the burning house. Eleanor returns to the womb, and Anna’s

body becomes for a second time a location of salvation for Eleanor. Later, as Anna's marriage is falling apart, Anna seeks to comfort Eleanor.

As she moved back and forth in that quiet rhythm a penetrating sweetness assailed me. She was happy, tremendously happy, and I could feel her lightness. The two of us were floating in the chair. The intuition of her joy came on as a kind of blue and oceanic feeling, but it was sharp, as well, and it flashed through each nerve and left me lighted as though I lay in a dry electric field still pulsing with friction. Before birth, in just this way, our mother's joy translates into us, sinking cell by cell into the body, forming mind, providing a hinge of differentiation. (226)

Both Eleanor and Anna come to gestate in a womb-like environment provided by Anna's physical nurturing. Instead of imagining a confining, closing cave, Erdrich, via Eleanor, imagines gestation as a place of joy and peace. This peaceful place bears no resemblance to the constricting wombs imagined by Freud, Plato nor of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir⁵, who reject maternity and mothering as an imprisonment of the mother⁶.

Anna and Eleanor are not the only characters in Tales of Burning Love who find transforming power and salvation in the gestating womb. When Marlis discovers she is pregnant with Jack Mauser's child, she begins to understand her own self as more powerful. Instead of going to sleep in self pity, a voice comforts her. "The baby, I think at first. But no, it is different. It is me who calms me down. Me who says *You are something. You are a protector. You are a mother. Giving life is sexier than fucking Jack. Live it, baby live it!* ...I sleep like an aquarium bubbling in stillness holding safe my little fish" (324). The pregnancy has changed Marlis and made her stronger. Erdrich notes that it is not the baby calming Marlis, but

⁵ In Interviews with Simone de Beauvoir, she argues that maternity and motherhood make women slaves.

⁶ Although these feminists rightly assert that patriarchy has often exploited this desire to comfort and care for one's offspring.

Marlis who is more in control than she ever has been. In this way, Marlis's gestating body "beckons her forward to a better understanding" of the feminine power she possesses (Alaimo and Hekman 16). Instead of understanding maternity as "lashing us to our bodies," Erdrich argues that maternity can be a source of strength (Rich 13). This directly contradicts understandings of maternity by Euro-American philosophers which see maternity as weakness, and feminists like Judith Butler, who argue that the essential maternal trope, in which maternity is the essence of a woman's desire, is negative and should be rejected (125).

Erdrich ascends the notion of the maternal trope in Four Souls by giving Under the Ground power to save her daughter Anaquot from a horrible illness. Under the Ground was a healer in the Ojibwe tribe.⁷ For the purpose of viewing the womb as salvation, though, her healing of Anaquot is directly linked to her prior gestation of Anaquot. "That old woman's daughter lay next to her, close, curled the way she used to lie within her mother's body. The healer ached for her child's return. There was nothing...that she was not prepared to accomplish in order to save her girl" (52)⁸. Eventually, Anaquot does recover, and Under the Ground has provided a second womb of sorts to nurture her daughter back to life. Here, maternity is not the essence of Under the Ground's desire, but it offers her daughter a return to the womb as part of her healing situates gestation as a location of power instead of weakness.

⁷ I will discuss later how she gained all her healing knowledge, for this story also has a corporeal feel.

⁸ The strong desire has long been harnessed to lash women to their bodies. In this way, theorists like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler are correct in arguing that this relationship has long made slaves of women.

CHAPTER 2

USING BIRTHING SCENES TO TRANSGRESS PERSONAL, FAMILY AND GENDER BOUNDARIES

This transformative power branches out, and creates bonds and relationships between characters. Within this section, I will argue that Erdrich critiques notions about families, friendships, and that she offers a new way to view relationships. Specifically, in America, family units are scrutinized and critiqued. Family definitions are strictly mandated by law. One must only note the furor surrounding California's Proposition 9 to see evidence of such patriarchal power in defining American families. Erdrich critiques this view of relationships and families by providing many examples of families and bonds that in no way resemble an American nuclear family made up of one father, one mother, and obedient children. In this way, Erdrich transgresses the boundaries and definitions of families. According to Chris Rumsford's article "Theorizing Borders" which seeks to examine primarily physical landscape borders, he argues that examining borders and transgressions of borders can help us understand social boundaries. He argues that "Borders are no longer only national but may take many different forms" (156). Viewing familial relationships and their strict American definition as actual borders can be helpful; because, we can see how Erdrich harnesses the power of the female gestating body to transgress and thus critique these borders. First, I will start with relationships between women that become stronger because of a birth. Then, I will examine how Erdrich challenges gender norms by endowing three male characters, Lipsha, Nanapush, and Scranton Fox, with female gestation and lactation characteristics.

In a few notable delivery scenes, two people come together transgressing past boundaries that have separated them, in an effort to aid the delivery of a child, and create a

new, stronger relationship. This transgresses boundaries in a few ways. First, society argues that a baby is best delivered in a hospital by an obstetrician and nurses. Davis-Floyd identifies this phenomenon as “medicalization.” She argues medicalization is problematic because it situates the woman as weak and her body as needing patriarchal obstetrical control (38). Second, some relationships between women in our society are viewed as problematic; for example, relationships between mothers and daughters and mother-in-laws, relationships between women of different classes or races, and sexual relationships between women. Hertha Wong examines problematic relationships in “Adoptive Mothers.” She argues that problems between mothers and daughters in Erdrich’s texts originate because patriarchal hegemony has marginalized them (177). This is true, as Wong argues. However, I would like to show a few examples of the opposite, where birth leads two characters who have in the past opposed each other to a better relationship that moves past the tropes concerning relationships between women. Adrienne Rich argues that labors attended by women “can only have left their mark on the consciousness of any woman who witnessed them, underwent them, or heard them described” (133).⁹ She argues that historical women who attended labors and helped others are largely lost because of patriarchy (134). Luce Irigaray, in “When These Lips Speak Together” argues that women need a new language, a new way to relate to one another (82). Erdrich shows how this midwife relationship can facilitate a new language in Four Souls, when Polly Elizabeth becomes a midwife of sorts who saves Fleur’s son and possibly Fleur’s life. Polly Elizabeth states that she is drawn to Mauser’s house (after her sister Placide and Mauser divorce, and he remarries Fleur) by “the prospect of a baby” (62). When Polly Elizabeth discovers that Fleur might lose the baby, she immediately begins to research ways to ease Fleur’s preterm labor. She gives her whiskey to relax her muscles, which later becomes a huge

⁹ Although Erdrich does provide positive examples of midwives, it is important to note that Pauline—Sister Leopolda later, identified herself as a “midwife”, instead of offering Fleur help during her miscarriage, Fleur’s baby dies.

problem for Fleur. Polly Elizabeth then “gently elevates her hips, the child’s cradle, on some pillows” (64). As Fleur imbibes the whiskey, she “cries out Help Me! And straightaway, she caught my heart. To be needed by someone as strong as Fleur, even though at first glance I had despised her...that I might be able to help her grow the child...I realized I might cherish her” (65). When a male obstetrician arrives, he personifies American patriarchal hegemony, and calls Polly Elizabeth’s methods “crude” and states he will not treat Indians (65-66). Erdrich clearly combines Native American themes of racisms and patriarchal themes that a doctor will always know better than an unschooled stand-in midwife. Erdrich weaves together these themes and lets them matriculate in the physical body of a woman. In this way, she has “endowed biology, nature [and even culture and history] with flesh, allowing them to materialize more fully” (Alaimo Material Feminisms 241). Erdrich has transgressed many boundaries to create this critique, including class, race, and also nature, culture and history. Within this transgression, Erdrich begins to show a better ontology that rests on her Ojibwe heritage and in the body of one of her most celebrated characters—Fleur Pillager.

Eventually, Fleur delivers the baby safely, with the help of Polly Elizabeth, although he seems to suffer from fetal alcohol spectrum. Still, Fleur and Polly Elizabeth work together and create a friendship that transforms Polly Elizabeth in unexpected ways. The former prude and judgmental head of the Mauser house who once called Fleur a “squaw” has left that language behind and found love and friendship with Fleur and her child, and has found a romantic relationship with Fantan, Mauser’s helper. In other words, Polly Elizabeth has found an existence “beyond all appearances, all disguises, all designations” (Irigaray 89). When Polly Elizabeth finds out that Fleur is the last of her family, she proudly asserts “Well, she’s got me now...If she’ll have me, she’s got Miss Gheen” (130). A relationship that began when Fleur was Polly Elizabeth’s servant has now transformed, and is based in equality. This change in the relationships was specifically brought on by Fleur’s impending birth, and the trouble therein.

