

Feminist Dystopia and Reality in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*  
and in Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*

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Abstract

This article examines two recent examples of feminist dystopias: Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) and Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018). True to their genre, these novels act as warnings, denouncing the patriarchal control over women's bodies and the capitalistic over-exploitation of nature. Strategically positioned between dystopia and realism, they recover and revise generic and thematic conventions and propose relationality and solidarity of humans and the natural world as the best way to redress patriarchal and capitalist abuse. All in all, these feminist dystopias offer an opportunity for reflection on the intersections of current forms of literary feminism and transmodernity.

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### Notes on contributor

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## 1. Feminist Dystopias as a Sign of Transmodernity

It is a truth more and more acknowledged today that we live in dystopian times. This is not a claim that some past dystopian predictions in fiction have proved true in the present world, but a recognition of the symbolic value dystopian fiction has achieved “in representing fears and anxieties about the future.”<sup>1</sup> However, the current obsession with dystopia is not just about the future: writers and critics often resort to the dystopian characterization of our present time in order to denounce the injustice, powerlessness, and violence experienced by too many people around the world. As a genre with a particularly strong connection to culture and politics, dystopia mediates between past, present, and future: grounded in the anxieties of the present, it speculates on the future consequences of current events and actions.<sup>2</sup>

Although Lyman Tower Sargent admits that it is difficult to define a literary work in terms of its author’s intentions, he argues that “a defining characteristic of the dystopian genre is that it acts like a warning.”<sup>3</sup> The urgency of this warning is evidenced in the devastation caused by climate change, the deepening inequalities resulting from neo-liberalism—including its associated “colorblind racism”<sup>4</sup>—and the global spread of populism that situates us in a “third authoritarian era.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the current backlash against women’s rights has given rise to a global feminist outcry, which has been met by all-too-often extreme expressions of the rage “felt by the many people who resent the social prohibition against speaking with the blunt force of unmasked white patriarchal power.”<sup>6</sup> A key moment of all this was the year 2016, when we witnessed the effects of post-truth and populism in the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president. It is thus no wonder that since 2016 dystopia has become “a current literary and cinematographic phenomenon in expansion” with record sales.<sup>7</sup>

If this is the case, it is almost certainly because we have much to be warned against.<sup>8</sup> But a warning “implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible,”<sup>9</sup> which is why dystopia is inextricably bound up with utopia. Far from counterparts, dystopia and utopia are allies for, although they use opposed strategies, both are fueled by “the dissatisfaction with the sociopolitical status quo and the desire for change.”<sup>10</sup> Utopian dreaming is at the roots of the two most promising and potentially transformative social movements today: feminism and ecology. Both movements draw attention to the resemblance between current reality and dystopian fiction, making the future more present than ever, especially when it comes to the effects of global warming, which, while universally devastating, particularly affect women and marginalized peoples throughout the globe.<sup>11</sup>

One of the features of contemporary feminist dystopias is the call to transcend the boundaries of fiction and engage in global activism. A recognizable example of this shift is the appearance of the Handmaids—from Margaret Atwood’s “Ur-female-dystopia”<sup>12</sup> *The Handmaid’s Tale*—in women’s marches and protests worldwide, thereby becoming “a metaliterary trend topic.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, both utopia and dystopia are commonly associated with sociopolitical and cultural paradigm shifts. Understood as “social dreaming,” “[u]topias and the changes they undergo both help bring about and are reflections of paradigm shifts in the way a culture views itself.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, dystopia shares with utopia the basic objective of “sociopolitical change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm change.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, feminist dystopias can be considered not only as a response to pressing sociopolitical developments of our time, but also as a literary genre that reflects and contributes to define transmodernity. Sustained by the basic motifs of transformation and transcendence, and especially responsive to globalization, virtuality, and the excesses of capitalism, *transmodernity* is

“the paradigm that allows us to think our present,”<sup>16</sup> and feminist dystopias can make a relevant contribution to this thinking.

In tracing the origins of contemporary feminist dystopias, an account of the dystopian turn and its predecessors is due. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan focus on the dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s that worked “against the grain of the grim economic, political, and cultural climate.”<sup>17</sup> These dystopias moved away from the “bad places” evoked by the original ancient Greek term and resisted classification. Sargent sees such works as “critical dystopias,”<sup>18</sup> which pinpoints the fact that “utopianism resides within dystopia primarily in its function as a warning.”<sup>19</sup> A warning implies that there is still hope, which is why “utopia and dystopia have to be regarded as interconnected concepts.”<sup>20</sup> All in all, the utopian impulse speaks today through dystopia: “We live in bleak times, so utopia has to disguise itself as dystopia.”<sup>21</sup>

In order for dystopias to deliver a warning, they need to be rooted in the present, so that the fictional world does not differ much from our own. Traditionally, the utopian element lay outside the dystopian story because, by considering dystopia as a warning, readers could hope to escape its dark future.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, the late twentieth-century critical dystopias—such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Ursula LeGuin’s *The Telling* or Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*—allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure:

the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups—women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not

contemplated by hegemonic discourse—for whom subject status has yet to be attained.<sup>23</sup>

