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Biocolonialism, Indigenous Identity and Belonging in a Dystopian World: Reading Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

Evripidis Karavasilis, Universitat de Barcelona, evripidis98@gmail.com

This research paper discusses the effacement of Indigenous populations and governmental control over women's bodies as practices of biopolitics and biocolonialism. By examining Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), the essay sheds light on the strategies of the US government to claim Indigenous peoples' land, misappropriate their genetic material and violate their rights to culture and self-governance. At the same time, it investigates the struggles Indigenous people face in order to attain belonging in the US society. Erdrich's *Future Home* follows the quest of an Ojibwe woman, named Cedar Hawk Songmaker, raised by a white, middle-class family in Minneapolis, as she seeks to discover her biological parents and reconcile with her Indigenous origins. The story unfolds in a dystopian setting: species suddenly face devolution and, to ensure humanity's survival, the US government imprisons women in special institutions, where they are forced to bear children. At the onset of the narrative, Cedar is four months pregnant and starts writing a diary addressed to her future offspring; in doing so, she chronicles her experiences as an Ojibwe in female gravid detention and grants the world a historical record of the atrocities instigated by the government's totalitarianism. Tracing the connections between genomics and biocolonialism, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim Tallbear criticizes the misappropriation of Indigenous genetic, natural and cultural resources by Western scientists as well as the limited underpinnings that heavily base race and Indigeneity on biology. Other Indigenous scholars, like Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) and Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), expose the ongoing colonial forces that compromise Indigenous identity and belonging, but also consider Indigenous futurisms, such as Erdrich's narrative, as depicting a potential resistance or reversal of colonialism. Drawing from Indigenous research on biopolitics and biocolonialism, the current research paper critically analyzes Future Home as a speculative literary work that portrays Indigenous oppression by Western science and the US government in a future Apocalyptic world.

> Maybe T. S. Eliot had it right. Our world is ending
> not with a bang but a puzzled whimper.
> —Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*

> Many forms of Indigenous futurisms posit the possibility
> of an optimistic future by imagining a reversal of circumstances,
> where Natives win or at least are centered in the narrative.
> —Grace L. Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*

A member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, Louise Erdrich has authored numerous pieces of fiction which center on Ojibwe people and bring their way of life and cultural practices to the forefront. Set in her home state of Minnesota, in a fictional Ojibwe reservation, *Future Home of the Living God* is a novel that heavily concerns the future of humanity. The story revolves around Cedar Hawk Songmaker, a 26-year-old woman of mixed ancestry, born by Ojibwe Mary Potts and raised by a white liberal couple, Sera and Glen Songmaker. Cedar embarks on a confounding search for identity and belonging during her pregnancy and recounts her life story to her yet unborn son in a diary form. Her quest is set against the backdrop of a gradually disintegrating world, as humanity has started to exhibit signs of devolution: babies are stillborn and Western scientists reckon that humanity will cease to exist. In view of the global evolutionary crisis, the US government strives to preserve humankind by keeping pregnant women in captivity, studying and experimenting on them in a hopeless attempt to comprehend the halt of evolution as we know it. Though set in the near future, Erdrich's depiction of this dystopian world does not diverge far from present reality. The author divulges in an interview with Canadian writer Margaret Atwood that "we have a tendency to regress after we move forward … Maybe I'm writing the biological equivalent of our present political mess" (*Inside the Dystopian Visions of Margaret Atwood and Louise Erdrich*). The turmoil surrounding US politics and reproductive rights prompted Erdrich to write a novel that criticizes the limited underpinnings of Western science, exposes US governmental corruption and at the same time celebrates Indigeneity and the reclamation of Indigenous rights.

Future Home, much like Atwood's 1985 classic *The Handmaid's Tale*, portrays a feminist dystopia where totalitarian regimes exploit women as reproductive tools. Erdrich's narrative, however, sheds light on women's experiences through an Indigenous lens and her unprecedented engagement with speculative fiction mixes the cultural diversity of her characters with future biological reconfigurations. By setting the novel in a future apocalyptic world, Edrich exemplifies Grace L. Dillon's

statement that "all forms of Indigenous futurisms are narratives of *biskaabiiyang*, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of 'returning to ourselves' … and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (10). More specifically, *Future Home* exhibits the repercussions of biocolonialism, a term introduced by Indigenous scholars to delineate the scientific and political forces that still target Indigenous intellectual, genetic and cultural resources. Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim Tallbear has written extensively about issues of racialization in science and the misappropriation of Indigenous genetic material by the West. In her essay, "Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity" (2013), she posits that the excessive emphasis genomics places on DNA lineages fails to represent Indigenous cultural conceptions and is even at variance with them. In Tallbear's words: "Indigenous peoples themselves also privilege biological connection to ancestors (alongside connection to land), but they have evolved a more multifaceted definition of 'indigenous' that entangles political self-determination and mutual networking for survival in a global world" (510). Drawing from Indigenous scholarship on biocolonialism and biopolitics, the current paper examines Erdrich's *Future Home* and scrutinizes the scientific, patriarchal and colonial oppression of Indigenous bodies. The last two sections of the paper offer alternative future potentialities of identity reconstruction and belonging, as imagined by the author in her portrayal of a dystopian, decaying world.

