

Gendered Ecological Authority in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*: A Crenshawian Intersectional Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional approach, this article explores how Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) can be read as a question of gendered ecological authority. It is here where Fleur Pillager and Margaret Kashpaw are seen as possessing a form of cultural authority that is produced at the intersection of race, gender, and ecological custodianship, which has not been sufficiently theorized in the field so far. The research method, Belsey's (2005) model of textual analysis, shows that the colonial attack on these women is aimed at this intersection: the sexual, ecological, and linguistic elements are attacked at the same time because they are simultaneously constituted. Findings show that Fleur's knowledge of bear-clan medicine, the nature of her relationship with Matchimanito, Margaret's warrior tradition, and Nanapush's matrilineal naming of Lulu are formal enactments of the principle that ecological sovereignty and cultural survival go hand in hand in the Anishinaabe world. The article presents an original extended intersectional approach, with the addition of ecological custodianship as a fourth analytical dimension in addition to race, gender, and class.

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Introduction

Tracks (1988) by Erdrich is, among other things, a novel about women's knowledge. Its two most formidable characters, Fleur Pillager and Margaret Rushes Bear, are not the first victims of colonial violence, although a lot of colonial violence is heaped upon them. They are caretakers: of botanical expertise, of water-spirit connections, of warrior heritage, and of the practical and ceremonial structures of the Anishinaabe ecological world. The formal structure of the novel, which centers on their knowledge and their survival, is one of Erdrich's most continuous arguments. The argument is that Indigenous women are not the passive recipients of colonial dispossession but the mainstay of their community's cultural and ecological legacy. This article does not dismiss that argument, but brings it into conversation with Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional perspective and argues that the authority represented by Fleur and Margaret, what this study terms gendered ecological authority, is an intersectional phenomenon that cannot be well understood through the lens of feminism alone or postcolonialism alone.

Crenshaw (1989) wrote the original essay intervening in the antidiscrimination law literature. It focused on the legal system's failure to account for the intersectional experience of Black women, who were discriminated against both based on race and gender, neither of which was addressed by the law in isolation. Her claim that the combination of several identity constructions creates oppressions that are not simply the sum of the separate

oppressions has since spread beyond the law to become part of sociology, education, feminist theory, and literary criticism. Its use in Indigenous women's literature has been superficial and has never taken into account one of the most significant aspects of Indigenous women's literature: the ecological aspect of Indigenous women's authority and vulnerability. Race and gender in *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988) create not only the vulnerabilities that the existing Crenshaw scholarship has explored, but also other types of vulnerabilities. It also generates certain kinds of ecological knowledge, ceremonial authority, and land-based custodianship, which form the community's most resilient resistance to colonial dissolution. This study proposes that care of the land, the fourth axis of Crenshaw's three-axis framework, join the three to properly analyze the literary portrayal of Indigenous women.

The novel, *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988), is about the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in the years between 1912 and 1924, during which time there was an ongoing colonial attack on their land tenure, ceremonial practice, and community organization. The allotment system, the epidemic winters, the logging industry's insidious penetration of Pillager land, and the boarding school system's assault on Indigenous language and culture are all set against the historical backdrop of the character studies in the novel. In this context, the novel's women protagonists are not simply survivors of the colonial assault, but they also organize their survival in relation to particular forms of knowledge and authority made up in and by the Anishinaabe matrilineal tradition. This gendered ecological authority is manifested in Fleur's bear-clan medicine expertise, her friendship with the water spirit Misshepeshe, her trickster-like ability to use the colonial logging machinery against the loggers themselves, and her preparedness to use the colonial logging machinery against the loggers themselves. The corporeal, martial expression of Margaret's warrior tradition is the war cry that has not been heard for fifty years, the bite that proves deadly. These two women represent the novel's argument that this is the main intersection attacked by the colonial project: the Anishinaabe woman who carries both her racial identity and her gendered custodianship and ecological knowledge.

