

Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*: Uncertainty, Proleptic Mourning and Relationality in Native Dystopia

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This article examines Louise Erdrich's latest novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) in the light of the current conversation about the attacks on women's reproductive rights and the devastating effects of climate change. Erdrich's speculative novel describes an unspecified future where evolution has reversed itself and human reproduction is under threat, as a response to which a Puritan authoritarian government takes control of women of childbearing age to try to sustain procreation. The article contends that, using the dystopian mode—and more specifically, a theorization of uncertainty as characteristic of the present situation of many people—Erdrich addresses persisting, historical unresolved grief, making current feminist and Native vindications visible. She also continues the challenging of the whitestream idea of progress and the subversion of stereotypes that characterize her oeuvre. Most significantly, the article reads the novel as representative of both Indigenous resurgence and the global transmodern paradigm insofar as it articulates a relational understanding of language and identity as our best hope for the future. The article concludes that Erdrich's use of the future perfect tense is best interpreted as a ritual of proleptic mourning that connects this novel to Native American literary activism.

Keywords: Louise Erdrich; Native dystopia; Native American resurgence; transmodernity; relationality; proleptic mourning

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Future Home of the Living God, de Louise Erdrich:
Incertidumbre, duelo proléptico y relacionalidad en la distopía nativa

Este artículo ofrece un análisis de la novela más reciente de Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), desde el punto de vista de su relevancia en la conversación actual sobre los ataques a los derechos reproductivos de las mujeres y los efectos devastadores del cambio climático. Esta novela especulativa describe un futuro indeterminado en el que la evolución ha comenzado a dar marcha atrás y la reproducción humana se ve amenazada, como respuesta a lo cual un gobierno de corte autoritario y puritano toma el control de las mujeres en edad fértil para intentar sostener la procreación. El artículo argumenta que, partiendo de la idea central de la distopía—y más concretamente, de una teoría de la incertidumbre como característica de la situación actual de multitud de personas—Erdrich da cuenta del dolor histórico sin resolver persistente en nuestra era, visibilizando reivindicaciones feministas y nativas actuales. También contribuye al cuestionamiento de la idea dominante blanca del progreso y a la subversión de estereotipos, dos temas habituales en la obra de Erdrich. El artículo destaca la concepción relacional del lenguaje y la identidad, fundamentales en la novela y esenciales en la visión esperanzada del futuro que ofrece la autora. Dicha relacionalidad conecta el texto tanto con el movimiento de resurgencia indígena como con el paradigma global transmoderno. El artículo concluye que, mediante el uso del futuro perfecto, Erdrich ofrece un ritual de duelo proléptico que conecta esta obra con el activismo literario nativo estadounidense.

Palabras clave: Louise Erdrich; distopía nativa; resurgencia nativa estadounidense; transmodernidad; relacionalidad; duelo proléptico

1. INTRODUCTION

According to American historian and critic Jill Lepore, the abundance of dystopian novels being published in the last few years is a sign of contemporary pessimism. She sees this as a literature of political desperation: while “dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance[,] it’s become a fiction of submission. [...] Its only admonition is: Despair more” (2017). Louise Erdrich’s latest novel, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), a dystopia that has been compared to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), may be one such product of our disheartening times, but it is far from being a narrative of resignation. In it, Erdrich sends a message from a fictional future which, in accordance with the activist impulse that characterizes Native writing (see Blaeser et al. 2017), attempts to make us react in the face of climate change and the persisting attacks on women’s rights all over the world.

The novel is set in Minnesota in an unspecified near future when evolution has suddenly and mysteriously stopped and seems to be reversing itself. As animal and vegetable species change in strange, scary ways, women start giving birth to primitive babies, spontaneous abortions become frequent, pregnancies are fatal for many mothers and male sex organs are not developing properly. Science cannot stop the world from running backwards; in fact, it cannot even start to explain what is happening. The Church of the New Constitution, which has replaced the US government—whose borders with Mexico and Canada have been closed, making Americans illegal aliens in their neighboring countries—is rounding up pregnant women and imprisoning them. Eventually, all women of childbearing age become prone to being taken and forcefully used for procreation. In order to escape control, people go underground, try to hide expecting women and take them North, discard their cell phones and other screens and go back to more traditional and reliable means of communication like snail mail and face-to-face talk. Amidst this chaos, Native Americans take the opportunity to recover lost lands and decolonize their lives in a bid for Indigenous resurgence.

