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“THIS NOTEBOOK, YOUR LETTER”: THE FUTURE READER AND THE  
PIVOTAL PRESENT IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S *FUTURE HOME OF THE LIVING  
GOD*

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Dr Sindija Franzetti is a senior lecturer at the Department of Communication and Learning in Science at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden. In her thesis *Epistolarity in a Post-Letter World* (2021) Franzetti sought to discover aspects of epistolarity that persist even in a world where the global reach of increasingly digitized interpersonal communication seems to obviate the need for letters. Her current work on epistolarity brings into dialogue literary studies and writing pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Epistolarity, future reader, pivotal present, temporal polyvalence, intergenerational time

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# “This Notebook, Your Letter”: The Future Reader and the Pivotal Present in Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*

## Abstract

This article proposes epistolarity as a productive critical framework for exploring the concept of ‘present futures.’ The analysis focuses on Louise Erdrich’s novel *Future Home of the Living God* with the aim to demonstrate how letter writing can help us conceptualize the complex interrelations between the present moment and the future. Cedar, the Ojibwe narrator, writes a letter to her unborn child during unprecedented evolutionary and climate crises. The present moment is fraught with uncertainty, and the future is difficult to imagine. Through her epistolary efforts, Cedar writes against apocalyptic future narratives. Her letter creates a space for present and future encounters between the writer and her addressee even if the world as we know it has ceased to exist. In the novel, I argue, key elements of epistolarity such as the central role of the reader, the significance of the present moment of writing, and temporal polyvalence disrupt the conventional notion of time as a linear progression. Whereas linear time moves from past to present to future, the act of letter writing in Erdrich’s novel directs our attention to the future as a vital and vivid presence in the present moment. In the novel, the ‘you’ being addressed is also already a part of ‘me,’ the narrator. This epistolary bond between a mother and her unborn child in the novel extends the biological connection between them into the realms of culture and history.

## 1 Introduction

A future reader is a potent trope in contemporary art and literature that is concerned with the fate of our planet and humanity.<sup>1</sup> One fascinating example is the one-hundred-year artwork by the Scottish artist, Katie Paterson, titled *Future Library* in Oslo, Norway.<sup>2</sup> Every year from 2014 until 2114 a writer will be asked to contribute a text to *Future Library*. The manuscripts will be stored at a public library, Deichman Bjørvika. The first to contribute was Margaret Atwood with her manuscript *Scribbler Moon*. All of the texts will remain unread until published in 2114 as an anthology of books. A forest of a thousand spruces was planted; they will become the paper onto which the hundred manuscripts will be printed. Paterson’s artwork is, as Atwood notes, “a meditation on the nature of time.”<sup>3</sup> It is also, she continues, “a tribute to the written word [...] and a proposal of writing itself as a time capsule, since the author who marks the words down and the receiver of those words—the reader—are always separated by time.”<sup>4</sup> But narratives crafted with a future reader in mind are more than time capsules; they do more than preserve and pass on artefacts of the present time to

future generations. Such narratives anticipate an encounter between the writer and the reader.

Paterson's artwork draws our attention to the potential of a narrative, as a written form of communication, to bridge hard-to-imagine distances and differences between the writer and her future readers.<sup>5</sup> Such communication requires critical reflections and great leaps of imagination. In a brief accompanying essay to her manuscript, Atwood shares the following reflections:

[T]hose who will read my work are a hundred years into the future. Their parents aren't yet born, nor, in all likelihood, are their grandparents. How to address these unknown readers? What will they be able to understand of my world, the world that is the ground for my own contribution? And how will the meanings of words have changed in that time?<sup>6</sup>

Atwood's *Scribbler Moon* is addressed to unknown and, ultimately, unknowable future readers. She acknowledges the probability that a hundred years from now, the world may have undergone such profound transformations as to become unrecognizable, possibly rendering our language unintelligible. Yet, despite the uncertainty, in writing her novel, Atwood anticipates "this encounter—between [her] text and the so-far non-existent reader." She wonders what her voice, suddenly "awakened, after a hundred years," will say, "as a not-yet-embodied hand draws it out of its container and opens it to the first page."<sup>7</sup> Atwood contemplates the inherent uncertainty of the future; yet she shows faith in the narrative's capacity to deliver meaning even into a hard-to-imagine and possibly unrecognizable future. She hopes her novel offers more than a link between the present moment of writing and the future moment of reading. A narrative becomes an act of imagining, of making possible an encounter between the writer and the reader even amidst political, climate, and other catastrophes.