Therefore, Polly Elizabeth and Fleur have found a new way to exist and be “without models, standards or examples” (Irigaray 90). They have transgressed normal boundaries which might argue that a white woman and an Ojibwe healer searching for revenge should never be friends on an equal plane. The birth has facilitated this, and ironically, it has facilitated Fleur’s alcoholism. While Polly Elizabeth’s cure did create a bond, it would inaccurate not to acknowledge that Fleur does not escape unscathed. Later, she must contend with her dependence upon alcohol, which was brought on by Polly Elizabeth, who acknowledges “my cure was a curse” (122). In this way, Erdrich exemplifies that even within the notions of transgressed boundaries, the character’s actions are not always black and white, and not without repercussions.

Erdrich provides an example of a midwife and a mother-in-law assisting a difficult delivery in Love Medicine.¹⁰ In the scene, Marie Kashpaw is about to give birth to her last child. Her mother in law, Rushes Bear, whom she tries to throw out of the house because of Rushes Bear’s distemper, aids her delivery along with Fleur Pillager. According to Rich, who researched historical deliveries, “A woman would give birth with the help and moral support of the grandmother, a woman friend of relative, or a group of women” (131). This is precisely what happens for Marie. Marie refuses to go to a hospital, a place she was “afraid of” (Love Medicine 101). Davis-Floyd argues that women who are subject to medicalization in hospitals allow society to “take advantage of (a mother’s) extreme openness...and ensure that she will be imprinted with its most basic notions” (40). Marie escapes this imprintation and abuse by doctors who might have seen her birthing body as weak and thus needing medical intervention. In her home, she opens herself to Fleur and Rushes Bear, and thus a more tribal imprint occurs, despite her white heritage. In the midst of the delivery, Marie almost dies, but then sits up to

¹⁰ It is important to note that this story was added to the 1986 edition and was not in the original. This addition is important for its link to Erdrich’s own birthing stories in The Blue Jay’s Dance. It seems that this was added after Erdrich had biological children of her own.

cook a meal in which she “imagined that the three of us (Rushes Bear, Pillager, and Marie) ate together until we are satisfied” (103). This symbolizes how the three women are equals. In Western medicine, the doctor with his knowledge is above the nurse and the delivering mother. However, Erdrich points to a different epistemology, where each woman is an equal working toward a common goal. During the labor, Marie describes that she “clung to their voices, all I had, as they spoke to me in low tones, as they told me when to hold my breath and when to let it go” (103). Thus the three women have found a common language not unlike the language Irigaray promotes. Nector—Marie’s husband—underestimates the power of this language to forge bonds between the women, and offers to pay Fleur money, which she refuses. This shows a patriarchal viewpoint of obstetrics, where doctors are paid with money for their work. Nector, who lives in the white patriarchal world, understands the delivery differently than the three women. Rushes Bear states “You shame me. You never know that this birth was hard enough for her to die” (104). The asymmetry between Nector and the women who aided the delivery highlights the bond that is created by the women through Marie’s birthing body. Marie argues, “Before the birth of that child, a son after all, Rushes Bear was a hot fire that I wanted to crush. After that, things were different. I never saw her without knowing that she was my own mother, my own blood. What she did went beyond the frailer connections. More than saving my life, she put the shape of it back in place” (104). The connection is sparked by Marie’s difficult delivery. Within the body of a woman, with the aid of midwives, Erdrich shows that women can learn a new language that goes beyond patriarchy. Marie and Rushes Bear have found a new language that Nector obviously doesn’t understand. Irigaray argues finding this language is imperative: “If we don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story” (88). Marie and Rushes Bear have found a body language, based on Marie’s birthing body, and within that body and experience, they have found a new way to interact. Fleur’s Ojibwe medicine, as well as Rushes Bear’s nurturing of

Marie, has pointed to a better way, where meaning can be conveyed in a mixing of Ojibwe words, moans and sighs.

Erdrich further exemplifies the transformative power of the gestating female body to create relationships and families that critique the nuclear notion of families. In Tales of Burning Love, and The Beet Queen, Erdrich utilizes the gestating female body and motherhood to critique concepts like “motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms” (Rich 43). In Tales of Burning Love, Candice and Marlis, both Jack Mauser’s former wives, join together to birth and nurture Jack Mauser’s baby, despite the fact that Marlis is the one that is actually pregnant with his child. Candice stays with Marlis through her pregnancy and delivery, but both of them fail to recognize that they are beginning to create an unnuclear family. Candice argues that the very idea that she and Marlis might be in a lesbian relationship was “upsetting, faintly painful...Could the whole idea have some weird attraction? Was it weird? I’m from a normal family, whatever that means, but the whole idea, somehow felt normal too” (350). Candice sets up the concept of a lesbian family and then asks the question propelled by the heterosexual matrix: is this normal? Erdrich answers this question as Candice and Marlis make love for the first time; she describes Marlis’s body as being “so powerful it was a physical shock to her” (360). She further describes Marlis’s lactating breasts as streaming when she and Candice make love (359). As they care for the baby and nurture their new found relationship, Candice remembers “vaguely that she had once regarded what seemed entirely normal, now, as absurd, foreign, freakish. The baby lay between the two of them—he was a lovely little baby, with fine long fingers and dark coppery hair” (360). In this way, Erdrich uses the gestating, lactating, orgasmic female body and its offspring (a boy, ironically) to expand the concept of family. The picture is idyllic: two doting caregivers resting in bed with a baby between them. Erdrich seems to ask: in this picture, can you imagine two mothers? In this way, Erdrich has transgressed the

myth of a heterosexual matrix with the postpartum body of a mother, proving that she is a “writer interested in gender politics and the perspectives of female characters” (Rainwater 274).

Erdrich uses Celestine’s birthing body to facilitate another unnuclear family in The Beet Queen. When Celestine, pregnant with Karl Adare’s baby, goes into labor in a large snowstorm, she arrives at the house of Karl’s former lover, Wallace Pfef, in desperate need of help. Celestine’s situation is dire, and almost goes unnoticed by Wallace because of the howling storm winds that accompany the blizzard. Pfef argues, “Celestine and the baby could have died beneath my window while I read history. In the morning I would have found mother and baby huddled tight against my red snow fence like the foolish pheasants I sometimes find there” (152). Celestine is delivered from this horrible situation by a dog who hears her cries. While Celestine labors, Wallace becomes a midwife of sorts. He “boiled water, sterilized my best pair of shears. I made a bed for the baby. I warmed up washcloths and wrung out hot towels to wipe Celestine’s face” (153). Erdrich has again critiqued normative gender assumptions even some feminists are guilty of. For Rich, a midwife was normatively a woman. However, Wallace Pfef assumes the role of midwife for Celestine. As Celestine crowns, Wallace acknowledges that the surprise on her face is not unlike the surprise he saw on Karl’s face when Karl injures his back in their hotel room. Invoking Karl, the father of Celestine’s baby as well as Wallace’s former lover, seems to foreshadow the unnuclear family that is being created as Celestine labors with Dot. Eventually, Dot is born, with what Wallace describes more as effort than pain. Celestine promises to name the baby after Wallace—Wallacette. But Karl’s sister and Celestine’s best friend, Mary, nicknames her Dot and that name sticks.

Karl, his former lover’s Wallace and Celestine, and his sister Mary all comprise Dot’s family. Wallace has birthday parties for Dot and even fixes a Beet Queen contest so Dot will win, despite her anti-queen persona. Mary circles Dot and even roughs up her first grade teacher over a misunderstanding. And Karl pops in occasionally to check on Dot, and sends

gifts from his job as a travelling salesman. While totally unconventional and unnuclear, Dot's family is a loving one. Celestine, Mary, Wallace and even Karl love and nurture her. In this family, "mother love" is given not just by the mother, Celestine, but also by Wallace and Mary (Rainwater 274). Through Dot, Erdrich critiques the notion that families are best made of one father and one mother. Chris Rumsford argues that borders are mutable (164), and Erdrich exemplifies this by transgressing the nuclear family border. She moves the border over with Celestine's female, birthing body. Celestine has given birth to more than just one baby, she has given birth to a queer family, where both of Karl's lovers and Karl's sister, Wallace, Celestine, and Mary parent Dot, Karl and Celestine's biological child. Although marriage may in the short term be defined as "between a man and a woman," Erdrich, through the birth, points us to a world where families can be made up of two fathers, who were once lovers, one mother, also a former lover, and a weird aunt, who hovers, dotes and adores. Erdrich employs the gestating female body and motherhood and shows how it can critique patriarchal concepts like motherhood and shows how the body can critique the nuclear American family. In other words, if patriarchy erects itself on the body of a woman and mother, Erdrich, through Celestine and Marlis, begins to dismantle the concept that "mother" must come with "father" and "baby" and replaces it with "mother, another mother, aunt, father, father's lover who is stand in father" (Rich 55).

