Journal Of the Iraqia University (75-1) December (2025)

ISSN(Print): 1813-4521 OnLine ISSN:2663-7502
Journal Of the Iraqia University
available online at
https://iasj.rdd.edu.iq/journals/journal/view/247

The Female Body as Decolonial Theory and Praxis in Heid E. Erdrich's Poetry through L. B. Simpson's Lens

Inst. Estabraq Rafea Gharkan College of Arts, University of Anbar
istabraqrafea@uoanbar.edu.iq
Inst. Muzahim Hussein Mohammed College of Tourism Sciences, Mustansiriayh University
Email: muzahimhussein@uomustansiririyah.edu.iq

الجسد الأنثوي بوصفه نظرية وممارسة تفكيكية للاستعمار في شعر هايد إي. إردريتش من منظور ليان ب. سيمبسون

م. استبرق رافع غركان كلية الآداب، جامعة الأنبار
م. مزاحم حسين محمد* كلية علوم السياحة، الجامعة المستنصرية

الملخص:

في مواجهتهم المستمرة لسياسات الاستعمار القائمة على الإقصاء والدمج القسري، كثيرًا ما يستعيد الكتّاب الأمريكيون الأصليون العلاقة العميقة بين الجسد والأرض بوصفها موقعًا للمقاومة واستعادة المعنى. ومع ذلك، لم تحظَ تمثيلات الجسد الأنثوي في شعر هايد إي. إردريتش باهتمام نقدي كافٍ، لا سيما من حيث علاقتها بأنماط المعرفة والوجود الأصلانية، أو من حيث اشتغالها بوصفها ممارسة فعلية لتفكيك الخطاب الاستعماري.تنطلق هذه الدراسة من هذة الفجوة النقدية لتبحث في الكيفية التي يتجسد بها الجسد الأنثوي في ديوان *Cell Traffic* (2008)بوصفه نظريةً وممارسةً تفكيكيتين للاستعمار، وذلك من خلال توظيف مفاهيم ليان ب. سيمبسون: النهضة الجذرية، والمعيارية المتجذرة، والرفض التوليدي. وتعتمد الدراسة على تحليل نصي لعدد من القصائد المختارة، مستندةً إلى الأطروحات الفكرية التي تقدمها سيمبسون في كتابها (2017) *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن إردريتش تعيد تشكيل الجسد الأنثوي بوصفه موقعًا للمعرفة والمقاومة، حيث يغدو حاملًا لأنماط وجود أصلانية تتحدى الصور النمطية الاستعمارية، وتفكك تسليع الجسد، وتناهض سياسات نزع ملكية الأرض. وبهذا، لا يقتصر حضور الجسد على البعد الرمزي، بل يتجاوز ذلك ليؤسس ممارسةً تفكيكيةً للاستعمار، تعيد وصل ما فصله الخطاب الاستعماري بين الجسد، والأرض، والمعرفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الرفض التوليدي، المعيارية المتجذرة، هايد إي. إردريتش، ليان ب. سيمبسون، الأمريكيون الأصليون، النهضة الجذرية، أنماط المعرفة والوجود.

Abstract

In their fight against the dispossessive and the assimilative policies of colonialism, many Native American writers foreground the body's attachment to the land. However, existing scholarship on Heid E. Erdrich's poetry has not examined how her representations of the female body engage Indigenous ways of knowing and being, or how they function as a decolonial praxis. This article addresses this gap by investigating how the female body in Heid E. Erdrich's *Cell Traffic* (2008) acts as a decolonial theory and praxis by applying Leanne B. Simpson's concepts of radical resurgence, grounded normativity and generative refusal. The article conducts a textual analysis of selected poems, supported by the concepts and key ideas from Simpson's *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance* (2017). The article concludes that Erdrich's representation of the female body enacts a decolonial theory-and-praxis that challenges colonial stereotypes, objectification and land dispossession by reasserting the Native American ways of knowing and being that are encoded in both

the body and land.**Keywords:** generative refusal, grounded normativity, Heid E. Erdrich, Leanne B. Simpson, Native American, radical resurgence, ways of knowing and being.