1. "It is the future that haunts us now": Ojibwe and Western Understandings of Devolution and the Apocalypse

In her very first letter, Cedar introduces herself to her future son (and the readers) and exposes the multiple forces that hinder her being-in-the-world. She is perplexed about her Indian origins, which at the start of the novel remain unknown, and struggles with attaining a sense of identity and belonging. Erdrich opens Part 1 of the novel with a long confession that exposes Cedar's inner world and situates the novel in the context of devolution:

> When I tell you that my white name is Cedar Hawk Songmaker and that I am the adopted child of Minneapolis liberals, and that when I went looking for my Ojibwe parents and found that I was born Mary Potts I hid the knowledge, maybe you'll understand. Or not. I'll write this anyway, because ever since last week things have changed. Apparently—I mean, nobody knows—our world is running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways, in a way yet ungrasped. I am sure somebody will come up with a name for what is happening, but I cannot imagine how everything around us and everything within us can be fixed. (*Future Home* 3)

In her opening words, Cedar contextualizes the narrative and links the evolutionary crisis with her own identity crisis. At the thought of humanity's extinction, while also being four months pregnant, Cedar contemplates her Indigenous origins for the first time. A year prior to the beginning of the story, she had received an invitation letter by her Indigenous, mother, but she chose to ignore it. Only now that circumstances have changed does she entertain the idea of visiting the reservation. As she puts it: "Until this biological confusion, until my pregnancy, until this great uncertainty that life itself has suddenly become, I've hidden the fact that I even opened the letter" (6). As Kelli D. Macomber points out, the burden of hiding her liminal, mixed-race heritage can be attributed to her living in a world where she does not fully belong as she is otherized by her social milieu. Eventually, she decides to reunite with her biological family, because "nothing *out there* feels as important as what's *in here*" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 9). Uncertain of her own identity yet faced with the impeding evolutionary crisis and her pregnancy, she becomes more willing to explore her Indigenous origins and more comfortable with getting to know her Ojibwe parents, Mary Potts and Eddy.

Eddy is in fact the first person to whom Cedar confesses her pregnancy, not only because of their common intellectual curiosity, but also because he reassures her concerning the mystery of devolution. The Ojibwe are not really traumatized by the idea of evolutionary change, unlike white people. The reason for this is most accurately given by Eddy, who imbues Cedar with optimism and surmises that "Indians have been adapting since before 1492, so I guess we'll keep adapting" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 35). Eddy does not perceive devolution as regressing nor as progressing, but simply as shifting and adapting. Additionally, Indigenous peoples are already familiar with apocalyptic scenarios. Dillon asserts that "the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place" (8), referencing the imperial history and obliteration of Indigenous populations. Given the preservation of biocolonialism, the Native Apocalypse that ensued with the arrival of European settlers is an ongoing event and contemporary Indigenous people are its survivors. In his discussion on Indigenous speculative literature, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice points out that "[w]hen apocalypse appears as an overt theme in Indigenous writing, it's more than speculation—it's experiential, even in its most fantastical, because in a very real way it hasn't ended" (168). It is then anticipated that Cedar's Ojibwe family is not obsessed with the idea of devolution. Erdrich depicts Indigenous people as constantly adapting and, in the process, shifts biopolitical power dynamics. In his essay on the interrelation of colonialism and biopower, ethnographer and anthropologist Scott Lauria Morgensen invites the reconsideration of "the past *and* present biopolitics of settler colonialism" in order to dispute "presentist" approaches to colonial history and its lingering effects (68). Erdrich accentuates current manifestations of biopolitics and biocolonialism by

depicting the hopeless reaction of the West to the idea of a devolutionary Apocalypse, and the continuous disregard for Indigenous peoples and their knowledge.