The protagonist and first-person narrative voice of the novel was given the name Cedar Hawk by her white liberal adoptive parents, Glen and Sera Songmaker. However, as she is quite disappointed to discover, her Ojibwa birth name is the rather unexotic Mary Potts, and she is one in a long line of namesakes who are no old-time Indians but middle-class reservation Catholics. The developing ecological and reproductive crisis finds Cedar pregnant at 26, which motivates her to visit the reservation, where she reconnects with both her mother Sweetie and her husband Eddy, as well as with her ancient storyteller grandmother. Cedar, who had rebelled against her Buddhist and ecologist adoptive parents by embracing Catholicism—to the point of working on the edition, publication and distribution of a “magazine of Catholic inquiry” called *Zeal* (Erdrich 2017a, 6)—goes through a personal process of learning how to subvert her previously erroneous, stereotyped expectations about ethnicity. Forced to hide and run away from the authorities, and not knowing exactly what is happening or whom she can trust—including Phil, the father of her baby—

her journal is a therapeutic account of capture and escape, of support and betrayal. After weeks of hiding in her house, she is forcefully taken to a prison-hospital where pregnancies are monitored and the rare surviving newborns are taken away by the authorities. Cedar manages to escape with the help of Sera and is on the run for a while, finding refuge on the reservation, only to be finally betrayed and captured again. At the end of the novel Cedar has given birth to a viable baby boy who is taken away from her, and is kept in a reproductive prison where she will be inseminated. The political thus becomes very personal for this character, who soon learns that her body is no longer her own but the property of the dictatorial state.

The dystopian focus of *Future Home of the Living God* may arguably seem like an anomaly from a writer who has been widely recognized for her recovery of Native traditions in the whitestream, capitalistic world of today. Although future-oriented fiction by Native Americans is not a novelty, the idea that Native writing is mostly focused on the past is still widespread.¹ Erdrich's novel challenges such stereotypical expectations about indigeneity while, at the same time, its warning about the future that may await us unless we react to gender and ecological violence is also meaningful within the current boom of feminist dystopias. Following in the footsteps of Atwood's literary classic *The Handmaid's Tale*—whose Hulu adaptation has been a hit since its first season came out in 2017, bringing it back onto the bestsellers' list—both Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018) denounce the current onslaught on women's reproductive rights by creating a totalitarian male chauvinist society, while British writer Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and Chinese-American Maggie Shen King's *An Excess Male* (2017) offer fictional reversals of patriarchal social roles. All these recent texts can be read as warnings about the present state of women's rights, but in the case of Erdrich's novel, the feminist urge of the dystopian motif goes hand in hand with specific cultural and political vindications. This author's deliberate groundedness in contemporary reality is compatible with what Judith Merrill describes as the main objective of speculative fiction, which introduces "a given set of changes [...] into the common background of 'known facts'" in order "to explore, to discover, to learn, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-examination, something about the nature of the universe, of man [*sic*], of 'reality'" (2017, 27). However, Erdrich resists the whitestream idea of dystopia, arguing instead that for Native Americans the term might refer to a realistic scenario (Erdrich 2017f), partly because "Indigenous people in the Americas are descended of relatives who survived the dystopia of genocide. To us, dystopia is recent history. (For many, it is

¹ And yet, since the publication of Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* (1978)—reissued as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990)—other important names in Native American fiction, like Sherman Alexie, have tried their hand at speculative fiction. Grace L. Dillon, who coined the term "Indigenous Futurism," edited *Walking the Clouds* (2012), the first anthology of indigenous science fiction, and the Native presence in the genre is currently on the rise, including prolific authors like Stephen Graham Jones alongside new voices like Elizabeth LaPensée, Cherrie Dimaline and Rebeca Roanhorse.

the present)" (Erdrich 2017b). The dystopian motif thus gains a new relevance in its visibilization of very real and persisting Native American historical unresolved grief.

In a review entitled "Do We Need Another *Handmaid's Tale*?" Ron Charles asks "this awkward question" about *Future Home of the Living God* only to conclude that, although the novel is unquestionably timely, the way "the political and environmental context is only vaguely and rarely hinted at" keeps us "largely in the dark with [Cedar] as she hides or flees from people out to capture her and steal her unborn baby" (2017). Charles argues that, in comparison to previous works by Erdrich and to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Future Home* seems "slack and minor," and he ascribes this to the conflicting motives of "wanting to make a point but knowing that polemical novels are a drag" (2017). While acknowledging that Erdrich's readers' expectations may have been unsettled by her new text, an unusual one in her trajectory, I contend that the uncertainty or lack of more detailed context is in fact the crux of the novel and the key stylistic choice around which Erdrich is making an important point.² By constantly emphasizing the impossibility of knowing, Erdrich theorizes uncertainty as a way of denouncing the vulnerability of the rights of women and Natives, who live under the constant threat of violation. Starting from this basic assumption, this article examines how the novel questions the foundations of the idea of progress, subverting stereotypes of civilization and savagism, unsettling preconceptions of biological race and culture and theorizing a relational understanding of language and self instead. This basic relationality is compatible both with the idea of Native resurgence (Simpson 2011) and with recent developments that point to a new global cultural paradigm that is coming to be known as transmodernity (Rodríguez Magda 2004; Ateljevic 2013). Also, interestingly, Erdrich expresses relationality in the future anterior or future perfect tense, which turns the novel into a literary ritual of proleptic mourning aimed at making us react before ecological disaster becomes inevitable.