Cedar, the young Ojibwe narrator in Louise Erdrich's novel *Future Home of the Living God*, too has faith in the capacity of written communication to bridge hard-to-imagine distances and differences. Early in the novel, Cedar writes: "I fear that we are heading into a lightless future devoid of the written word [...] nonetheless I am writing this long and involved missive which I hope that you will someday read."<sup>8</sup> The novel takes the form of a notebook/letter that Cedar addresses to her unborn child; she writes during the time of unprecedented evolutionary and climate crises. Cedar's present moment of writing is characterized by uncertainty, and the future she envisions is one where the world as we know it has ceased to exist. The questions that Er-

drich explores through Cedar's notebook/letter to her unborn child revolve around the openness and unknowability of the future. Nevertheless, Cedar's conception of the future is not an apocalyptic one. Instead, by addressing her notebook/letter to her unborn child she nurtures the hope that the child will read it one day. She writes her letter despite the possibility of "a lightness future."<sup>9</sup> In doing so, Cedar envisions what, at the time of writing, appears to be an improbable future encounter between her and her unborn child. Thus, through the act of writing her notebook/letter, Cedar embraces the openness of the future and shows faith in letter writing as a creative, resourceful, and transformative practice.

In this article, I analyze how an imagined, "so-far-non-existent reader" may affect the present moment of writing and condition the content and the form of the narrative.<sup>10</sup> As I will demonstrate, the novel shows how epistolarity can help us conceptualize the complex interrelations between the present moment and the future. I argue that key elements of epistolarity such as the central role of the reader, the significance of the present moment of writing, and temporal polyvalence disrupt conventional notion of time as a linear progression. Whereas linear time moves from past to present to future, the act of letter writing in Erdrich's novel directs our attention to the future as a vital and vivid presence in the present moment. After all, Cedar's pregnancy makes the 'you' being addressed (the unborn child) also already a part of 'me,' the narrator. Furthermore, letter writing not only grounds Cedar in the present moment, from which she seeks her past and anticipates the future, but it also creates a sense of multiple temporalities as coexisting. Cedar's pregnancy and her Indigenous cultural heritage amplify the complex experience of time shaped via epistolarity within the novel.

Previous analyses of Erdrich's novel center around several interrelated key themes: the preservation of Indigenous cultural heritage, the genre of speculative fiction and dystopia, the ramifications of climate change, and issues pertaining to reproductive and women's rights, with emphasis on Indigenous communities.<sup>11</sup> Although the specific focal points vary among the scholarly examinations of *Future Home of the Living God*, one common thread in the discussions is the exploration of future and its relation to the present moment of narration. For instance, Silvia Martinez-Falquina employs the concept of "proleptic mourning" to elucidate Cedar's unique experience of time. Cedar's sense of time, according to Martinez-Falquina, is one where "we in-

habit the present moment as the object of future memory;” a future memory as mourning of “our own and our world’s destruction.”<sup>12</sup> Emphasizing the significance of Indigenous history and culture in Erdrich’s novel, Julie Siepak articulates a slightly different understanding of the relation between the present and future. Drawing upon the insights of Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte, Siepak proposes that Indigenous peoples “live in the dystopic future today.”<sup>13</sup> For Indigenous communities a future that demands adaptation to various biological, climate, and political catastrophes is not a future yet to unfold; rather, it has been an integral aspect of the present since the arrival of settlers. Erdrich’s novel, Siepak suggests, allows us to “re-imagine future,” envisage a future “beyond the colonial domination.”<sup>14</sup> Bridgitte Barclay extends the decolonial reimagining of the future to include kinship with non-human species. She argues that “Cedar writing to her unborn emphasizes the cross-species connection.”<sup>15</sup> Cedar’s letter writing efforts, Barclays notes, provide “radical hope” as the human species is facing extinction.<sup>16</sup> Because of its receptiveness to a range of potential futures and connection with non-human entities, Barclay suggests, Cedar’s narrative may be interpreted as “a love letter to another species” that could eventually inhabit the Earth.<sup>17</sup>