A fear for the future of humanity predominates the world at large, given the inexplicable species devolution and the consequent endeavors to prevent humanity from extinction. Species seem to be turning prehistoric: canines now resemble wolves, insects appear relatively enormous and plants, such as broccoli and cauliflower, no longer exist. Cedar notices a hawk-sized bird whose head is "beakless, featherless, lizardlike" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 116), while data on common fruit flies show that "on the molecular level it is like skipping around in time…shuffling through random adaptations" (55). People are bewildered and organize demonstrations, but in this global turmoil, it is not politicians or the military to whom they appeal "but scientists of every background…emerging as though from a dream, their faces still flattened in shock" (66). There is a mutual incomprehension within the scientific community which cannot address the sudden regression. Still, whenever a crisis emerges, states favor "historical truths articulated by genome science" over Indigenous Knowledge (Tallbear, "Genomic Articulations" 510). This amenity is rooted not only in settler colonialism and narratives of European superiority but also in the common misconception, as Laurelyn Whitt specifies, that Native Americans are "*sine scientia*, without science" (27). The disregard of Western scientists towards Indigenous understandings of the Apocalypse demonstrates, according to Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, the "asymmetrical power relationships" that characterize Native and white epistemology (171). Cognizant of the biologists' role in the annihilation of Indigenous Knowledge and people, Cedar distrusts certain of their claims and constantly deliberates over questions concerning the universe, evolution and existence. She humbly concedes that she is but "a lay observer of the great mystery, the simple *why*, which no scientist can answer any better than [her]" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 202). What US scientists dread as devolution and potential human extinction, Cedar views as normal. Upon further contemplation, she concludes that "[t]hings aren't really falling apart. All that is happening, even the purest chaos…is basically all right" (264). Along these lines, science lacks "value-neutrality" (Whitt 59) and is indeed guided by political ulterior motives, as exhibited by its alliance with the US government and the biopolitical control over people's lives, which will be further explored in the following section.

2. Biocolonial Science and Institutionalized Detention of Indigenous Women's Bodies

Early in the novel, the US government declares the evolutionary crisis "a state of emergency" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 10), paving the way for its unconstitutional, racist and dehumanizing laws. Following Giorgio Agamben's influential theory on the camp

as the "state of exception," Morgensen asserts that for the Indigenous, colonization is this "exception to the law" that allows for the eradication of Native people "while defining settlers as those who replace" (52). In the postcolonial state of exception, the West can reaffirm its unquestioned authority. As follows, the government in *Future Home* weaponizes Western bio-sciences to terrorize and control the public. First it enacts "the Patriot Act," according to which it holds the authority to "seize entire libraries and medical databases in order to protect national security" (91–92). In accordance with settler colonialism, Indigenous knowledge is confiscated on the basis of human progress. As Jenny Reardon and Tallbear have specified, the assumption that scientific research is beneficial to all humanity falsely justifies the misappropriation of Indigenous writings, cultural artifacts and even genetic material by the West. In a similar effort to enforce its power, "the government seize[s] the cable companies" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 65) so as to censor what news the media broadcast. These changes are abrupt, occurring overnight, but their impact is quickly noticed by Cedar. For instance, the media now allow less women to appear on screen, while at the same time "[t]here are no brown people, anywhere, not in movies not on sitcoms not on shopping channels or on the dozens of evangelical channels up and down the remote" (56). Patriarchy and white supremacy at any rate extend imperial values onto the modern colony. In dialogue with Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (Goenpul) investigation of the "white possessive," whiteness is normalized so that white supremacy be preserved and "white patriarchal knowledge production" ensured (9). In the modern state of exception that Erdrich portrays, the US government implements laws that not only restrict access to knowledge but also target the Indigenous and people of color to re-assert its biocolonial superiority.

The old government eventually collapses and a new one, "The Church of the New Constitution," is formed. As religious authorities take over, the restrictions immediately tighten and the soon totalitarian regime fuels nationalistic sentiments and mistreats women of color. Simpson understands totalitarian power as arising from "coercion and hierarchy," tools which albeit foreign to Indigenous thinking, are inherent in white patriarchal and colonial authority (4). The biological crisis in *Future Home* provides the perfect excuse for the church government to intervene in bodily processes. It launches the WV ("Womb Volunteers") program whereby pregnant women are kept in hospitals (or "Future Home Reception Centers") for scientific study, openly legalizing their imprisonment and abuse. Cedar's husband, Phil, defends this so-called "*female gravid detention*" (93) claiming that "it's a global crisis, it's the future of humanity, so you can see why they need to keep an eye on women" (310). Under the threat of devolution it is women's duty to preserve the human race by giving up their wombs and DNA. The fact that science habitually persecutes women can be regarded as what Anna Kemball

calls "biomedicalisation of normalcy" (163). Biomedicine dictates what is accepted as normal, so in the context of devolution, geneticists legitimize women's confinement and experimentation. The work of Genomic scientists is a distinctive example of biocolonialism as it "extract[s] biological resources from indigenous peoples' bodies" in order to promote Western financial and scientific advancements" (Tallbear, "Genomic Articulations" 512).[1] In one of the most pivotal scenes in the novel, Cedar visits a doctor for a check-up, yet he enquires her if she is of "any special ethnicity" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 65). The government, in fact, prefers women of color for the role of WVs; this favoritism ties with Reardon and Tallbear's claim that Indigenous DNA "has emerged as a new natural resource" (235). Likewise, in her analysis of modern biocolonialism, Whitt does not merely condemn "science *in* imperial history but science *as* imperial history" (xiv), highlighting the entrenched role of biological sciences in colonial cultural domination. Biocolonialism lingers in present times as those in power appropriate Indigenous genetic material, which they manage as a product of shared ownership, and deem ethnic women the most vulnerable to exploitation.

