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The Body Subject to the Laws: Louise Erdrich's Metaphorical Incarnation of Federal Indian Law in "The Round House"

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Abstract

Author Louise Erdrich, a member of the Chippewa tribe in North Dakota, addresses historical and current social justice issues facing Native Americans in many of her critically acclaimed novels. *The Round House* is no exception. Erdrich begins her novel by describing a violent attack against the young protagonist's mother, an attack made possible by the systemic racism and lack of tribal sovereignty that underpins federal Indian law and policy. Erdrich transmutes the evil couched within those laws into one deplorable incident. The effects that unfold from that incident expose how—not only historically but also even today—lack of sovereignty results in communal trauma for Native Americans. In a series of deft metaphors, Erdrich repeatedly invokes the theme of haunting, rot, and infection to call out the body of laws that constitute contemporary federal Indian policy.

Keywords: VAWA, OVW, The Round House, Violence Against Women, Louise Erdrich, Tribal, Sovereignty, literature, federal Indian law, Native, Law

Author Louise Erdrich is the daughter of a German-American father and a Chippewa-American mother, an active member of her tribe, and an occasional attendee of Catholic Mass, as well as a follower of Ojibwe spiritual beliefs. She draws on these contrasts in her identity to write American-Indian narratives that are renowned for their nuance and authenticity. Erdrich's novels could not be defined as a series in the strictest sense, but her books like *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace*, *The Painted Drum*, *Tracks*, and *Four Souls* trace recurring characters and family names— Nanapush, Coutts, Pillager, Kashpaw, Lamartine, and Shaawano, to name a few— as far back as the nineteenth century. Though her medium is fiction, her work is relevant to modern indigenous matters. Erdrich does not shy away from the political, nor would her subject matter allow her to even if she wished. The broad chronological scope she uses to tell her stories illuminates how the struggle of American Indians today can only be understood through examining the many physical, psychological and legal injustices indigenous people have sustained in the wake of Western contact. In her novel, *The Round House*, she taps into a particularly legal vein. Public prosecutor Joe Coutts, son of tribal judge Bazil Coutts, recounts events from his thirteenth year as he narrates the novel. Erdrich wrote *The Round House* just before American Indian tribes gained any legal authority over non-Indians with the provisions contained in the 2013 Violence against Women Act (VAWA) reauthorization (Department of Justice). This gap in jurisdiction had essentially enabled predators to exploit American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) women without legal repercussion (Erdrich A25). The plot of *The Round House* revolves around the violent rape of Joe's mother, Geraldine, and the Coutts' ensuing inability to serve justice to her non-Indian attacker. Sadly, the events of the book are not fiction for many tribal women— a fact that was, of course, foremost in Erdrich's mind as she penned the novel.

As the narrative unfolds, the reader never escapes Erdrich's preoccupation with federal Indian policy. In one passage, a usually self-contained Judge Coutts reveals his disgust for the precedent set by the 1978 Supreme Court case *Oliphant v. Suquamish*: "This one is the one I would get abolished right this minute if I had the power" (Erdrich 243). The case, which definitively usurped from tribal courts any ability to prosecute non-Indians, is undeniably the most injurious legal precedent for the plot of this book. However, the reader comes to learn that *Oliphant v. Suquamish* is only the most immediate precedent and is built on the back of an entire legacy of federal Indian law. To justify the Supreme Court's decision for *Oliphant*, Justice Rehnquist invoked legal cases as far back as the late eighteenth century (Justia Legal Service). Erdrich never directly explicates the distinct stages of federal Indian policy. She takes it for granted that her reader knows that the last few centuries in the U.S. have seen eras of Indian Termination, Relocation, Assimilation, and Removal, and that each of those eras gave birth to their own law and policy (Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund). What Erdrich does take pains to expose is that law is a body that builds and grows upon itself. She skillfully plays with themes of haunting, rot, and infection to accuse federal Indian policy of rising from a body of corrupt laws. The message of her metaphors is that when a body of law is not vigilantly reviewed and renewed, when justice is divorced from legality, the urgent need to excise unjust laws and practices becomes as urgent as excising a putrid wound from the body.