1. Introduction Heid Erdrich was born in 1963 to an Ojibwe mother and German-American father. She was raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where both parents were teachers at a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school (Rhadigan, 2013, p. 13). In 1992, Erdrich first published a short story collection entitled *Maria Tallchief* (Mitchell, 2022). Then, she published several poetry collections including *Fishing for Myth* (1997), *The Mother's Tongue* (2005), *National Monuments* (2008), *Cell Traffic: New and Selected Poems* (2012), *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media* (2017), and her most recent collection *Little Big Bully* that was published in 2020 (Erdrich, n.d.). Erdrich's poetry "not only reflect Ojibwe ontologies and epistemologies, but work[s] to create, renew, and reinvent Ojibwe worldviews and lifeways with each word, line, stanza, and page" (Rhadigan, 2013, p. 16). Her poetic subjects are wide-ranging and reflective of her conceptualization of Indigenous identity which, although deeply rooted in her Ojibwe culture, is viewed not as static and essentialized. This is due to Erdrich's deployment of "less quintessentially Native topics" (Rhadigan, 2013, p. 17) like science and the Internet to reassert her identity and validate her Indigenous knowledge. Speaking about the complex and multivarious nature of Erdrich's poems in *Cell Traffic*, Dean Rader states that Erdrich dismantles (and re- mantles) literary forms, she merges science and Native histories, she assembles poems from RSS feeds, she plays with complicated interchanges of creation and translation, she takes on the deeply disturbing topics of skeletal remains and Native peoples, and she is one of the few Native poets who repeatedly engages canonical American poetry. At the same time, amazingly, her poetry also reflects an Ojibwe worldview (qtd., in Ziarkowska, 2020, p. 175).She integrates scientific concepts and terminologies with her Ojibwe ontologies and worldviews to foreground Indigenous concepts of relationality and embodied and grounded knowledge (Rhadigan, 2013).At the center of Erdrich's poetic involvement with her Indigenous identity is the Indigenous female body. In *National Monuments* (2008), she writes "Love your own body every moment" (2008, pp. 55-56). Thus, her poetry is concerned with exposing the colonial violence and dehumanization of Native American women. Erdrich seeks to dismantle "the victim image" (de Finney, p. 28) by mainly foregrounding Native women' sacred bodies, their agency, voice and presence against colonial perpetration of negative stereotypes (Mitchell, 2022). Erdrich resists the objectification of Native American women's bodies by transforming them from static objects displayed in museums where they are mistreated as "objects of scientific study and the objects of history" (Poremski, 2015, p. 6) to active, strong, free and independent agents.

2. Literature Review Heid E. Erdrich's poetry receives attention in contemporary Indigenous literary studies that investigate various issues and Indigenous concepts including corporeality, science, biology, media, the Internet, relationality, sovereignty, and ontology.Rhadigan (2013) and Ziarkowska (2020) investigate the intersection of science with Ojibwe epistemologies in Heid Erdrich's *Cell Traffic* (2012). They apply biotechnological and biopolitical frameworks to explore the integration of Indigenous concepts of relationality, kinship and sovereignty with biogenetics. They examine Erdrich's indigenization of biogenetic metaphors such as microchimerism that refers to the movement of cells from the mother to the fetus. Infused with the Indigenous conceptualization of kinetics (movement) and its role in knowledge production, this scientific concept of movement becomes a vehicle for expressing Ojibwe concepts of interdependence, Indigenous relationality and matrilineage that challenge Western scientific discourse that reduces Indigenous knowledge as primitive and unscientificMajhor's 2019 dissertation explores how Erdrich's poetry challenges Euro-American binaries between subject and object, human and nonhuman. She locates Erdrich's verse within an Ojibwe framework of relational materiality, where poems like "eBay Bones" grant voice and agency to human remains and sacred objects. Similarly, Poremski (2015) examines how poems in Erdrich's *National Monuments* foreground the human remains as alive, feeling and worthy of respect and empathy. She gives voice, life and agency to the bones. Therefore, she disrupts the logic of the museum that mistreats the dead remains as objects and historical relics. Instead, Majhor asserts that through the concepts of relationality and sovereignty, Erdrich reclaims the humanity of the dead remains by treating them as relatives.Critical engagement with the representation of dead remains also forms the core of Madsen's 2021 book chapter that discusses selected poems in Erdrich's *National Monuments* and how they employ Anishinaabe storytelling to critique and dismantle the myth of "manifest destiny" that forms the core of U.S. exceptionalism. Madsen foregrounds the decolonial power of the dead bodies and bones to resist colonial erasure through their continued presence that exposes the violence which the colonial historical narratives seek to disavow. This explains why Indigenous dead remains are treated as objects of scientific study or historical relics to be displayed in museums. This appropriation of corporeal remains is