To ensure women's uninterrupted obedience, the government tracks them via a distinctive technological apparatus called Mother. Cedar mentions that "[c]ell phone locaters can't be turned off" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 103), so that Mother is always aware of their location. In the meantime, the protagonist remains enclosed at home, no longer able to contact her family since "[i]t is now a crime to harbor or help a pregnant woman" (102).[2] Even staying in the safety of her house, however, does not guarantee her escape as illustrated at one point in the narrative when Cedar's computer (though it had run out of battery) activates on its own and a voice says: "Hello dear, this is Mother. How are you tonight? I am worried. We don't seem to be communicating very well" (150). Mother's bizarre appearance is followed by Phil's destroying the computer, yet her voice still echoes: "'Please get in touch with Mother. Please get in touch,' it says, in pieces on the floor" (151). Mother appears as a protective, caring figure that genuinely attends to women's needs and safely escorts them to Future Home Reception Centers. Macomber indicates that the church government utilizes Mother based on "the idea that women are more likely to follow another woman's voice" (19). It thus creates a falsified idea of safety and turns female solidarity against them. The government solidifies its biopower through Mother. As Morgensen explicates, modern colonization enforces biopower not

[1] Emblematic of such research was the Human Genome Diversity Project, which commenced in the 1990s and whose scope was to "provide clear genetic evidence of human evolutionary history" by studying Indigenous blood and DNA (Tallbear, "Narratives of Race and Indigeneity in the Genographic Project" 412). Tallbear references the project extensively in her work and heavily criticizes its dehumanizing practices against Indigenous populations.

[2] Women are also unable to flee the country, as "borders were sealed off years ago" (141). Cedar describes the country as an enclosed space, where mobility has been outlawed and residents are imprisoned by the state.

only by eliminating but also by creating life. In this light, the emergence of Mother and the establishment of the WV program epitomize the government's biopolitical tools to manage and monitor pregnancies nationwide.

Cedar opens Part 2 of the novel with a single sentence: "*They have us*" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 155). Her house is raided, and she ends up in Fairview Riverside Hospital where the government keeps pregnant women like her for study. Cedar's capture demonstrates that to the hospital scientists, "genomes exist as real phenomena in the world that they simply sample and study" (Reardon and Tallbear 238). In the name of scientific progress, which is of interest only to white patriarchal scientists, women are oppressed and their DNA is misused. Surprisingly, Erdrich's protagonist is initially content with her detention, explaining how much she enjoys the food and how "[i]t seems impossible to feel anything but a calm and pleasurable acceptance of [her] comforting little hospital world" (*Future Home* 161). Such a docile reaction puzzles the readers, who soon come to realize that the nurses have been drugging her. When Cedar's first roommate, Agnes, advises her not to take her morning vitamin, the dream shatters. The drugs' effects subside, and the protagonist is left wondering how she "ate this food and liked it" (166). Aside from administering Cedar "happy pills," the nurses "get [her] blood drawn every day" and deliver it to scientists for study (190). In agreement with Tallbear's critique of the racialization of Indigenous tribes by the West, blood examinations have forever served to "[test] racial authenticity," a practice that has its roots in European imperialism ("DNA, Blood, and Racializing the Tribe" 82). Simultaneously, through blood tests, the women's genetic material is treated as white property, which reminisces the ways colonizers usurped Native American territory.[3] As Mishuana R. Goeman (Seneca) writes, Indigenous women's bodies bear "the documentation of gendered forms of violence as they become marked through colonial dispossession … increased levels of violence, and targeting for death" (103–4). The WV program later includes "any woman who's childbearing age" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 319); even women who are not pregnant but fertile are compelled to either "carry to term a frozen embryo … or be inseminated with sperm from the old sperm banks" (202). Biopolitical authority entails the right over life itself, which in this case translates to enforced pregnancy, deprivation of freedom, vulnerability and death, as most women do not survive their labor.

Through the WV program, the government and scientists also uphold essentializing perceptions of race and indigeneity. Upon meeting her new roommate, an Asian woman

[3] In another instance, when a nurse named Slider examines Cedar and touches her belly, Cedar senses the baby "shrink away from her hand—so dry, white, and cold" (189). Her unborn child's fear at the touch of a white hand can be paralleled to the white settlers confiscating Indigenous land.

nicknamed Spider Nun, Cedar remarks that "[they] possibly share the major DNA haplotype B marker found in most American Indians as well as people in Ulaanbaatar" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 169). Cedar traces this genetic commonality in order to befriend her roommate by dissociating themselves from the white people in the hospital. Another point of convergence between the two women is the discrimination they face on account of their ethnic identity. For example, the nurses humorously call Spider Nun "little China doll" (171), a characterization that derives from colonial images of the Orient. In every respect, Jodi A. Byrd (Chickasaw) maintains that racializing and colonizing practices should be grasped "as concomitant global systems that secure white dominance through time, property, and notions of self" (xxiii). Cedar's thinking on genetic material clearly differs from that of white scientists. While she is more interested in social bonding and solidarity, they "privilege biogenetic delineations of indigenous identity" and fragmentize humans into racial classifications of their choosing to exploit them as research subjects (Tallbear, "Narratives of Race and Indigeneity" 416). As evident by the concentration of BIPOC women in the hospitals, the "racialized perspective is represented as DNA" ("DNA, Blood, and Racializing the Tribe" 83). Consequently, racist ideology lingers in the modern world as a remnant of coloniality, which favors genetics over community and interpersonal relationships.