The majority of the novel follows Joe's fixation with ridding the community of his Mother's attacker. His obsession is potently foreshadowed in the very first pages of the book. Joe and his father, oblivious to the horrific events happening to Geraldine, become preoccupied with removing the little seedlings that have dug into and threatened the foundation of the Coutts' home: "As everything on the reservation grew quiet and hushed, it seemed increasingly

important to me that each one of these invaders be removed, even down to the very tip of the root” (Erdrich 4). It is in this still moment that they first sense a disturbance. Where is Geraldine? The momentum of the book viscerally shifts once the Coutts men ask this question. Geraldine's job as a tribal enrollment officer had inadvertently burdened her with a dangerous secret, putting her in the middle of a domestic relationship gone awry between young Mayla Wolfskin and non-Indian Linden Lark. Geraldine agrees to meet Mayla to talk. Lark finds them near the tribal Round House where he violently rapes both women before attempting to burn Geraldine, Mayla, and Mayla's baby alive. In an attempt to hide the evidence, Lark throws his empty gas can in the nearby lake (where it will eventually be joined by the hush money from the baby's true father, Governor Yeltow). Geraldine manages to narrowly escape. She skids into the driveway just as Joe and Bazil are about to mount a full search. The mother that returns doused in blood and gasoline is an entirely unrecognizable person to Joe. In this coming of age novel, Joe is just learning how to process such complexity. He does not understand how someone could do this, he does not understand why his mother has gone numb, and he most definitely does not understand why, after the likely perpetrator is in custody, the law is rendered impotent to do anything about it.

The epiphany that legality and justice do not always come in hand in hand spurs an evolution in Joe's character. Joe embodies Erdrich's own preoccupation with terminating the problem at its source. He becomes willing to achieve this objective via non-conventional methods, and at some point in his transformation, he even becomes willing to kill for it. He views Lark as a Wiindigoo, someone who, according to his tribe's tradition, is infected by an evil spirit and comes to “see fellow humans as prey meat” (Erdrich 192). Under tribal justice, the sadistic Lark would be recognized as a Wiindigoo and killed before he could infect others.

Because conventional law fails to hold or prosecute Lark, Joe turns to his Tribe's ancient practices. The book's often dark content and moral ambiguity is punctuated by several moments of both spirituality and playfulness. Accompanying young Joe on his quest for answers is a boy gang of immature adolescents who still participate in the comical hallmarks of early teenage years, like sneaking beer, crushing on Joe's hot aunt Sonja, joining a bible study to meet girls, and blushing at their elders' lewd jokes. Cappy, Joe's best friend, is linked with Joe in a way that accentuates the spiritual aspect of *The Round House* as well. It is to Cappy who Joe divulges his belief that Lark is a Wiindigoo, and it is Cappy who ultimately helps Joe kill Lark. Cappy's tragic death is preternaturally foreshadowed by Cappy's brother at the beginning of the novel when he emerges from a vision, telling Joe, "I was praying for your family and my family and all of a sudden, I saw a man bending over you, like a police maybe [...] He was surrounded by a silver glow" (45). Joe sees this *ghost* periodically throughout the novel, and it is only at the climax of the novel when the cops stumble upon the boys' car accident that the *ghost* is recognized.

Though Linden Lark is unquestionably the evil antagonist of *The Round House*, he is so one-dimensionally evil that a sophisticated writer such as Erdrich would never portray him this way unless his plainness had a purpose. Linden Lark's exploitation of Indian jurisdiction is simply a stand-in—one of many embodiments for the rotting foundation of law that haunts the reservation. While Lark's consummate evil can be distracting, subtle symbols of injustice haunt the perimeter of the narrative in the form of Joe's ghost as well as in Mayla Wolfskin's adrift corpse. While we do find out that Mayla's baby survived, it is eventually revealed (in the form of a dream) that Mayla's decomposing corpse is augmenting the soil of some landfill, her justice and her very body forgotten. Surveying the tribal cemetery, Joe muses that he does not fear the

spirits of his ancestors, but is haunted by the “gut-kick of [their] history” (Erdrich 106). It is no wonder that the *ghost* haunting Joe throughout the book is revealed to be a white cop, a law-enforcer; in a way, that history and law-enforcement are one and the same. The police officer’s facial expression, which regards Joe with “sour contempt,” underscores the legalized malice of federal Indian law (334).