Erdrich also critiques the controversial topic of the immutability of the female gender of mother through two of her trickster characters—Lipsha and Nanapush—and their ability to metaphorically gestate and give birth to children. Julie Barak acknowledges this in her essay "Blurs, Blends, Berdaches: Gender Mixing in the Novels of Louise Erdrich." Barak argues "In her play with gender borders, she is attempting to break down her readers' notions of traditional gender roles by creating...characters who cross over and through traditional gender definitions" (9). For the purpose of this study, however, I will only focus on the womb images and gestation

metaphors. As Nanapush and Lipsha gestate and birth children, they physically represent how “bodies are fluid and emergent,” because both Nanapush and Lipsha’s bodies emerge and change to aid characters in need. (Tuana 189). Although these births are metaphorical, they are no less powerful than a traditional birth and as such, they further situate the gestating body as a locus of power and transformative space. Because of this, they are worthy of examination. These gestating male bodies challenge gender dichotomies and further reveal how the “imposition of hard borders,” especially as they relate to gender, can limit powerful human characteristics (Rumsford 161).¹¹ It is important to note that each of the characters is an Ojibwe trickster (also called berdache) character and are privy to healing and old Ojibwe ways. Therefore, Erdrich utilizes her Ojibwe history as a catalyst to examine the power located in the gestating body. Barak acknowledges that within the Ojibwe community “the berdache’s ability to perform both gender roles made them special to the community” (4).

Nanapush exemplifies this unique quality when he saves both Fleur, and later her daughter, Lulu, in two womb-like images in Tracks. Nanapush goes to check on Fleur’s family. He finds a womb-like tomb, filled with Fleur’s relatives. Nanapush says, “I was the one who broke the thin-scraped hide that made a window. I was the one who lowered myself into the stinking silence, onto the floor” (3). The thin scraped hide sounds like the amniotic sack, and like a phallus or a doctor’s tool, he goes inside the womb/tomb to find Fleur “feverish, filthy, and shaking” (3). He lashes her to the sacks of supplies and the boards of the sled and “wrapped more blankets over her and tied them down as well” (3). The blankets create a tight, warm, saving space—not unlike a womb—that carry Fleur to Nanapush’s home. In this way, Nanapush has been both the phallus and the womb, and this highlights his trickster characteristics. Later, Nanapush cuts the ropes off of Fleur, he says her “chest rattled as she strained for air” (4),

¹¹ Ironically, a textbook produced by the State of North Dakota argues for a male/female dichotomy within the Ojibwe tribe. It notes that the Ojibwe had “separate customs for men and women” and cites more strict gender roles than the berdache employs (49).

recalling the way a newborn clears its throat after delivery. Therefore, Nanapush created a womb that saved Fleur, despite the fact that he is male.

He does the same for her daughter, Lulu, although later in a much more concrete corporeal passage.

She laid you in my lap and piled clothes on until I feared you'd smother, but you still shivered so hard you rippled from one end to the other and could not be stilled. I hunched over....then absorbed the cold into myself...Many times in my life I wondered what it was like to be a woman, to be able to invent a human from the extra materials of her own body. In the terrible times...I gave birth to loss. I was like a woman in my suffering, but my children were all delivered into death. It was contrary, backward, but now I had a chance to put things into proper order. Eventually, my songs overcame the painful burning and you were suspended, eyes open, looking into mine. I did not dare break the string between us and keep on moving my lips...I talked on and on until you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the swell and ebb and did not sink but were sustained...I nursed you...[then, he returns her to her mother, Fleur, and she is healed]. So on the first warm day I brought you to her on a small toboggan, the way I had once transported Fleur herself, the first winter of her troubles. (Tracks 166-169)

Barak situates Nanapush's ability to heal Lulu through gestation as a power based on language and words, as the Native American community especially relies on the power of words to transform (Roemer, Introduction 6). Although there is much evidence for this, I would like to place the gestating body at the center of this examination. In order to heal and save both Fleur and Lulu, Nanapush gestates them. He must take on female characteristics to do this. Because of his status as an Ojibwe trickster, he has access to both gender traits. In this way, the Ojibwe heritage, as well as the gestating female body and the power available to it allow Nanapush to transgress the concept of binary genders, and instead, point to the benefits of fluid genders. His

status as a trickster allows him access to womb-like characteristics including an umbilical cord and a healing environment not unlike that provided for the fetus by amniotic fluid. In this way, Erdrich shows that “gender emerges from human interaction” (Tuana 191). The need—a pseudo womb—emerges from human interaction. Nanapush must provide the womb or Fleur and Lulu will die. Through this interaction, a gestating body transgresses biological dualisms. Thus, “the trickster’s crossing over encourages an openness to a fluidity of identities that can lead to resignification and recontextualization of traditional binary relationships” (Barak 10). Erdrich transgresses traditional binary gender roles and allows a man, albeit a trickster, to metaphorically gestate. Instead of situating the phallus, or male characteristics as solely desirable to save and heal, Erdrich places the womb within reach for Nanapush to facilitate Fleur and Lulu’s healing and rebirth of sorts. In this way, the female gestating body mixed together with Ojibwe histories can lead us to a better way to view gestation characteristics. Instead of a sign of gender dualism, for Erdrich, gestating bodies can lead us to an understanding that genders and identities are fluid and changing.

Lipsha also unmasks gender dualisms when he gestates Jack Mauser’s baby in The Bingo Palace. One important distinction between Lipsha and Nanapush’s situation is that Lipsha is partially responsible for the dire situation that requires him to gestate the child: he has stolen a car with a baby inside of it. And, when he realizes it, he does not fight to remove the baby from his father, despite Gerry’s rising desperation. Nanapush is not responsible in any way for Fleur and Lulu’s dire situation. Erdrich complicates the saving womb metaphor in this way, because although Lipsha will try to save the baby, he is partially responsible for the dire situation he and the baby find themselves in. However, Barak argues that both characters “work between worlds to raise questions about accepted patterns of thought and action” (10). In this situation, Lipsha’s work begins once Gerry has left him and the baby in a snowstorm with “emptiness all around...where there is no woman reaching down to take you in her arms” (259).

Lipsha then uses the dire situation to spur action, and he stays “curled around the baby...I pull the baby closer to me, zipping him inside of my jacket.” Lipsha’s jacket forms the metaphorical uterine walls, and he begins to perform the act of gestating the child to keep him warm and safe. Lipsha shows that “the sexed body is not something reliably constant,” because of his ability to metaphorically gestate the child to keep it safe (Riley 224). He then says “An unknown path opens before us, an empty trail shuts behind...We are the trackless beat, the thought without a word to speak” (259). Lipsha intuitively recognizes that he must gestate the child to save it. He argues that the “unknown path opens before us, an empty trail shuts behind.” The unknown path opening could be the dilation, and the closing path could be the constricting womb. Within that time-space moment, Lipsha takes on the characteristics of a female body and binds his fate with another in order to offer the child the chance of salvation. In this way, the female body is not inadequate, but it is the only option for saving the child. Erdrich has braided together Ojibwe trickster characteristics with the gestating characteristics of a female body to transgress gender binaries and to show how to “subvert that culture and its belief in the ‘notion of a true gender identity’” (Bordo, “Feminism and Foucault” 255). Although Erdrich transgresses the gender binary with other characters, braiding of the gestating body and the Ojibwe trickster characters creates a loud critique of the notion that bodies denote genders which are immutable, static and unchanging.

One new example of Erdrich braiding together Ojibwe histories and the mutability of female gender occurs in The Red Convertible, Erdrich’s collection of short stories published in 2009. In “Father’s Milk” a soldier, Scranton Fox, joins the slaughtering of a peaceful Ojibwe community by the US Army. An Ojibwe mother straps her baby to a cradle board and attaches it to a dog, which runs away from the havoc. The soldier follows the dog and ultimately takes the baby and attempts to care for it. Because the baby is hungry, he offers her his breast and ultimately is able to produce milk for her. “She nursed with utter simplicity and trust. He felt a

slight warmth, then a rush in one side of his chest, a pleasurable burning...He put his hand to his chest and then tasted a thin blue drop of his own watery, appalling, God-given milk" (302). In this way, Erdrich further argues that "gender arises from human interactions," because Scranton's ability to produce milk arises from his interactions with the infant, who needs milk (Tuana 191). Although Scranton is not an Ojibwe trickster character, Erdrich still braids Native American themes within this text: the baby is without her mother because the raid on her Ojibwe village forced to mother to send the baby away to try to save it. In this new example, the truth of the slaughters that faced American Indians is brought to life, and the need for breast milk and the soldier's subsequent ability to produce it to save the baby creates a strong critique of the damage Western hegemony produced in the American Indian community. At the same time, it is a critique of the notion that genders are static and do not change. Here, the ability to produce breast milk, an ability that is always situated with the female gender, transfers to a male out of human interaction.