2. "NOBODY KNOWS": THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF UNCERTAINTY

Erdrich has written about the violations of women's bodies before, most notably in *The Round House* (2012), which dealt with the lack of protection of Native women against white rapists. In *Future Home of the Living God* she aims at exploring "what a public creature you become when you're pregnant," and how pregnant women are vulnerable "to an extreme degree" (Erdrich 2017c). The dystopian ownership of the pregnant woman's body on the part of the state in this novel is inspired by real and specific attacks on women's rights. When she wrote a first draft in 2002, at the regressive times after 9/11 when George W. Bush signed the Global Gag Rule and the Patriot Act, Erdrich started wondering why evolution had begun and what would happen if, just as mysteriously, it

² Although the novel also received a good number of positive responses (Corrigan 2017; Athitakis 2017), the more critical reviewers (Franklin 2017; Garner 2017; Scholes 2017; Merritt 2018) offered similar opinions to Charles's.

stopped.³ After years working on other projects, she retrieved and finished the novel in 2017, when Donald J. Trump reintroduced the Global Gag Rule, which “cruelly cuts off US funds from international family planning and goes further to eliminate HIV testing, Zika testing, and birth control. Death from unsafe abortions, vaginal maiming, fistula, HIV, and unknown suffering will result, but all that was and will be largely invisible to the American public” (Erdrich 2017d). Acting on the conviction that older women with strong voices like her have a responsibility towards younger ones, Erdrich writes as a reaction to current antichoice campaigns, which “are simply about controlling young women’s bodies” (Erdrich 2017c)—a statement of intent that emphasizes both the timing (Erdrich 2017d) and the political content of her work.

Through Cedar’s first-person narrative, by means of which this character tries to come to terms with uncertainty and speculation, Erdrich visibilizes the vulnerability that comes with lack of knowledge. Characters constantly wonder about the meaning of what is happening, but “nobody knows” (53) because “the first thing that happens at the end of the world is that we don’t know what is happening” (93). In interview, Erdrich has pondered the significance of not having reliable sources of information: “How do we respond to a huge catastrophe with a system of information that’s becoming centralized in the hands of huge, corporate, money-making concerns? Where do we go?” (Erdrich 2017e). The journal-structured novel is a response to this reflection; it is, in Erdrich’s words, “about things falling apart, about the chaos in the wake of disaster, and about how little we know when we need information the most. It is about how vulnerable women’s rights are” (Atwood and Erdrich 2017). Cedar reflects on the radical changes that accompany the crisis, like the fact that women become less and less visible in the media or that, perhaps not surprisingly, “there are no brown people, anywhere, not in movies or sitcoms not on shopping channels or on the dozens of evangelical channels up and down the remote. Something is bursting through the way life was” (44). Information grows more and more scarce, and the fascist-like government eventually imposes a complete news blackout, with no newspapers, no television and “radio extremely sketchy” (84). As a result, people start protesting and organizing themselves, and instead of traceable and hackable technology, “there are news kiosks all through the city where people congregate to share rumors” (84-85).

From the bits and pieces of information that Cedar manages to collect while she is in hiding, we learn that animals have stopped breeding (44), that “ducks are not ducks and chickens are not chickens, insects are nutritious, and there are ladybugs the size of cats” (90). Still able and willing to observe nature, she finds out that strange species that seem to be primitive versions of animals are appearing, like “a bird about the size of a hawk” that might be similar to an *Archaeopteryx* or a *Confuciusornis* (92),

³ Less well-known than the Patriot Act of 2001, the Global Gag Rule—officially known as the Mexico City Policy—requires that any overseas organization receiving US aid, including those in countries where abortion is legal, is not involved in any way with providing abortion or even mentioning it, or else they will lose any US funding.

while others are acquiring enormous sizes, like “a saber-toothy cat” big enough to devour a dog (104-105). Mirroring the unpredictable changes in nature, pregnancies are fatal to most women because the developing babies attack their mothers’ immune system (256-57). Those babies who make it through childbirth show abnormalities in the neocortex and the sex organs of male babies are defective or sometimes do not develop at all (69). As a result of the reproductive crisis, pregnant women—whom people are encouraged to report via the Unborn Protection Society line (124)—are rounded up and “sequestered in hospitals in order to give birth under controlled circumstances” (72), which becomes official policy when it is assigned a denomination, “*female gravid detention*” (74; italics in the original). Violence and torture are exerted by the government, which uses tools of control such as insect-like spy drones or Mother, an androgynous figure with “a Prince Valiant helmet hair” (68) that appears on Cedar’s computer screen, a kind of parody of Big Brother. Because viable pregnancies are so scarce, eventually all young women’s bodies are prone to being taken captive. To make space for them, prisons are now reserved for women (85), who are forced to either “try and carry to term a frozen embryo from the old in-vitro clinics” or “be inseminated with sperm from the old sperm banks” (159).