Cedar's relationship with Spider Nun, along with her ties to her biological and adoptive families, bring about her escape from the hospital. Although Spider Nun remains a silent character for the most part of the novel, the two women gradually form a mutually supportive friendship. One night, Cedar witnesses her roommate "finger-braiding…[a]n Ojibwe method of creating fancy sashes, wall hangings, belts, tumplines, and ropes" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 178). Though oblivious at first, she realizes that Spider Nun weaves an escape rope out of hospital blankets and decides to contribute. In a future world ravaged by biopolitics and biocolonialism, an Ojibwe weaving technique enables Erdrich's characters to strengthen their bond and sketch an escape plan. Cedar narrates that they "sleep during the day so that [they] can stay up weaving all night" (190). Despite their exhaustion, what provides Cedar with relief and hope for the future are visions of her Ojibwe Grandma Virginia, who appears in her dreams to assist with weaving the rope: "'Take a rest,' she says. 'Anweb, I'll do some.' Her crooked little fingers jump and fly along the cords" (198). Cedar's relationship with her Ojibwe family is essential to her survival. As Tallbear proposes in her essay "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming," in reverting the impacts of colonialism, "*making kin*" and sustaining meaningful relations are important alternatives to multicultural models that have failed both in the US and Canada (37). Tallbear's call for relationality manifests in Cedar's family bonds and friendships, which facilitate her escape. When the rope is finally finished, Cedar regains

hope, thinking that "whatever is going to happen, this week [she] will be in [her] true family. And wherever [she's] going, [she] believe[s], it's Indian Paradise" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 178). Indeed, with the help of Sera and Eddy, Cedar manages to escape and reunites with her Ojibwe and adoptive families on the reservation.[4]

3. Finding Belonging through Family Bonds and Ojibwe Community

Among the many trials that Cedar undergoes as she navigates the future monolithic world, she grapples with her own being-in-the-world and strives to explore her still uncharted Ojibwe identity. As Byrd specifies, for Native Americans identity construction "is predicated upon discourses of indigenous displacements that remain within the present everydayness of settler colonialism" (xviii). Following European expansionism, racialization and discrimination engender a liminality between the Indigenous' own culture and the versions of it that white people impose on them. To illustrate this point, when Cedar was in primary school, "Sera kept [her] hair in braids," out of respect for her Ojibwe origins, "though [she] famously chopped one off" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 5). The cutting of the braid symbolizes her uprooting from Ojibwe culture and assimilation into white society. Assimilation, as a matter of fact, is "rewarded with recognition" (Simpson 88). Apart from that, Cedar received special treatment by her white family, who would call her an "Indian Princess" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 5). Only when she attends college and mingles with other Indian people does she realize that "[she has] no clan, no culture, no language, no relatives" (5). Considering that "[b]elonging is integral to how identity functions" (Moreton-Robinson 14), Cedar copes with constructing her own subjectivity because she cannot renegotiate the gaps between her biological and adoptive families. When she finally meets her Ojibwe parents, their ordinariness – being high-class Catholics – offends her. As the image Cedar had adopted shutters, she complains: "Who are the Potts to suddenly decide to be my parents, now, when I don't need them? Worse, who are they to have destroyed the romantic imaginary Native parents I've invented from earliest childhood, the handsome ones with long, both-sided braids, who died in some vague and suitably spiritual Native way?" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 6–7). Cedar's disappointment proves Simpson's understanding of stereotypes as manifestations of colonial power which have prescribed "the way [she] think[s] about [her] body" (91–92). Indigenous self-identification is ergo filtered through stereotypical, inaccurate perceptions of Indigeneity that have been passed down by white people for generations.

[4] Shortly before they flee the hospital, Spider Nun finally speaks and reveals her true name, Tia Jackson. After a long, agonizing labor, Tia loses her baby, which Cedar reckons "is not all bad. Obviously not. Without a baby, Tia can move in the world like a normal person. She is free" (236).

