

# Collapse and Reversed Extinction: Beyond Inherited Epistemologies of Species Loss in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

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## Abstract

This article argues for the importance of a critical examination of the frameworks and epistemologies through which species extinction is conceptualized. As global biodiversity loss rates accelerate, the legacy of nineteenth-century colonial science continues to inform understandings of species extinctions, whereby the discourse around species loss is profoundly intertwined with notions of taxonomies, race, and hierarchies. My article demonstrates how Louise Erdrich's post-apocalyptic novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) exposes and destabilizes these inherited Western epistemologies of extinction. Erdrich's narrative centres around a bizarre extinction event where evolution begins to spin out of control, perhaps running backwards, and where biological categories and species boundaries lose their meanings. As an Indigenous Futurist text, the novel is told from the perspective of a pregnant woman of Ojibwe ancestry who becomes imprisoned when a white authoritarian government, in an attempt to maintain the status quo, detain all women of child-bearing age. The reverse extinction scenario, as my discussion shows, produces an ontological uncertainty within the diegesis, with characters left in a state of unknowability about the nature of the world—a situation that provides Indigenous communities with opportunities for land reclamation and empowerment. The novel reads as a counter-narrative to Western notions about scientific progress also on the level of form, as the text presents an introspective and cyclical unfolding of events. In this way, rather than to provide apocalyptic resolution, Erdrich's novel mobilizes uncertainty and subverts the mainstream post-apocalyptic genre template in order to gesture towards the possibility of alternative futures liberated from colonial epistemologies.

**Keywords:** extinction, Louise Erdrich, post-apocalypse, colonialism, Indigenous Futurism.

## Resumen

Este artículo defiende la importancia de un examen crítico de los marcos y epistemologías a través de los cuales se conceptualiza la extinción de especies. A medida que se aceleran las tasas de pérdida de biodiversidad global, el legado de la ciencia colonial del siglo XIX continúa informando la comprensión de las extinciones de especies, por lo que el discurso sobre la pérdida de especies está profundamente entrelazado con las nociones de taxonomías, razas y jerarquías. Mi artículo demuestra cómo la novela postapocalíptica de Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), expone y desestabiliza estas epistemologías occidentales heredadas de extinción. La narrativa de Erdrich se centra en un extraño evento de extinción donde la evolución comienza a salirse de control, tal vez retrocediendo, y donde las categorías biológicas y los límites entre las especies pierden su significado. Como texto futurista indígena, la novela se cuenta desde la perspectiva de una mujer embarazada de ascendencia Ojibwe que es encarcelada cuando un gobierno autoritario blanco, en un intento por mantener el statu quo, detiene a todas las mujeres en edad fértil. El escenario de extinción inversa, como muestra mi discusión, produce una incertidumbre ontológica dentro de la diégesis, con

personajes que quedan en un estado de incognoscibilidad sobre la naturaleza del mundo, una situación que brinda a las comunidades indígenas oportunidades para la recuperación de tierras y el empoderamiento. La novela se lee como una contranarrativa a las nociones occidentales sobre el progreso científico también en el nivel de la forma, ya que el texto presenta un desarrollo introspectivo y cíclico de eventos. De esta manera, en lugar de brindar una resolución apocalíptica, la novela de Erdrich moviliza la incertidumbre y subvierte la plantilla dominante del género postapocalíptico para señalar la posibilidad de futuros alternativos liberados de las epistemologías coloniales.

*Palabras clave:* extinción, Louise Erdrich, post-apocalipsis, colonialismo, Futurismo Indígena

The twenty-first century proliferation of post-apocalyptic and dystopian narratives has become an extensively theorized phenomenon in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Within the environmental humanities, a number of scholars voice concerns that “mainstream” post-apocalyptic culture—with Hollywood disaster films often being cited as the prime example—simplifies and distorts ecological processes and power dynamics that drive anthropogenic destruction of the nonhuman world. As Noah Theriault and Audra Mitchell remark, what typically remains unquestioned in such post-apocalyptic representations are the structural capitalist and colonial formations that “drive global patterns of extinction” (178). The evidence that a human-driven mass extinction event currently threatens biodiversity on the planet is becoming increasingly incontrovertible. If, as Ashley Dawson argues, this decimation of biodiversity cannot be grappled with in isolation from the forces of capitalism and colonialism (15), then mainstream post-apocalyptic narratives are perhaps particularly misleading when it comes to the sixth mass extinction. Post-apocalyptic fictions, which habitually render extinction as a spectacular event and equate it with the collapse of Western civilization, risk obscuring the “slow violence” of species loss (Nixon 2)—the invisible and systemically complex annihilation of biodiversity across the globe.