The lack of detailed information about the changing natural and political contexts is a strategic element in the narrative, expressed both explicitly and through literary subtlety. Reflecting on the disruption of the natural course of motherhood, for example, Erdrich’s narrator often needs to correct the verbal tenses in her diary, revising her use of the future and resorting to the conditional mode instead. Cedar becomes painfully aware that previously objective scientific knowledge about pregnancy has become utterly unreliable and that, although she is still compelled to try to keep track of the weekly development of her foetus as expecting mothers often do, she “should form no expectation” (116) or take anything for granted. The insecure, vulnerable perspective of this young expectant woman is aimed at triggering an emotional reaction on the part of the reader, who has to face the fact that the world we have always known may not have a definite future. The author’s theorizing of uncertainty thus requires the active participation in the construction of meaning on the part of the reader, whose often frustrated search for truth is guided by Cedar’s. Erdrich’s aesthetic choice is thereby endowed with strong ethical implications.

3. “THE NARRATIVE IS ALL THAT MATTERS”: SEARCHING FOR A LANGUAGE OF RELATION

In spite of uncertainty and danger, Cedar—and the novel—resist resignation and take great pains to look for meaning in language. Indeed, she exemplifies the human urge to know the story we are part of: “I want to see the story. More than anything, I am frustrated by the fact that I’ll never know how things turn out” (67). She is writing in an attempt to defy her lack of knowledge in this moment of crisis and to leave her legacy

for posterity, an idea she struggles to believe in despite everything: “Historic times! There have always been letters and diaries written in times of tumult and discovered later, and my thought is that I could be writing one of those. And even though I realize that lexical knowledge may be useless, you’ll have this record” (3).

In Erdrich’s characterization of Cedar’s notebook, there are reminiscences of the famous epitaph Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1728, when he was only 22. In Franklin’s text, body and book are one and the same; the decadence of the body is anticipated by the decadence of the book, “stripped of its lettering and gilding” (Franklin 1728). Both would be “food for worms” were it not for the fact that they will hopefully appear once more “in a new and more perfect edition, corrected and amended by the author” (Franklin 1728), which we can interpret as either a religious resurrection or an account of writing as a way to eternity. In *Future Home of the Living God*, Cedar writes, “This notebook has become my life, or perhaps better to say that this notebook has become the way I remain connected with my life, and with you” (171). The cover of Cedar’s notebook “has peeled in places, or scratched down to the gray pulp”; the back, with a blank area reserved for the baby’s name or picture that may never be filled and decorated with garlands of roses, doves and pointing cherubs—“foolish little signs of romance” (171)—is smudged, showing the wear of much handling. However, the “tape-protected ultrasound” she has glued on it “looks perfect” (171). The cover is also decorated with a photograph that Cedar takes at the beginning of the narrative during her first drive to the reservation to meet her biological family. Although she knows that everything she sees is “physically balanced on this cusp between the now of things and the big, incomprehensible change to come” (13), the only unusual things she encounters are the quietness and the alarming sermons advertised on church billboards: “In one enormous, empty field a sign is planted that reads *Future Home of the Living God*. It’s just a bare field, fallow and weedy, stretching to the pale horizon” (13). By choosing this picture to decorate her notebook, paper and field become one in their bareness and emptiness, but also in their potential for cultivation and growth. This possibility of starting something new allows the reader to hope that, as the living god he is, Cedar’s baby may eventually find a home in land and language.

Side by side with her words, Cedar starts creating a new world for her baby by compiling “bits of paper from the now and from the before, as mementos of the curious world you will be entering soon” (171). These keepsakes, which have made their way “from all corners of the earth” (172) to the Material Recycle Facility where she temporarily hides after escaping the hospital-prison in a recycling truck, include lemon candy wrappers from Spain, tags marked Made in China, Taiwan, USA, Sri Lanka and Berlin, cards printed in Korea, gilt and lavender wrappers from France, Australia and Indonesia, wine labels from New Zealand, scraps of iconic American soup, laundry soap packaging and a long etcetera of objects coming from all over the transmodern, globalized world. The bits and pieces that Cedar salvages from the world that is disappearing symbolize her diverse attempts at finding an appropriate language

for self-expression. On the one hand, while she reflects on evolution in her writing for the last volume of *Zeal*, Cedar alludes to the heap of broken images representative of modernism as she ponders, "Maybe T. S. Eliot had it right. Our world is ending not with a bang but a puzzled whimper" (190). On the other hand, she is drawn to the study of the Catholic Incarnation, which leads her to reflect on the creative power of language: "The word is an idea, the idea of God" (64). She wonders whether there exists a language outside the human experience of words spoken and thought, "or perhaps a pre-language made up of words so unthinkable holy they cannot be said, much less known. Perhaps you will know how to speak this language. Perhaps it is a language that we have forgotten in our present home" (65). Pointing to her baby's future, connecting him to the past, Cedar invokes a language of connection which nevertheless remains ungraspable and vague in her Christian account of it.