CHAPTER 3

TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PEOPLE AND THE SURROUNDING ECOLOGY THROUGH WOMB IMAGES AND BIRTHING SCENES

Erdrich continues to braid her Ojibwe understandings of nature and culture with the gestating female body to create a critique the object/subject divide that is pervasive in American culture. Recently, with the articulation of material feminisms by Donna Haraway and Stacy Alaimo, as well as science studies scholars Bruno Latour and Andrew Pickering, the concept of the nature/culture divide has been strongly critiqued. In an interview in Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality, Latour argues that “Humans and nonhumans are engaged in a history that should render their separation impossible” (39). In the same text, Andrew Pickering makes a similar argument for machines: “Inanimate machines might be included in the overall picture of becoming” (99). Donna Haraway’s famous cyborg distorts the line between animate and inanimate, arguing that the cyborg, a mixture of technoscience and female body, offers the best future ontology for women. In Erdrich’s North Dakota Saga, as well as her memoirs, she reveals an understanding of reality which does not rest on binary opposition between humans, nonhumans and machines. Erdrich transgresses the boundaries between people and the surrounding ecology and environment. The gestating female body branches out into the surrounding ecology and even into cultural constructions and seemingly inanimate objects like cars, prisons and McMansions. Alaimo critiques the nature/human divide in her book, Undomesticated Ground, and also in her essays and introductions in Material Feminisms. Alaimo argues that when we traverse the nature as a backdrop trope, we begin to recognize that “Nature exceeds human desires to know it, to render it flatly visible, to rein it in” (Undomesticated Ground 37). In this section, I argue that Erdrich utilizes the female gestating

body and the surrounding ecology to show that nature exceeds the human ability to classify it, and as such, she shows how there is no boundary between nature and culture. She weaves together Ojibwe epistemologies with these gestating characteristics to critique Western understandings of nature/culture, Native Americans, and female bodies.

To begin examining Erdrich's critique, I'd like to look at her first memoir, The Blue Jay's Dance. It is a collection of vignettes, recipes, history, and her own musings about female identity and the area surrounding her home. In The New York Times review of the book, Sue Halpern argues that "the book is a ramble, and sometimes the reader is tempted to stray from Ms. Erdrich—when she celebrates her husband's thick hair, for instance, or when she chronicles all the adventures of the neighborhood cats" (A1). The review does not mention Erdrich's affiliation with the Ojibwe nor her tribal connections. Seemingly, for Halpern, the misadventures of animals have nothing to do with pregnancy. In fact, this approach misses the point of the text, in which Erdrich uses her maternity to identify with the animals, plants, insects and rocks which surround her New Hampshire home. In The Blue Jay's Dance, after musing on the blank in famous historical labors, the very next vignette is about Chuck and Tasmin, two cats whose ardor has resulted in "tribes of cats" throughout the woods (37). Erdrich seems to fill in the blank in labors with Tasmin's gestation of her kittens. When Chuck dies after freezing in the winter pond, Erdrich describes Tasmin's gestating body as it "ripples furiously with kittens" (40). Because The Blue Jay's Dance describes her own gestation and labor, Erdrich's gestation facilitates a heightened awareness of the gestation of animals. But, Erdrich's connection does not stop with maternal bodies. Tasmin is alone with this litter, and Erdrich, upon hearing Tasmin's howls, begins to "tremble at her weird grief...and [I] feel like howling with her" (40). Erdrich lashes herself to the grief of a cat, and in this way, shows that humans are not alone in their capacity for sorrow. Later, Erdrich describes finding a kitten underneath her house. Although instead of just finding the kitten, Erdrich argues that "It was as if the house itself had

given birth” (99). She goes down into the cramped crawl space beneath the house to rescue the kitten. She states “I tried to breath, to be patient, I waited, put myself into suspended animation. I held it, drew it [the kitten] close to me. Out it comes with a squeak of terror....It is the last of the kittens between Chuck and Tasmin” (100). In this richly corporeal description, Erdrich doesn’t just ramble when she describes the kittens, she highlights the origins of the cats, allows the house to give birth to one of the cats, identifies the tribes that the cats created, and even rescues a cat. In this way, Erdrich shows how “Humans are mixed with nonhumans” (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, 214). And Erdrich transgresses the boundary separating humans and nonhumans by showing how many ways she identifies with the cats, the birthing house, and grief produced by Chuck’s untimely end.

Cats aren’t the only nonhuman entities that she allows to capture her imagination and thus transgress the boundaries between humans and nonhumans. She muses on the lifecycle of a Luna Moth, which is only one week, and whose sole purpose is to “mate and lay eggs” (The Blue Jay’s Dance 78). She discusses the stones and rocks around her home, and the “kidney shaped pond”—a circular shape that has womb-like appearance and that refuses to yield and become clear and appealing thus subverting her human capacity to control the pond. That pond becomes a stopping point for a goose who has lost its mate, and Erdrich’s attention to its apparent mourning shows an “attempt to represent [nature] as something else, something beyond cultural constructions” (Alaimo, Undomesticated Ground 36). She imagines a spider, which becomes pregnant and then kills her mate (143). In this way Erdrich magnifies the world surrounding her farm much like Barad argues nature should be viewed. Barad argues “What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of all bodies—human and nonhuman—and the material discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked” (128). For Erdrich, all the bodies around her farm matter: the cats, the spiders, the rocks, the Luna moths, as well as her own. Each of these bodies offers a source of inspiration, a muse, through which

to view the world. In this way, nature is not inconsequential or an entity to be controlled, but equal to the human bodies surrounding it. And, the female body becomes a paradigm through which to view the world, instead of a crippling point of weakness.

Erdrich's Ojibwe heritage guides this ontology. Anderson argues that Judeo-Christian creation stories reflect "the subservient nature of animals and earth" (7). In Ojibwe creation stories a "Kinship with the natural order is strong suggested in the Winnebojo story with the humans being the weakest of the beings, dependent upon the other creators for survival...Humans were not masters of creation" (7). In other words, there is no hierarchy between nature/humans in Ojibwe epistemologies. In Pandora's Hope, Bruno Latour argues that "time enmeshes humans and nonhumans with each other. The tyranny of dichotomy between objects and subjects is not inevitable" (200). He urges us to open up space to see a world with no such dichotomy. Ojibwe epistemologies represented by Erdrich's texts offer such a world without the object/subject dichotomy.

In her essay "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," Alaimo argues that we inhabit "what I am calling a trans-corporeality"—the time space where human corporeality, in all of its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment" (Material Feminisms 238). Erdrich's texts often point to such a reality, especially in The Blue Jay's Dance. In one vignette—"Fiddlehead Ferns"—Erdrich links together her Ojibwe heritage, breastfeeding, and how what she eats affects her breast milk. In the vignette, she receives Fiddlehead ferns, which she steams and which turn her breast milk an odd flavor. She states "I found when I've had great quantities of them, the baby loves me more, craving the slight oddness of fiddlehead milk, spring milk" (84-85). In this way, Erdrich's material fleshiness is inseparable from what she eats, which is derived from the world around her. Fiddlehead ferns, it turns out, are a traditional Ojibwe food, according to an article about them in Indian Life (Daneilson 5). Within the world recorded in The Blue Jay's Dance, plants and humans affect

one another. There is a strong transgression between humans and nature. This is true in Ojibwe epistemologies, too. Dodgson and Struthers examine traditional Ojibwe breastfeeding practices. In a significant transgression of the boundary between animals and humans, they cite a story in which an orphaned bear cub was nursed by an Ojibwe woman. Her husband was rushed upon and attacked by the bear cub's mother. After he killed the mother, he felt responsible for the cub's life. So, "great grandmother nursed the small bear until it was old enough to be introduced into a group of bears and feed on its own" (59). Such a one way transgression between animals and humans is unheard of in current Western culture.¹² For the traditional Ojibwe, the human/animal divide is nonexistent, and animals are not only used for human needs. Anderson argues that according to the Ojibwe, "human beings are kin to the animals. There is a difference between "responsible mastery" and actually being related to your totem animal" (10). There is not so great a transgression when offering to be a wet-nurse to your kin, but there is a huge transgression when offering breast milk to an "animal." As Alaimo argued, the human body opens up to the world around it, and for the Ojibwe grandmother as well as Erdrich, this opening up is strongly rooted in a woman's lactation. These two examples strongly suggest that there is no hierarchy between humans and nonhumans, no divide, but instead, there exists a reciprocity and interrelatedness.