Another difference is that in classical dystopias such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, memory is usually individual, whereas critical dystopias show that “a culture of memory—one that moves from the individual to the collective—is part of a social project of hope.” This does not mean that they will necessarily have a happy ending, for more commonly, “[i]nstead of providing some compensatory and comforting conclusion, the critical dystopia's open ending leaves its characters to deal with their choices and responsibilities. It is in the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relation with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations for utopian change.”<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, in critical dystopias, “[t]he intersection of gender and genre has opened up the creation of new, subversive, and oppositional literary forms.”<sup>25</sup> Feminist dystopia, a key example of this intersection, as Jeanne Cortiel argues, is connected both to modern dystopias of the twentieth century like those by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, and to early feminist theories and realist fiction such as the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman or Kate Chopin.<sup>26</sup> Because dystopias traditionally maintain gender hierarchies, “the feminist dystopia also includes a critique of the genre itself,” and by focusing on female protagonists they already transform generic conventions. Since its development in the 1970s, at the time of second-wave feminism, feminist dystopia has been grounded in feminist utopianism, which connects it to coetaneous activism.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a good number of feminists were drawn to the subject of dystopia during the 1980s backlash,<sup>28</sup> thus showing the resistance of utopian hope in spite of adversity. In

tune with third-wave feminism, feminist dystopias since the 1990s have turned more apocalyptic and more attentive to diversity, class and race differences.<sup>29</sup>

In the past few decades the genre has undergone further changes. Feminist dystopias after 2016 differ from those that came before in explicitly refusing to cede ground on women's rights already achieved, and can thus be taken as representative of the developments of transmodernity in the new millennium. The current reality of precariousness, risk, and uncertainty has brought on the growing commodification of bodies, especially female ones, and while this affects women everywhere, it is poor and marginalized women who are most at risk of the recent regression in women's rights. Two telling examples of this regression are the passing of more restrictive reproduction laws in the United States and the continuing violence against women everywhere.<sup>30</sup> All in all, and despite the irony, as noted by Sheryl Vint, that this boom of feminist dystopia about reproduction comes at a time of global overpopulation,<sup>31</sup> there seems to be an obsession with women's bodies and reproduction which these novels reflect.

Bearing these points in mind, this article examines Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) and Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* (2018) as two examples of recent feminist dystopias which denounce the patriarchal control over women's bodies and the capitalistic overexploitation of nature. In *Future Home of the Living God*, human reproduction is under threat in a context where evolution is literally going backwards. In response, a Puritan authoritarian government takes control of women of childbearing age to try to sustain procreation. In *Red Clocks*, life is apparently "normal," but it is in fact very difficult for women, directly affected by the new laws which make abortion illegal, banning IVF and making marriage a prerequisite for adoption. Neither novel is set in the distant future, but rather suggest that fiction could soon become fact. Moreover, rather than the "bad places" associated with previous dystopias, these novels

are rooted in nature, presenting the landscape of Minnesota and Oregon, respectively, as characters in their own right. Both texts theorize relationality and the solidarity of humans and nature as the best possible way of redressing patriarchal and capitalist abuse.

My analysis of the two novels thus sets out to show, firstly, that feminist dystopias function as warnings aimed at prompting people to actively engage in the fight against climate change and the attack on women's reproductive rights, which connects them to utopian thinking and activism. Secondly, I contend that this motivation is related to the way these novels are strategically positioned between dystopia and realism. This is a particularly interesting element which distinguishes recent feminist dystopias from earlier ones, and which illustrates the fluidity of borders characteristic of the transmodern age. Apart from an opportunity to reflect on the intersections of literary feminism and the new cultural paradigm, the deliberate blurring of generic borders in the novels casts a critical view on the present. Last but not least, feminist dystopias such as these affirm the values of solidarity and relationality that are central to transmodernity.

## 2. Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Zumas's *Red Clocks* as Warnings

Of Ojibwe and German-American ancestry, Louise Erdrich is the most widely known Native American writer today. The dystopian motif of *Future Home of the Living God* is an exception in her seventeen novels, most of which focus on the recovery of Ojibwe stories and traditions. Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, the recipient of various accolades, is this Oregon-based author's third published book. A transethnic comparison of the two novels suggests the variety of recently published dystopias—which by no means conform to a monolithic trend—while at the same time revealing their common

underlying themes. The two central elements of particular relevance are their temporal fluidity and their strategic articulation of fiction and reality.

The Ojibwe protagonist and narrator of *Future Home of the Living God*, which is set in Minnesota at an unspecified but near future, was originally called Mary Potts, but was given the name Cedar Hawk Songmaker by her white liberal adoptive parents. Pregnant at twenty-six, Cedar is writing a diary for a baby who may or may not survive, for the few women whose pregnancies are not interrupted or who do not die in the process more often than not give birth to primitive-like babies. Animal and vegetable species are experiencing unexpected changes, and while the scientists note that the world seems to be developing in reverse, they are at a loss to explain what is happening. In the midst of chaos and uncertainty, the Church of the New Constitution replaces the U.S. government and establishes an authoritarian regime, which is isolated from Canada and Mexico after the closure of the borders, so that Americans are now illegal aliens in their neighboring countries. Desperate to sustain procreation, the authorities imprison pregnant women, monitor their pregnancies, and take away any healthy baby at birth. Women who, like Cedar, have preserved their fertility are forcefully retained to bear more babies. After her visit to the Ojibwa reservation to find her biological family, her capture and escape, at the end of the novel we encounter Cedar in captivity again and about to go through a second pregnancy.