Cedar's connection to her Ojibwa ancestry is more definite, as shown by her encounter with her biological grandmother soon after they first meet on the reservation. Observing this ancient woman, it occurs to Cedar that "perhaps she has lived through the final efflorescence of human culture and thought. She is perched on top of the pyramid, Grandma Virginia, a tiny, pinched gargoyle riffling a pack of cards" (34). When, asking for information about her ancestry, Cedar mentions the word "pregnant," something is registered, and the old woman starts sharing story after story, her memory shifting, telling and retelling many versions of her history, so that Cedar soon realizes that "the narrative is all that matters" (35). She thus becomes keenly aware of the dynamic, living nature of the creative storytelling process.

Another way in which the longed-for language materializes is through two songs that connect Cedar to women and mothers, on the one hand, and to her baby and Native heritage, on the other. The first of these songs appears when Tia, a pregnant young woman who escaped from the hospital with Cedar, gives birth to a stillborn baby and sings to it, relating past and future, the song becoming a language beyond linear chronology. It was "not a song composed of words, but a song made of sounds that I will hear later, in a different place," says Cedar; "Sounds that were made a hundred thousand years ago, I am sure, and sounds that will be heard a hundred thousand from now, I hope" (185). Later, when Cedar is imprisoned for the second time and surrounded by powerless but undefeated pregnant women, most of whom will die at childbirth, the women hum to accompany and mourn those whose turn it is to be taken away by the authorities:

It is a beautiful, powerful, all-knowing sound. They open their mouths to sing a song that I already know. The song must be in me. [...] Maybe we all learned it in former lives, deep places, gathering grounds, caves and huts of sticks, skin houses, prisons, and graves. It is a wordless melody that only women sing. Slow, beautiful, sad, ecstatic, we sing a hymn of war and a march of peace. (253)

As for the second song, it appears when a spirit visits Cedar nearly every night as her own labor approaches and brings her the song that Sweetie's husband Eddy—a sensitive, well-educated man who is devoted to the writing of a memoir about why he decides not to kill himself every day, a homage to the small joys of life—composed for the baby: “it is high, repetitive, and comforting, like a lullaby” (258). Connecting her to her Ojibwa family, this is the baby song that Cedar hears during labor, supporting and accompanying her. It is also the song that she sings once her baby has been taken away from her, when she says, still addressing him, “I sing your song. My guardian spirit has returned” (266).

4. “MY EXPLORATIONS OF IDENTITY”: TRANSMODERN INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE AND RELATIONALITY

Cedar's search for a language of relation in spite of and as a reaction to uncertainty goes hand in hand with her quest for a coherent sense of her self, which she refers to as her “explorations of identity” (56). As I contend, for a solid reflection on what it means to be Indigenous in the contemporary US—which requires a negotiation of the differential and the relational—two perspectives should be taken into consideration: the idea of resurgence, specific to the Native context, and the broader transmodern paradigm, currently in the process of being theoretically characterized. As for the former, in her characterization of Native resurgence, Nishnaabeg author and critic Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states that it is now time for Native people to take the seeds of their culture and political systems—which they had been forced to pack away—and plant them again (2011, 15). Resisting offering a predetermined definition of resurgence, she instead makes “a call to Indigenous Peoples to delve into their own culture's stories, philosophies, theories and concepts to align themselves with the processes and forces of regeneration, revitalization, remembering and visioning” (2011, 148). Interestingly, Simpson's view of resurgence tries to reverse “the violence of dispossession” and is, accordingly, not oppositional—for possession is associated with capitalism—but relational, based on recognition, or “a process of seeing another being's core essence,” a series of reciprocal, continual and society-generating relationships (2015). Erdrich's pondering the future of society in the face of the overt control of technology and its destructive impact on humans and nature can also be interpreted as an example of the literary representation of transmodernity—“the emerging socio-cultural, economic, political and philosophical shift” (Ateljevic 2013, 201) or simply, in the words of Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, who coined the term, “the paradigm that allows us to think our present” (2019, 21).⁴ Transmodernity is sustained on the basic motifs of transformation and transcendence, and some of

⁴ See also Rodríguez Magda (2004) for a complete account of her definition of the term, which she first used in 1989. Although her work is originally written in Spanish, some translations into English can be found on her blog (Rodríguez Magda n.d.).

its main themes are globalization, virtuality and the excesses of capitalism. It also accounts for “a new *relational* consciousness” (Ateljevic 2013, 213; italics in the original) or, as Christian Moraru states in his definition of cosmopolitanism—a literary articulation of transmodernity—an emphasis on “self and other’s foundational co-relationality with respect to one another” (2011, 17). The relational center in *Future Home of the Living God* is thus both a way to articulate resurgence in literature and an example of the “new hopeful fictions” that Rodríguez Magda calls for at the crossroads of transmodernity (2019, 29).