intended to maintain Indigenous dispossession and establish a colonial sense of place and belonging that pushes the Indigenous people to the margins of the dead past. However, through poetic voice and the inclusion of Native creation stories, Erdrich subverts the fictive narrative of the national formation of the U.S. and reasserts Native American sovereignty and cultural continuance.Mitchell (2022) investigates colonial representation of Native American women, and Erdrich's poetic intervention in *National Monuments* (2008). The article applies rhetorical sovereignty as a framework that centers the right of Native American women to self-representation that resists colonial objectification and erasure, and reclaims their bodies through communicative means. The article also applies Lisa Tatonetti 2014's *Big Mom* theory that reconstructs women's representation as strong and autonomous, and as sites of scared resistance and healing.Černe (2023) examines how Native American resistance is tied to the land and its ancestral memory. The article applies the concept of "remapping" theorized by the scholar of gender and Indigenous studies, Mishuana Geoman. This study conducts a textual analysis of the central metaphor of the Mississippi river and its valley in two poems: "New Orleans" (1983) by Joy Harjo (Muscogee) and "Pre-Occupied" (2013) by Heid E. Erdrich. Through the concept of "remapping", the article reclaims the Indigenous space by reconceptualizing the river not as evidence of colonial expansion or the triumph and dominance of U.S. empire, but rather as a repository of Native American people's memory, and a source of their resistance, survival, freedom and sovereignty.Rifkin (2021) explores the settler colonial disruption of everyday Indigenous life. He examines the poetry by Heid Erdrich, Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota), and Cheryl Savageau (Abenaki). He argues that settler colonial processes aim not only at Indigenous land dispossession, but also at controlling everyday Indigenous life and affects by imposing the colonial heterogendered relations. The article concludes that the poetry of Erdrich, Soldier and Savageau with its focus on feeling, memory and relational connection perform a decolonial intervention by foregrounding everyday affects as central to the reclamation of Indigenous communal worldviews and self-determination.Denise Low's 2020 chapter examines the complex and multimodal nature of Erdrich's poetry as a political strategy that disrupts settler narratives. Erdrich's integration of formal features such as ellipses, verb tense shifts, fragmentary lines with non-literary media like photographs, videos/"poemeos," and other archival or digital elements act as counter-cartography that remaps histories of place, dispossession, and presence by disrupting the colonial linear chronologies and reasserting Indigenous relationality to land and community.Although recent scholarship on Heid E. Erdrich's poetry investigated Indigenous memory, kinship, rhetorical sovereignty, Native women's representation, and the politics of embodiment, none of the existing studies have grounded their readings of Erdrich's poetry in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's concepts of radical resurgence, grounded normativity, and generative refusal. Thus, they overlook the epistemological and decolonial implications of Erdrich's poetics that reasserts embodied, creative and land-based practices as the bedrock of Indigenous theorizing, lived resistance and resurgence.Therefore, the article addresses this gap by applying Simpson's theoretical lens to demonstrate how Erdrich transforms the Indigenous female body into both theory and praxis—a living site where knowledge and resistance are enacted through embodied relationships with land, kin, and community. Consequently, this research will provide further insights into Indigenous thought, decolonial aesthetics, and Native American relational ethics.