With the mere construction of the Round House, the book's namesake, Erdrich acknowledges the longstanding problem of injustice on the reservation, as it was built to “plead mercy from the Creator ... since justice was so sketchily applied on earth” (333). The location where Geraldine’s attack occurred has great spiritual significance in that it is a source of myth for their tribe. Joe lays awake several nights in a row to hear his eccentric grandfather Mooshum recount its history in his sleep. Each night, Mooshum picks up where he had left off the night before to tell the tale of his grandfather, Nanapush. During a profound winter, a tribal woman is falsely accused of being a Wiindigoo. Her son, Nanapush, is unwilling to kill her and they escape together into the wilderness. While wandering, the mother tells him about the vast herds of buffalo that have long since disappeared. The two sing the sacred buffalo song together. When Nanapush is caught alone in a great storm, the last buffalo mother appears and offers herself to him to save the tribe. He hides inside of her carcass to shelter himself from the storm, and her meat saves the tribe from starvation. Her soul continues to speak to Nanapush over the years, giving Nanapush the reputation for both madness and wisdom. She tells him, “Your people were brought together by us buffalo once. Your clans gave you laws ... rules that respected us and forced you to work together” (Erdrich 227). The concept of a body of laws unique to the tribe surfaces in this story’s rendering, and is solidified by the building of the Round House, which the buffalo mother tells Nanapush “will be my body. The poles my ribs. The fire my heart” (227).

Joe momentarily forgets about the buffalo story until he hears his father use the word “carcass” (Erdrich 199). This word brings the tale of the buffalo and the Round House rushing back, but his elation is quickly quenched when he grasps what his father is saying. This is the pivotal moment where they learn that Linden Lark—the “carcass,” as Bazil and Joe repeatedly refer to him—is in jail. The police, however, are legally compelled to let him go. Because the government affords tribes no jurisdiction over white men, the efforts of Judge Coutts and his predecessors to practice airtight law are for naught in Geraldine’s case. This vulnerability is echoed by the Round House itself. When Joe visits the Round House he notices a high keening sound coming from the building as wind “pour[s] through the gaps in the mud chinking”(74). The gaps in the Round House are reminiscent of other figurative devices throughout the novel in that they are lamentably permeable, and therefore exploited. With hands tied behind their back in legal red tape, Geraldine decides she will be the one to protect them from Lark. She, too, is convinced Lark is a Wiindigoo: “Lark’s trying to eat us, Joe. I will be the one to stop him” (262). That night, Joe counts all the holes in the tiles above his head (78 holes in one, 81 in the next) before admitting: “If my mother went after Lark, he’d kill her. I knew this. I counted the holes again and again” (262). The holes, gaps, and wobbly structure metaphorically represent the corruption in Federal Indian Policy. Joe resolves he can no longer be satisfied with “sketchily applied” justice. With that decision, his transformation from child to vigilante for justice is complete.

Though laws are intended to protect, they do the opposite in *The Round House*. The only effective law we do see in *The Round House* is actually the law of nature— namely, decay. Joe reaches a moment of fevered clarity after Lark’s murder, muttering to himself, “the noodles became a carcass...the human, the buffalo, the body subject to the laws” (Erdrich 310). The

theme of rot is most prominent in a central scene where Judge Coutts attempts to address Joe's burgeoning confusion over legal matters. A reserved and pragmatic man, Basil turns to a rotting casserole by way of explanation. By constructing a precarious silverware structure on top of the casserole, Basil makes a grand allegory for the history of federal Indian law. The judge points to the rotting casserole "foundation" and starts from the beginning. He explains to his son that land greed was the foundation for Indian law, conveniently worded to divest rights and assets from natives and bestow them upon the privileged: "Everybody's in on it. George Washington. Thomas Jefferson. [...] Chief Justice John Marshall, who wrote the decision for this case and made his family's fortune" (242). He goes on to explain to Joe that speculators were acquiring rights from Indian land while it was still occupied, "literally betting on smallpox," and that the Marshall's wording in the obiter dicta of a preliminary case is still used as a premise for modern Indian law (242). Unforgettably, Marshall named Indian land "discovered," granted Indians only the right to "occupancy," and decided that the Indian "character and religion [were] of so inferior a stamp that the superior genius of Europe must certainly claim ascendancy" (242). As for the wobbly edifice of kitchen utensils, Judge Coutts explains that it represents the law practiced within the tribe, "crafted keenly" by him and other Indian law practitioners in order to build "a solid base here for [their] sovereignty" (243). Lack of sovereignty, which Native Americans have been valiantly fighting for since their colonization, left Indians protected by only a patchwork structure that predators frequently exploit. There is no denying in Joe's mind that the foundation it rests on both figuratively and literally stinks.