A reflection on resurgence can be found in one of the subplots of *Future Home of the Living God*, which relates to the Native movement to recover lost land and profit in the context of the turbulent situation. When Cedar goes to the reservation to meet her biological family, she is surprised to find that her well-to-do mother Sweetie, who owns a Superpumper gas station, is all business. Sweetie tells the tribal council meeting that the apparition of Kateri Tekakwitha—also known as Lily of the Mohawks, the patron saint of Native people—on the reservation is an opportunity to make some financial profit. Filtering Sweetie’s act through Cedar’s surprised perspective, Erdrich teases stereotypes and presents Natives who can adapt to the new circumstances. In fact, the current chaotic situation is not as traumatizing for them as it is for non-Natives for, as Eddy explains, “Indians have been adapting since before 1492 so I guess we’ll keep adapting” (28). The visible leader of resurgence on the Ojibwa reservation, he makes his case thus: “Quite a number of us see the governmental collapse as a way to make our move and take back the land” (95). This motivation gives Eddy a sense of purpose that heals him of his depression. He makes use of the opportunity to take action—he grows out his hair and “doesn’t slouch anymore” (225); he plays hand drum songs and sings warrior songs which confuse the surveillers; and he “plots strategies. Thinks of survival measures. [...] He wants to make the reservation one huge, intensively worked, highly productive farm” (226). His objective is for the reservation people to be self-sufficient, “like the old days” (227). Under his leadership, the Natives grow pot to trade to the white people and to be used as medication; they seize the National Guard arsenal at Camp Ripley so that whites do not bother them; and they “decoloniz[e] the uniforms of the militia” (227), welcoming non-Indian veterans from across the nation. The Natives even have a “new unbreakable code” (228), a non-verbal language based on the howling of wolves, which is Erdrich’s in-joke reference to the code-talkers of World War II (Erdrich 2017e).

Whites peacefully returning their lands to the Natives—to the point where the “compassionate removal of non-tribal people” (214) living on stolen land is not even necessary—is not a likely situation, even in a chaotic context like that described in the novel. Nevertheless, Erdrich’s fictional reversal of power in order to confront settler colonialism makes a lot of sense as a Native utopia in the middle of dystopia. It shows that interpretation is contingent on perspective and puts forward a literary representation of Indigenous resurgence that highlights the current imbalance of white-

Native power relations. It also complements the novel's blunt challenging of the idea of progress and of the stereotypes around the foundational dichotomy of civilization and savagism. One such reversal relates to the expectation of Natives being trapped in the past. This puts artists in a double bind, as one of the characters in Tommy Orange's debut novel *There There* points out: "The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it's stuck in the past. The catch, or the double bind, about the whole thing is this: If it isn't pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And if it is stuck in tradition, in the past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous people living now, how can it be modern?" (2018, 77).

Erdrich addresses this double bind not only by writing a dystopian novel set in the future, but also by emphatically creating a Native hero for posterity. As aforementioned, at different points during her pregnancy Cedar is visited by a guardian spirit, a calming, powerful presence that comforts her: "As I am floating on that tide, something happens that may be supernatural. A presence sits on the edge of the blow-up mattress, weightless, formless, protective. It is a kind of shadow. Maybe an angel. Magnetic and gentle, its love settles over me like a buoyant cape. Together, we sleep" (217). Although the spirit could be related to Cedar's biological grandmother, who is often nearby when it appears, or to her baby's father Phil, referred to as an angel by Cedar, the ambivalence is sustained until the end of the novel. As her due date approaches, the good spirit visits Cedar almost every night and when she finally gives birth to a healthy baby boy, for the brief moment when Cedar can hold him, she recognizes him: "*It's you*, I said. *It was always you*" (264; italics in the original). Erdrich thus suggests that Cedar's baby, wherever he might be after being taken from his mother, will survive and become the living god of the future.