In *Red Clocks*, life is apparently “normal,” except for the recent legislation that deprives women of rights over their bodies. The Personhood Amendment, “which gives the constitutional right to life, liberty, and property to a fertilized egg at the moment of conception,”<sup>32</sup> has been ratified by the U.S. Congress. As a result, abortion is illegal in all fifty states: “Abortion providers can be charged with second-degree murder, abortion seekers with conspiracy to commit murder. In vitro fertilization, too, is federally

banned, because the amendment outlaws the transfer of embryos from laboratory to uterus. (The embryos can't give their consent to be moved)" (30–31). In the course of the narrative, the Every Child Needs Two Law takes effect "to restore dignity, strength, and prosperity to American families" (32). As a consequence, "[u]nmarried persons will be legally prohibited from adopting children" and a federally regulated agency will need to approve all adoptions (32). There is also a "Pink Wall" on the border with Canada, a diplomatic agreement that allows the border police to detain and forcibly test any woman or girl whom they suspect to be seeking an abortion. The novel recounts the terrible consequences of these laws on the lives of four women, each of whom is defined by a role that will be progressively challenged, for Zumas wants to expose "the inadequacy of labels":<sup>33</sup> "the biographer" (Roberta Louisa Stephen, aka Ro), "the mender" (Gin Percival), "the daughter" (Mattie Quarles), and "the wife" (Susan Korsmo). Interlaced between the chapters devoted to each of the four women, we are presented with the story of Eivør Mínerudottir, a fictional Faroese female polar explorer and ice researcher who is the subject of Ro's book.

The novel reveals the connections between these women and the transformations they undergo. Ro is a history schoolteacher rolling her last dice to become a mother. She evolves from a desire that verges on irrational obsession to her acceptance of her life and its possibilities beyond motherhood. Susan is a mother of two who dotes on her children but is unhappily married. Her competition with Ro is evident, for each wants what the other has. Susan eventually considers resuming her career as a lawyer and will divorce her husband. Gin is an eccentric woman who lives alone in the woods, her human contact reduced to the women who come to her looking for traditional remedies for their ailments, which, in the minds of the bigoted townspeople, equals witchcraft. From a distance, Gin observes Mattie, the recently arrived teenage girl she gave up for

adoption, who, unaware of their bond, comes to her for help. Mattie, the daughter and fourth focalizer of the novel, is trying to terminate her pregnancy. This is a difficult decision which she takes in spite of her own positive experience with adoption and the traumatic remembrance of her disgraced friend Yasmine who was imprisoned after she performed an abortion on herself. In the end, there is hope that Mattie will succeed in having an abortion and continue with her life, which shows that the underground women support system is active in spite of the legal and social impediments.

Both authors deliberately refer to a near future which could soon become true by grounding their novels in contemporary reality. *Future Home of the Living God* offers an apparently dystopian but actually quite faithful reflection of the frequent attacks on women's rights regularly reported by the media. As Erdrich explained, she wrote a first draft in 2002, when George W. Bush signed the Global Gag Rule and the Patriot Act, but it was when Donald Trump reintroduced the Global Gag Rule that she retrieved and completed the novel.<sup>34</sup> Aware that anti-choice campaigns are a means of exerting control over young women's bodies, Erdrich's novel delivers a clear political statement.<sup>35</sup> But the dystopian motif is also put to a culture-specific use: to visibilize the persisting historical grief of Native Americans, for whom, as Erdrich has argued, dystopia may well refer to a realistic scenario because they are "descended of relatives who survived the dystopia of genocide. To us, dystopia is recent history. (For many, it is the present)."<sup>36</sup>

As for Zumas, her work is part of the conversation on "the national debates we're having around abortion rights, yet again, and sexual harassment, because both of those are linked at their core to this question of a woman's sovereignty over her own body."<sup>37</sup> *Red Clocks* is grounded in a very familiar reality, since the laws that make this fictional world dystopian for women correspond to the beliefs of many people today. The

conservative, anti-choice Supreme Court, Vice-President Mike Pence's outspoken support of anti-abortion legislation, or Donald Trump's interested use of the abortion controversy for his reelection are, unfortunately, not fictional, but very real.<sup>38</sup> The current attempts at banning abortion altogether by overturning *Roe vs. Wade* US Supreme Court decision (1973),<sup>39</sup> most notably through heartbeat bills introduced by various states, make the legal situation of *Red Clocks* quite plausible. Because a good number of people are trying to make this happen, and would certainly not interpret it as dystopian, the dystopian motif in *Red Clocks* suggests that dystopia and utopia depend on one's perspective. Zumas, in fact, did not see her novel as a dystopia but as a paratopia, "using the Greek prefix for 'near' or 'around.'" As she claimed, "[s]omething about dystopia feels so solidly separate from us, and I wanted to invite the reader to experience the world of *Red Clocks* as, 'This is actually happening, maybe next week.'"<sup>40</sup>

