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# **A Saber-tooth in my Backyard: Return of the Ancient Wild in Louise Erdrich's Future Home of the Living God**

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## **A Saber-tooth in my Backyard: Return of the Ancient Wild in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God***

The preternatural closeness to Nature of Indigenous peoples is an enduring stereotype in Western literature, going back to Fenimore Cooper's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Indian characters: fierce warriors lurking in the dark, ominous forests and wise chiefs invoking Mother Earth. Ojibway scholar Gerald Vizenor soon labeled these clichéd images as "Indians" with a lowercase i and italics. In her article "Waln, the Postmasculindian, and Hip Hop," Sarah Kent defines his theoretical development in such words:

*Using Indigeneity as his ideological framework, Vizenor reshapes Jean Baudrillard's theoretical considerations of simulacrum to engage with the settler-colonial production of the indian. As Vizenor suggests, the indian mistakes and substitutes itself for the real, erasing the presence of Indigeneity, evolving into hyperreality, and concealing its own production: "indian, misgiven here in italics, insinuates the obvious simulation and ruse of colonial dominance. Manifestly, the indian is an occidental misnomer, an overseas enactment that has no referent to real native cultures and communities."*

Indeed, the simplistic simulations of Nature lovers Indians do not do justice to the complex network of entangled relationships lying at the core of Native cosmogonies. Laguna Pueblo literary critic Paula Gunn Allen gives an insight into this convoluted reciprocal belief system when she writes:

*Christians believe that God is separate from humanity and does as he wishes without the creative assistance of any of his creatures while a non-Christian tribal person assumes a place in creation that is dynamic, creative, and responsive. Further, tribal people allow all animals, vegetables, and minerals (the entire biota, in short) the same or even greater privileges than humans. The Indian participates in destiny on all levels, including that of creation.*

In mainstream representations, these complex aspects are often missed. Likewise, in mainstream literature, Native American protagonists are often expected to long for a return to the romantic wilderness, the pristine landscapes of a pre-conquest territory. In contrast, they supposedly feel lost and irrelevant in contemporary urban spaces.

To disrupt such a pitiful standardized characterization, Ojibway novelist and poet Louise Erdrich published in 2017 *Future Home of the Living God*. This dystopian narrative explores the apocalyptic aftermath of a civilization having gone past the tipping point of what Nature can take. As the novel begins, the survival of the human species is at stake, the climate has changed, and evolution has gone backward: prehistoric animals reappear, and human fetuses overdevelop their reptilian brains. A patriarchal totalitarian state then claims possession over the female body. The protagonist, Cedar Songmaker, a young Native woman raised by adoptive parents in white Minneapolis, refuses to comply with the newly instituted rules and chooses to become a mother according to her own terms. Meanwhile, she bears witness to the return of the feral in quiet suburbs and engages in a process of adaptation and adjustment to this renewed wildness. Through Cedar's eyes, we are invited to experiment with the frightful and yet mesmerizing re-enchantment of the margins of a city where time and evolution go suddenly backward, confronting Prehistoric times with the Anthropocene.

I intend to show how the novel recombines patterns of different realities in a subtle correspondence of time periods and epochs, which, in turn, re-enchants contemporary human settlements (cities and Indian reservations). I will study how the text endows the return of the feral in the midst of civilization with individual empowerment and agency and how this process allows the reader to engage in a spiral of reflexivity.

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While introducing dissonance into an established situation, namely the uncontrollable return of the feral in the midst of industrialized civilization, *Future Home of the Living God* abolishes the notion of linear human progress to forcefully re-institute cyclical times. By so doing, the novel questions the notion of a Pre-Anthropocene epoch as opposed to the current Anthropocene time period. In *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*, Hubert Zapf prepares the ground for thinking about this undetermined “Before”:

*Indeed, on a planetary scale, [...] the very concepts of climate change or the Anthropocene presupposes the assumption of some kind of balance, however fragile and unstable it may be, of a prior, non anthropogenic state of Nature as the logical basis for the diagnosis of an environmental crisis in the first place, which makes sense if it is conceived as the result of an increasingly uncontrollable interference of human agency in a fundamentally self-regulating global ecosystem.*

Instead of conveniently choosing a state of Nature immediately before the European colonization of America to figure a counterforce to the Anthropocene, Louise Erdrich finds inspiration in ancient Prehistoric times, in other words, a non-anthropogenic state of Nature for the mere reason that it was bereft of any human presence, Native or white.