Bears further muddy the Western ontological divide between humans and nonhumans, according to an interview with Gerald Vizenor. Vizenor argues of bears and the Ojibwe "we must all want to be bears...I say that...knowing as most tribal people know that bears are in structure more like humans...They're like us and they're in us and we're in them. We're in the bear"(Bruchac 297). It is important to note that Erdrich is a member of the Bear Clan of the Ojibwe on her Grandfather Patrick Gournea's side. This connection with bears is exemplified by Fleur throughout Erdrich's novels. At the end of her life, instead of dying, she seems to

¹² While humans drink the milk of other animals, it is very uncommon in America and Europe for

transform into a bear, as is implied in The Bingo Palace. Fleur's interaction with bears does not stop there, though. A drunken bear breaks into the birthing room when Fleur is delivering Lulu in Tracks. Nanapush says that while enduring a life-threatening delivery, he hears Fleur making strange noises, and that "Perhaps the bear heard Fleur calling, and answered" (59). Margaret tries to deny the bear entry into the Fleur's house, but the bear ambles in. "I am a man, so I don't know exactly what happened when the bear came into the birth house, but I have heard she was filled with such fear and power that she raised herself on the mound of blankets and gave birth" (60). The bear brought power into the birthing room. After this, although Fleur seems dead, when the Lulu cries, she "drew the baby against her breast and lived" (60). Although this transgression is not welcomed by the characters in Tracks, the bear facilitates Lulu's safe delivery, because until the bear came in, Fleur was exhausted from laboring and almost dead (60). The bear is more than just an object, and Nanapush argues that it might have even been a spirit bear from a different dimension (60). Here, Erdrich creates nature that refuses to rest in the background. The bear has agency beyond human understanding or human ability to classify it. And, although everyone surrounding Fleur is alarmed and wary of the bear, the bear does no harm and actually saves Fleur. Latour argues that human and nonhuman "have a complex genealogy" that is interrelated (Pandora's Hope 206). Here, the bear has agency that blends with human birth, and in this way, Erdrich reveals the complex genealogy surrounding humans and nonhumans. Fleur and Lulu's salvation rests on a birthing situation transgressed by a powerful animal. Thus, Erdrich critiques the divide that situates animals as objects who are mastered by humans, and instead provides an interrelated shared experience between a bear and Fleur's birthing body.

Erdrich transgresses the human nonhuman divide in The Bingo Palace, when it is revealed that Lipsha was thrown into a marsh by his mother, June. Zelda tells Lipsha that she

humans to share breastmilk with "animals."

found him in a “gunnysack filled with rocks” (51). Although the veracity of the story is in question, Lipsha begins to believe it is true. The gunnysack recreates the womb, and as he is thrown in the slough, he is surrounded by water. Lipsha was supposed to drown in this slough-water. As he recalls this traumatic event, he remembers the pain from inhaling the water inside this inadequate womb. He then realizes:

I was saved...Darkened and drenched, coming toward me from the other side of drowning, it presses its mouth on mine and holds me with its fins and horns and rocks me with its long shining plant arms. Its face is lion-jawed, a thing of beach foam, resembling the jack of clubs. Its face has the shock of the unburied goodness, the saving tones...What it is, I don't know. I can't tell. I never will. But I do know that I am rocked and saved and cradled. (218)

According to Beidler and Barton, the lake creature of Matchimanito, or Missepeshu, is the one who saves Lipsha in the water (141). In this way, the human nonhuman divide is thoroughly transgressed because not only is Lipsha saved by a creature who breathes life into Lipsha, this creature is possibly an ancient god revered and feared by the Ojibwe. In crossing this divide, Erdrich has invoked a pre-modern world that Bruno Latour argues has a better ontology than our own. He argues “Spirits and agents, gods and ancestors, were blended at every point” (We Have Never Been Modern 128). For Erdrich, this blending between gods, animals and humans all happens in a womb-like space that should kill Lipsha, but doesn't. Erdrich seems to argue that nonhumans have an “intelligence and foresight” that can save or offer a better way to be in the world (Latour Pandora's Hope 203-4). It is Missepeshu's foresight that saves Lipsha and keeps him safe until Zelda finds him. Nancy Tuana argues that “the knowledge that is too often missing and is often desperately needed is at the intersection between things and people...between experiences and bodies” (188). Erdrich points to this intersection between

things—a gunnysack—nonhumans—the lake monster—and bodies—Lipsha’s vulnerable fetus-like body, as a possible location to discover a better way to be.

The physical environment and place is primary in Erdrich’s novels (Beidler “Louise Erdrich” 92), and as such, how Erdrich uses the environment and endows it with womb images is very important to this study. Elements like earth, fire, wind and water are important to Erdrich’s texts. She acknowledges the agency of rocks in Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country. When her companion and guide describes a rockslide he was caught in on an island, he says it began because “he said something mildly offensive to the rock” and the rockslide started as a result so the rocks, whom they call “grandfathers,” could say “Don’t fool around with us.” (68-69). Her Ojibwe heritage foregrounds this connection. Anderson records that for the Ojibwe “All parts of creation have the same life force or energy, although their forms are different. There is not a difference between human persons, other animate beings and what in English would be inanimate objects. The label other-than-human persons could be applied to...trees and rocks” (34). Erdrich endows inanimate objects like trees and rocks with womb metaphors and uterine images, thus critiquing the concept that some entities are inanimate by arguing that “the dichotomy between construction and reality is untenable” (Hekman 90). In this way, Erdrich shows us that constructions like cars and prisons and nature can be possibilities for “new settlements” which would render these divides between nature, culture, inanimate and animate invalid (Alaimo and Hekman 6).

Some of the womb metaphors are simple, even though their apparent simplicity belies the complexity that they point the reader to. For example, Albertine describes her Grandpa Nector as “pregnant with history” (Love Medicine 19). In the same text, when Lipsha finds Gerry Nanapush in the trunk of his car, he describes Gerry as “curled up tight as a baby in his mother’s stomach” (362). In this way, the trunk of the car metaphorically becomes his “mother’s stomach.” Later, Nanapush describes the names of Fleur’s dead relatives “grew within us,

swelled to the brink of our lips” (Tracks 6). And, Lyman describes to Lipsha how the bank works like “the procreation of money” (The Bingo Palace 101). Lipsha describes the sweat lodge he and Lyman visit as “as tight as a womb” and he argues that it makes him miss his mother, June (The Bingo Palace 192). And Candice describes her barren womb as similar to one of Jack’s tools—a level: “I pictured the ethereal little tube of lime-green fluid fixed inside of me where no child would ever grow” (Tales of Burning Love 285). Even invoking these seemingly simple similes and metaphors calls into question the liminality of the female gestation, and also the nature/culture divide. Erdrich asks if a car, or level, or money can metaphorically behave like a womb, then are these “things” separate from humans? These simple images help us to understand how “human intentions are bound up and intertwined (in many ways) with prior captures of material agency in the reciprocal tuning of machines” (Pickering, The Mangle of Practice 20). Money and names can become alive like a fetus in the womb, and Erdrich begins to cross the animate/inanimate divide with the gestating characteristics of the female body. These metaphors point to what Tuana describes as “emergent interplay, which precludes a sharp divide between the biological and the cultural” (190).

This emergent interplay is highlighted when Jack Mauser is born from the impending death in his flaming McMansion. As he is in the bottom floor of his burning home:

Water swirled around the floor, rising in a powerful wave...He smashed his fists on the window...and then threw himself forward...Finally, after all the ship and drag, a fluke of freezing air worked in Jack’s favor. With the flames at his back, the house above about to collapse...Jack threw himself at the white window and popped through...He toppled, naked except for a single bow stuck to the middle of his forehead, into the empty spot.

Jack sprang up, alert (Tales of Burning Love 113-114, 141).

Here, the water swirling on the floor has an amniotic feel, and the crushing weight of the house above could be seen as the uterus contracting. But, perhaps the most corporeal part of the

description is the way he pops through the window with no clothes on, almost the way a fetus is pushed into the cold air with no clothes. Jack's fate is similar to the fate of a newborn infant. He needs clothes immediately. In this emergent interplay, in which Erdrich combines the womb with Jack's McMansion, Erdrich points to a dissipating divide between inanimate and animate. Erdrich shows that these cultural constructions can give life to characters, and as such, she reveals the fallacy in denying agency and life force to other than human entities.