What mostly hinders Cedar from situating her biological and cultural roots is the mystery of her adoption since "the legality there is definitely to be questioned" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 4). As stated in Chapter 21 of the 1978 US Code on Indian Child Welfare, the entitlement to adopt an Indian child shall preferably lie with "(1) a member of the child's extended family; (2) other members of the Indian child's tribe; or (3) other Indian families" (Congress House, United States).[5] Aware of the relevant laws, Cedar remains confused, while Glen and Sera always evade her questions and prolong her ignorance. Generally speaking, as Justice points out, Indigenous communities are marked by "frayed edges of kinship that so many of us have worked to reweave" (48). In Cedar's effort to rebuild the ties to her Ojibwe family, it is not so much the evolutionary or identity crisis but her pregnancy that incites change. As her alienation escalates, she acknowledges that her future son "need[s] to enter the web of connections that [she] never really had" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 7). In the hope that her child will not be estranged, Cedar is determined to explore her Ojibwe heritage by searching for her biological family and living with them on the reservation. There, she builds a healthy relationship with her mother, Sweetie, and deciphers the mystery of her adoption, finding out that she was actually born to her and Glen. According to Elisa Faison, Cedar's mixed identity is "a fruitful metaphor for her adaptive promise" (102). Cedar explores the world and her own subjectivity via a range of perspectives – her Songmaker family being white liberal Buddhists, while her Potts family being high-class Ojibwe Catholics – and reconstructs her own selfhood, what she calls "a collage of DNA" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 301). Shifting the emphasis from biology to lived relationships and shared experiences, Ojibwe scholar Brenda J. Child highlights "*the strength of Ojibwe family and community life*," which is founded on the mutual devotion between parents and children ("The Boarding School as Metaphor" 39). Even though Cedar's Native American identity is initially marked by confusion, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes a beacon of change.

Apart from her biological and adoptive parents, a figure that largely influences Cedar and acts as a guide in her journey is her Ojibwe Grandma Virginia, most distinctively through her acts of storytelling. The first time they meet, Cedar confides in her that she is expecting and "the word 'pregnant' …triggers a story, and then another story, many of them" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 43).[6] Pivotal here is that Cedar

[5] Joan Heifetz Hollinger underlines another instance of biocolonialism, namely that there has been a growing interest by white families to adopt Indian children because "the number of healthy white children available for adoption has declined" (455–456).

[6] In a reversal of her cutting her braid as a child, Cedar notices that Grandma Virginia "has not allowed anyone to cut her hair" (42), staying faithful to her Indigenous heritage.

willingly chooses to become Grandma Virginia's audience. In contrast to Western authoritarian connotations of education, storytelling in Native American communities is a "*consensual* engagement" (Simpson 161). Cedar's eagerness to listen to Grandma Virginia's Ojibwe stories implies that she recognizes her as "*Mindimooyenh*, the Ojibwe term for a female elder," which translates as the "*one who holds things together*" (Child, *Holding Our World Together* 63). Storytelling strengthens familial and tribal bonds since older generations are responsible for educating the young and nourishing their minds. Stories are not mere fables but vitally contribute to the tribe's education and hence carry epistemological value. More than that, as Justice explains, they are essential to our very existence:

> Our lives are incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories told about us, and the stories we inherit. They are both the process and the consequence of the transformations into the fullness of our humanity. Indeed, without those stories, without the teachings about the *who*, *how*, and *why* of us, something is profoundly, almost existentially amiss …We know ourselves *only* through stories. The unstoried life is a terrible thing to comprehend, a soul-deep desolation. (34)

In the most plot-pertinent story in the novel, "The Fat Man's Race," Grandma Virginia explains that inside everyone lies "a guardian angel and an angel of perversion," the latter of whom appeared in her dreams in the form of a blue man, almost demon-like (Erdrich, *Future Home* 297). Her story is meant to shield Cedar from her own angel of deception, who is personified by Phil, since he is the one responsible for Cedar's capture. As Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) supports, Ojibwe elders educate and guard their relatives through stories of lived experiences that ensure the survival of the community. Thanks to Grandma Virginia's story, Cedar opts to stay with her Ojibwe family while Phil's fate purposefully remains unknown.

Against the chaos and uncertainty that predominates the future world, Cedar engages in writing, another traditional Ojibwe practice,[7] which can be regarded both as a therapeutic escape and a way to reassert agency. The protagonist confides in the opening page: "Historic times! There have always been letters and diaries written in times of turmoil and discovered later, and my thought is that I could be writing one of those" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 3). Such records have hitherto been written by white historians and are marked by violence, inaccuracy, and cultural appropriation. In reaction to this

[7] Erdrich discloses in her *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003) an interpretation of the name "Ojibwe": "The meaning that I like best of course is Ojibwe from the verb *Ozhibii'ige*, which is 'to write.' Ojibwe people were great writers from way back" (8).

historical crime, Erdrich selects her Ojibwe protagonist to record the events in diary form, preserving Ojibwe tradition and knowledge. In this light, Indigenous literature can be construed as a historical archive. As LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) notes, Indigenous writings have the potential to generate "a future 'literary past' for American Indians" (36) and provide depictions of colonization that are not tampered with by the white perspective. Most importantly, Justice states that "[o]ur literatures are the storied archives ...the ways of meaning-making in the world and in our time" (186). Cedar's letters first and foremost provide an anchor to the present and a healing mechanism against confinement and loss. It is crucial to note here that I use the word "healing" in Simpson's definition: "I don't want to be "healed." I want to have processed hurt and pain ... to the point where they don't control me" (103). As Cedar records her inner thoughts and experiences, she acknowledges that "this notebook has become the way [she] remain[s] connected with [her] life, and with [her baby]" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 216). Arguably, the primary reason Cedar writes the letters is so that her future child will be cognizant of the events following devolution. By extension, critic Kristin J. Jacobson argues that "all readers become Cedar's intended reader/future child" (159). Edrich's choice to author an epistolary novel transcends the binary between sender and receiver and, in turn, encompasses anyone who reads *Future Home*. In this sense, Cedar's initial intent that her letters become historical records is fulfilled.