An additional critique that arises from scholarly discussions of post-apocalyptic imaginaries is that the genre masks the fact that for Indigenous communities, the apocalypse has already taken place as a result of colonial assaults. Kyle P. Whyte anticipates Theriault and Mitchell’s argument in his reflection that post-apocalyptic narratives erase the perspectives of Indigenous peoples who have already endured the hardships that Western culture fears climate change will bring about, such as ecosystem collapse and forced migration (226). In this view, the sixth mass extinction and its effects become a *déjà vu* situation for many Indigenous peoples (Whyte 226-27). The acceptance of the Native Apocalypse as already having occurred is foundational to the movement known as Indigenous Futurism. Writers of Indigenous Futurism, as Grace L. Dillon explains, “posit the possibility of an optimistic future” (8) in the sense that they challenge the victimization and erasure of

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the recent surge of post-apocalyptic narratives, see, for example, Teresa Heffernan’s *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (2008), and Claire Colebrook’s *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (2014).

Indigenous communities that is typified by the Western apocalyptic tradition. Led by scholars such as Dillon, as well as David Gaertner and William Lempert, Indigenous Futurism is both an emerging scholarly practice, a genre, and an activist movement that mobilizes science fiction tropes and that attempts—in the words of Danika Medak-Saltzman—to “imagine otherwise” (Medak-Saltzman 143). Indigenous Futurist art seeks to look beyond settler colonial realities and to actively promote decolonization in the present.<sup>2</sup>

A central example of an Indigenous Futurist text is Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich's post-apocalyptic novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), where both species extinction and Indigenous resilience are core story elements. The narrative follows 26-year-old Cedar Hawk Songmaker, an adopted Ojibwe woman raised by white Minneapolis parents, who is four months pregnant with her first child when the world experiences an apocalyptic event where evolution has seemingly spun out of control, perhaps running backwards. This development leads an authoritarian government to detain all women of childbearing age.<sup>3</sup> Written as a journal and addressed to Cedar's unborn baby, the novel documents Cedar's pregnancy, her process of becoming acquainted with her Native American family, and her eventual captivity. Erdrich's text is a significant contribution to Indigenous post-apocalyptic literature, as well as to species extinction fiction, demonstrating that the post-apocalyptic can be an invaluable genre for mediating Indigenous perspectives on environmental collapse and for underscoring the limitations of inherited Western epistemologies. As scholarship on the novel has already established, Erdrich adroitly pushes against problematic aspects of mainstream post-apocalypticism, particularly through her staging of Native empowerment in the context of ecological and societal collapse. In this way, the narrative gestures toward the possibility of alternative futures liberated from the rule of progress (Childers and Menendez 214; Maucione 268), reproductive futurism (Shaw 322), and colonial epistemologies.

In this piece, I will demonstrate how *Future Home of the Living God* challenges mainstream post-apocalyptic fiction by suggesting that the novel speaks to and subverts a species extinction discourse closely bound up with colonial epistemology and its fixation on taxonomies, race, and hierarchies. My discussion will be focused around the novel's thematic treatment of extinction and its formal composition

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<sup>2</sup> “Writers of Indigenous futurisms,” as Dillon remarks, “sometimes intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably *change* the perimeters of sf” (3). Dillon is credited as having popularized the term “Indigenous Futurism” and published the first Indigenous Futurist anthology, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, in 2012. Since then, the Indigenous Futurist movement has steadily grown and has been both advocated and disputed. As Miriam C. Brown Spiers cautions, authors that reclaim older Native texts as belonging to the realm of science fiction potentially end up portraying Native realities as mythical and fantastical to non-Native readers. In this way, colonial structures are reinforced rather than challenged (Brown Spiers xvi).