Erdrich uses themes of immurement oscillating with freedom to convey the uselessness of the nature/culture and thus animate/inanimate divide. Gerry Nanapush is one such character who rides on the changing themes of imprisonment and freedom. Within this play, his escapes have a birth like feel. Gerry, a famous Chippewa activist, is described as having "eel-like properties in spite of his enormous size. Greased with lard once, he squirmed into a six-foot-thick prison wall and vanished" (Love Medicine 200). In fact, when his wife, Dot is in the hospital due to give birth to their child, in his escape from the police, he is described as "squeezing himself unbelievable through the frame like a fat rabbit disappearing down a hole" (Love Medicine 209). His child—in Dot's belly at the time—is "as restless a prisoner as its father" (203). In this way, Gerry's escape from the police is foregrounded in Dot's gestation of his child, implying that the frame of the window is not unlike a cervix, which opens as the child exits the womb as much as Gerry exits the window. In The Bingo Palace, the circumstances leading up to his escape from a plane crash during a horrible blizzard take on a corporeal feel. "Some people, lightning struck twice. Some people attracted accidents. Fate bunched up and gathered like a blanket. Some people were *born* on the smooth parts and some people got folded into the pucker" (226 *italics mine*). Later, the plane crash and Gerry's subsequent escape is described in a birth like fashion. The crash was "not so much a crash as a peculiar distortions of time and space in which things moved soundlessly, and afterward, what he remembered of it was an almost liquid passion of disruption and then silence" (227). Then, Gerry "squeezed

himself tighter, rolled off the split seat and through a gap torn in the fabric of the cabin” (227). The incidents surrounding the plane crash sound very birth-like, and the liquid passion and disruption of silence could be the amniotic fluid which aids the fetus’s exit from the womb. With this “liquid passion,” he “squeezes himself...through a gap torn in the fabric of the cabin.” Here, his body sounds fetus-like as it pushes its way through a gap. The female body branches out into the cultural construction—the plane. Tuana argues that “the social and the natural, nature and culture, the real and the constructed, are not dualisms we can responsibly embrace...it is the interaction between them that is the world that we know and are of” (209). Gerry is from such a world. His immurement in prisons and planes and subsequent birth-like escapes point to the false dualism between nature and culture. Providing the plane and prison womb-like images, Erdrich erases the divide between animate and inanimate. Both the real—Gerry—and the constructed—prison and planes, interact together in equal ways to create Gerry’s rebirth on the “smooth side of the fold, or on the pucker of the fold” (The Bingo Palace 226). Therefore, Erdrich uses images and metaphors surrounding birth and gestation to cross the animate/inanimate divide.

Gerry is not the only character whose birth-like interaction with the inanimate world point to the inaccuracy of the inanimate/animate divide. As Agnes is swept away in a flood of biblical proportions, she is born into a new identity: Father Damien. As her beloved piano is carried away in the flood waters, Agnes considers “first of crawling into its box, nestling as though for safety among the cold dead keys” (Last Report 39). In other words, she considers becoming one with the inanimate piano, and sinking to the bottom of the river with it. Later, she is saved from drowning in the water in a womb of her nightdress. She is also saved by a carpenter, whose has Christ-like overtones. In this way, Erdrich complicates the metaphor because Agnes is not only saved by the womb-image. The dress that saves her “filled with air and ballooned all around my shoulders...I opened my mouth to wail. There was darkness, and I

sank into its murmur...I now believe in that river I drowned in spirit, but revived. I lost an old life and gained a new...Agnes slept. That cessation of awareness proved a bridge between her old life and new" (41-42). In this way, the womb of the dress and the surrounding waters give new life to Agnes much in the same way the actual uterus and the gush of amniotic fluid facilitate new life for an infant when emerging from the birth canal. This scene represents a "reciprocal tuning of human and material agency,"....which can "itself reconfigure human intentions" (Pickering, Mangle of Practice 21). The flood has reconfigured Agnes's intentions and identity. It has assisted a new life for Agnes, whose prior life without Berndt was unhappy. In this way, nonhuman agency ceases to be inanimate, and instead, joins with the human (Agnes) to create new life. Although water can be considered inanimate, its ability to "reconfigure human intentions" points to the fallacy of terming it inanimate. In the womb and birth, the amniotic fluid is a part of the fetus, and as such, designating the waters as inanimate, but the fetus as animate, is problematic. Separating them too early can cause the death. In this way, the qualities of the gestating female body—the amniotic fluid that is represented by the flood—facilitates a reexamination of the divide between animate and inanimate. Floods mingled with humans are primary in Ojibwe creation stories. According to Anderson, Sky Woman is also saved from a flood that was meant to kill her. To counteract the flood, she builds a home on a turtle's back, which becomes the earth on which the Ojibwe live (4). Thus, Erdrich's Ojibwe history, the very creation stories could have been told as a child, point a world which combines humans and floods to create the world. And, to the Ojibwe as well as Erdrich, separating the two would be untenable.

Snow in blizzards, like the water that comprises floods, has been termed inanimate or unalive by Western epistemologies. These elements reside on the "other" side of the animate/inanimate divide. But Erdrich uses a blizzard to critique the animate/inanimate divide in Tales of Burning Love. When Marlis releases Eleanor out of the safe and warm environment of

Dot's car, into a howling blizzard, her journey takes on a corporeal feel, not unlike a fetus exiting the womb. According to the text, Eleanor "blinked, shuddered her way out of a black, lightless well, groundwater draining. Once again, she was a blown bubble, comfortable and free, bobbing to the surface. The snow parted. Sunlight glittered on her eyelids. Warmth broke across her face" (369). The heavy snow completely surrounds Eleanor, like the walls of the uterus surround an infant. Later, Leopolda highlights this womb-metaphor as she argues "It isn't floating we do in the womb...We are flying those first five months, swooping and diving. It is during the last months that we learn what it is to be held too close, imprisoned, confined. And then come to the frightful journey of our birth...Do you suppose any child is ever born unmarked?" (372). While it is unsurprising that the sadistic nun would see the womb as a prison for a child, her birth metaphor highlights Eleanor's predicament. If Eleanor does not exit the blizzard, she will die. A fetus is in the same predicament. If the fetus does not exit the womb at the proper time, it too will die. The winds in the blizzard "blasted Eleanor forward over the remaining drifts and she landed in a swoop of snowless concrete at the doorway. She threw herself at the transparent sheet, pounding, and shouted though she had no voice, until she fell through one automatic door left open" (373). As Eleanor arrives at the "transparent sheet" and finally falls through a "door left open," the metaphorical birthing scene is complete. In the blizzard, Eleanor was in a bubble, and finally she pushes on a cervix-like transparent sheet, and falls through an opening. Pickering argues that "the contours of material and social agency are mangled in practice, meaning gently transformed and delineated" (The Mangle of Practice 23). This is true of Eleanor's experience with the material and social agency surrounding her. The blizzard has combined with Eleanor and the airport, ultimately creating a womb-like experience for Eleanor. All of these constructions work together to argue that each has agency and life force.

CHAPTER 4

TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Eleanor's urgent predicament highlights the oscillation between birth and death that comprise some of Erdrich's most recognized womb images. Early in The Blue Jay's Dance, she argues "Perhaps it is odd to contemplate a subject grim as suicide while anticipating a child so new she'll wear a navel tassel and smell of nothing but her purest self, but beginnings suggest endings and I can't help thinking about the continuum, the span, the afters, and the before" (8). Erdrich argues, much like Suzanne Bost does, that death highlights the importance of actual lived-in bodies and the truths surrounding their permeable and ultimately vulnerable, fleshy forms. These images about birth and her womb images meet "with the unsettling backdrop of death... This backdrop keeps the matter of illness [and pregnancy and labor] situated on the continuum with death" (Bost 346). In other words, we experience reality in the continuum, with all its befores and afters. According to Claudia Kalb, who wrote an article about little acknowledged phenomenon of still births, our American culture is uncomfortable with death. She further argues that in American culture, we "associate giving birth with life, with the future, with the defiance of death" (54). There is a strict dichotomy between birth and death. Thus, Erdrich's mixing of the two is very noteworthy. Ojibwe world views recognize and highlight the continuum, as Basil Johnston records in Ojibway Heritage. He records "The Four Hills of Life," which highlight the four stages of life, infancy, youth, middle age, and old age (109-18). At each of these hills, many Ojibwe die. Thus, death is a reality on each hill, and this reflects reality better than understandings that separate death at certain times as "unnatural." This section will focus on the combining of life and death within birthing bodies and wombs, and how Erdrich mixes these images to critique world views concerning death. I will begin by examining how activities surrounding Moses Pillager's cave adds to this critique. Then, I will examine Fleur

and Pauline's troubled gestations. In these examples, Erdrich highlights the continuum, and in this way, leads us to a deeper way of understanding the liminal time in the womb as well as the complex time of death.