3. Theoretical Framework Simpson conceptualizes her decolonial resistance of the ongoing colonial process of land dispossession by grounding her literary and critical writings in her own culture and teachings. She believes that reasserting the Indigenous people's attachment to their land "replicate[s] Indigeneity" (Simpson, 2017, p. 87) and provides "the ultimate antidote to colonialism" (Simpson, 2011, p. 16). Simpson contends that reconnecting the Indigenous bodies to the land resists land dispossession that threatens their Indigenous knowledge systems (2017). Thus, the body and the land-based practices and processes become the site of their embodied and grounded resistance, and radical resurgence which she defines as "nonhierarchical relationships between land and bodies, bodies meaning the recognition of our physicality as political orders, and our intellectual practices, emotions, spirituality, and hubs of networked relationships" (Simpson, 2017, p. 43). According to Simpson, radical resurgence generates a grounded normativity that challenges the colonial violence and removal of the Indigenous bodies by reattaching them to their land. This reattachment protects the Indigenous bodies, intellect, emotions, spirits, ethical practices and the network of relationships that are embedded in the bodies (Simpson, 2017)This relationality with the land and the conceptualization of the bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits as political orders form the core of Indigenous decolonial resurgence because they generate both theory and knowledge. For Simpson, "Individuals carry the responsibility for generating meaning within their own lives; they carry the responsibility for engaging their minds, bodies, and spirits in a practice of

generating meaning (2017, p. 156). This is why colonialism seeks to remove the Indigenous bodies from their land by "break[ing] the network of intelligent relationships housed in Indigenous bodies in order to prevent the replication of Indigenous freedom, in order to get land" (Simpson, 2017, p. 127)Thus, Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of knowing and being are tied to the network of relationships that are encoded in the bodies and their relationality to the land. Simpson calls this decolonial mode as "the practice of Aki" (2017, p. 164) which means establishing a reciprocal relationship of respect and kinship with the land in order to gain liberation from colonial control, and reassert sovereignty and self-determination over Indigenous bodies, intelligence and intellect, and spiritual presence (Simpson, 2017).It means that the Indigenous life style, their land-based and creative practices provide the basis of their decolonial theory and embody a mode of resistance that foregrounds the validity and the continuity of the Indigenous knowledge systems. In other words, Indigenous lived experiences, practices and processes are essential to the Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Indigeneity is generated, revitalized, and manifested through these practices (Simpson, 2017). Speaking about the Indigenous reconfiguration of theory, Simpson points out that "Theory" is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people. Theory isn't just an intellectual pursuit. It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion. It is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives (2017, p. 151)The quote above makes it clear that living on the land embodies practicing indigeneity as "a theoretical intervention" (Simpson, 2017. p. 19) that challenges colonialism and its dispossessive policies. Living is both a theory and praxis that refuses the physical and cultural erasure of Indigenous people. Simpson terms this as generative refusal. It refuses the hierarchal, extractive, exploitive and assimilative processes of the colonial system, and generates a grounded normativity that reclaims the values of reciprocity, relationality, kinship, sovereignty, freedom and self-determination (Simpson, 2017).

4. Methodology This article applies a qualitative interpretive method grounded in Indigenous feminist literary analysis and decolonial hermeneutics to examine selected poems from Heid E. Erdrich's *Cell Traffic* (2012). Poems such as "Fat in America," "This Body, The River," "Nesting Dolls," and "Newborn" were selected for analysis because they reflect Erdrich's involvement with embodiment, motherhood, and land-based relationality that are central and closely relevant themes to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's conceptualization of grounded normativity, resurgence, and generative refusal that inform the analytical framework. This thematic relevance with Simpson's concepts helps investigate Erdrich's poetry as an articulation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and a reconfiguration of the female body as a site where Indigenous epistemologies and decolonial praxis are embodied and land-based.

4.1 Method and Procedure The analysis relies on a close reading of the select poems, paying attention to language, imagery, and poetic form as an expression of relationality and embodied epistemologies. The methodology follows an Indigenous-centered interpretive ethic grounded in relationality, sovereignty and interdependence. Instead of applying non-Indigenous critical paradigms, the article foregrounds Indigenous intellectual traditions by employing Simpson's concepts that align with Erdrich's poetic engagement with the female body as sacred, sovereign, and decolonial.