Evidently, in these dystopias "the critique of the present is manifested in the stylization and exaggeration of 'what we have now,' and the women's move against the status quo is enacted as a utopian counterpart."<sup>41</sup> In *Future Home*, due to the devastating effects of human action on the environment, fertility is a scarce resource which determines the oppressive control of reproductive women. In *Red Clocks* the laws make women more likely than men to be imprisoned, excluded or killed for making their own choices. However, these novels not only condemn this reality but also project a utopian dream of what might be. In *Future Home*, people go underground to escape the control of the authorities, and there is a system reminiscent of the underground railroad at the time of slavery to hide expecting women and take them North. In a return to more human forms of contact after the technological excesses, cell phones and screens are discarded and snail mail and face-to-face talk again become the most reliable means of

communication. Interestingly, Native Americans make the most of the chaotic situation and manage to recover lost lands, which is an example of indigenous resurgence. *Red Clocks* has its own underground resistance, exemplified by the Polyphonte Collective, which is connected to the abolished Planned Parenthood, and was created in response to “the surveillance state and male-supremacist legislation” (312). Apart from affordable abortions, they offer counseling, legal services for women, childcare and cop watching (314–15). They also fight for reproductive rights and try to repeal the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment that took those rights away from women. As Ro observes, facing her own inaction, “[t]hey don’t just sit there watching” (315), and this will be part of her awakening to a new life purpose.

### 3. Recovering a Language of Relation and Resistance

As the two novels show, when it comes to the deleterious effects of climate change and other excesses of neoliberalism, it is women who suffer the most. They also point to the dangers of inaction and call on us to take a stand against the unjust treatment of women, especially women of color such as Cedar in *Future Home* and Yasmine in *Red Clocks*.

In order to involve readers and make their warning more effective, they resort to formal fluidity and relationality. In *Worlds Apart*, Dunja Mohr argues that contemporary feminist dystopias imagine and create “from a world riven by binary logic an alternative world of transgressions, of new interstices and interrelations.” Claiming that feminist dystopias have shown that “classifications such as utopia *or* dystopia are indeed in many cases obsolete,” she examines the activist aspects of feminist utopian/dystopian literature and proposes a new subgenre, “transgressive utopian dystopias,” some of whose characteristics are pertinent to the works I am examining. Transgressive utopian dystopias are hybrid texts which “incorporate within the dystopian narrative a utopian

undercurrent,” and “they criticize, undermine, and transgress the established binary logic of dystopia.” Since Mohr associates the transgression of binary thought and the collapse of generic boundaries with poststructuralism,<sup>42</sup> it is worth examining whether more recent feminist dystopias continue or move beyond those postmodernist features. While it is true that the new dystopias inherit many of their literary features from various genres, I argue that there is a renewed emphasis on formal fluidity and generic blurring. Although these features were already present in modernist and postmodern works, they now point to a vindication of values specific to the present.

The protagonists of *Future Home* and *Red Clocks* are committed to a process of language recovery and revision. As is often the case in other contemporary feminist dystopias, which, as Ildney Cavalcanti argues, “overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men’s) domination and (women’s) liberation,” language has a liberating potential here too. Like their female protagonists, Erdrich and Zumas engage in “resistance and subversion through language.”<sup>43</sup>

Cedar is writing her diary for her baby to prevent the erasure of her true story at the hands of the authorities and record historic times that seem like the end of the world. Part of it is an account of her search for her own origins: adopted by Sera and Glen Songmaker, she comes to know her biological mother Mary Potts on the Ojibwe reservation, and towards the end of the novel she discovers that her adoptive father Glen is actually her biological father. What she wants is for her baby to “enter the web of connections”<sup>44</sup> she grew up without but is now in the process of recovering, and this requires the affirmation of a language of relation. Together with her written account of individual and communal memory, and as part of her search for a language of self-expression, Cedar recreates the world that is disappearing by compiling bits and pieces

“from the now and from the before” (171), to provide her baby with a history.<sup>45</sup> This results in a hybrid voice inspired by Christian narratives—she is a devoted student of the Catholic Incarnation, about which she writes in her theological newsletter *Zeal*—and the Ojibwe stories she hears from her grandmother and other relatives on the reservation.

As a polyphonic novel, *Red Clocks* is also a sustained reflection on the blurred borders between history and fiction in the interspersed sections about the life of Eivør Mínervudottir. Often, the scenes Ro describes present us with an account of the process of writing, with crossed-out lines and final decisions about the explorer’s life:

~~Born in 1841 on a Faroese sheep farm,~~

~~The polar explorer was raised on a farm near~~

In the North Atlantic Ocean, between Scotland and Iceland, on an island with more sheep than people, a shepherd’s wife gave birth to a child who would grow up to study ice. (1)

Ro’s indecisiveness is apparent especially at the beginning of the novel, and the absence of self-correcting marks later on signifies her finding a voice to imagine the explorer’s life and make decisions about her own. Ro has a notebook where she writes in list form, “and any list is eligible” (8). We witness the development from the early list “Accusations from the world”—which include items like “You’re too old,” “If you can’t have a child the natural way, you shouldn’t have one at all,” “You’re doing something unnatural,” or “Every child needs two parents,” “Children raised by single mothers are more liable to rape/murder/drug-take/score low on standardized tests” (8–9)—to the final list of things Ro wants, which includes “more than one thing” (348).

These lists are a way for Ro to come to terms with the social restrictions and limiting expectations about womanhood that she faces and develop her own assertive voice.