Following her escape from the hospital, Cedar resides on the reservation, where she witnesses Ojibwe's land dispossession and dismemberment. Eddy informs her that Ojibwe land "was lost through incremental treaties" and handed over to white "city people who wanted to escape to a cool rustic home during the heat of summer" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 269–70). Simpson also refers to this rise of industrialization and its toll on Indigenous culture. As she puts it: "Our most sacred places have been made into provincial parks for tourists, where concrete buildings cover our teaching rocks. Our burial grounds have cottages built on top of them. The rivers have lift locks blocking them" (4). The rapid expansion of cities, along with technological and industrial advancement, has led to environmental deterioration and increased Indigenous land dispossession. As Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard maintains, "[t]erritoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element" (7). From colonial times to the present, white settlers have infringed Indigenous rights to land and water, which is not merely an issue of territorial sovereignty, but also cultural identity. Cedar writes that for many Native people, "their particular tribal origin spot—hill, lake, cave, mountain—is the real place they emerged from" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 170). Their attachment to land is in many respects cultural and spiritual. Veritably, Native Americans consider "*peoplehood* as emerging *in relation with particular lands and waters*

and their nonhuman actors" (Tallbear, "Genomic Articulations" 514–5). In contrast to colonial emphasis on sovereignty and biopower, land is fundamental to Indigenous belonging, thinking and pedagogy. Education in particular is largely founded upon land and nature. This is why for the Indigenous, displacement from their land equals a direct "attack on Indigenous Knowledge" (Simpson 170), what Western science and the US government do from the beginning of Erdrich's narrative.

Regardless of the US government's schemes, the Ojibwe community relentlessly protests against biocolonial power structures and institutions. As Eddy explains, "[they] see the governmental collapse as a way to make [their] move and take back the land" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 121). In this fashion, they prove not only that they can adapt to the evolutionary and political crises but also that they are prepared to counteract centuries of biocolonialism. Attachment to land – both physical and spiritual – creates a dynamic that white supremacists cannot simply overthrow, which is why settler colonialism has failed to completely eradicate or acculturate Native Americans. As Simpson most vigorously puts it: "Our presence is our weapon" (6). The Ojibwe in *Future Home* form strong relationships and actively collaborate to reclaim their land. During a tribal meeting, Cedar observes that "[o]n Eddy's map the land owned by non-Indians is yellow. The green is State Forest. The purple is tribal. Most of the map is yellow, some green, a bit less purple" (270). The goal of the community is to "see this map change. The green parcels can already be colored in—changed directly from green to purple. We have secured state land. The yellow is what we are working on now" (270). The inclusion of these lands into Ojibwe territory is not strictly related to self-governance but aims instead to reunite Ojibwe relatives who have been removed from the reservation due to land treaties. In this regard, Eddy's maps epitomize what Justice terms "*cartographic kinscapes*" (197), as their purpose is to re-map Ojibwe relations and re-invigorate their sense of community and belonging.

The Ojibwe people, with whom Cedar connects, are actively interested in promoting the health and prosperity of the entire tribe. Throughout *Future Home*, female characters face violence and discrimination, whereas in the Ojibwe community, "women are sacred" (287). Unlike Future Home Reception Centers, the Ojibwe safeguard pregnant women, which is why Cedar decides that she wants her child to be born on the reservation. Soon enough, she also receives her tribal ID. Membership is fundamental to Indigenous cultures as it fosters community, relationality and belonging. Nonetheless, "self-identification is not what makes you Native. What is important is who claims you from within the tribal nation, who your kin and non-human kin are and …living your life according to Native cultural ways of being" (Moreton-Robinson 13). Equally nullifying the prominence of genetic lineages in Western thinking, Justice reminds

us that "biology is only a very small part of our humanity; the rest is a process of becoming" (33). In order to truly be a member of the tribe, the people need to accept you and strong, long-lasting relationships need to be forged. For Cedar, this occurs during a praying scene, when the whole tribe gathers to seek spiritual refuge from their deity and protector Kateri Tekakwitha. The moment of praying marks the first time Cedar refers to Ojibwe people in the first-person plural "we" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 291), implying that she finds belonging via their communal spirituality. As LaDuke advocates, intratribal bonds and intergenerational prayers bring Indigenous people closer together. On the reservation, Cedar feels protected and included, as she remarks: "Our people. My people. Your people. I could never say that before. Eddy has decolonized the uniforms of the militia" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 287). Eddy has helped Cedar realize how holistic Ojibwe culture is, meaning that everybody is a vital member of the tribe, and the community attends to everybody's needs. Communal belonging is best represented towards the end of the novel, when the Potts "end up making all of the food on the reservation, and feeding absolutely everyone" (313). In a reversal of the first Thanksgiving dinner, the Ojibwe community promotes justice and acceptance, so that everyone, including Cedar, can find belonging.