The previous research on *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988) mostly concentrated on the female characters of the novel from either of the two distinct perspectives of feminism or postcolonialism. There is a lack of studies that have used Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional approach to suggest that Pillager and Kashpaw represent a distinctly gendered ecological authority located at the intersection of race, gender, and ecological stewardship. The ecological dimension of Crenshaw's framework lacks theorization for Indigenous women's fiction. This leaves the most analytically distinguishing aspect of Erdrich's female characters, their ecological knowledge as a means of their cultural and political power, without an adequate account. Therefore, this study aims to address it. The study thus explores the constitution of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework of gendered ecological authority in Pillager and Kashpaw in *Tracks* (1988) and analyzes the race, gender, and ecological custodianship as cultural resistance in the chosen text as per Crenshaw's Intersectionality in the selected text. The questions the study seeks to answer are: 1) How does Crenshaw's intersectional framework illuminate gendered ecological authority in Fleur Pillager and Margaret Kashpaw in *Tracks*? 2) What is the role of the intersection of race, gender, and ecological custodianship as cultural resistance in the chosen text as per Crenshaw's Intersectionality?

Why this Study?

This study is limited to *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988) and deals with the novel's three key characters that are associated with females: Fleur Pillager, Margaret Kashpaw, and Nanapush, who, as a matrilineal custodian by proxy, is the character through whom the female ecological knowledge is transmitted to Lulu. Its value is theoretical: adding a fourth dimension, ecological custodianship, to the intersectional framework developed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991). It affords a more suitable analytical tool for the study of Indigenous women's literature than the current intersectional scholarship offers. The scope of this study is limited to *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988). It does not discuss Erdrich's other fiction, nor does it make an analysis of other writers from the Native American literary tradition. The analysis is

limited to the three principal custodians of Anishinaabe ecological and cultural knowledge in the novel: Pillager, Kashpaw, and Nanapush.

Crenshaw, Intersectionality, and Feminism

The theoretical tradition out of which this study emerges does not begin with Crenshaw, but with the foundational feminist scholarship whose work she builds upon and whose limitations and blind spots she corrects. Notably, hooks' (1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* offered one of the earliest sustained arguments that mainstream feminist theory (dominated by white, middle-class, academically credentialed women) systematically marginalized the experiences of women of colour, working-class women, and women from the Global South. This was not incidental, but instead structural. The dominant feminist discourse constituted woman as a category that implicitly encoded whiteness and class privilege, rendering non-white and non-middle-class women invisible within the very movement that claimed to speak for them. It is from this basic critique (that identity categories are always already implicitly racialized and classed) that Crenshaw's intersectionality blossoms. The spatial and experiential language of understanding is from Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which brings a consciousness that is not solely along a single axis, but rather the consciousness of the borderland between racial, gendered, and cultural experiences. Anzaldúa's new mestiza consciousness is a mode of knowledge created at the intersections of various, sometimes contradictory, consciousnesses. It prefigures the formal principle of Crenshaw's intersectionality but also situates it within the experience of borderlands in terms of both body and space.

Collins (1990) took Hooks's argument about marginalization one step further. They argue in an epistemological way that the particular location of black women within the nexus of racial, gendered, and class oppression generates a type of knowledge that is not only different from dominant modes of knowledge. It is also the product of an experience of the intersection of these oppressions. The interlocking systems of race, class, and gender that organize social life. As described by Collins (1990), the matrix of domination is directly relevant to the Anishinaabe women's situation in *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988): the allotment system, the gender hierarchies of colonial law, and the class dispossession brought about through the poverty of the reservation. It is especially interesting in the context of this article to consider how Collins' emphasis on the ways that oppressed groups learn bodies of knowledge, knowledge that is practical, relational, and embodied, knowledge that the dominant culture cannot access or replicate. It applies to the way that Fleur's medical knowledge comes to be known. Her bear clan's ecological knowledge emerges from the intersectional position that Collins calls the source of unique epistemic authority.

The concept of intersectionality was coined in its most focused form by Crenshaw (1989), who explored a particular case: *DeGraffenreid v General Motors (GM)*, where a Black woman's discrimination claims were rejected because they failed to fall under the category of race discrimination and the category of sex discrimination that the court recognized. This decision, Crenshaw said, showed a "structural bias" in the way the legal system thought about discrimination: The law also treats racial discrimination and gender discrimination as two separate and parallel *Tracks* of discrimination, one involving discrimination against people of color, another involving discrimination against women, and those who suffer at the intersection are invisible. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 37). In 1991, she expanded the framework to violence and found that shelters and legal services for women victims of domestic violence in Los Angeles were not adequate for the needs of women of color who experienced racial and gender violence. That's why Crenshaw's theory is relevant to the study of literary fiction. It is a theory about the way compound oppressions create compound vulnerabilities in the material world, and literary fiction is one of the most precise tools for representing the material world.