Like rot, evil is portrayed as a contagious entity in *The Round House* that serves to advance the theme of corruption; it spreads upon contact. Cappy and Joe repeatedly call Linden Lark the "skin of evil," referencing a *Star Trek* episode in which a humanoid said to be evil

incarnate wreaks deadly havoc. For a while, Lark seems almost untouchable. He gets away with Geraldine and Mayla's attacks, smugly unscathed, and almost seems to revel in his assault by Bazil and Joe in a grocery store: "If you can smile while being choked and can-beaten, he was doing it" (Erdrich 258). Lark subsequently skitters away while Bazil, suffering his first heart attack, is left incapacitated on the floor of the meat aisle. Whenever a character comes into contact with Linden, it is as if his evil is cast onto them instead. Like a Wiindigoo, which can "cast its spirit inside of a person," Joe fears that Lark's evil is similarly contagious (192). After murdering Lark, Joe frets: "Would I become a Wiindigoo? Infected by Lark?" (310). And it seems that Lark's evil continues to plague his killers even from beyond the grave. Joe calls for Cappy in his disturbed sleep and Cappy cries in his dreams, leading Joe to admit, "I was not exactly safe from Lark. Neither was Cappy. Every night he came after us in dreams" (324). Although Cappy's eventual death is not a direct consequence of contact with Lark, Erdrich clearly illustrates the ways in which a Wiindigoo worldview is detrimental to communities.

There is more than one type of predator in *The Round House*. Like Lark, Governor Yeltow and the U.S. government demonstrate their proclivity to "see fellow humans as prey meat" in the way that they exploit Indian land and women (Erdrich 192). Joe, his family, and his community are poorly shielded from this outlook, because it is precisely this worldview that shapes the laws that are meant to protect them. Because of this, they are left exposed with nowhere to stand and nothing to latch onto but "best-we-can-do-justice" (323). Murder, while not ideal, serves an ideal justice that "threads that unfair maze of land title law" (323). Realizing that evil is further perpetuated when good people sit around complacently, Joe attempts to excise the putrid wound from his community. His digression into moral ambiguity is portrayed in neither a critical nor a triumphal light. His vengeance, which leaves his best friend dead and his

family old before their time, rings hollow. Joe never gets caught for his crime, and Cappy becomes the human sacrifice that Joe intended himself to be. His evident decision to become a public prosecutor betrays perhaps remorse for his vigilante action, or perhaps simply a shred of faith that these injustices can be corrected legally after all.

In fact, Erdrich herself has made it evident that she does believe in possible redemption for American Indians through the amendment of federal Indian law. She was very outspoken on this issue immediately before expanded provisions for VAWA (that would concede more jurisdictional authority to native tribes in cases of sexual assault) were set to be put up for a vote in congress (Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund). In a *New York Times* opinion piece titled "Rape on the Reservation," Erdrich stressed that 80 percent of sex crimes on reservations are committed by non-Indians who are immune from prosecution in tribal courts. She then reiterated the central idea of *Round House*: "To protect Native women, tribal authorities must be able to apprehend, charge and try rapists — regardless of race" (Erdrich A25). In fact, *The Round House* itself is akin to a grand campaign for the issue; Erdrich even draws inspiration for the plot from the actual sexual assault case of Jancita Eagle Deer, underscoring how tangible this issue really is. Eagle Deer, who is a Sioux Indian of South Dakota, reported her rape by former South Dakota governor William Janklow while under his employ as a babysitter. Even at the vulnerable age of 15, she had the courage to accuse her attacker, but when the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) forwarded the case to the FBI, neither arrests nor charges occurred (LaDuke). By speaking out again in 1974, seven years after the alleged rape, Eagle Deer aimed to disbar then attorney Janklow from practicing law in tribal courts (LaDuke). Five years later, in 1979, Janklow would go on to serve his first of two terms as South Dakota's governor, but not before vigorously promoting the notorious 1978 supreme court case of *Oliphant v.*

Suquamish during his office as state attorney (LaDuke). Eagle Deer never did get justice. Rather, she died in a suspicious hit-and-run accident just days after the date of the tribal hearing that had compiled evidence to disbar Janklow—a hearing that Janklow never bothered to show up for. Her mother, Delphine Eagle Deer, had picked up the torch of her quest for justice, but was beaten to death by a BIA police officer months after Jancita's own death. Unsurprisingly, the incidences went unresolved (LaDuke).