In light of the definition of critical dystopias presented above, the conversation of utopia and dystopia that these texts incorporate is articulated in the open endings of both novels. In the final scene of *Future Home of the Living God*, Cedar remembers the last time it snowed in Minnesota, back when she was eight: “That was the year we lost winter. Lost our cold heaven” (266). Her condition at the end is extremely uncertain: she is imprisoned, recovering from her first pregnancy, waiting for her next one in her cell. But the memory of the sharp cold that exists no more sustains her, and she dreams that her baby is safe, kept by a helpful doctor, a possibility that is left open at the end of the narrative: “Whiteness fills the air and whiteness is all there is. I am here, and I was there. And I have wondered, ever since your birth. Where will you be, my darling, the last time it snows on earth?” (267). Similarly, the ending of *Red Clocks* is open: it consists of a list of things Ro wants to do, which includes, for example, “To go to the protest in May. To do more than go to a protest” (349), suggesting that she may have been inspired by the Polyphonte Collective to become a social activist; and “To be ok with not knowing” (349), so that she has greater confidence in facing what the uncertain future may bring. Her last wish “[t]o see what is. And to see what is possible” (349) resonates with utopian and dystopian echoes. Hence, in both novels, individual recollection becomes “the first, necessary step for a collective action.”<sup>46</sup> However, true to the spirit of critical dystopias, the voices of women, and of Native Americans, in the case of *Future Home*, are an exercise in collective memory that articulates a social project of hope.

Another feature that connects these novels to critical dystopias is their “intensification of the practice of genre blurring,”<sup>47</sup> which also characterized feminist

dystopias from the beginning.<sup>48</sup> It is by “self-reflexively borrowing specific conventions from other genres” that such works “blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression.” This makes them formally and politically oppositional, for the very notion of “an *impure* genre, with permeable borders which allow contamination from other genres... represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology that reduces everything to a global monoculture.”<sup>49</sup> This also applies to *Future Home*: it is presented as a letter Cedar writes to her unborn baby; and by making us privy to her reflections, her journal-structured observations of the changes around her and her fears in the face of overwhelming uncertainty and persecution, she makes us surrogate addressees and demands that we bear witness too. In her diary Cedar also delves into the world of nature, noting, for example, changes whereby “ducks are not ducks and chickens are not chickens, insects are nutritious, and there are ladybugs the size of cats” (90). Her detailed descriptions of new species are often excessive and parodic, sometimes humorous, like the bird the size of a hawk with a “beakless, featherless, lizardlike, rosy red” head (91–92), a “graceful thing with fluid, darting movements” which “behaves exactly like a lizard-bird” (92). Her fascination with new interspecies fluidity leads to the realization that she is “not at the end of things, but the beginning” (92), and it seems clear that nature is reclaiming its territory. Cedar’s exercise in natural science also includes genetic mutations (106 ff.) and evolution (107, 160). Another genre this novel engages with is spiritual history, which encompasses Cedar’s frequent reflections on her faith—she is especially interested in the canonization of the Lily of the Mohawks, Kateri Tekakwitha. Moreover, some of the passages on the world that is disappearing are written in a poetic prose that frames them as rituals of mourning:

And all the while as the light slants lower and lower, bathing us in a gorgeous, smoldering glow, my heart slowly cracks. The deep orange-gold of the sun is pure nostalgia. An antique radiance already sheds itself upon this beautiful life we share. I grow heavy, rooted in my lawn chair. Everything I say and everything my parents say, the drift of friends, the tang of lemonade, the wine on their tongues, the cries of sleepy birds and the squirrels launching themselves without fear in the high tops of the old maples and honey locusts, branch to branch, all of this is terminal. There will never be another August on earth, not like this one; there will never be this sort of ease or precision. The birds will change, the squirrels will fall, and who will remember how to make wine? (61)

The whole novel is inspired not only by speculative fiction, but also by mystery fiction and the thriller. Moreover, apart from *The Handmaid's Tale*, interesting intertextual connections include echoes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" during Cedar's imprisonment in hospital; resonances of transcendentalism—"the soul is not in the body. The body is in the soul" (264), and she imagines the neurons of her baby's brain connecting like the stars she sees, "interconnecting thoughts in the giant mud of God" (106)—an allusion to T. S. Eliot—maybe he "had it right. Our world is ending not with a bang but a puzzled whimper" (190)—or quotes from Hildegard of Bingen—"Everything is penetrated with connectedness, penetrated with relatedness" (257).

*Red Clocks* also sets the dystopian motif in conversation with a series of narrative genres. There is a good deal of suspense: Mattie's attempts to terminate her pregnancy; the false accusations against the mender Gin Percival, which could lead her to jail; the biographer's (Ro's) desperate attempts to become pregnant; the growing tension on the

road to separation between the wife (Susan Korsmo) and her husband; or Eivør Mínerudottir's struggle for survival. Biography is present throughout in the intercalated sections on the life of the explorer, but it is here understood as inherently fluid too, as Ro becomes more prone to resorting to her imagination to fictionalize Eivør's life, using the first person and thus projecting her own self on the life she is putting down in writing. Ro's colleague and friend Penny is a romance fiction writer; the tsunami siren evokes narratives of natural disasters and there is a long scene of a legal case. Pirate books are referred to in the mender's ancestry and her constant self-identification as a Percival; Greek myth appears in the description of the Polyphonte Collective; and self-help books are evoked in Susan's attempts to save her marriage. Cetology is also present, together with references to whales from popular culture, and there is a lot of scientific detail in the account of the explorer's study of ice.