4. "I looked into the soul of the world": Signs of Hope in the Future Dystopia

Despite the Ojibwe's tenacious efforts, Cedar is captured once again and taken to Stillwater Birthing Center where she witnesses extremist ideologies about pregnancy and undergoes further experimentation. Photographs of other pregnant women are kept on the wall above the epigraph: "*She served the future*" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 320). The idea of serving a higher cause, that is the preservation of humanity, allegedly justifies the atrocities executed against Indigenous women. Mother is also on constant watch to keep the women under control: "'You are here because you did something wrong,' she says, 'but this is a place of forgiveness'" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 321). Instilling guilt into the captured women correlates with Simpson's contention that "[s]hame is a powerful tool of settler colonialism because it implants the message in our bodies that we are wrong" (185–6). If the body is wrong, then it is of no personal value and can be easily manipulated as a tool. Mother declares that women can repent "by contributing to the future of humanity. Your happy sentence is only nine months" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 321). Women are thusly indoctrinated into surrendering their bodies to the church government's biopower and the white scientists' lust for scientific progress. Moreover, the reason why Cedar is under constant surveillance is that she "might be carrying one of the originals" (310), a baby as those born before the start of devolution. Tallbear discusses the genetic scientists' fixation on originality, pointing out that "independent

forensic analyses had assessed the ancient human as having morphological similarities to several other studied populations, both contemporary Native American and Asian" ("Genomic Articulations" 521). Since these ethnic groups can provide knowledge representative of "modern humans at an earlier point in evolution, then indigenous DNA is part of modern humans' inheritance and, thus, property" (Reardon and Tallbear 238). On the grounds of evolution and genetic inheritance, Western science abuses Indigenous bodies to preserve genetic originality and secure the future of humanity.

Nevertheless, the birth of Cedar's son constitutes a re-vitalization of humanity and Indigenous selfhood and thus provides a scenario of salvation that deviates from the otherwise dystopian narrative. The birth scene is narrated in very spiritual words: "One by one the saints entered the room. Over the next hours thousands of spirits were admitted. We were surrounded by a jungle of plants. *I shine in the waters. I burn in the sun, the moon, the stars*" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 333). Indigenous people celebrate nature and vitality and strive for "the re-creation of beings that continually live lives promoting the continuous rebirth of life itself" (Simpson 158). Symbolically, Cedar's baby is born blue, reaffirming its uniqueness and embodying change. The blue color foreshadows the "resurrection both of the biological and the folkloric past" (Faison 115). In a world devastated by biopolitics and biocolonialism, an evolutionary and cultural (re-)birth denotes a glimpse of hope for a better future. By the end of the narrative, Cedar's and her son's fates may be left unknown, but the sheer fact that both survive labor, while most women and babies do not, signifies a potential for change. It also entails a "critique of the grand narrative of American exceptionalism" (Tallbear, "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming" 25). Contrary to the white Americans' despair, the Ojibwe adapt and survive the impeding evolutionary Apocalypse. As Justice certifies, "when Indigenous writers and other writers of colour imagine apocalypse, they think about what endures *beyond* it," namely life, love and connection (167). The novel ends with Cedar's last letter, written in February, in which she reminisces long-gone snowy days in Minnesota: "My dear son. I know you're going to read this someday. I can tell that you're going to wonder what it was like, in the *before*" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 334). Climate change has gravely reduced snowfall and Cedar ponders: "Where will you be, my darling, the last time it snows on earth?" (337). Erdrich closes *Future Home* in an enigmatic way yet instills in the readers' minds an optimistic prospect of restoration.

Returning to Erdrich's interview by Margaret Atwood, *Future Home* is "filled with shapeshifting; identities are not only unclear, they change" (*Inside the Dystopian Visions*). Precisely like devolution, Cedar's subjectivity transforms, encompassing a

wide range of ethnocultural and religious identities. The bleak setting notwithstanding, Cedar overcomes feelings of loss and tackles her alienation by attaining belonging within her family and the Ojibwe community. She weaves an intricate web of interrelations, as she explores her Indigenous heritage and forms meaningful familial and tribal bonds. She also heals herself by writing an archive of Indigenous survival and adaptability to her future child, hence bequeathing to him the sense of belonging which she has long sought. Ultimately, mother and son connect in multiple – physical and spiritual – ways, ensuring the sustainability of Ojibwe culture. As Cedar realizes early on in the narrative, at the onset of devolution: "I am not at the end of things, but the beginning" (Erdrich, *Future Home* 116).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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