*Today I see something I have never seen before. A bird about the size of a hawk swoops off the oak, down into the mulberry branches, and then hops among the leaves. Its tail is very long, and it seems to clutch at the bark and twigs with claws poking from the hinge of its wings, like a large bat. I glimpse its head—beakless, featherless, lizardlike, rosy red. The feathers are a slate blue with black tips. The bird, or whatever it is, seems to be eating both fruit and the insects that would be hovering around the tree and crawling on its bark. A graceful thing with fluid, darting movements, it behaves exactly like a lizard-bird. It is captivating.*

*The animal bounds through the air toward a shocked-looking chocolate Lab, which disappears in its embrace. The thing—some kind of great cat, all muscle and powerful guile—tears long front fangs into and chokes down the bleeding haunches of the dog right there, and then drags the dog's head and torso up into the big oak tree.*

Contrastingly to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, shaped by the narrative of the loss of a former balance of Nature by the disrupting influence of a technological civilization, Louise Erdrich's novel tells the story of the loss of a precarious balance of civilization by the disrupting influence of wild Nature. Taking place in an indeterminate, however very close future (we can guess a few months from now), *Future Home of the Living God* indulges in a speculative exercise and flirts with "*uchronie*," or alternate history, as it posits the tipping point of the survival of humanity and the bifurcation point between our possible futures at present days. It compels us to wonder about the nation-dismantling event, as opposed to the nation-building event, that will precipitate our downfall, asking the question: "At what point can we change the course of history?"

Quite surprisingly, Erdrich's depiction of resurgent chaos is not deprived of poetry despite the cruelty of some scenes. Apart from the recurring lexical field of enchantment (words such as "mesmerized," "bewilderment," and "cuteness" repeatedly appear in Cedar's accounts), the text draws upon the rediscovery of the supranatural forces that animate Nature. Indeed, Cedar

gets "a sense of existence," as she calls it, alongside the acknowledgment of the *Anima Mundi* at work.

*So the more I consider all of this, the more it seems that our predicament would be best addressed by an acknowledgment of the Anima Mundi, the Souls of the World.*

*Evolution starts: a miracle. Evolution stops: a miracle. Life follows the patterns of the vastness all around us. The universe is expanding and contracting in timeless time. The earth 4.5 billion years old, the sun due to supernova and swallow us. And then contract again. Well that's what I think, and I am obviously only a lay observer of the great mystery, the simple why, which no scientists can answer better than me.*

In most desperate times, she is soothed by the Song of the Earth or the respiration of the universe contracting and expanding. She also clearly links our ability to survive such an environmental crisis to our capacity to appreciate the world's beauty even in the most dreadful circumstances:

*We have survived because we love beauty.*

In the novel, urban wildness is manifold: monstrous creatures from the Carboniferous, but also swarms of rats devouring corpses, riots, arsons, cries, shouts, and gunfires in the streets. To cope and adjust to the situation, pregnant Cedar hides in her house and turns into a nocturnal animal, reaching out to her own part of wildness.

*I gulp the darkness in, the rich turmoil of earth.*

She operates a bio-thanatic inscription for, as Edgar Morin defines it, she engages "the mutual nourishment of individual existence and the eco-organizational cycles of life and death." Her pregnancy, although appearing at first to be a curse given the political contingencies, proves to be the key to adaptation for, as she states: "Pregnancy is a wildness of being." She thus experiences in her flesh the uncontrollable energy of re-creation and engulfs in her womb the necessary and complementary forces of order and chaos, the same necessary and complementary forces that animate Nature as Hubert Zapf explains:

*[...] there is no easy way out of this double condition between order and chaos, balance, and turbulence in Nature. They seem to represent necessary, complementary,*

*and mutually conditioning polarities of both ecology and aesthetics, and to think them together is one of the inescapable quandaries with which contemporary ecological thought—and contemporary ecocritical literary theory—has to cope.*

Cedar refutes determinism and oppression by fully reinvesting the territory of her body, an expanding, shape-shifting female body defying patriarchy and male dominance. Her rebellion is an explicit echo of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the world is suddenly cut into a binary pattern opposing male activities to female chores on the pretense of ensuring survival. In "The Gender-space Paradigm," Ana Ruano Tirado explores the off-shoots of the subversion of women in the Canadian novel:

*Handmaids also lose the control of their bodies, which become state goods that serve as reproductive tools at the service of empowered men. The female body as a dispossessed property and procreation as an obligation for women are pivotal topics in feminist studies.*

She, later on, quotes Arthur Brittan to add:

*There is nothing about reproduction which necessitates the appropriation of children and women's bodies by men. Such an appropriation is a political act—it represents a means of redressing the perceived biological power of women to produce children.*

In *Future Home of the Living God* as well as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the violent domestication of women by men results from the latter's failure to domesticate Nature. In both novels, the pragmatic exploitation of resources, whether natural resources or women's wombs, is a doomed process. In both novels, patriarchal civilizations turn a blind eye to the obvious consequences of their acts. Through unsettling realistic details, Margaret Atwood presents a possible apocalyptic future to warn us of impending political oppression and chaos.