Also relevant is Ro's fairytale interpretation of her envy of Mattie's pregnancy: "A hard little glass splinter in [Ro] hopes the girl is miserable" (264); the glass splinter is "thrilled" (267) to hear that Mattie's attempt to have an abortion in Canada was unsuccessful, and when she tries to discourage her from trying again, it is the glass splinter that chooses the words she utters: "The biographer's whole self is a splinter" (299) encouraging Ro to make Mattie give her the baby. When she writes about Eivør Mínerudottir and that her book is published under a man's name, Ro assigns a similar splinter to her:

In the first fairy tale Uncle taught me, a glass splinter in the eye would make all the world ugly and bad. I have such a splinter now. I see Harry's name on my paper in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* and curl with rage. It is mine but nobody knows. They know the facts imparted, which have

more value than my small self; yet with the splinter lodged in me, I can't rest.

(307)

It is not until Ro develops a closer relationship with Mattie and she sees how afraid the girl is and how much she needs not to be pregnant that the splinter melts and disappears. Furthermore, *Zumas* includes an excessive, parodic element in the objectification of women's bodies—most tellingly in Ro's appointments with an insensitive doctor when she takes steps to become pregnant. As for intertextual relations, they include echoes of Emily Dickinson's poetry—"The three o'clock bell is big over the harbor, flakes of bronze dropping slow to the water, bell in her mouth, bell in her scabbard" (40)—of Virginia Woolf, especially *The Waves*,<sup>50</sup> and of *Moby Dick*, which is directly quoted from and sets the background for the references to whales (124).

Although neither genre blurring nor intertextuality are exclusive to transmodern literature or contemporary feminist dystopias, their prevalence and the way they point to specific values like relatedness and fluidity can be considered a defining characteristic of our age. To a large extent, the political motivation of novels like Erdrich's and *Zumas*'s is connected to their being strategically positioned between dystopia and realism, whilst combining a series of different genres. As emphasized by Cody Delistraty, "in the last couple of years, dystopian fiction has both exploded and fundamentally changed as a genre. Most of it—especially the large number of books written by women—doesn't quite qualify for the label. Rather, today's "dystopia" hews closer to reality than ever before."<sup>51</sup> While *Future Home* refers to changes in nature that are not realistic or expected right now, its representation of the treatment of women is not that far from reality. As for *Red Clocks*, the situation is disturbingly close to our own, and evokes the famous saying that "one man's utopia is another man's dystopia,"<sup>52</sup>

or, more pertinently, that some men's utopias are often women's dystopias. Hence, this strategic blurring of genre borders and between dystopia and realism in recent dystopian novels by women, which deal with gender "in a way that's fundamentally true,"<sup>53</sup> is an incisive critique of the present state of affairs which in turn reminds us that what may be dystopian in a particular context, for a particular group of people—gender, class, race, nationality are some of the relevant factors here—may be, simply, real life, in another.

#### 4. Towards a Transmodern Ethics of Solidarity and Ecology

If it is true that "utopia exists in the quotidian,"<sup>54</sup> it makes sense to attend to the utopian undercurrent in feminist dystopias as a repository of ideas directed at political transformation. Akin to values emphasized in the transmodern age, the utopia within these dystopias has to do with female solidarity and the recovery of nature.

Interestingly, in both novels gender and ecology are complicit in acting together against the evils of patriarchal neoliberalism. Gender is a positive assertion, collectivity acts as a remedy against sexism, and nature keeps the speculative form of these narratives in balance, rooting them in reality. In *Future Home*, we have the added reference to Native American resurgence, based on a reciprocal and balanced understanding of life.<sup>55</sup> The essential value in these utopian undercurrents and in the formal fluidity noted above is relationality, one of the key values that is being vindicated as relevant in

Transmodernity. It seems clear that a new awareness of shared global risks and interdependencies has made us more willing "to accept contradicting realities and multicultural perspectives,"<sup>56</sup> and this is particularly evident in feminist dystopias.

In *Future Home*, there are various levels of relations, articulated through Cedar's participation in the Ojibwe storytelling tradition. Reflecting the potential of her mixed origins, background and knowledge, her baby—whose father is a white American of

Italian descent—will be one of the few survivors, the living god of the future as Cedar imagines him. Relationality is reinforced in the way the creation of a new human being connects mother and baby to nature, to the universe, and to God, in a transcendental reciprocity of body and soul: Cedar becomes aware of the integrative power of life and loves “every fresh new cell of blood, every icy flash of neuron, a love of you, a love of everything” (209). Relationality is also made manifest in various examples of solidarity: the underground system of support which includes her adoptive mother Sera and helps Cedar escape from hospital the first time; the friendly doctor in Cedar’s second imprisonment; and the bonds established by the imprisoned women, often expressed through song and kinship. Interestingly, there is also a culture-specific utopia in the midst of dystopia: It appears that the current situation is not as traumatizing for the Natives as it is for non-Natives, since, as Cedar’s Ojibwe stepfather Eddy explains, “Indians have been adapting since 1492 so I guess we’ll keep adapting” (28). He becomes the leader of a movement to “take back the land” (95) and make the reservation self-sufficient, “like the old days” (227). Part of this move of resurgence is the “new unbreakable code” (228) the Natives adopt, a non-verbal language based on the howling of wolves, which Erdrich somewhat humorously connects to the code-talkers of World War II.<sup>57</sup>