5. Discussion Erdrich's involvement with the representation of the Indigenous female body is not merely thematic, because of its centrality to her Ojibwe culture and worldview. She rearticulates the female body as a decolonial mode of agency, resilience, resurgence, grounded presence, autonomy, memory, sovereignty, and Indigenous knowledge production and reclamation. More specifically, Erdrich deploys the female body as a site of power that resists colonial control over Indigenous land and bodies through the mechanisms of stereotyping and objectification. Here, Simpson contends that settler colonialism seeks to erase the Indigenous cultures in order to maintain land dispossession by removing the Indigenous bodies from the land. She states that shame forms the core of the settler colonial system "because it implants the message in our bodies that we are wrong" (2017, p.186). Thus, body sovereignty as a subversive tool of colonial stereotypes and body politics is pivotal in Erdrich's poems. In "Fat in America", Erdrich tackles this issue by opening the poem with a serious tone when she writes This is no joke. She is fat and happy in the U.S.A. The kind of woman who always has plenty of loving men—not just perverts either. You are thinking that she can't be all that fat. Well, she is. There are folds of flesh at the back of her neck—her half-moon cheeks swallow her eyes—her eyes are olives sunk in the whole wheat dough—her chin doubles when she laughs, and wobbles when she talks—her shoulders are broad and sold as XXL men's. Her breasts are vast (2012, p. 183).To reinforce the serious tone of the first line, the speaker announces with confidence and defiance that the unidentified woman is 'fat and happy in the U.S.A'.

This statement challenges the colonial and the capitalist body politics that create exaggerated beauty norms that generate stereotypes against fat women and render them as ugly and sad. The clever and the intentional insertion of the adjective 'happy' along with the reference to the U.S.A deconstructs the colonial and capitalistic myth that envisions the country as the land of slim beautiful women, a land where only women whose beauty comply with Westerncentric norms of beauty are happy and confident.The speaker doesn't shy away from describing how the woman really looks in terms of bodily appearance. She makes the woman's fatness more visible because "…every body is a political order and every body houses individual self-determination" (Simpson, 2017, p. 112). This indicates that the speaker not only embraces the woman's fatness but also celebrates it as a site of Indigenous freedom that affirms and respects bodily, intellectual, spiritual, and land sovereignty (Simpson, 2017). In this way, the body functions as "a political order that threatens forms of sovereignty to settler states" (Simpson, 2017, p. 118). Then, Erdrich gives more depth, immediacy and agency to her representation of the female body when she states that …her hips rise biblically (mounds, doves, wheat, hills) nothing is fertile enough to describe them, except the Great Plains where she was born. Yes, her hips are like cropland. And the valley between? Agorgeous secret place, a gorge of ferns and falls—her thighs are sacks of grain, a harvest—her calves carved timbers, marble sculpture. And her feet? Ah! These are the platforms of faith—holy and round and strong (2012, p. 183)In the quote above, Erdrich performs a generative refusal through grounded normativity by infusing her representation of the female fat body with expressions that are grounded in Indigenous knowledge. She employs the adverb 'biblically' to reclaim the holiness of the female body by challenging the Christian attitudes that render the Indigenous female body as filthy and sinful. Then, she foregrounds Indigenous cosmology and relationality by reestablishing the strong ties between the female body and 'the Great Plains'. This kinship between the body and the land is reinforced in the next simile that compares the hips to the cropland. Erdrich continues her use of natural imagery to depict the female body. She refers to expressions like ferns and grain to indicate the embodied and the grounded basis of the fat woman's decolonial resistance of stereotypes through generative refusal. Such expressions establish the female body's full presence on the land because according to Simpson "… one has to be fully present and engaged in Nishnaabeg ways of living in order to generate knowledge, in order to generate theory" (2017, p.28).More precisely, the speaker refuses the policing of the Indigenous body by the colonial body politics. This refusal generates a decolonial relationship based on respect, reciprocity and relationality between the body and the land. At the end of the poem, Erdrich explicitly reaffirms her description of the female body as sacred and strong. This holy and unbreakable attachment acts as a decolonial mode against land dispossession, and validates the Native American relationship with the land. In this regard, Simpson states that…within Nishnaabeg thought, the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment*. Indigenous bodies don't relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to land through connection—generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear *relationship*. The reverse process of dispossession within Indigenous thought then is Nishnaabeg intelligence, Nishnaabewin. The opposite of dispossession within Indigenous thought is grounded normativity. This is our power (2017, p. 43).In "Fat in America", Erdrich "articulates and reasserts alternate notions of Native embodiment, community, and relational identity that …[is] powerfully resisting definition and categorization under the imposed legal, social, and political matrices of the settler state" (Rhadigan, 2013, p. 23). In "This Body, The River", Erdrich continues her grounded and embodied resistance by challenging the artistic representation of the female body. She indigenizes the Western ekphrastic tradition by reconfiguring the body as a carrier of Indigenous culture (Simpson, 2017). She opens the poem with the following lines: "All that time I ran underground, green as mud. / I didn't know I would flow until / some boy stretched out with me by the river" (2012, p. 142). In these lines, the speaker foregrounds the role of kinetics (movement) in the production of Indigenous knowledge by using the verb 'run' combined with the simile that compares the speaker to the green color that connotes life, growth and kinship with the land. The fluidity and the movement of the female body and its relationality with the land and the river create a grounded normativity that opposes the static and the oppressive depiction of women in patriarchal and capitalistic art. Here, Erdrich underscores the embodied and grounded nature of Indigenous knowledge whose core is the decolonial love that resists land dispossession by creating a network of relationships that ties the female speaker to her lover and the land. This closely aligns with Simpson who contends that: the original knowledge, coded and transmitted through complex networks, says that everything we need to know about everything in the world is contained within Indigenous bodies, and that these same Indigenous bodies exist as networked vessels, or constellations across time and space intimately connected to a universe of nations and