*If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real.*

Stepping in her shoes, Louise Erdrich offers a reboot of the original novel with the same concerns in mind. The first draft of her novel was initially written in 2002 during the Bush administration in reaction to the post-9/11 implementation of the Patriot Act. She then abandoned the project. In 2016, she felt the urge to complete it in the wake of the Presidential

election that brought Donald Trump to power. However, Erdrich's novel is essentially a novel of hope and of "survivance," to draw upon Gerald Vizenor's concept.

*Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories; not a mere reaction, or a survival name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.*

In the novel, Cedar's Native step-father responds to her concerns about the end of the world in such words:

*"Indians have been adapting since before 1492, so I guess we'll keep adapting."*

*"But the world is going to pieces."*

*"It is always going to pieces."*

*"This is different."*

*"It is always different. We'll adapt."*

Contrary to Atwood's post-apocalyptic barren state of Nature, Erdrich's writing contrives an unbridled luxurious wilderness defying Cartesian rationalization. *Future Home of the Living God* is not the tale of the end of the world but the narrative of an incident occurring during the cyclical renewal of the world. The return of the feral stands as a shaping force, redeeming chaos and structural violence aiming at restoring the cosmos.

The novel openly posits living beings as intersections between realms and trusts hybridity to be the key to overcoming the ordeals induced by this Nature gone mad where new species "both familiar and alien" sprout. The main character acknowledges her being at a cultural crossroads: "I am a walking contradiction." Meanwhile, she also points out the corporeal memory of centuries of transformation, our DNA keeping track of every step of our evolution:

*We carry the history of our genetic mishaps.*

*Our bodies have always remembered who we were.*

Empowered with this awareness, she envisions a set of connections with the rest of the living world to stay attuned to this ever-shifting environment, thus giving illustration to Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality:

*Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment.'*

Louise Erdrich's choice of setting her novel at the margins of the city, a dynamic space determined by "the fleeting, mutating bodies and material substances that move through it," to borrow Christopher Schliephake's words, is not insignificant. The transformation of the margins (suburbs, prison, reservations) restores the reciprocal interplay of transitory forces in a space where human and non-human worlds overlap. The metamorphoses triggered by this fertile ground convey continuity, meanwhile jamming and entangling references, thus creating composite objects.

Being confronted with this resurgent urban wildness gives Cedar agency. It hereupon materializes through the first-person narrative testimonial she feels compelled to write to her unborn child. Interestingly, while the diminishing genitive "Offred" muzzled Atwood's protagonist's identity (her real name is never disclosed to the reader), Cedar affirms her strong enduring presence by stating out loud "I am the utterance of my name," thus confirming the cosmic power of verb. In *Future Home of the Living God*, words possess a performative intensity as they help refound a conscious being to the world. In parallel, the reader is invited to pay attention to the story-weaving at work: Cedar's origins are revealed to her through different, even contradictory, stories only she can make sense of. Her newly discovered Native grandmother is a talented weaver of yarn and stories:

*She shows me that she is making a belt, finger-weaving it from strands of yarn, braiding a sash with such precision that it will look like it was created on a loom.*

*Listening, I realize that her tales are so practiced that Grandma Virginia probably tells and retells them all the time [...] She seems to have lived out many versions of her own history.*

Grandma Virginia's sash and storytelling mirror the constant reweaving of DNA. Instead of bluntly confronting the environmental crisis and biological chaos, Erdrich's characters seek

transitional stances made of entangled agencies, thus writing a new chapter in the Indigenous presence in the natural world and, more specifically, in urban spaces.

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To conclude, I would like to quote Christopher Schliephake's *Urban Ecologies* again when he writes that “the materiality of our urban worlds, like space, becomes a text that can be read, interpreted, and negotiated.” Reversely, as Hubert Zapf notes in *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*:

*In the imaginative space of cultural creativity provided by art and literature, processes of radical reconventionalization, defamiliarization, and defiguration but also of creative recombination and reconfiguration are employed to continually renew ossified forms of thought, perception, communication, and imagination.*

In *Future Home of the Living God*, Louise Erdrich recombines the patterns of different realities by drawing upon many time periods and epochs: Prehistoric times, the Anthropocene, human time, the evolution time, the 80's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, current topical concerns and speculative futures. By reweaving the many stories and individual destinies contained in these patterns, she questions and re-enchants our relationship to urban settlements, meanwhile making a strong point of linking the issue of environmental justice to the issue of social justice, namely, minorities' rights and women's rights. *Future Home of the Living God* is indeed a sustainable text, for it stands as a manifold first-person narrative directly challenging the reader's assumption of his or her stance and agency in the complex, energetic network of the living world.

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