In *Red Clocks*, Zumas declares her core interest: female friendships and relationships. To her, “it’s really intriguing that we come to think of ourselves as these very separate beings, but we’re really not. We rely on one another and on the natural world in ways that we’re usually unconscious of.”<sup>58</sup> The way she structures the novel—from the focus on the biographer and her obsession with becoming a mother, to sixteen-year-old Mattie’s success in having an abortion and continuing with her life—offers some hope of reproductive freedom for the future. The existence of activist groups like

the Polyphonte collective and the alternative healthcare arrangements, exemplified by the mender, provide an underground system of care that proves essential for survival and resistance. All the characters start from a position of relative dissociation from each other, but the narrative progressively unveils relations they are not even aware of. The biographer and the wife are closer than their rivalry allows them to see; the mender is actually the daughter's biological mother; and the mother will save the mender from a false accusation of witchcraft by figuring out the actual events leading to her accusation by connecting different stories she happened to hear. The text plays with these women's roles in a way that calls on us to reflect on how a specific positioning does not always allow us to see how close to others we actually are. The lesson is already there in the words of Virginia Woolf from *To the Lighthouse* that frame and inspire *Red Clocks*: "For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too" (Epigraph).

By emphasizing utopian dreaming in their novels, Erdrich and Zumas show that relationality applies not only to people but also to place and to nature. Rather than the "bad places" we associate with earlier dystopias, these novels are deeply rooted in the natural landscape. Erdrich describes the loss of winter in Minnesota as a visual and musical work of art that we would soon probably be grieving over: "We didn't know it was heaven" (265), says Cedar sadly, reminding us that there is still time for us to react and stop climate change before it is too late. Although it remains unclear what the primitive babies born in the novel are like, the fact that male organs are not developing properly, and sometimes not at all suggests that nature is leaning towards the feminine. Nature in the novel is shown to be strangely transformed, mostly through new mixings, but it is not destroyed: "nameless plants" grow even in the pregnant women's prison, "pushing into it. ... [e]very day there is an even thicker green profusion" (258) catching hold "across the fences, across the razor wire, even along the glass towers of the guards,

rearing into ferocious sunlight” (259). This creative power of nature, which prevails in spite of human violations, echoes Cedar’s new awareness of female companionship and the Ojibwe ethics of care.

In *Red Clocks*, the Oregon landscape with the overpowering figure of the ocean is also described poetically:

In Newville you can watch the sea eat the ground, over and over, unstopping.  
Millions of abyssal thalassic acres. The sea does not ask permission or wait for instruction. ... Today its walls are high, white lather torn, crashing hard at the sea stacks. ... The water heaves up for reasons they don’t have names for. (6)

Nourishing and threatening, the ocean is the unifying thread in the novel. It could sweep them all, nature thus re-conquering its territory, as the tsunami drills remind them. When Mattie, who was always attracted to whales, sees a dozen of sperm whales stranded on the beach, she touches one of them just before it dies, and yearning to know her biological origins she relates to the whale as a surrogate mother: “A whale is a house in the ocean. A womb for a person” (124). In a novel with so much womb symbolism—such as the red clocks reference as used by Gin the mender—this moment is transformative. Terribly disturbed by the destruction she has witnessed, Mattie joins the mourning ceremony with her classmates, and dreams of inventing a way of using the whales’ strength to produce renewable energy, so that they are protected instead of being killed or left to die. Whales and humans—all of nature for that matter—are connected further in the concluding chapter. As its focalizer Ro says, “[m]ost whales, when they die, don’t wash up on beaches. Their carcasses fall to the ocean floor, where they are consumed over time by foragers big and small. A deep-sea whale fall can feed

scavengers for fifty years or more” (344). When Eivør Mínervudóttir dies of exposure, her body, which “sank to the bottom of Baffin Bay, west of Greenland... entered many other bodies” (346). Ro imagines how the explorer’s body becomes food for thousands of beings, including a shark which is in turn eaten by citizens of Reykjavík on Christmas day, 1885 (346–47). Not only does Eivør Mínervudóttir enter other bodies, but other brains too, for the people who read her research—even if published under a man’s name—“were changed by the explorer” (348), as was the translator of her notebooks, the biographer working on her life narrative, the students who hear her stories, the people who will read Ro’s book once it is published (347–48). All of this takes relationality to another level, reminding us of the inescapable connection between all beings.

## 5. Conclusion

Although it will evidently take time and more in-depth analyses of contemporary feminist dystopias to establish whether they mark a clear departure from past forms of the genre, my study of *Future Home of the Living God* and *Red Clocks* points to a renewed ethical commitment through a revision of generic and thematic conventions. Their strategic positioning between dystopia and realism demands a reconsideration of these categories beyond simple opposition. Positing the essential inadequacy of binaries to represent today’s world, the two authors present fluidity and relationality as essential values in the recovery of a voice for women. By blurring the borders between dystopia and the current reality, these novels raise a call to take action against the loss of women’s reproductive rights and environmental destruction. Further, their rootedness in reality and emphasis on relationality, reciprocity and solidarity show a move towards a new transmodern ethics.