*Future Home of the Living God* clearly takes the form of a mother’s letter to her unborn child. However, surprisingly few scholars explicitly acknowledge and explore letter writing and its effects on our understanding of possible futures in Erdrich’s novel and their relation to the present moment of narration. In her article, “Reproductive Futurism, Indigenous Futurism, and the (Non) Human to Come in Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” Kristen Shaw focuses on Cedar’s pregnancy to illustrate how in the novel the present and future are envisioned as “sites of possibility.”<sup>18</sup> Erdrich’s novel, Shaw claims, “foregrounds Indigenous resilience and creativity that fuses traditional knowledge with contemporary technologies to open for new futures.”<sup>19</sup> However, it is not only Cedar’s pregnancy that opens possibility for new futures. The biological and cultural connections between a mother and her child, as Kaylee Jangula Mootz demonstrates, are intricately interwoven in the novel. Mootz argues that in Erdrich’s novel the body is both a biological archive “containing millions of years of evolutionary data within its DNA” and “a language-based archive, an archive of memory, story, song, and words.”<sup>20</sup> Cedar’s notebook/letter addressed to her unborn child emphasizes the significance of an archive that is collected and writ-

ten with a future reader in mind. For in Erdrich's novel without the encounter between the writer and her addressee, the archive cannot reach its transformative potential for "survival and futurity."<sup>21</sup> Drawing on the previous scholarship, this article places epistolarity at the heart of its analysis to illustrate its critical role in creating a space for present and future encounters between a writer and her addressee.

In what follows, I first offer a brief overview of Erdrich's novel, with focus on the narrative's elusive details and hybrid form. Afterwards, I analyze selected passages to demonstrate the effects of epistolarity on our experience of temporality within the novel. To establish the conceptual framework for this analysis, I draw on Janet Altman's and Liz Stanley's research on epistolarity. Furthermore, Donna Haraway's concept of *kainos* and Kyle Powys Whyte's discussions of Indigenous perception of time are crucial in exploring the role of epistolarity in *Future Home of the Living God*. Erdrich's novel explores the intricate interplay between the present moment and potential futures by highlighting the epistolary, biological, and cultural bonds between a mother and her unborn child.

## **2\_Elusive Details and Hybrid Form**

Published in 2017 Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* revolves around an evolutionary crisis caused by a failed genetic replication, a copying error within the letters of human and other DNA. Set in the not-too-distant future, the novel plunges its readers *in medias res* of this unfolding disaster. Cedar's world is changing in "a way as yet ungrasped,"<sup>22</sup> the exact causes, precise nature, and magnitude of the unfolding crises is beyond anyone's grasp and comprehension. Thus, in writing her letter, Cedar tries to "describe what cannot be put into words;" "a compulsion" that Linda Kauffman sees as "one of the hallmarks of epistolarity."<sup>23</sup> Humans are struggling to procreate, mothers and babies die in childbirth, and the few babies who survive appear to be of a different human species although it is unclear whether these births mark the onset of a pre- or post-*Homo sapiens* species. In the midst of this evolutionary crisis, Cedar and other women of childbearing age become the subjects of the government's attempts to stave off the extinction of the human species via enforced procreation and incarceration. Birthing centers and hospitals become prisons for pregnant women and "Womb Volunteers" awaiting insemination.<sup>24</sup> Together with these unfolding crises,

there is also a growing scarcity of food, electricity, and reliable sources of information and channels of communication.

Cedar inhabits and writes her letter during a “perilous time in the history of creation” that is full of “swirling questions” about the fate of human and other animals, language, communication, humanity, and the world at large.<sup>25</sup> Many species undergo rapid mutations: “ducks are not ducks and chickens are not chickens, insects are nutritious, and there are ladybugs the size of cats.”<sup>26</sup> Some of the creatures Cedar spots and makes a record of are “a lizard-bird,”<sup>27</sup> “a *saber-toothy cat thing*”<sup>28</sup> in a tree eating a chocolate Labrador, a giant bug with “a three-foot wingspan,” and “golden green eyes the size of softballs.”<sup>29</sup> The accounts of these new creatures in the novel are few and brief. The lack of detailed descriptions of things and events in *Future Home of the Living God* mirrors the uncertainty that the characters experience within the story-world of the novel. The world into which Cedar’s child will be born is in an “unknown state.”<sup>30</sup> Silvia Martinez-Falquina argues that “the uncertainty or lack of more detailed context is in fact the crux of the novel and the key stylistic choice around which Erdrich is making an important point.”<sup>31</sup> Erdrich’s novel, according to Martinez-Falquina, both emphasizes “the impossibility of knowing” and “questions the foundations of the idea of progress.”<sup>32</sup>