<sup>3</sup> Critics have commented on the novel's debt (and perhaps too-close resemblance) to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), as Atwood's novel, too, conjures a dystopian vision of female enslavement and forced reproduction. See, for example, Stephanie Merritt's review of Erdrich's novel in *The Guardian*.

around the experience of uncertainty. This essay thus adds to existing scholarship on Erdrich's novel by bringing the text's treatment of extinction to the fore. Erdrich constructs her text around a bizarre extinction event that turns all species categories and taxonomies on their head, as contemporary species vanish and hybrid new-old organisms appear. The event produces a profound uncertainty within the diegesis, with characters left clueless about what is actually happening—a situation that Indigenous characters, as the novel suggests, are better prepared for than non-Indigenous individuals. As I show, the novel reads as a counter-narrative to Western notions about scientific progress on the level of form, as the text presents an introspective and cyclical unfolding of events. Importantly, Erdrich's novel exposes how dominant understandings of species extinction are profoundly intertwined with the legacy of nineteenth-century imperialism, and it asks instead what *alternative* and more productive epistemologies of extinction might look like.

### **“Ducks are not ducks”: In Defence of Fuzzy Taxonomies**

As rates of biodiversity loss continue to accelerate, awareness of species extinctions increasingly manifests in the collective imagination. While the ethico-political effects of this environmental consciousness include intensified conservation efforts and legal frameworks put in place to protect species, it is crucial to also be mindful of the history, origins, and development of species extinction discourse. It is important to note that, as extinction scholar Dolly Jørgensen states in a recent article, “Western scientific understandings of extinction as a biological phenomenon arose at a specific moment under the context of European colonialism” (210). The Linnaean preoccupation with classifying, hierarchizing, describing, and taxonomizing that characterized European science from the seventeenth century onwards—fuelled by an increasingly systematic uncovering of the fossil record—eventually made species extinction thinkable in both the scientific and the popular imagination (Barrow 5). This conceptualization of species disappearance emerged, more specifically, in the nineteenth-century, through the work of figures like the French naturalist Georges Cuvier. By studying elephant bones and comparing them to mysterious giant fossils sent to Europe by settler colonists in America, Cuvier concluded that there must have existed animals that were once living but that were now *espèces perdues* (lost species) (Kolbert 29).

Following Cuvier's discoveries, the “species” category crystallized as the central “unit” scientists used to measure, theorize, and understand extinction. As Ben Garlick and Kate Symons remark, the perception of extinction as the loss of “discrete units of biological life,” which still remains dominant, evinces “the legacies of nineteenth-century colonial science in contemporary biology and conservation discourse” (290). Our contemporary understanding of species extinction, then, developed *through* colonial science. According to Audra Mitchell, while the tendency for our conceptualization of species extinction to coalesce around the “species” category can be useful when it comes to ensuring rapid political action to protect

biodiversity and to initiate conservation projects, it also forecloses extinction discourse around this concept (25). The rule of species taxonomies arguably also speaks to a human preference for “orderly” classifications of nonhuman nature and a desire for control and predictability.

Alongside imperialist expansion and studies of the fossil record, which allowed scientists to grasp extinction, also followed ideas about how some species and races were superior to “primitive” ones (Brantlinger 17-44).<sup>4</sup> Species extinction discourse is, as a consequence, intrinsically interwoven with the broader imperialist extinction discourse analysed by Patrick Brantlinger in his book *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930* (2003). Although primarily concerned with the extinction narrative surrounding Indigenous tribes, Brantlinger’s insights about how “[e]xtinction discourse is a specific branch of the dual ideologies of imperialism and racism” (1) in many ways speaks to the issue of species extinction, since ideas about racial hierarchies and species boundaries developed in a joint process. In his recent discussion of geologic extinction, Jeremy J. Schmidt observes that “assumptions of race and empire” fused the concept of extinction to biological loss of species, rather than to also denote broader geological processes such as glacier disappearances (282). The type of logic that species extinction discourse is built on, then, where taxonomies and biological units have been used to justify perceived hierarchies and white supremacy, is something that could fruitfully be studied in greater detail and brought more into focus in contemporary debates around biodiversity loss.

Erdrich’s novel, as the remainder of this article will demonstrate, offers a compelling narrative for illuminating the colonial legacy of extinction discourse and for exploring what happens when human understandings of mass extinction are forced to confront the loss of seemingly reliable systems of classification and taxonomizing. The extinction imaginary conjured by *Future Home of the Living God* is one that, as species categories are rendered useless, unsettles the Western-scientific understanding of extinction and instead narrativizes an alternative vision where Indigenous communities thrive and regain sovereignty in the face of environmental and apocalyptic uncertainty. Although the novel hinges on a speculative twist to the narrative of the sixth mass extinction, the sudden species metamorphoses that occur in the story invite an allegorical reading where readers are forced to draw linkages to ongoing biodiversity decline.