beings (2017, p. 21).Therefore, the Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are inscribed on their bodies and their kincentric ties to the land. Erdrich writes "just that first time, this body, the river / flows around stones, whorls an undertow, / makes a map, borders another territory, / divides up the whole wide wet world" (2012, p. 142).The lines above dismantle the colonial cartographic practices that separate the body from the land, and the human from the non-human by recentering the Indigenous relationality and reciprocity between the female body and the land. Erdrich reconfigures the Indigenous body and the land as inseparable and unclassifiable. According to Geoman, "bodies are mobile and not fixed identities" (2013, p. 120). This body mobility and relationality with the land establish "embodied geography" that remaps both the body and the land on Indigenous terms (Goeman, 2013). In "Nesting Dolls", Erdrich becomes deeply engaged in her indigeneity and reenacts the intertwining between theory and praxis in relation to the body and the lived and land-based practices. In the poem, she reconceptualizes the female bodily experiences such as procreation, pregnancy and birth as decolonial processes and Indigenous ways of doing that manifest Indigenous ways of knowing and ways of being. She employs the first person to highlight the individual's role in generating collective truths that are opposed to colonialism (Simpson, 2017). She firmly announces that I've been golden in the long afterglow,I've been that bubble in the honey pot,I've been sweet, sweet in me and all along someone else.That's the mystery. First the man gives up his driblet of will,it leaves his body to enter mine and in a moment start another body that will leave mine (2012, p. 152).The opening lines of the poem gives agency to the female speaker by focusing on her experiences through gustatory images created through expressions such as 'honey' and 'sweet.' These images foreground the role of the physical, the lived and the emotional experiences in generating Indigenous knowledge by protecting the locus of knowledge production which is the grounded normativity or the reattachment of the body to the land. In the second stanza, Erdrich describes woman's pregnancy in Indigenous terms. Instead of highlighting the colonial Westerncentric male dominance in the process of reproduction, Erdrich cleverly employs the verb 'gives up' to describe male's role in the process. In the process of procreation, the man only 'gives up his driblet of will' inside the woman's womb that becomes the site of creation. Thus, the female pregnant body embodies her agency, strength, tenacity and autonomy. Erdrich continues her Native reconfiguration of child creation. She refers to The egg, the gold bubble in me, once in my Ojibwe mother, once in her Ojibwe mother, and so on back like nesting dolls. Now we tip the jar watch the slow pour of gold, the bubble thins grows toward self, toward that lovely love of self (2012, p. 152).The speaker's reference to being an egg inside her 'Ojibwe mother' who was an egg inside her grandmother transforms her body to a site of ancestral transmission, memory, matrilineage, sovereignty, self-determination, community relationships and cultural continuity that confront colonial erasure and the settler claims of ownership over Indigenous lands and bodies. Thus, through the process of birthing, the female body encodes the decolonial theory and its lived practice that validate the emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual basis of Indigenous knowledge. This embodied knowledge is decolonial because it challenges the colonial attitudes toward the Indigenous people as "…stupid, and … void of higher thought" (Simpson, 2011, p.34).In "New Born", Erdrich foregrounds her Native culture and worldview in relation to pregnancy and birth. In the first stanza, she writes "In the beginning/ we had to say your name/ to get you to stay. Here, Erdrich alludes to the opening verse from the bible that describes the story of the creation. However, unlike some of her poems that integrate science and her Ojibwe culture, she indigenizes the child's creation by stressing the role of chanting that transforms it to a process of "becoming" [that] does not rely on a division between men and women or progress and civilization, but rather on balance. Both men and women have important roles in the ceremony" (Goeman, 2013, p.113). Therefore, pregnancy and birth become processes that are infused with the Indigenous creative practices and epistemologies. They are transformed into vessels that contain Indigenous knowledge. The poet repeats the pronoun 'we' to describe the communal and the ceremonial nature of Native American culture (Simpson, 2017). Erdrich writes We said it and finally your eyes lit.Your cord stump darkened and fell.We sewed it into a pouch, a beaded turtle whose legs point in the sacred four directions,whose back holds up the world—this world you now claim with your radiant, human gaze (2012, p. 156).In the above quote, Erdrich connects the creation of the child to the Ojibwe creation stories. She mentions how the child's 'cord stump' is collectively 'sewed' into 'a pouch' that resembles "a beaded turtle/ whose legs point in the sacred four directions, / whose back holds up the world". These final lines allude to the Native American creation stories, foreground the central position of children in Native cultures, embody the interdependent nature of Native American communities (Anderson, 2000), and align with Simpson's concepts of grounded normativity and radical resurgence. In Indigenous cultures, children are not considered possessions of the biological parents; rather, they are understood to be gifts