Interestingly, resurgence in this novel does not necessarily equal biological inheritance, just like identity does not directly or irrevocably correspond to ethnicity. The novel delves into the transformation and transcendence of such categories. This baby is the son of Phil—a vegetarian who "becomes carnivorous in times of stress" (79); a white man of Italian and Spanish origins whose ancestors "worked the building trades, put up the basilica and the cathedral" (79)—and of Cedar, a mixed-blood woman who describes herself as "a walking contradiction, maybe two species in one body [...], an insecure Ojibwe, a fledgling Catholic, an overstriving brain cooking up conflicting dramas" (66). Erdrich reflects on the mixture of identities common to Native people, which is in fact "common to all of us. We are all mixtures of some sort or another—usually one heritage predominates, but that isn't at all predictable" (Erdrich 2017b).

Assuming that she was adopted out of a Native tribe—although she will eventually learn that Glen, whom she believed to be her adoptive father, is actually her biological father—Cedar's understanding of her ethnicity while growing up was theoretical and romanticized, something that made her special until she went to college and found herself a Native without a tribe or a trauma to define herself by. What she later learns about her biological mother's family is disappointing, starting with her real name or

her mother's occupation. Neither can match her expectations about "special powers or connections with healing spirits or sacred animals" (5), which she imagined in her youth when she defined herself as a "Native girl" and an "Indian Princess" (4). In her subsequent explorations of identity, Cedar looks for answers in spirituality and embraces Catholicism, both as a form of rebellion and in an effort to obtain the connections she lacks. This is the same reason why, when she learns that she is pregnant, she bonds with her Ojibwa biological family, so that her baby can "enter the web of connections" that she herself never had (6). Her mixed heritage makes her very much in need of reconciling and relating, and this is particularly obvious in regard to her spirituality. As she says, "I have integrated both my ethnicity and my intellectual leanings into my faith first by analyzing the canonization of the Lily of the Mohawks, Kateri Tekakwitha" (6) and then by putting herself at the helm of the *Zeal*. When she later meets her biological mother and learns that they have this religion in common, she interprets her choice of Catholicism as "inherited genetic congruence" (13), an ironic statement. Sweetie defines herself as "a pagan Catholic" (23), an embracing of contradiction that Cedar expands in her own self-definition, which encompasses a wealth of different beliefs, since she adds her newly encountered grandmother's Ojibwe stories to her studies of the Virgin Mary and the Incarnation, of Kateri Tekakwitha and Hildegard of Bingen.

The novel sets out to prove that the borders between supposedly separate concepts or between different ethnic groups are nothing but a blurry area. Thus, the future god is of mixed ancestry, the result of a negotiation of cultures and ways to understand spirituality, which makes him, ironically—or perhaps not so, if we consider Erdrich's usual subversion of ethnic and cultural borders—"one of the originals" (245) who can survive. Being able to bear a healthy baby is a tempting possibility for Phil, who suggests to Cedar that they use their reproductive compatibility to gain power within the authoritarian system, something she perceives as a betrayal: "'We would be in charge of things. Rich. Super rich! We'd be safe. If we somehow worked out genetically, I mean, to have a normal child the sky's the limit for us.' 'We could seize power and found a dynasty,' I say, meaning it sarcastically. 'That's right,' says Phil softly, reaching for me" (246-47). Thus is ambivalence about Phil's character, which has been sustained throughout the novel, solved in the end, and he becomes, to Cedar, "[a]nother angel of deception" (242). Phil, however, is not the only one to betray Cedar. After cooking a Thanksgiving feast and feeding "absolutely everyone" (248) on the reservation—including the "Transcendence seekers [...] bearing Tibetan prayer flags" and "the Catholic pilgrims," a variety of peoples who have come looking for protection (247)—Cedar goes to the statue of Kateri to pray and is kidnapped by "some random pilgrims" (248) who turn her in to the authorities for the money. The old colonial narrative of the Native woman being captured by whites is thereby repeated as a story of betrayal—as Cedar interprets it, "Kateri really let me down" (249), suggesting that the Native saint can only offer an inadequate kind of protection.

The novel thus ends with Cedar in captivity at the hands of the state, which intends to use her body for procreation. There, she observes how the women “have tried to make beauty” (258) by setting out pots and filling them with “nameless plants” whose growth they welcome with curiosity and interest. Other “accidental plants are pushing into the prison as well” and “every day there is an even thicker green profusion” (258) of nature catching hold “across the fences, across the razor wire, even along the glass towers of the guards, rearing into ferocious sunlight” (259). The creative and resilient power of nature, which will prevail in spite of human violations, echoes some of the connections that Cedar has forged and her new awareness of female companionship and the Native values of caring for nature, land and women. Appropriately, Cedar’s new hybrid, relational set of beliefs shows resonances of transcendentalism, another intertext of transformation and transcendence:

And the sky has bloomed, it is verdant with stars. I’ve never seen stars like this before. Deep, brilliant, soft. I am comforted because nothing we have done to this earth affects them. I think of the neurons in your brain connecting, branching, forming the capacity I hope you will have for wonder. They are connecting, like galaxies. Perhaps we function as neurons ourselves, interconnecting thoughts in the giant mud of God. (106)

Cedar’s creation of a new human being connects both mother and baby to nature, the universe and God. As her baby grows inside her, she becomes more aware of the reciprocity of body and soul—“the soul is not in the body. The body is in the soul” (264)—and when she finally holds him in her arms she writes, “I looked into the soul of the world” (264). In spite of uncertainty, danger and betrayal, Cedar finds joy in the integrative power of motherhood and loves the world: “every fresh new cell of blood, every icy flash of neuron, a love of you, a love of everything” (209).⁵

5. “WE DIDN’T KNOW IT WAS HEAVEN”: PROLEPTIC MOURNING AND LITERARY ACTIVISM

Apart from a reflection on uncertainty in times of crisis and an assertion of specific relational values that can be simultaneously read as global and specific to Native traditions, Erdrich’s wake-up call for us to be more aware of what is happening at the present time and react before it is too late makes sense in relation to what Stef Craps characterizes as “contemporary culture’s tendency to understand and address climate change through a fictional future history of the present” (2017, 484). Following Mark Currie, Craps argues that we live in an anticipatory mode of being, that is, we inhabit the present as the object of future memory, to the point where the future anterior or

⁵ In this fleeting joyful account of maternity there are echoes of Erdrich’s 1995 memoir *The Blue Jay’s Dance*. The comparison of the two texts, however, evidences the painful regression that Erdrich perceives in women’s reproductive rights, which enhances the new novel’s relevance and urgency.

future perfect is “a tense for our times” (Currie 2013, 67). In Erdrich’s novel, Cedar feels that “instead of the past, it is the future that haunts us now” (2017a, 63). Although the overwhelming changes she witnesses around her make her check herself—“Stop thinking about the future. *Now* is all we have, I tell myself” (69; italics in the original)—this is not easy to do, and perhaps it is not even possible. Thus, when she admits “I am more comfortable with the before-ness or the after-ness of life. I am happier dissecting the past or dreading the future. I really have no proficiency at simply experiencing the present” (69), Cedar is elucidating the complex temporality of the current age.

As Craps also suggests, the future anterior tense is “built into the notion of the Anthropocene itself, which proposes that human life will be readable as having had an impact” (2017, 484). It is a kind of “posthumous stance” (486) from which we look back and mourn our own and our world’s destruction. No less importantly, Craps continues, “future-history approaches to climate change tend to be driven by an activist agenda,” as “they aim to ward off the imagined catastrophe by sensitizing readers to the enormity of the losses they or later generations will face if the current state of affairs continues, by making them feel ashamed about their inaction, and by inviting them to consider how they could prevent the apocalyptic outcome” (487). Towards the end of Erdrich’s novel, the enormity of the loss that we may be facing is suggested by a particularly moving scene in which Cedar remembers the last snow they had in Minnesota, where winter no longer exists. When they used to have winter, Cedar says, “we didn’t know it was heaven” (265). Erdrich poetically describes the deep cold that is no more as a musical and visual work of art, where one could hear “the quick staccato reports of snare drums” like a marching band (265), “a delicate whisper,” a “tinkl[ing] together” of “haunting wind chimes” (265), and see “an altered world” of “jagged puzzles, mathematical labyrinths, furies of intersecting lines” where “[e]very inch was an original design” (266).

Erdrich thus literally and literarily freezes this winter scene as she has known it, making it come alive in what is already an altered world and mourning its imminent loss. In the narrative, Cedar and her parents have seen the gradual disappearance of winter. First the cold did not hurt, then snow became scarce, until there was only rain: “That was the year we lost winter. Lost our cold heaven” (266). Imprisoned as a womb slave at the end of the novel, overwhelmed by an absolute uncertainty about what is to come, Cedar remembers the last time it snowed in Minnesota, when she was eight: “The snow built up on every surface. And I can feel it now, so heavy. [...] And I am in it. [...] Whiteness fills the air and whiteness is all there is. I am here, and I was there” (268). Here and there—the novel’s narrative present and past—are as different as heaven and hell, and Erdrich asks us to join Cedar in her grieving for a world that exists no more and to act before this dystopia becomes a reality. Devastated by the probability of this tremendous loss, we are left with the hope that Erdrich’s prediction will never become true, that neither we nor our posterity will have to witness “the last time it snows on earth” (267). In *Future Home of the Living God*, a dystopian novel grounded

in uncertainty and relationality and a cautionary tale that speaks to both Native and feminist studies, Erdrich presents us with a ritual of preliminary or proleptic mourning that has the potential of becoming a powerful political practice, thus confirming the activist impulse often found in contemporary Native literature.⁶

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