Intersectionality as a field of study in the social sciences and humanities also underwent methodological and theoretical development in the 2000s. In his study, McCall (2005) identified three methodological strategies in

intersectional analysis. They are anti-categorical, intra-categorical, and inter-categorical, and he proposed that the inter-categorical is the most productive approach for empirical studies, one which sees social categories as meaningful analytical tools but is critical about their limitations and the inequalities they structure. Taking an intra-categorical approach, this article focuses on Erdrich's portrayal of Anishinaabe women as a unique group within the more general categories of women and Indigenous people, which are not fully described by any of the categories. There were also some questions suggested in relation to the ability of this framework to capture pleasure, agency, and complex subjectivity, as well as oppression and victimhood, as in Jennifer Nash's (2008) *Re-thinking Intersectionality*, which applies to this research in its emphasis on gendered ecological authority as a positive power rather than simply a site of vulnerability. Kathy Davis' (2008) analysis of intersectionality as a feminist buzzword explored the reasons for the rapid uptake of the concept in academia, suggesting that this very indeterminacy, which means that no axes of identity are specified in advance as relevant in any particular context, is what gives intersectionality its analytical flexibility. Cho et al. (2013) took this development one step further by calling for intersectionality as a field of study and not just a theoretical concept, paying attention to methodological and political applications. This study adds to that field by suggesting a new analytical axis specific to the context of representation of Indigenous women in literary works, namely, ecological custodianship as the fourth axis.

Studies on Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

Readings of *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988) have been numerous and wide-ranging. Rainwater (1990) is one of the earliest significant critical engagements with Erdrich's fiction, which asserted that Erdrich's narrative strategies consistently situate her reader on the borderland between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems, where the reader must negotiate not only between different knowledge content but between systems of fundamentally different assumptions. This mediation of narrative between worldviews is exactly the kind of thing that Rainwater (1990) described in relation to *Tracks*' (Erdrich, 1988) description of Fleur's ecology: *Tracks* places Fleur's bear-clan practices and her relationship with Misshepesu consistently in the epistemological position of being essentially real in the worldview that the narrative inhabits, although it also recognizes that this reality is unreadable within the epistemology of the colonizing system. It is this epistemological doubleness that Crenshaw's (1991) framework, enhanced by Belsey's (2005) textual analysis, is especially attuned to read.

However, Owens (1992) set the political stage for *Tracks*' (Erdrich, 1988) most consistent reading during the early 1990s. Owens contended that Native American novels, in essence, are acts of cultural self-determination, formal counterassertions of Indigenous presence in the face of the colonial narrative's refusal of Indigenous presence, or its representation of Indigenous absence, primitivism, or defeat. His reading of *Tracks* highlighted the novel's exploration of Anishinaabe land tenure and its systemic erasure by the allotment era, as well as the community's common struggle against it. Owens' political analysis is incomplete in the sense that the novel's resistance is also a gendered one. The most powerful agents of cultural continuity are the women whose power is derived from their gender, race, and ecological knowledge. The feminist-spiritual dimension of Indigenous literary criticism, which Owens' political reading was missing, was introduced by Allen. According to Allen (1992), the Indigenous female principle, which she terms the feminine cosmological tradition, has been suppressed by European colonialism's patriarchal assumption, and recovering this principle is a literary and political task. Although this study agrees with Allen that her reading of Fleur as a female figure presenting this feminine principle is generative, this reading must be supplemented by Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional analysis, which was not included in Allen's reading, as it has a more distinct focus on the specifically racial and economic aspects of Fleur's authority and vulnerability.

Ruppert's (1995) reading of the Nanapush- Pauline polarity, where Nanapush serves as the novel's guardian of Anishinaabe oral and ecological knowledge, and Pauline is the novel's figure of colonial assimilation. It is pertinent

to the argument of this study with regard to gendered ecological authority, and the Nanapush- Pauline polarity makes the value and fragility of the ecological knowledge that the novel's women embody visible. Stookey (1999) offered an overview of Erdrich's major works, which treats *Tracks* within the context of the author's oeuvre and his formal stylistics in representing the community's resistance to the process of colonial dissolution and his careful incorporation of Ojibwe spiritual tradition. Stookey's (1999) focus on the novel's ceremonial symbolism offers valuable background for this study's argument on the ecological aspect, but her model does not provide the intersectional analysis found in Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) work.