From its opening page, *Future Home of the Living God* presents readers with a strange new mass extinction scenario: rather than species becoming extinct in the

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<sup>4</sup> For example, as Charles Darwin writes in *The Descent of Man* (1871), “[a]t some future period ... the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world” (156). Moreover, in his book *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), Amitav Ghosh notes that Alfred Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” (1850) would seem to be expressing a type of justification of species extinction as the natural way in which evolution would confirm humans as the superior species; the poem advances the idea that it is humankind’s task to “Move upward, working out the beast, / And let the ape and tiger die” (qtd. in Ghosh, *Nutmeg* 79).

“usual” way and thereby reaching the end of their evolutionary lineages, lifeforms on the planet become subject to sudden mutations that indicate evolution may have reversed itself. In the novel’s first paragraph, Cedar narrates that the “world” is now “running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways, in a way as yet ungrasped” (3). As Cedar reveals:

Reports are coming in of experiments hastily conducted on fruit flies, DNA experts who say on the molecular level it is like skipping around in time, and that small-celled creatures and plants have been shuffling through random adaptations for months now. And hasn’t anyone noticed that dogs, cats, horses, pigs, et cetera have stopped breeding true? (55)

Humans, too, are affected by the mutations, with neonatal survival rates decreasing and with “male sexual organs ... not developing properly. Sometimes not developing at all” (Erdrich 88). People conclude, as a result, that the human species is dying out and that the apocalypse is near. Pieces of information that emerge from the narrative indicate that the novel’s present may be a climate-changed future: Minneapolis has already experienced its “first winter without snow” (11), and Cedar’s adoptive mother believes that the evolutionary mutations may be “a new kind of virus” released from thawing permafrost (10). At the same time, the novel does not dwell on this potential causality between human-induced ecological destruction and evolution’s potential reversal; the message at the core of the narrative is that the event is random and unforeseen.

Not until one hundred pages into the novel does Cedar provide a description of the new species that are mutating and appearing. Cedar now remains locked inside her home, unable to leave the house for fear of her pregnancy being discovered. While looking out the window one morning, she spots something she has “never seen before”—a “bird, or whatever it is” that partly resembles a hawk, but that has a beakless and lizard-like appearance (116). A similar incident occurs soon after: Cedar watches in disbelief as a “sand-colored blur” attacks a Labrador dog in her backyard. “The thing – some kind of great cat, all muscle and powerful guile,” writes Cedar, “tears long fangs into and chokes down the bleeding haunches of the dog” (132-33). The “cat,” which resembles a sabre-toothed tiger, then climbs up a tree and “stretches itself” along a branch (133). In Emily McAvan’s formulation, the text here upsets the “stability of evolution” with its “orderly narrative” (96), and instead evokes strong impulses of chaos and instability. In the aforementioned scene, the scenario of the domesticated dog becoming the victim of unclassifiable wildness—or, as McAvan writes, of “an alterity that cannot be controlled or contained” (97)—collapses the boundaries between wild and domesticated (we are not accustomed to seeing dogs become prey). This unpredictable evolutionary development, then, provides scarce possibilities for any essentialist categories or systemization and thereby undermines the human desire for control of the nonhuman world. If, as Cedar states, “ducks are not ducks” and “chickens are not chickens” (114), then inherited scientific

epistemologies lose their meaning and purpose in attempting to grapple with the “fuzzy” species now evolving.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of the de-evolution scenario giving rise to horror and alarm, however, it is framed as a liberating situation that gives Cedar a strange sense of hope. After having reflected on her observation of the lizard-bird, Cedar feels that she is “not at the end of things, but the beginning” (116). When she informs her partner Phil about her sighting of the sabre-toothed tiger, the couple collapse with laughter, “spinning out of control, crazy, weak, until we’re gasping on the floor” (133). Crucially, as the situation escalates on a global scale, the ensuing chaos presents Cedar’s Ojibwe family with the opportunity to reclaim the territories that were stolen from their ancestors by the United States government. Cedar remains in frequent contact with her birthmother, Mary Potts, and her step-father, Eddy, subsequent to her first visit to the reservation, which takes place at the outset of the novel.<sup>6</sup> Eddy, who shares his step-daughter’s optimism about the biological upheaval, writes her a letter to let her know that the tribe has formed its own militia. As he recounts, “[q]uite a number of us see the government collapse as a way to make our move and take back the land” (121). It is also Eddy who explains to Cedar that the Ojibwe community do not interpret the apocalyptic situation as a novelty. According to Eddy, “Indians have been adapting since before 1492 so I guess we’ll keep adapting ... [T]he world is always going to pieces” (35). Unlike the government, which attempts to conserve the status quo and prevent the situation from accelerating, Indigenous peoples approach the apocalypse as a continuation of an already-apocalyptic present.<sup>7</sup>