Anywhere else in the United States, the events of Eagle Deer's case would likely have spurred a highly publicized legal inquisition, but according to a journalistic report covering Standing Rock Indian reservation by investigative journalist Kathy Dobie in 2011, circumstances were still woefully similar in other parts of Indian country. Dobie witnessed firsthand the complex maze of legal red tape described in *Round House*, and she styles this apex of legal inefficacy as wholesale "justice deferred" (64). She discovered that the local BIA was hamstrung by a lack of jurisdiction and funding. In 2009, the reservation had trusted only 11 officers with the protection of almost 9,000 people (Dobie 60). In the event of a crime, sentencing caps impeded the BIA. The 2010 Tribal Law and Order Act increased that cap from one year to three years, so tribal courts could then prosecute felonies committed by other Indians, but only allowing, as one scholar details, that they have "a law-trained judge, they pay for a public defender, and they have long-term, full-service incarceration facilities" (Tharp 27). Needless to say, few tribes can afford this, and because the state cannot or will not pay for their own as well as tribal services, cases are often referred the already inundated state courts (Tharp 27). Some serious crimes are forwarded to the FBI for investigation and the U.S. Attorney's Office for prosecution (Dobie 59). Disturbingly, a public defender interviewed by Dobie divulged that in the four years of his career, not a single rape case had been prosecuted; this admission is

incongruous with Dobie's portrait of a reservation practically swarming with quietly traumatized victims (64). Lack of funding certainly contributed to this disparity, but several other inhibiting factors were at work: in the event of a sexual assault, days sometimes passed before an officer was able to show up (59). In addition, a victim may or may not have sought services in the face of shameless perpetrator intimidation, and in the less-than-likely prospect that the single Indian Health Service hospital was even stocked with rape kits, evidence of an attack was often sent to the FBI and never seen or heard from again (60, 64). Tribal Judge William Zuger described the federal authorities as a "black-hole": a place where evidence and justice go to fester (64). As time passes, witnesses are intimidated and the case becomes less and less sound for either the BIA or the U.S. Attorney's office to prosecute. There are a few theories regarding this inadequacy, and one plausible explanation is that these government and state entities are designed to churn through cases thoroughly, albeit glacially; they are unable to respond with the same alacrity that local officers are (theoretically) able to, and by the time they do, the case has gone cold. Another explanation is that attorneys want airtight cases, which rape cases rarely are (64). Despite several requests from the tribes and the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, the U.S. Attorney's Office has refused to provide their case declination statistics. However, Syracuse University's research reveals that in a three-year sample period, they declined to prosecute 50 percent of murder cases, 76.5 percent of adult sex-crime cases, and 72 percent of child sex-crime cases (63).

Opponents to the Office of Violence against Women (OVW) espouse beliefs that tribes should continue to be dependent on protracted statutory processes instead of enabling local authorities to better address sexual violence on the reservation (Heritage Foundation 24). They claim that states would be better suited to handle these situations, but Dobie's account makes it

clear that putting more ‘middlemen’ between crime and legal recourse is unsound practice. Such propositions are willfully blind to the generational suffering that they will continue to perpetuate. They are also blind to the data. Native American women can expect sexual violence at 2.5 times the rate that non-Natives do, and up to 70 percent of those crimes will be perpetrated by non-Natives, roughly half of them strangers (Tharp 26). These numbers are harrowing and unprecedented for other parts of America.

In March 2013, VAWA’s reauthorization (which contained new provisions aimed at protecting AI/AN women on reservations, as well as vulnerable immigrant women and transgender persons) was voted through the House by a wide margin: 286–138 (Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund). Among the dissenting, however, was then-senator of Alabama Jeff Sessions. The OVW, which has been around since VAWA became law in 1994 (written and championed by Joe Biden), is directly under the purview of the Department of Justice (Department of Justice). With Sessions now heading up the Department of Justice (DOJ) as Attorney General, many fear that the OVW is in peril. Furthermore, blueprints for Trump’s 2018 budget hew very closely to the budget proposal provided by the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation, and they too have the OVW on the chopping block. The OVW provides countless vital services for domestic violence victims nationwide, but in a brief justification for its proposed elimination, the Heritage Foundation states that, “Using federal agencies to fund the routine operations of domestic violence programs that state and local governments could provide is a misuse of federal resources” (24). They clearly take issue with the provisions for tribal jurisdiction as well, because most of the supplementary reading that they provide directs readers to articles arguing against the capability of tribes to prosecute non-Indians. The Heritage Foundation’s budget blueprint borrows its abstract verbatim from the introduction of an article