The most comprehensive single reference volume to Erdrich's fiction, Beidler and Barton (2006) contains genealogical charts, character identifications, and scene-by-scene annotations for all of Erdrich's major novels. Beidler and Barton's (2006) study is useful as a contextual resource in this respect because it helps to explain the genealogical and community connections that underlie the novel's portrayal of Fleur's Pillager lineage and Margaret's Kashpaw connections. Connections that are crucial to grasping the nature of matrilineal knowledge transmission are read as gendered ecological authority. What existing study, including those in this review, has not done is that it has not theorized the ecological dimension of the women's authority in the light of the intersectional approach of Crenshaw (1989, 1991), and it is this gap that this article is filling.

Although there has been significant critical scholarship on *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988), there is a lack of published studies that have adopted Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional theory to theorize gendered ecological authority as a compound form of cultural power that emerges from the intersection of race, gender, and ecological custodianship. The ecological axis is not theorized in readings of Indigenous women's fiction from a Crenshaw perspective. This axis is the specific focus of this study.

Methodology

The current study is qualitative and interpretive, using Belsey's (2005) model of textual analysis and Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectional framework. Rather than viewing the formal elements of *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988), its imagery, its positioning of the narrating voice, and its symbolic ecology as neutral aesthetic elements. It analyzes these choices as culturally and politically charged enactments of the ecological authority that its female characters embody. The study is conducted in the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that the meaning of literature is not inherent in the text itself, but in the dynamic interaction between text, theory, and culture. This paradigm is suitable for the article's argument. It is the premise that the ecological authority Crenshaw (1989, 1991) identifies is gendered, and that existing literature has not theorized the category of ecological authority in *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988), is an interpretive construction which relies on the theoretical lens used.

This study uses Belsey's (2005) model of textual analysis as manifested in three commitments, which are directly active in the analysis of *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988). The first is a commitment to ideological critique: all formal selections made in the novel are read as contributing to the colonial-racial-gendered ideological contexts Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) frame maps. This is to say that when Erdrich describes Fleur's body as 'her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow' (p. 16), this is not simply characterization, but the description of a specifically Indigenous feminine body that cannot be domesticated through the act of objectification by the colonial gaze. Second, the commitment is to intertextuality. The novel's material forms are understood as a function of the Anishinaabe oral and ceremonial culture (in which the voice of Nanapush is understood). This is read through the lens of the particular Anishinaabe sense of clan identity as produced through ecological kin relations, rather than biological ones alone, as Nanapush states, 'Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth' (p. 31). The third commitment is to reading formal absence as meaningful presence: the violence of the novel is the colonial project; it is the braids forced into Nanapush's mouth, the shaved scalp, a reading not just as event but as formal inscription of the target of the colonial project: the gendered

ecological authority that the braids represent. These three commitments allow the analysis to examine Erdrich's prose as a precision instrument that encodes what Crenshaw's theory of oppression (1991) theorizes: the compounded nature of oppression and authority at the intersection of multiple positions of identity.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality with an expanded focus on ecological custodianship as a fourth analytical lens beyond race, gender, and class. Anishinaabe women's authority in *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988) calls for this extension. Though not essentially related to her race, her gender, or her class position, Fleur's power, her medicine knowledge, her connection with Matchimanito, and her bear-clan identification are constituted by all three. It is ecological: it is made from her long-term embodied, relational practice with the ecological community of Matchimanito Lake and the Pillager Forest. The colonial violence against this authority is thus not only racial and gendered but also ecological: the logging of Pillager Forest and the land allotment of Matchimanito are not just economic operations but violence against the specific ecological conditions in which Fleur's authority is formed and exercised.

The warrior power of Margaret has another ecological dimension: her war cry is an ancestral ritual, which has been banned by the colonial pacification project, but is embedded in her body as cultural memory. The specifically biological dimension of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional compound, as it applies to Indigenous women, is this preservation: the body as an ecological archive of ancestral practice, which remains unaffected by colonial suppression, and which is infused with gender in specific ways, making the Anishinaabe woman's body the primary site of both colonial assault and cultural resistance. This section applies Belsey's (2005) process to the reading of these body-borne cultural performances as formal textual events: the war cry, the bite, the braids, and the shaved scalp are not merely dramatic events but are formal arguments about the nature and the victims of colonial gendered ecological violence.