Erdrich emphasizes the continuum, the before and afters, and also points to the mutability of the border between life and death on one interesting piece of land: Moses Pillager's cave and island. It is initially described in the second edition of Love Medicine, in the chapter "The Island." This chapter is comprised of Lulu Nanapush's seduction of Moses Pillager on his island, and their subsequent wintering there while she is pregnant with their child. In the chapter, her description of Moses Pillager is very fetus-like and his cave takes on a metaphorical womb-like feel. Erdrich describes "the cave that was his house" as "lit from odd places. The front was fitted of mortared stones set with jeweled windows, jagged shards of gleaming mica....He lashed limbs together, piled trappers blankets, rough hides, and cans of food high along the walls" (78-79). This description is womb-like for many reasons. Donelle N. Dresse includes Linda Hogan's description of a cave as womb-like feminine space: "They (caves) are a feminine world, a womb of earth, a germinal place of brooding" (11). It is circular, dark, hidden within the island much like a uterus is hidden inside a female body. The cave implies circularity, and the blankets and food within which will nurture and feed Lulu and Moses could be the uterine walls which are laden with fuel for the developing fetus. She describes Moses as "made of darkness, weightless, fragile, lifting and falling around me with each breath" (81). This description makes him sound fetus-like in his dark cave lined with blankets and food. Although the cave from the onset is womb-like, as the chapter progresses, Lulu's impending birth highlights the womb aspects. In this way, the cave ceases to be merely inanimate ground where Lulu and Moses live. It exemplifies the "folding of humans and nonhumans into each other" because Moses and Lulu and their child unfold in this nurturing womb of earth (Latour, Pandora's Hope 176). Lulu's impending birth also links the cave to death. She argues that she

has to exit and leave the cave to enable her safe delivery. She says “I would have to bear it when the snow vanished and my heart thudded, once, in fear. Women died in their blood....The ice had broken and the black water swelled. I knew this baby, still tied to my heart, could drag me under and drown me” (84). The cave is simultaneously a place of birth and creation and a place of possible death. Huffer highlights linking the womb to death. She argues that the mother “is a symbol of beginnings; as the one who gives birth, she occupies the place of origin...she also marks the place of return: in giving birth, the mother simultaneously assures the eventuality of death” (7). In patriarchal ideations, this return is unnatural, and man must fight to escape this return. But, for the Ojibwe, the womb and death are part of the continuum; their linkage is not unnatural. As such, they point to the primacy of our physical bodies, because in each situation, the body and its work: dying and birthing, are first and real. This is a point highlighted in an essay by Judith Bailey, who has been a labor and delivery nurse and currently is a hospice nurse. She argues that birth and death are “mirror images of each other” and that as people die, they are “birthed into this other realm of mystery” (32).

The cave and island represent a location for these mirror images to be played out. They appear other times in Erdrich’s canon as a place of death and transformation. Both Fleur and Father Damien go specifically to the island to die, or transition into the Ojibwe heaven (Last Report, 350; The Bingo Palace, 273). The cave is a place of beginning for Lulu, as it gestates her and Moses as they await their child’s birth, and a place of ending, where Moses, Fleur and Father Damien—all major characters in her texts—transition into the next life. Father Damien—Agnes, builds a fire outside and states that she could feel Fleur just beyond the circle of the fire that is warming her weak body. The island and its cave is a location where the unborn, the dead and the living can coexist. In The Bingo Palace, Fleur is intercepted on the island by loved ones who have died.

On the island there was a cave and in that place her cousin sat grinning from his skull chair, waiting for her to settle into the whiteness and raving dust along with all their relatives. Steadily, slowly, her clean steps press...she listened. Her sisters bickered and argued. Her grandmother, Four Soul,...sang quietly. Nanapush was there to smooth her face and again he was a young man. Her mother was combing her father's hair calm about his shoulders. The child she lost whimpered, rocked safe by the wind that swirled through and scoured clean the cave where Moses Pillager had slept with his child and his love between him and the windigo (273).

The cave and the island represent the folding of humans and nonhumans, dead and living, and the unborn and born into each other. The island resists classifications of alive, dead, and also notions of time. While the island is a place of gestation and creation, it is also a place where the dead can mingle with the living. Erdrich accesses the germinal island and cave to directly question Western understandings of life and death. And, she highlights these questions with elements of womb. For Erdrich, birth and destruction are part of a continuum, part of a cycle. She makes this point on Moses Pillager's island.

Within his island, Erdrich also critiques the mutable truths of life and death. This feminine ground is sacred to the Ojibwe, and as such, the Ojibwe understanding of living and death saturate the cave, and critique the concept that there is a strong division between each. Basil Johnston points to mutability of this divide in his book, Ojibway Heritage. Basil argues we should not view death as immutable: "Nor should we regard their [infants] passing as final. Perhaps, they will be born again in forms new and different; perhaps, their spirit will return to infuse new beings" (113). In other words, death is not final, and there is no strong divide between the infants who have passed and their spirits, which could infuse new beings. In stories and analogies, Ojibwe characters can recross the divide between life and death, a point which Victor Barnouw acknowledges this in his study of Chippewa myth motifs. He argues in

Chippewa stories, there is no finality to death (51). In other words, in the stories of the Ojibwe, the divide between life and death is transgressed. Erdrich highlights this transgression in the womb, and she uses the womb, birth and death to open up epistemological space to critique a logos that deems life and death as completely separate entities.

Erdrich accesses another location to critique separation of life and death within womb images in Four Souls, as a young Ojibwe girl named Fanny becomes Under the Ground, a powerful healer. At the loss of her own mother, Under the Ground “goes after death itself, and so had herself buried alive in birch-bark covering. Connected only to the upper world by a breathing straw, she went down into the earth” (49). The straw is synonymous with the umbilical cord, which sustains the gestating body by providing oxygen and nourishment to the fetus. The straw does the same for Fanny. While under the ground, she searched through the layers of earth to gain knowledge about healing. After the tribe digs her out, they discover that she is alive “during the quiet, slow washing of her face and arms and eyelids” (50). Then, “she drew a rough breath” (50). This washing after an emergence is similar to the washing of an infant, and her rough breath is similar to an infant’s first breath. She is a powerful doctor, and Nanapush remembers being cured by her. Fanny is placed in the grave, where she gestates and is reborn as Under the Ground. The knowledge she gained in this experience makes her a powerful healer who ultimately uses this knowledge to save her daughter Anaquot from a horrible sickness. Under the Ground has transgressed the stiff boundary between life and death by being buried alive for five days, and she gained power from the womb-like space. Erdrich, has drawn on the “power of creation and destruction, enabling them to transcend oppositions, fusing birth and death, loving and mourning” (Bost 349). Erdrich perhaps fueled by Ojibwe epistemologies, argues that within the womb, power comes from transcending those oppositions. According to Anderson, the Ojibwe are governed by the Great Laws, which embrace “the rhythm and continuity of life, birth, growth and decay” (34). Under the Ground

used these rhythms and this continuum that connects birth and death to gain power and understanding in life, and ultimately access the power to heal a very ill daughter. Traditional Ojibwe healers—the Medewewin—go through a continuum like *Under The Ground*, to gain power. According to Johnston, to gain the third order of healer, a candidate was metaphorically shot and restored to life (Ojibwe Heritage 91). Johnston explains “Restored to life, the candidate possessed powers not before possessed...and he was able to summon supernatural powers and beings, cause vibrations in things, and commune with the supranatural order and beings” (91). One difference for Erdrich’s *Under The Ground* is her time spent literally under the ground, in a womb like tomb. Erdrich connects *Under The Ground*’s power to this time, when she was metaphorically gestated and brought back to life not unlike an infant to the power she possessed as an Ojibwe healer. The story is foregrounded in Ojibwe history; however, Erdrich added the corporeal image of the womb and tomb to highlight the continuum healers likely faced daily as they helped the sick and eased the suffering of the dying. Further, the tomb for *Under the Ground* has facilitated her abilities as a healer.

Erdrich provides a seemingly simple womb metaphor into death when June is pushed out of “Andy’s” truck. Before the moment of her birth/death, June’s mistreatment by Andy is of note because it complicates this metaphor. Andy uses June, the fetus, to attempt sexual gratification. Although this attempt fails, Andy’s actions are clearly not nurturing. “June had wedged herself so tight against the door that when she sprang the latch she fell out. Into the cold. It was a shock like being born” (Love Medicine 6). Like a fetus, she is wedged into a narrow opening not unlike a birth canal. When she falls out into the North Dakota blizzard and begins walking home, the home she arrives at is death. For June this is not a “final” destination. Much like the Ojibwe trickster character Nanabozo, she comes back to the land of the living again to visit Lipsha and Gerry. In Bingo Palace, June appears to Lipsha to give him lucky Bingo tickets (55). Even though June froze to death in the blizzard, she reappears to Lipsha,

proving that she has recrossed the divide between life and death. She does this again on page 237, when Gerry leaves Lipsha and the baby in the car to rush after June. She does these things after being born into the an icy death. Erdrich seems to argue that birth and death are on the same continuum, and even though June dies at the beginning of Erdrich's canon in a womb metaphor, she is still a major character in her canon.

Erdrich further critiques the stiff division between birth and death in Tales of Burning Love, when Lawrence Schlick commits suicide while cremating Anna's body. As the cremation nears, "He lay beside his wife for a moment as though to take the fit of the narrow space. One sound, the shuddering whine of a woman deep in labor, escaped him. In the vibrating blackness, he held on to Anna as tightly as he could" (435). For Lawrence and Anna, there is no Ojibwe heaven implied. But, his desire to hold on to her in the "vibrating blackness," could be a contracting uterus: the "whine of a woman deep in labor" is an unmistakable birthing image. Within the tight, transforming space of the cremation chamber, Anna and Lawrence will meld together in ashes and cease to be separate entities. For Lawrence, there is no moment of death for Anna, nor for him. As they join together in the tight womb-like space of the crematory, they are in a liminal spot of becoming ash and cinder. William Saletan, who recently wrote an article about redefining death, argues that doctors are realizing there is "no moment of death" (B02). Thus, not only is Erdrich critiquing the birth death divide, she is also critiquing the erroneous concept that death is a moment. For Lawrence and Anna, death is a process, not unlike birth. The process begins with ritualistic washing of Anna's body, and does not end when Lawrence places himself in the crematory. Erdrich chooses to leave out the moment of Lawrence's death, and instead focuses on the process leading up to that moment.