on loan from the Creator" (Anderson, 2000, p.159).This analogy reinforces the sacredness of the child and his relationality with the land. It's noteworthy that the creative acts of chanting, sewing and beading mentioned in the poem are central to Simpson's concepts of grounded normativity, radical resurgence and the intertwining of the decolonial theory and praxis. Simpson contends that This *procedure* or practice of living, theory and praxis intertwined, is generated through relations with Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg land, land that is constructed and defined by our intimate spiritual, emotional, and physical relationship with it. The procedure is our grounded normativity. Living is a creative act, with self-determined making or producing at its core (2017, p.23).Thus, sewing and beading embody lived practices and Indigenous processes that encode decolonial theory and praxis because they reassert the Native Americans' deep engagement with Indigeneity (Simpson, 2017). They are "Land-based knowledge [that] is practiced knowledge, knowledge that is used on the land. This becomes tied to the personal identity, spiritual development of people, and their overall relationships with others" (McGuire, 2010, p.123).In other words, Erdrich's Ojibwe culture is theorized and practiced through these creative acts that reattach the Indigenous bodies to their land and create a network of reciprocal relationships of care, respect, interdependence and sovereignty. Therefore, sewing and beading are Indigenous ways of Doing that articulate "Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being" (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003, p. 9). This interconnection between process and relationship that embody relationality and reciprocity is central to the Native American conceptualization of life and nationhood because it resists the colonial system that is authoritarian and hierarchal (Simpson, 2017).