The novel’s elusive details and its hybrid form resist the understanding of the world as coherent and time as linear. Framed as a mother’s letter to her unborn child, the novel is a mesh of intersecting forms and genres. It is at once a letter, a journal, a diary, a notebook, and pregnancy journal. Parts of it read as a climate change novel, thriller, religious treatise, philosophical meditation, and what one critic calls “persecution chronicle.”<sup>33</sup> Some of its central themes are reproductive rights, motherhood, environmental degradation, communication technologies and surveillance, religion, biological apocalypse, and Indigenous culture and heritage. At the start of the novel, however, Cedar appears to be unaware of the formal and thematic complexity of her emerging narrative. From the outset, she places her narrative within a particular literary history. “Historic times!” she exclaims on the first page of the novel.<sup>34</sup> “There have always been letters and diaries written in times of tumult and discovered later, and my thought is that I could be writing one of those,” she continues.<sup>35</sup> Cedar’s ambition as she begins writing the letter to her unborn child is to write a historical account, a record of the unfolding crisis to be read by future generations. Within the



novel's context, the words "historical account" and "record" may be seen as institutional and impersonal documents intended for an accidental and anonymous reader. At first, Cedar uses a number of different terms to refer to her text. In one instance she calls it "your diary—a record and an inquiry into the strangeness of things,"<sup>36</sup> while elsewhere she writes, "I tape your first [ultrasound] picture onto the cover of this bound journal."<sup>37</sup> As the novel progresses, Cedar finds a name for her narrative that captures its purpose. On three occasions in the novel, she refers to the narrative as "this notebook, your letter"<sup>38</sup> and "your notebook/letter."<sup>39</sup> Notebook/letter highlights the entanglement of the narrative's personal and interpersonal nature.<sup>40</sup> With its emphasis on both the personal and interpersonal, Cedar's notebook/letter amounts to more than a historical account. It performs the openness and unknowability of the future, and the three key epistolary elements—future orientation, pivotal present, and temporal polyvalence—play an integral part in this performance.

Other Indigenous writers have explored the potential of the letter to juxtapose personal and interpersonal narratives. For example, the memoir of the Ojibwe writer, Richard Wagamese, *For Joshua: An Ojibwe Father Teaches His Son* is framed as a father's letter to his estranged son. "As Ojibwe men, we are taught that it is the father's responsibility to introduce our children to the world," Wagamese writes in the opening pages of his memoir.<sup>41</sup> As an absent father he was not able to "perform this ritual so the child would feel that it *belonged*."<sup>42</sup> Thus, Wagamese's letter both narrates his own journey towards belonging as well as performs the father's "traditional duty" of creating such a sense of belonging for his son.<sup>43</sup> To emphasize the significance of storytelling in Indigenous cultures, Thomas King, a Cherokee scholar, reiterates the following phrase: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" throughout his book *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*.<sup>44</sup> Cedar's letter echoes King's belief: "This notebook has become my life, or perhaps better to say that this notebook has become the way I remain connected with my life, and with you."<sup>45</sup> Wagamese and Erdrich both use letter writing to highlight the critical role of storytelling within the Indigenous cultures and the interpersonal nature of these narratives. After all, storytelling connects past, present, and future, bridging generations.<sup>46</sup> This article focuses on the interpersonal nature of Cedar's narrative emphasized by epistolarity; an aspect of *Future Home of the Living God* frequently overlooked in the existing scholarship.