Analysis and Discussion

The most condensed and philosophically on-point description of gendered ecological authority in *Tracks* (Erdrich, 1988) is that of Pillager power, which is the basis for the novel's overall symbolic economy and is rooted in the Anishinaabe understanding of identity as constituted through embodied clan membership: Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery, and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 31) In this passage, three dimensions of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional compound are encoded at the same time. The transmission of power through bloodlines and bear-clan membership is racial in a specific Anishinaabe sense. Clan identity is a form of ecological kinship and makes up a person's relationship with the non-human community of persons, the bear, the lake, the forest, which is the Anishinaabe world. The power's expression through the hands, knotted, rough, and sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards (p.23), is gendered in this particular form. These are women's hands, hands shaped by the labour of beading, skinning, and medicine-gathering, which are the Anishinaabe woman's ecological practice. The political dimension is a belligerent gaze directly: here, the gaze does not accept the position of a colonized subject, with downcast eyes and a silent deference. Belsey (2005) would interpret the specific word 'impolite' as ideologically laden. It is a coded assessment of the colonial racial-gender system that the Anishinaabe woman refuses to submit to in her body. In short, the passage is a formal argument

suggesting that the three dimensions- ecological kinship, gendered practice, and political assertion are not separable but a single compound state of authority that cannot be described by any one of these.

In addition, because of Fleur's multiple drownings in Matchimanito Lake, the novel's most enduring formal claims of gendered ecological authority are in relation to her interactions with the Matchimanito Lake ecological community. The first drowning is told in the laconic style of the oral tradition of the ancestors: The first time she drowned in the cold and glassy waters of Matchimanito, Fleur Pillager was only a child. Two men saw the boat tip, saw her struggle in the waves. They rowed over to the place she went down and jumped in. When they lifted her over the gunwales, she was cold to the touch and stiff, and they shook her face down on the shore. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 10) The drowning and the survival are not just Gothic supernatural occurrences, but in the Anishinaabe way of thinking, through which the novel exists, the drowning and the survival are the way in which Fleur gets connected with the Matchimanito spirit community. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework demands that we recognize that this bond is raced (specifically Pillager, specifically Anishinaabe, specifically bear-clan), gendered (Fleur's relationship with the water spirit has a specifically gendered character), and ecological (it is constituted through physical immersion in, and survival of, the specific body of water that is Matchimanito). The men who save her register only a drowning and a recovery. They have no understanding of what has transpired. What Nanapush's narration exposes, however, is that the drowning is an ecological initiation. It is a rite of passage into the community of relations of the lake that is Fleur's particular power. Belsey (2005) would describe the space in between the men's perception and Nanapush's knowledge as ideologically charged. It is the space between the colonial epistemology, which can only see drowning, and the Anishinaabe epistemology, which sees relational initiation.

Similarly, the second drowning and its aftermath set the stage for a formal discussion of the ecological aspect of gendered Anishinaabe identity as a change to Fleur. The community's awareness of this transformation, Erdrich (1988) captures in fine detail as an oral account: She washed on shore, her skin a dull, dead gray, but she was breathing. She had been in the lake overnight, fighting. She never told what happened, and Pauline never asked. We followed the *Tracks* of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened, and pressed into the dirt. By night, we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11). What Erdrich is formally enacting is a way of talking about the ontological reality of the identity of the Anishinaabe bear clan. Fleur is not a bear, metaphorically speaking, but rather, in the world the novel inhabits, constitutively a member of the bear people. According to an extended intersectional framework proposed by Crenshaw (1991), this transformation has political implications. The colonial project of categorizing and controlling Fleur as an Indian woman, as a Pillager allottee, as squaw, is a category that her ecological identity denies. She is not part of the colonial taxonomy because her identity is made up of a relational ecological community for which the colonial taxonomy has no term. The bear *Tracks* which the community follows are literally inscribed in this refusal. She has left the colonial space of the human-only world and taken herself into the ecological community of persons that the colonial epistemology denies.