Conclusion

Heid E. Erdrich's poems foreground the Indigenous female body as the site of cultural memory, resistance, resurgence, liberation, relationality, matrilineage, sovereignty and cultural transmission and continuity. Erdrich challenges the colonial and capitalistic commodification and objectification of the body, by reconfiguring it as an indivisible part of the land, and as a locus that forms and sustains the spiritual, emotional, and land-based relationships. In "Fat in America," the celebration of a fat Indigenous woman unsettles Western standards of beauty and exposes the colonial pressures that try to separate Indigenous women from their own bodily sovereignty. "This Body, The River" extends this challenge by refusing the rigid boundaries that settler art imposes on women's bodies, imagining instead a body that moves with the land and generates knowledge in motion.In poems such as "Nesting Dolls" and "New Born," Erdrich turns to pregnancy, birth, and generational memory as Indigenous processes that sustain community and reaffirm kinship ties. These intimate moments are not simply personal experiences; they become acts through which knowledge is carried, reshaped, and handed forward. Sewing, beading, chanting, and other creative practices show how theory is embedded in daily life and how Indigenous nations maintain themselves through relational, land-centered practices.

References

Anderson, K. (2000). *A recognition of being: Reconstructing Native womanhood*. Second Story Press.

Černe, S. (2023). "It Carries My Feet to These Places": The Mississippi in Joy Harjo's and Heid E. Erdrich's Poetic Remappings. *Native American and Indigenous Studies 10*(1), 1-27. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nai.2023.0000.

de Finney, S. (2014). Under the shadow of empire: Indigenous girls' presencing as decolonizing force. *Girlhood Studies*, 7(1), 19–37.https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2014.070103

Erdrich, H. E. (2008). *My Beloved Is Mine.* In *National Monuments* (pp. 55–56). Michigan State

Erdrich, H. E. (2012). *Cell traffic: New and selected poems.* University of Arizona Press.

Erdrich, H. E. (n.d.). *Heid E. Erdrich*. Poetry Foundation. Retrieved September 10, 2025, from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/heid-e-erdrich

Goeman, M. (2013). *Mark my words: Native women mapping our nations*. University of Minnesota Press.

LaRocque, E. (2010). When the other is me: Native resistance discourse, 1850-1990. University of Manitoba

Low, D. (2022). Complexity and media in Heid E. Erdrich's verse. In D. K. S. Barker & C. A. Jacobs (Eds.), *Postindian aesthetics: Affirming Indigenous literary sovereignty* (pp. 87–94). University of Arizona Press.

Madsen, D. L. (2021). The exceptional power of the dead in Heid E. Erdrich's *National Monuments*. In G. Henry Jr., M. Noodin, & D. Stirrup (Eds.), *Enduring Critical Poses: The Legacy and Life of Anishinaabe Literature and Letters* (pp. 149–175). State University of New York Press.

Majhor, S. J. (2019). *We are all related: Contemporary Native American literature and the nonhuman turn* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota). University of Minnesota.

https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstreams/41b9fcad-334b-4bc3-9131-f244003faa1a/download conservancy.umn.edu+1

Martin, K., & Mirraboopa, B. (2003). Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous and Indigenist research. *Journal of Australian Studies, 27*(76), 203–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050309387838

McGuire, P. D. (Kishebakabaykwe). (2010). *Exploring resilience and Indigenous ways of knowing*. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health, 8*(2), 117–131.

Mitchell, R. (2022). *Amplifying agency and presence of Native American women in 21st century literature* (Master's thesis, University of South Dakota). University of South Dakota. https://red.library.usd.edu/diss-thesis/100 red.library.usd.edu+1

Poremski, K. M. (2015). Voicing the bones: Heid Erdrich's poetry and the discourse of NAGPRA. *Studies in American Indian Literatures, 27*(1), 1–32. https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.27.1.0001

Rader, D. (2020). Contemporary Indigenous American poetry. In M. B. Taylor (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of Native American literature* (pp. 395–412). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108699419.022

Rhadigan, R. (2013). *Moving bodies: Sovereignty, science, and Indigenous ontology in the poetry of Heid Erdrich* (Master's thesis, UCLA).

Rifkin, M. (2021). Feeling, Memory, and Peoplehood in Contemporary Native Women's Poetry. In J. M. Lutes & J. Travis (Eds.), *Gender in American Literature and Culture* (pp. 332–349). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge

Simpson, L. B. (2011). *Dancing on our turtle's back: Stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence.* ARP Books.

Simpson, L. B. (2017). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. University of

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.

Ziarkowska, J. (2020). *Indigenous Bodies, Cells, and Genes: Biomedicalization and Embodied Resistance in Native American Literature* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036890