### **Fragile Futures: Embracing Unknowability at the End of the World**

In addition to exposing the limitations and colonial legacies of Western species extinction epistemologies, *Future Home of the Living God* casts uncertainty and *not knowing* as more productive stances for navigating environmental catastrophe. Willingness to face uncertainty becomes, as the narrative makes clear, a better alternative to Western science and its fixation on taxonomies, classifications, and hierarchies. As I elaborate below, by making uncertainty its main narrative strategy,

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<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, a number of literary works that perform a similar blurring of species boundaries to that depicted by Erdrich here. Examples include Diether Dath’s *Die Abschaffung der Arten* [*The Abolition of Species*, 2008], Johanna Drucker’s *Downdrift* (2018), and Jeff VanderMeer’s *New Weird* fiction. In comparison with these works, Erdrich’s novel grants less narrative space to descriptions of species “blurrings”—instead, the narrative focus in *Future Home of the Living God* lies on Cedar’s experience and interpretations of the strange creatures that confront her. The effect of this “peripheralized” perspective of non-humans in the novel is that the species that appear come across as even more blurry and vague.

<sup>6</sup> It merits noting that Cedar’s white adoptive parents support both her and her Native family and actively try to work against the white supremacist authorities.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth underscoring that Erdrich’s novel not only evokes Indigenous survival, but also speaks to the wider concept of Indigenous *survivance* – a term coined by Gerald Vizenor to describe, in Vizenor’s words, an “active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion ... Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry” (1).

the text also mirrors the fundamental uncertainty that is at stake in the sixth mass extinction. The novel's mobilization of uncertainty is a core concern in Silvia Martínez-Falquina's reading of Erdrich's text. According to her analysis, lack of information and certainty about the apocalyptic situation produces an overwhelming uncertainty in both readers and characters, and this stylistic choice serves as the key aesthetic technique employed by Erdrich (167). Drawing on Martínez-Falquina's argument, Emily Childers and Hannah Menendez, too, emphasize the importance of indeterminacy for coming to grips with the novel (219). Uncertainty, they observe, "marks a way of being in the world in which vulnerability has become the norm [for women and Indigenous peoples]" (219). As a result, both Cedar and her Native family stand a better chance of navigating the uncertain biological reversal than the non-Indigenous population (Childers and Menendez 219). Uncertainty and indeterminacy thus become leitmotifs that play a vital role in articulating the novel's Indigenous take on the post-apocalyptic genre.

The relationship between uncertainty, narrative, and the ecological crisis has recently attracted the attention of a number of scholars working in the environmental humanities. In his book *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures* (2022), Marco Caracciolo explores narrative negotiation of uncertainty in the context of ecological breakdown, arguing that rather than to consider uncertainty as a stance that should be avoided, an embrace of uncertainty can prompt critical thinking and resilience in the face of environmental challenges (3). Accepting uncertainty, Caracciolo suggests, could lead to an abandonment of human exceptionalism and greater respect for the nonhuman world (3). Such an abandonment would mean letting go of "our culturally ingrained faith in metanarratives of scientific and technological progress and unlimited economic growth," Caracciolo states (183). Throughout his book, Caracciolo discusses various formal strategies employed by contemporary authors to negotiate and provoke uncertainty within their fiction, especially in relation to unstable climate futures.

Bearing Caracciolo's points in mind, I would suggest that Erdrich is invested in engaging uncertainty on levels of both plot and form. Firstly, one striking aspect of the novel is how little both characters and readers know or can know about the unfolding conditions of reversed extinction. The text provides no definite answers as to the exact nature and cause of the situation. The narrative portrays this unknowability as symptomatic of the apocalypse itself; as Phil fittingly remarks, "[t]he first thing that happens at the end of the world is that we don't know what is happening" (117). Cedar comments that while political chaos looms, "people are out in the streets, demonstrating against not knowing what they should be demonstrating about" (66). By emphasizing the unpredictability of the biological mutations, as well as the chaos that accompanies them, the novel evokes a forceful sense of what might be thought of as "nescience." In the words of Anahid Nersessian, nescience constitutes the state of not knowing and involves "the painful or unsettling sense that there is no meaningful link between what is known and what can be known, or what has taken place and what might take place" (315). The runaway nature of the events unfolding



in the novel, with no implied forms of causality, would seem to evoke a non-anthropocentric order that human communities fail to grasp, anticipate, or control.