Inadequate wombs, or miscarriages, add a complex layer to this study. Both Fleur and Pauline physical exemplify wombs that combine death in seemingly patriarchal ways. Fleur's inadequate womb and inability to easily birth healthy children highlight her oscillating position

between powerful Ojibwe healer and Native American who loses her land to forces who are sometimes beyond the reach of her power. Although one might wish that Fleur would use her healing power to rise above the treacherous tide that is literally stealing her land and her children, Erdrich's realistic portrayal of Fleur's inadequate womb and loss of healing power echo the realities faced by all American Indians in the late 19th century. This study would be inadequate without examining the places where the womb does not signify power, but loss, and where feminine power is sterilized. Alaimo argues in Material Feminism that the "space-time of trans-corporeality is a place of both pleasure and danger—the pleasures of desire, surprise, interconnection, and lively emergence as well as the dangers of pain, toxicity, disability, and death" (259-60). She then defines toxic bodies, arguing that all bodies have a degree of toxicity due to pollutants in this age. I would like to situate Fleur's body as a toxic body. She has been living in the white world of John Mauser, surrounded by corruption. And, although her son is saved because Polly Elizabeth nurses her, her body becomes addicted to whiskey¹³. When Margaret begins to cure her, she says "I can smell the liquor on you" (Four Souls, 202). She then states "The strength of your ancestors should not find an ending in your weakness" (204). Margaret announces the cure: eight days without food and water to cure her toxic body.

Fleur's body experiences also toxicity from Pauline's presence, which personifies Western patriarchy in the form of a novice Catholic nun, when she miscarries her second child. Unable to help herself stop the early contractions, Fleur instructs Pauline to bring alder. Fleur says this will stop the contractions. But, Pauline is unable or unwilling to locate alder. Pauline says, "I swept through the dry things and I don't know what I seized" (156). Pauline's cure almost causes Fleur to die during the miscarriage, and when Margaret arrives she makes the correct tea, and situates the blame with Pauline (163). In both cases, Fleur's proximity to Western logos weakens her power and makes her body toxic, not unlike the toxic bodies Alaimo

¹³ Toxic maternal bodies, especially as they relate to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in children are

identifies. Alaimo argues that “toxic bodies are produced and reproduced, simultaneously, by science, culture and other forces...they are volatile, emergent” (261-62). In both instances, Fleur’s toxic body reproduces toxicity. Western culture has corrupted Fleur’s body in real, material ways. Fleur’s corruption physically manifests in her womb and her children. It is important to contrast Fleur’s safe delivery of Lulu, which is facilitated by a bear, possibly an Ojibwe spirit bear. Ojibwe epistemologies foster life for Lulu, while Pauline’s Western ideals create death for Fleur’s second child. Fleur’s oscillating status between power and weakness manifests in her gestation and subsequent troubles therein.

While Pauline’s closeness to Fleur is to blame for Fleur’s miscarriage of her second child, Pauline’s own gestation and birth of Marie is troubling for my study, because I have argued that there is power in female gestation. Pauline and her self loathing gestation seem to contradict this thesis. If Erdrich braids together the gestating female body with her Ojibwe heritage to create a stiff critique of patriarchal hegemony, then what does one do with Pauline’s attempts to stop her gestation, and her attempt to kill her baby and herself by refusing to participate in the final stage of labor? Pauline literally represents the unraveling of female identity and Ojibwe identity. She hates her body when it isn’t pregnant: she sews stickers in her clothes as a form of self purification (Tracks 152). She denies her Ojibwe identity and clings to a white institution—the convent (Tracks 138). Thus her violence to her pregnant body is another manifestation of this self hatred. Pauline argues in Tracks that:

I had starved myself for so long that I had no way of knowing, when I first felt the movement, how far back to count...Since I already betrothed myself to God, I tried to force it out of me, to punish, to drive it from my womb. Bernadette caught me out back of the house one afternoon, pushing the handle of the axe against my stomach. But

discussed in The Broken Cord, by Erdrich’s former husband, Michael Dorris.

though I fell upon the wooden pole again and again, till I was bruised, Napoleon's seed had too strong a hold. (131)

While masochism for Pauline is normal, this violence has a material purpose beyond instructing her soul: she literally wants to rid her body of the fetus growing inside her. She does not want her body to change into a birthing body, so she attempts to stop the process, and loses the opportunity to grow from it. She views her gestating body as a locus of weakness. Later, while giving birth, she "reduced myself to something tight, round and very black clenched around my child so that she could into escape. I became a great stone, a boulder set under a hill" (135). She refuses to transform with the delivery, and as such, she physically represents how "Rigidity means death" (Anzaldua 101). Pauline has set up a border between herself and her gestating body. She refuses to transgress this boundary, and in that refusal, opens herself to death as a better option. Pauline refuses to acknowledge that the body can offer inspiration, especially at times of illness, birth and death. The mind cannot control the body at these times. Erdrich acknowledges this in The Blue Jay's Dance, when she says that when laboring, "I want to control the tale. I can't—therein lies the conflict that drives the plot in the first place. I have to trust this body—a thing inherently bound to betray me" (43). Anzaldua argues that psychological borders like these can be fertile ground for self growth (101). But, in her repeated attempts to end the gestation and ultimately even kill herself, she refuses to use her body to instruct her. This stiff refusal offers a warning to social constructionists. While laboring, Pauline argues "Words were useless. Thoughts foolish. All of the mind's constructions" (Tracks 134). Yet, she decides later to cling to those mind's constructions instead of listening to the words and language of her body. Instead of searching for a language within her body, she bridles herself a patriarchal logos and lashes her body to it. Refusing to acknowledge the significance of bodies has consequences, though Pauline's body serves her well to old age. But, she is poisonous to the other characters she encounters.

Concluding this study with Pauline's refusal to pay adequate attention to her gestating, birthing body highlights the importance of returning to materiality. Ignoring the material reality of maternal bodies as well as Native bodies misses a stiff critique of past ways of knowing that both can offer. The almost completely successful genocide of the Ojibwe offers a stern warning. Erdrich's actual existence situates this study as more important, for her survival is a direct result of gestative power of women, both Ojibwe and Euro-American.

But, more than just highlighting gestating bodies, Erdrich's canon is filled with examples of how her Ojibwe heritage aids her transgression of unnatural binaries. For this study, I have focused solely on viewing these transgressions through the gestating bodies that reside in her extensive canon, and this view certainly has the danger of being essentialist. Imagining that a woman can only see the world through her maternal body is dangerous, and this view risks a return to logos which situate mother and woman as synonymous. Erdrich takes this false analogy and uses it to show how the gestating female body can offer a vehicle to cross negative boundaries concerning nature/culture, gender constructions, and inaccurate understandings of life and death. A material feminist approach to examine Erdrich's canon allows for the convergences of Ojibwe history and feminism to critique patriarchal hegemony. According to Basil Johnston's Honor Earth Mother, "The North American Indians treasured their bond with Mother Earth, West Europeans, on the other hand, had long ago cut the umbilical cord that attached them to the land" (xviii-xix). Erdrich shows that for the Ojibwe, mixing the woman's gestating body and the earth was not negative, and thus does not risk returning to logos which situate the female body, the Ojibwe and other American Indians, and nature as weak. This Ojibwe ontology mixed with the female body as identified in Erdrich's canon offers the beginning of a new way of understanding all three entities—nature, woman, and American Indians. By returning to the body and its interactions with the surrounding world, including nature and culture, this new ontology seeks to unhinge the concept that of the body of woman

and nature are solid ground for heterosexist infrastructure (Alaimo and Hekman 12). In fact, I have shown how Erdrich uses the gestating female body to critique Euro-American concepts including that the female biology denotes weakness, the normative heterosexual matrix, the false divide between humans and extra-humans, and even the concept that death and life are not on the same continuum. Erdrich's canon offers an interesting convergence of ideas between material feminists and Ojibwe epistemologies that are useful for each. Hekman argues that "we must make matter matter, not only in science but in society as well" (116). Erdrich's Ojibwe history points to the dangers of failing in this undertaking to make matter matter. Within Erdrich's vast and acknowledged canon, material feminists and Native theorists can find common ground to join together their critique of Western hegemony.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The author is interested in poetry, American Literature and literary theory, specifically feminist theory. She is an English instructor at TCC, where she enjoys teaching rhetoric and encouraging her students to pursue their goals. The author would like to publish fiction and poetry at some point in the future. She also looks forward to camping, hiking and spending time with her husband, Mike, and children, Jack and Molly.