Likewise, the trickster economic intelligence of Fleur is a trickster kind of authority in a specifically hostile space, the white male commercial culture, as revealed by the Argus card game sequence. Erdrich uses the precision of a punchline to depict the men's misinterpretation of her power. Precisely one dollar per game, never more, never less, the men around her can't read the skillfully controlled power of the consistently exact winnings of Fleur. At the end of the story, the squaw can't bluff (Erdrich, 1988, p. 17). They are exhibiting the mode of colonial racial-gendered blindness described by Crenshaw (1991). They are ascribing to Fleur the kind of intelligence she does not have, treating her as a racial-gendered category ('squaw') that excludes the kind of intelligence she is displaying. Her fishlike, slippery hips (p. 16), her substantial yoke shoulders, her card-players' delicate fingertips: the Pillager bear-clan body in the economic space of white male commerce, and the men do not see the authority in what they only

sense as an objectifiable, exploitable squaw body. This would be called by Belsey (2005) an ideological blindness, in which the dominant ideology offers a categorical tool set to enable the men to see Fleur's body, but not her intelligence, her race, but not her bear-clan authority, her gender, but not her gendered ecological power. That is the way that the card game is her resistance to this apparatus; not opposition to the apparatus per se, but the trickster approach: to let the apparatus blind itself, while she gets exactly what she needs from it. The most embodied portrayal of the authority of ancestors in the novel is when Margaret shrieks, a war cry during the assault on Lazarre. Erdrich (1988) relates both the act and its historical significance in one sentence:

Margaret uttered a war cry that had not been heard for fifty years and bit Boy Lazarre's hand viciously, giving a wound that would later prove his death. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 112) The most analytically significant part of the sentence is the fifty years detail. In its cultural dimension, it encodes Nixon's (2011) slow violence. The public display of the Anishinaabe warrior tradition has been eradicated through fifty years of colonial pacification policy, missionary pressure, and institutional suppression, but not the practice itself from the bodies of the women who carry it. Margaret's body brings up what the colonial project had thought it was well able to suppress, and the moment of threat to its own existence triggers the preservation as if it were muscle memory. Crenshaw's (1991) expanded intersectional analysis sheds light on the political implications of this preservation of the body: the warrior tradition is racial (Anishinaabe warrior culture), gendered (Anishinaabe women warriors tradition differs from, yet is parallel to, the men's warrior tradition), and ecological (the warrior is in service to the land, the community, and the ecological world that they are a part of). Margaret's bite is thus not only an act of personal self-defense, but also a formally coded argument that this compound authority stands the test of 50 years of colonial suppression because it is in the body's own memory, beyond the radar of the colonial system's surveillance and control.

Additionally, Margaret's braids are cut off, the novel's most formally focused expression of colonial violence toward gendered ecological authority, and Erdrich (1988) carefully depicts its particularity so that its symbolic weight is equally clear: Lazarre had sliced Margaret's braids clean off, and now he was shaving the rest of her scalp. He started almost tenderly at the wide part, and then he pulled the edge down each side of her skull. He did a careful job. He shed not one drop of her blood. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 115)

Belsey (2005) would argue that the most devastating and formal detail in the assault is the word 'tenderly' and that the scalp in the attack is a form of colonial counter-ceremony meant to remove the most obvious signifier of Margaret's Anishinaabe womanhood. In the Anishinaabe context, braids are not just a hairstyle but a cultural statement. They embody wider spiritual and relational significance and denote a person's affiliation with the ceremonial and ecological world in which they live. The braids are specifically targeted as the intersectionality of Crenshaw (1991) shows; they are at once racial (Indigenous), gendered (Anishinaabe woman), and ecological (ceremonial-ecological community). The attack on the braids, then, is an attack on all three at once, and the colonial exactitude with which they are targeted. The careful job, the deliberate tenderness, shows the colonial knowledge that these three aspects of Margaret's identity are the compound needed to be addressed in order to achieve the dissolution of the colonial project. Later, he was silenced by the braids tied to his mouth. She pressed my jaw down, thick above my tongue; her braids, never cut in this life before, were tied to silence me. Powerless, I taste their flat, animal perfume' (p. 115) expands the attack to include the voice of male cultural transmission in the community; the colonial violence that takes the voice of the woman also takes the voice of the man who would pass it on.