On the one hand, the authors' specific accounts of dystopian and utopian motivations compel us never to lose sight of the particularities of different cultural and ethnic contexts. On the other, these feminist dystopias are sustained reflections on the two defining elements of transmodernity, uncertainty and vulnerability. The characters of *Future Home of the Living God* constantly ponder what is happening, but "[n]obody knows" (53), for "[t]he first thing that happens at the end of the world is that we don't know what is happening" (93). Part of Cedar's—and our—job is to "share rumors" (85), to collect bits and pieces of information, and figure out what is going on before it is too late. Similarly, in *Red Clocks*, the lack of understanding of certain occurrences—most notably, the poisonous dead man's fingers that appear on the coast of Newville—is denounced. "Nobody knows" why these algae have come, so the people reject the scientific explanations and blame it on witchcraft instead (182). Since in dystopias, knowledge is often endangered, the truth has to be sought out in spite of distraction or erasure. When Ro remembers how she learned about the new reproductive legislation on her computer screen, she tells herself... and us: "Don't just shake your head. ... Don't just sit there watching" (266). Feminist dystopias thus urge us to take action, by staying vigilant, by reflecting on the world and our place in it, and by vindicating the best possible language to express it.

## Notes

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1. Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction*, 2.
  2. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
  3. Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 6.

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4. Ventura, "Introduction," 4.
  5. Bassets, "El triunfo occidental."
  6. Ventura, "Introduction," 3.
  7. Di Minico, "Spatial and Psychophysical Domination."
  8. Milner, "Science Fiction and Dystopia: What's the Connection."
  9. Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 26.
  10. Mohr, *Worlds Apart*, 8.
  11. See Castañeda, Sabater, Owren, and Boyer, *Gender-based Violence and Environment Linkages*.
  12. Delistraty, "Welcome to Dystopian Realism."
  13. Di Minico, "Spatial and Psychophysical Domination."
  14. Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 3, 12.
  15. Mohr, *Worlds Apart*, 28.
  16. Rodríguez Magda, "Crossroads of Transmodernity," 21.
  17. Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 3.
  18. Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 9.
  19. Milner, "Science Fiction and Dystopia," 120.
  20. Boller, *Rethinking 'the Human'*, 24.
  21. Seyferth, "Glimpse of Hope," par. 15.
  22. Baccolini, "Persistence of Hope," 520; Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 7.
  23. Baccolini, "Persistence of Hope," 520.
  24. *Ibid.*, 521.
  25. *Ibid.*, 519.
  26. Cortiel, "Feminist Utopia/Dystopia," 156.

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27. Ibid., 155, 156, 159.
28. Mohr, *Worlds Apart*, 35.
29. Cortiel, “Feminist Utopia/Dystopia,” 158–59.
30. In an interview, Erdrich has noted the responsibility that comes from the awareness that her generation had more reproductive choices than her own daughters’—now aged between 16 and 32—have (in Patrick, “Louise Erdrich Discusses”).
31. Vint, “Capital Reproduction.”
32. Zumas, *Red Clocks*, 30. Hereafter page references are cited in the text.
33. Cited in Sugiuchi, “On Dismantling the Power.”
34. As she wrote in her “Facebook Page, what motivated Erdrich was that the devastating effects of this measure for women worldwide were largely invisible to the American public.
35. Cited in Patrick, “Louise Erdrich Discusses.”
36. Erdrich, cited in Coleman, “Interview.”
37. Zumas, cited in Walton, “Leni Zumas.”
38. See Zumas’s interview with Sugiuchi for more about the politicians and policies that inspired the novel.
39. *Roe vs. Wade* established that the right to privacy extends to a woman’s decision to have an abortion. This right is to be balanced by the state’s interests in regulating abortions, which in general concerns the third trimester of a pregnancy. At present this right is threatened in the United States.
40. Zumas, cited in Crum, “When Your Feminist Dystopia.”
41. Cavalcanti, “Utopias of/f Language,” 153.

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42. Mohr, *Worlds Apart*, 3, 50, 3. Among the long list of works Mohr discusses, including works by Angela Carter, Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy, she analyses Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* trilogy, Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* series and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.
43. Cavalcanti, "Utopias of/f Language," 152, 153.
44. Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 6. Hereafter page references are cited in the text.
45. For an in-depth analysis of language and relation in Erdrich's novel, see Martínez Falquina, "Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*."
46. Baccolini, "Persistence of Hope," 521.
47. Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 7.
48. Cortiel, "Feminist Utopia/Dystopia," 165.
49. Baccolini and Moylan, "Introduction," 7, 8.
50. See Zumas's detailed explanation of the influence of *The Waves* on her novel in Walton, "Leni Zumas."
51. Delistraty, "Welcome to Dystopian Realism."
52. Cited in Boller, *Rethinking 'the Human'*, 23.
53. Delistraty, "Welcome to Dystopian Realism."
54. Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.
55. For a definition of Native American resurgence, see, for example, Simpson's *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*.
56. Ateljevic, "Visions of Transmodernity," 213.
57. Cited in Demkiewicz, "Louise Erdrich."
58. Cited in Walton, "Leni Zumas."

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