by Christina Vallegas and employee David Mulhausen, which cites *Oliphant v. Suquamish* as legal justification for one of its arguments. As readers know, *Oliphant* stretches back to an 1824 treaty to retrieve part of *its* justification: "Indian tribes necessarily yield the power to try non-Indians except in a manner acceptable to Congress, a fact which seems to be recognized by the Treaty of Point Elliott, signed by the Suquamish Indian Tribe" (Justia Legal Service). Mulhausen and Vallegas suggest that granting tribes jurisdiction over non-Indians is "unnecessary, and dangerous," claiming that tribes already have "their own sovereign powers and operate separately from federal, state, and local governments" despite their article's initial statement that state and local authorities should handle all national matters regarding violence against women. Their contradictory statements reveal a desire to preserve the status quo: AI/IN citizens are left on their own in their quest for justice while simultaneously being prohibited from providing justice for themselves. This dilemma, as Erdrich illustrates in Joe Coutts' character, is certain to yield poor outcomes.

Even in VAWA's current, now vulnerable form, there is still much forward progress that must be made. VAWA only allows for prosecution against non-Indian perpetrators if they have an intimate tie with the tribe, yet roughly 41 percent of rapists are strangers that even now cannot be tried by tribal authorities (Tharp 26). The lengths that the U.S. government has gone to deprive a relatively small population of equal treatment and protection is perplexing. Even more troubling is the rate at which these vulnerabilities are exploited. It is ironic that an active body of laws has failed to react to a history that reduced Native people, especially native women, to no more than bodies; it fails to protect Native women from those who would treat them as less than human, leading to the possible conclusion that a colonial (i.e. Wiindigoo) mindset is far from eradicated. Scholar Andrea Smith theorizes that sexual violence is not a product of colonization,

but rather colonization is structured by, and symbolic of, sexual violence. She explains that Natives have always been viewed as less-than, impure, dirty, and in need of purification. She references a nineteenth century ad for *Ivory Soap* to illustrate this perfectly: "But *Ivory Soap* came like a ray of light across our darkened way, and now were civil, kind, and good ..." (Smith 72). Though these exact sentiments are outdated, Smith suggests they show up in even more insidious ways: sexual violence. A patriarchal viewpoint regards women as either pure or impure: "only a body that is 'pure' can be violated. The rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count," meaning that Indian women are "sexually violable and 'rapable'" (73).

This proprietary outlook of AI/AN peoples was also demonstrated during the Trail of Tears, the cultural and sexual violation of Native people at Indian boarding schools, and in the unconsented sterilization of 25 to 80 percent of Native women before its discovery in 1976, and countless others (Smith 73). Smith goes on to suggest that patriarchal characterizations makes AI/AN populations ripe for environmental exploitation as well: "Those peoples who have already been rendered dirty, impure, and hence expendable are then forced to face the most immediate consequences of environmental destruction" (81). With one hundred percent of discovered uranium deposits are on or near Indian reservations, this argument is difficult to deny—and it is just this sort of exploitive treatment that Dakota Access Pipeline protesters are attempting to fight: they are claiming that their bodies are not expendable, not inherently "dirtier", and that these actions indeed violate their purity (81).

Indigenous voices, silenced for so long, are finally beginning to be heard, and Erdrich's powerful voice joins their chorus. By Andrea Smith's logic, Erdrich's decision to take on the problem of rape on the reservation also sends a direct challenge to patriarchy and colonialism,

whether she meant to or not. Erdrich does indirectly experiment with themes of purity by tackling its inverse: putrefaction. By channeling these metaphors of rot, Erdrich inverts the belief that only pure (white) bodies can be defiled by impure (non-white) bodies, and she does so by characterizing that erroneous belief as putrid and impure in itself. Erdrich's call to action is that lawmakers not perpetuate the same cycle of corruption. If evil laws are used to justify policy today, then we continue to take advantage of the vulnerability of American Indians—a legal vulnerability that American itself is responsible for. The cycle must be reversed. The wound incurred by unenlightened men hundreds of years before and left to rot by a parade of complicit lawmakers must be mended.

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