Further, the naming of Lulu Nanapush is the novel's most formally precise move to counter-archive against the genealogical disruption of colonization, and is made possible by a philosophy of naming which Nanapush expresses in an earlier passage:

Nanapush is a name that loses power every time it is written and stored in a government file. That is why I only gave it out once in all those years. No Name, I told Father Damien when he came to take the church census. No Name, I told the Agent when he made up the tribal roll. (Erdrich, [1988](#), p. 32)

The epistemology of naming that is otherwise expressed in this passage is the philosophical underpinning of the novel's naming of Lulu, the novel's most important instance of matrilineal transmission. The power of the name is oral and relational. In living ceremonial and relational contexts and not stuck in the colonial documentation apparatus. The framework developed by Crenshaw ([1991](#)) sheds light on the political economy of this epistemology. The colonial census and the tribal roll are tools of racial management, tools for the classification, count, and administration of the Indigenous population within the colonial taxonomy. But when Nanapush resists the placing of his name on these instruments, he resists having his racial-gendered-ecological identity reduced to a data point in a system in which there is no category for bear-clan custodial authority. He names Lulu Nanapush, Nanapush,' I said: And her name is Lulu'," he is doing the exact opposite of what the census does; he is creating an identity in the living act of the speaking of the name, not in the death of the writing of the name" (61-62). This naming represents an ecological and gendered authority, passed down to Lulu: she is not just a bearer of a surname but carries with her the entire tradition of epistemological and ecological authority that the name Nanapush signifies.

In the end, the novel's most forthright philosophical expression of ecological sovereignty as the basis of the gendered ecology of authority is that all three of its custodial figures are represented when Nanapush enunciates his axiom regarding land: Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier. (Erdrich, [1988](#), p. 33) It is not just a statement of property, it's an ecological philosophy. Land is 'lasts life to life' because it is not a commodity but a community of persons, the bear clan, the water spirit, the forest's tree-persons, whose presence or not, makes up who they are as Anishinaabe community and by extension, the women's authority within the community. When one considers the extended intersectional approach outlined by Crenshaw ([1991](#)) with ecological custodianship as its fourth axis, the stakes in the attack by the allotment system on this land become clear. It is not the mere economic dispossession, but the destruction of the ecological conditions that make up the context of Fleur's authority. With the taking of the land, the bear-clan medicine knowledge has no referents, the water spirit has no lake, and the matrilineal transmission that Nanapush works with for Lulu has nothing ecological to transmit. The formal argument of the novel, that the logging and allotment are not only economic but cultural and ecological catastrophe, is formally coded in the parallel between the destruction of the ecology and Nanapush's ageing: I weakened into an old man as one oak went down, another and another was lost (p. 9). Both the ecological and the human communities are one, and the women's powers rely on both.

Conclusion

This article has taken the position that a gendered ecological authority emerges as a result of the simultaneous intersection of race, gender, and ecological custodianship in *Tracks* (Erdrich, [1988](#)), and that the intersectional theory of Crenshaw ([1989](#), [1991](#)) needs to be expanded to incorporate this ecological axis to fully analyze Indigenous women's literary representation. The analysis has shown how Pillager's authority is interwoven with her bear-clan affiliation, how she relates to Matchimanito, how she is the trickster woman who plays cards, and how the bear was present at her birth; how Margaret Kashpaw's warrior authority is the embodied practice of the ancestors that the colonial project has attempted but failed to erase from the women's bodies; and how the act of naming Lulu by Nanapush can be seen as a matrilineal transmission that extends this compound authority through the ruins of the colonial disaster.

As already illustrated in the analysis, the colonial attack on this compound authority is a concentrated one on the intersectional aspects of that authority. Shaving of Margaret's braids, silencing of Nanapush with those braids, logging of Pillager Forest, allotment of Matchimanito land: they attack the racial, gendered, and ecological aspects of the women's authority at once, since they are at once constituted. This compound can't be addressed or described with a single act of resistance, nor with a single-axis analysis. The colonial project's attack, as much as the authority it attacks, is as complex as Crenshaw's ([1989](#), [1991](#)) framework makes visible, and as well-coded into Erdrich's formal choices as the project's regenerative potential is the capacity of the landscape's women's medicine knowledge.

The study's theoretical work goes beyond the analysis of *Tracks* (Erdrich, [1988](#)) and towards the wider project within Indigenous women's literature. This study offers an analytical tool that can be applied to the depiction of any Indigenous community where women's power is a function of their ecological knowledge, land-based practice, and ceremonial connection to the non-human community by including ecological custodianship as a fourth axis of Crenshaw's ([1989](#), [1991](#)) framework. These communities are found throughout Indigenous North American fiction, from Silko's *Ceremony* ([1977](#)) to Orange's *There There* ([2018](#)), and this expanded intersectional approach is an invitation to read more closely the complex tradition.

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