Although I here use the term “interpersonal,” Cedar’s letter to her possibly non-human child opens space for encounters of all kinds.<sup>47</sup>

### **3\_Epistolary Form, Its Temporalities, and the Present Future**

Three characteristics of epistolarity are particularly relevant when conceptualizing present future in *Future Home of the Living God*. Yet, it is important to note that the relation between the present and future is not static but changes as the narrative progresses. The first defining characteristic of epistolarity is that a letter is always addressed to “a specific *you* who stands in a unique relationship to the *I*.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, what distinguishes epistolary from other narrative forms, according to Altman, is that it makes “the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator) [...] Indeed, at the very inception of the letter, he plays an instrumental generative role.”<sup>49</sup> A letter, she continues, is always “the results of a union of writer and reader.”<sup>50</sup> The relationship between the writer and her addressee gives shape and meaning to an epistolary narrative. Furthermore, a letter is also a space for encounters between the writer and her addressee.

The opening words of Cedar’s missive and Erdrich’s novel are “When I tell you that my name is Cedar Hawk Songmaker [...] maybe you’ll understand.”<sup>51</sup> Only a few lines later we learn who the “you” she addresses is: “Did I mention that I’m four months pregnant? With you?”<sup>52</sup> Cedar’s unborn child is an unconventional addressee. She addresses a “you” (the unborn child) who is also already an integral part of “I” (the expectant mother). The pregnancy and letter writing prompts Cedar to reflect on the difficulty of distinguishing between the personal and the interpersonal: “[N]o matter how I tried to talk to you, the truth is I felt that you were not altogether *you*. You were a fragment of me. That’s why I kept writing, to convince myself, to prepare myself for you to be a person, apart from who I am.”<sup>53</sup> After all, Cedar’s addressee is both a vivid presence in her womb and a future reader of her letter. Even as an unconventional addressee, Cedar’s unborn child plays a critical role in shaping her narrative. Not least because the unknowability of the future of her not-yet-born-child motivates Cedar to search for her biological and cultural heritage. Early on in her letter she writes how growing up she “had no clan, no culture, no language, no relative”—no sense of belonging.<sup>54</sup> Through her letter, she documents her own journey of finding where she belongs and weaves “[a] web of connections” for her unborn child.

Cedar's letter-writing efforts and her pregnancy ground her in the present moment, from which she explores her past and anticipates the future.

The significance of the present moment is, according to Altman, the second key characteristic of epistolarity. In a letter "all else radiates" from the present tense.<sup>55</sup> "The letter writer," Altman explains, "is anchored in a present time from which he looks toward both past and future events."<sup>56</sup> Being anchored in the present time, as Liz Stanley explains, does not always mean "literally in terms of verb tenses."<sup>57</sup> Rather, letters are anchored in the present moment if they are "written at a particular point in time which influences their content, even if not explicitly. Letters are strongly marked by their quotidian present."<sup>58</sup> Such quotidian present is especially evident in Cedar's observations of her pregnancy and the development of her baby: "Your bones are hardening, your brain is hooked up to stereo—your ears [...] You can hear me as I read aloud the first words of my letter to you. I am going to tell you everything, bit by bit, day by day."<sup>59</sup> In the passage Cedar describes to her baby a developmental milestone—the maturation of the hearing. By emphasizing hearing, Cedar juxtaposes written and oral storytelling. While traditionally, a letter is always read in a more or less distant future, in the passage Cedar speaks to her unborn child directly in the present moment as she also writes down the words to be read some time in the future.

When discussing the significance of the present time in epistolarity, Stanley goes so far as to suggest that letters "do things with and to time."<sup>60</sup> Even when a letter is read and reread in the future, "[the] 'present tense' aspect of a letter persists—the self that writes is in a sense always writing, even after the death of the writer and addressee; and their addressee is 'always listening' too."<sup>61</sup> The pivotal present in Erdrich's novel too does "things with and to time." In the following passage Cedar describes her first ultrasound. Her description captures the present moment in all of its vibrancy. I quote the passage at some length because it is precisely the detailed visualization of the future child made possible by the ultrasound technology that ultimately destabilizes Cedar's and by extension our sense of time:

At first there is only the gray uterine blur, and then suddenly the screen goes charcoal and out of the murk your hand wavers. It is detailed, three-dimensional, and I glimpse tiny wrinkles in your palm and wrinkle bracelets around your wrist before your hand disappears into the screen's fuzz [...] I see the arch of your spine, a tiny white snake, and again your hand flips open, pressing at the dark-

ness. The technician touches out knee bones, an elbow. Then she goes in through the thicket of your ribs. The heart, she says. I see the hollows of the chambers, gray mist, then the valves of your heart slapping up and down like a little man playing a drum. Your whole heart is on the screen and then the technician does something with the machine so that your blood is made of light moving in and out of your heart. The outflow is golden fire and the inflow is blue fire. I see the fire of life flickering all through your body.<sup>62</sup>

Throughout the passage, Cedar employs the present tense eagerly observing the various body parts and movements of her unborn child as they appear on the screen. The undeniable presence of Cedar's unborn child on the screen and the consistent use of the pronouns "you" and "your" throughout the passage create a sense of future as an already vivid presence in the present moment.

An epistolary narrative is by its nature future oriented. Futurity, as Altman points out, "is a crucial component of epistolarity."<sup>63</sup> Letters are often "charged with anticipation and speculation about the future."<sup>64</sup> That is to say, in the process of composing a letter the writer imagines the moment when her words will be read in a more or less distant future. However, the future in letters is not always necessarily perceived as time that follows the present. Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of epistolary narratives is their temporal complexity. These narratives, Altman claims, are notable for their temporal polyvalence when "[t]he temporal aspect of any given epistolary statement is relative to innumerable [past, present, and future] moments" of writing, reading, and rereading.<sup>65</sup> Like letters, pregnancies too are "characterized by a particularly strong orientation towards the future."<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, as sociologists Laura Völkle and Nico Wettmann point out, "the temporality of pregnancy" may be viewed as "an entanglement between different temporal references."<sup>67</sup> Thus, much like letters with their emphasis on a future reader, the ultrasound technology allows to visualize and to bring into the present moment the developing, unborn child. Such "entanglement between different temporal references and simultaneity of past, present and future" is further exemplified by the ultrasound images also becoming "memories for the future child."<sup>68</sup> Cedar's notebook/letter is written in the present moment, filled with narratives of the more and less distant past, and addressed to her unborn child.

The experience of looking at the detailed images of her unborn child and the vividness of future in the present moment fundamentally alters Cedar's sense of time during the ultrasound: "I have the sensation time has shifted, that we are in a directionless flow of time that goes back down infinite tunnels and corridors, as if this one

room in the hospital has opened out onto the farthest stretches of the universe.”<sup>69</sup> Cedar’s letter and by extension Erdrich’s novel draws our attention to a kind of temporality that Donna Haraway calls *kainos*. *Kainos* destabilizes conventional understanding and experience of time because, as Haraway puts it, “*Kainos* can be full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings of nurturing what might still be. I hear *kainos* in the sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities.”<sup>70</sup> In Erdrich’s novel epistolarity foregrounds the centrality of the present moment of writing. In addressing her unborn child, Cedar also makes the past and possibly more so the future an integral part of that present moment of writing. In turn, Erdrich’s novel creates “the sense of thick, ongoing presence” that challenges the Western sense of time.

Time in Erdrich’s novel may be viewed, to use Mark Riftik’s words, as “temporal orientation” rather than “a container.”<sup>71</sup> Indigenous peoples have a different kind of experience of time. “Rather than approaching time as an abstract, homogenous measure of universal movement along a singular axis,” Riftik continues,

we can think of it as plural, less as temporality than *temporalities*. From this perspective, there is no singular unfolding of time, but, instead, varied temporal formations that have their own rhythms—patterns of consistency and transformation that emerge immanently out of the multifaceted and shifting sets of relationships that constitute these formations and out of the interactions among those formations.<sup>72</sup>

The presence of “you” in Cedar’s body and her letter shapes the future as a temporal orientation contingent on the bonds and interactions between the writer and her addressee. Put differently, epistolarity in Erdrich’s novel emphasizes the connection between the complex experience of temporality and the encounters made possible via the letter.

The idea of temporal orientation as depending on a “shifting set of relationships”<sup>73</sup> is particularly visible once Cedar gives birth to her son. “My dear son,” she writes at the end of her letter only weeks after his birth, “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*.”<sup>74</sup> The phrase “the *before*” is striking, the emphasis hers. Cedar is referring not just to a time past, prior to her son’s birth, but also to a time to come, in anticipation of when her child will read her letter. Thus, “the *before*” is the pivotal yet uncertain present from which she addresses her child at the same time as her account of “the *before*” is con-

tingent on an imagined future moment of reading. The phrase “the *before*” is Cedar’s attempt to put into words what cannot be described but only performed and experienced via her epistolary narrative—the complex entanglement of a future that is already a part of the present moment.