The “biological chaos” (Erdrich 310) at the core of the narrative intensifies as the novel draws to a close. As lifeforms begin to appear more and more unrecognizable, also food takes on unfamiliar qualities. Upon being served lunch at the prison facility after her final capture, Cedar notes that chickens resemble “pale iguanas” more than chickens (317). At the same time, plant vegetation proliferates, threatening human-made structures with “an ever thicker green profusion” (326). As I argued above, these random mutations expose the limitations of biological sciences and scientific predictions. By narrativizing this development, the novel encapsulates some of the complex uncertainty involved in the sixth mass extinction. In her seminal work *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (2016), Ursula Heise underscores that although we may assume that species extinction is a straightforward process to study and grapple with, the science around extinctions is, in fact, extremely obscure and indeterminate (13). Scientists find extinctions difficult to measure and predict, and the current wave of anthropogenic extinctions may have dramatic and unpredictable consequences for both local ecosystems and for the global biosphere. Since the biological collapse taking place in Erdrich’s novel captures this same uncertainty, Cedar importantly concludes that “we’ve come to the end of science” (78).

In her introduction to the anthology *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012), Dillon notes that one of the characteristics of Indigenous Futurist texts, such as Erdrich’s, is that they “undercut the limitations of science altogether” (2). Reflecting on what the term “science” in Indigenous science fiction denotes, Dillon asserts that Indigenous practices and traditional knowledge do constitute a science of their own “despite their lack of resemblance to taxonomic western systems of thought” (7). The dissemination of these “Indigenous scientific literacies” typically occurs through storytelling and the handing down of everyday teachings (Dillon 7-8).

The notion that Western science meets its limitations in the novel’s apocalypse is also made visible through Erdrich’s depiction of pregnancy. Since babies develop unforeseeable genetic mutations, Cedar remains in the dark about how her baby will turn out and whether it will survive. As Cedar writes, “here I am, maybe a walking contradiction, maybe two species in one body. Nobody knows” (84). Cedar nevertheless finds comfort in listening to her Native grandmother’s stories, which the old woman begins to recite when Cedar approaches her to inquire about genetic diseases that run in the family (43). The implication of the scene is that this freely interpretable and story-bound knowledge may be a superior form of scientific method for navigating ecological collapse.

At the end of the novel, Cedar gives birth to a living human son, but remains imprisoned at the detention centre, waiting to become pregnant again. In other words, the novel’s ending accentuates the narrative’s pervasive uncertainty. Post-apocalyptic narratives, it should be noted, tend to inherently express such an

uncertainty in their depiction of the aftermath of cataclysms. As scholarship on the post-apocalyptic tradition argues, the genre must be understood as standing in critical relation, as well as in temporal relation, to the apocalyptic. James Berger, in his study *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), explains that if apocalypticism involves closure, revelation, and clarification, post-apocalypticism can offer no certainties or resolutions (5-8). With the rise of post-apocalyptic culture, as Teresa Heffernan asserts, revelation loses its meaning and its function as an organizing principle (7). In the words of Monika Kaup:

Anything that appears in the *eschaton*, the final events of the divine plan, is part of the predetermined future of apocalyptic narrative ... Whereas apocalyptic futures are closed and deterministic, post-apocalyptic developments are open and indeterminate. In the unfolding world of post-apocalypse, the future is once again uncertain, and uncertainty results from spontaneous activity and its (unplanned) consequences. (69)

Hence, the narratives of “reliable” closure, certainty, and predetermined futures that are associated with the apocalypse become unsettled and more complex in a post-apocalyptic climate. In this regard, Erdrich’s novel writes itself into the tradition of post-apocalyptic open-endedness—the text refuses to offer any form of redemption or to narrativize situations that stage and overcome direct threats to human survival. The novel instead presents a highly introspective account of the apocalypse, focusing on Cedar’s inner mentation rather than external events. This introspective style of the novel gains further resonance through the narrative’s use of *contained* spaces as its main setting—the majority of the story takes place within claustrophobic locations such as prison cells and underground shelters.

Intertwined with the novel’s strategic use of uncertainty and its subversion of Western extinction science is also what previous scholarship on Erdrich’s text has described as its questioning of progress (Martínez-Falquina 165; Childers and Menendez 212). The centrality of the idea of linear progress for evolutionary theory cannot be overstated. Yet, as one of the scientists that makes a television appearance in the novel explicitly states, the fossil record consists of only a fraction of species that have existed (69). With the biological chaos occurring in the narrative, evolution might therefore “skip forward, sideways, in unforeseen directions. We wouldn’t see the narrative we think we know. Why? Because there was never a story moving forward and there wouldn’t be one moving backward” (69). This passage, in addition to directly undermining the idea of progress and linearity, reads as a comment on the text’s own composition.

As a departure from the formal characteristics and genre features typically associated with a post-apocalyptic novel, Erdrich’s text engages more spontaneously with form. The novel does not follow what might be thought of as a linear story progression, but presents a cyclical and more multi-layered unfolding of events. Scenes and situations, for example, repeat themselves throughout the narrative: Cedar visits her Native family on the reservation, becomes imprisoned by the authorities, returns to the reservation, and is imprisoned once again. Structurally, the novel is organized around these repetitive episodes and Cedar’s processing of them.

With a return to the same occurrences, the narrative can offer none of the redemption and resolution typically provided at the end of post-apocalyptic stories such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) (Colebrook 199). Instead, the text forcefully points to the Indigenous experience of apocalypse as a cyclical phenomenon and to the notion that, as Whyte puts it, many Native cultures "see their societies as already having endured one *or many more* apocalypses" (236, emphasis in original). The effect of the novel's cyclicity is, ironically, that a degree of certainty arises from the future's uncertainty. In the same way that Cedar will continue to fight for her freedom and risk becoming imprisoned once again, so too with the Indigenous experience of ecological apocalypse. As Erdrich's novel illustrates, the future return of world-ending cataclysms is something that Indigenous communities are uniquely prepared for in an already-dystopian and ever-changing present.

### Conclusion: Towards New Epistemologies of Extinction and Collapse

In December 2022, when the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) concluded after its two-week long proceedings, parties had reached an agreement to protect 30 per cent of global lands and seas. While measures such as COP15's ambitious target give cause for hope concerning the future of biodiversity, all evidence suggests that the rates of ongoing species extinctions remain alarmingly high.<sup>8</sup> To halt this anthropogenic ecocide, what may be needed is not only a greater engagement with the capitalist and colonial drivers of species loss (Dawson 15), but a critical examination of the frameworks and epistemologies through which we map and understand extinction. An awareness of how species extinction discourse is indebted to European imperialism and remains entangled with systems of thought rooted in taxonomies, hierarchies, and race, could ultimately lead to decolonial conceptualizations of extinction as not merely a scientific concept describing the evolutionary end of biological units, but as an indicator of the complex modes of violence that have given rise to the Anthropocene.

In this article, I have demonstrated how Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* provides an important space for exposing and reimagining the colonial epistemologies of extinction. By evoking the compelling scenario of reversed extinction and its accompanying biological chaos, the novel mediates the limitations of Western extinction science, also pairing that science with a white authoritarian order. Through its use of uncertainty as the central element that animates the narrative, Erdrich illustrates that an embrace of uncertainty can serve as a more productive alternative to Western science's preoccupation with classifying and taxonomizing the nonhuman environment. Crucially, the novel frames uncertainty in

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<sup>8</sup> This fact is made clear in the most comprehensive assessment of global biodiversity decline to be carried out and published in recent years, namely the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES's) *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (2019). The report's key findings are bleak, with biodiversity "declining faster than at any time in human history" (xiv).

the face of ecological apocalypse as a state that gives rise to Indigenous empowerment and reclaimed sovereignty, as Cedar's Ojibwe family use the situation as a hopeful opportunity to "keep adapting" (35) and to take back territories that were stolen from them. Whereas many post-apocalyptic narratives treat Indigenous communities, as well as nonhuman species, as inevitable victims of the world's end (Theriault and Mitchell 179), Erdrich's text highlights Indigenous survival and recovery, as well as the importance of storied knowledge. Accordingly, as a narrative that challenges the one-dimensionality of the cultural post-apocalyptic landscape, *Future Home of the Living God* must be approached as a timely and thought-provoking work which demonstrates that to reconceive of endings and extinction is both possible and necessary.

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