#### **4\_Intergenerational Time**

By writing her letter Cedar does not attempt to create an ideal and idealized future for her unborn child. Her narrative is entangled in and emerges as a collage of other narratives, materialities, experiences, and worldviews. Put differently, the idea of DNA and culture are closely interwoven in Erdrich’s novel. The following passage from the novel exemplifies this tangle of adaptations and mutations, both biological and cultural:

what sort of being am I, really? First I find that I am my father’s actual child, descended of a line that goes back to Richard the Lion-Hearted. Then I find that my heritage is also bound up in a sinister blue man who impregnated my grandmother in a dream. And you, with Phil as your father [...] carry within you the patience of ancestors who worked with stone. Sometimes I think of the grab bag of labels and photos that I rescued from the recycling center, the fascinating collection of printed words and images. Without act or will on my part, I am creating a collage of DNA and dreams, all those words made flesh.<sup>75</sup>

This genetic and cultural collage is her child as well as the letter to her child. The question Cedar asks herself, “what sort of being am I, really?” echoes her and her reader’s question about what kind of being her child will be. Will it be human or an entirely different species? For most of the novel there is a real possibility that Cedar’s child might be a Yeatsian beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. Yet she chooses to birth and address it anyway. Epistolarity in *Future Home of the Living God* is not used to copy and transmit the cultural values of the past, but rather to destabilize, possibly even dismantle the very idea of stable and linear cultural heritage as a viable and sustainable practice.

Cedar’s is not the only mother’s letter in *Future Home of the Living God*. While Cedar is anticipating the loss of the human species and of written communication, her letter begins with a documentation of another kind of loss. She remembers how a year before she began writing the notebook/letter to her unborn child her adoptive mother, Sera, gave her a letter from Cedar’s biological Ojibwe mother, Mary Potts, called Sweetie. Cedar opened the letter and read it twice, only to put it back into the envelope and archive it. This letter from Cedar’s biological mother is not reproduced in the

novel; we only have access to Cedar's reaction to its contents. From the letter Cedar learns that her "family had no special powers or connections with healing spirits or sacred animals."<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, she learns that she was born "Mary Potts, daughter and granddaughter of Mary Potts, big sister to another Mary Potts, in short, just another of many Mary Potts reaching back to the colonization of this region."<sup>77</sup> Cedar finds the letter disappointing because its contents dismantle the idealized version of her origins and does little, in Cedar's view, to create a connection with her clan, culture, and language. The failure of her mother's epistolary communication, for Cedar, resides in its inability to deliver a sense of belonging and cohesion. The mothers' letters in Erdrich's novel draw the reader's attention to bonds between mothers and their children as both biological and textual. Furthermore, the letters raise questions about the difficult task of communicating across temporal and generational distances.

The mother's letter in *Future Home of the Living God* positions Cedar as "*aanikoobijigan (yankobjegen)*," the Anishinaabemowin (Neshnabémwen) expression that means "ancestor and descendent at the same time."<sup>78</sup> She is a granddaughter who hears her Ojibwe grandmother's, Mary Pott's, Indigenous stories and a daughter who receives her biological mother's letter. Cedar is also a storyteller who writes a letter to her unborn son to both acknowledge his presence in the present moment of writing and reach across the temporal and generational distances extending into the future. Epistolarity in Erdrich's novel together with Cedar's pregnancy and her Indigenous cultural heritage draws our attention to what Kyle Powys Whyte calls "an Anishinaabe perspective on intergenerational time."<sup>79</sup> Intergenerational time is, he explains, "a perspective embedded in a spiraling temporality (sense of time) in which it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life."<sup>80</sup> The resistance of Cedar's letter to be contained within any one narrative form and genre further exemplifies this sense of temporality as spiraling time. For, as Whyte notes, "Experiences of spiraling time, then, may be lived through narratives of cyclicity, reversal, dream-like scenarios, simultaneity, counter-factuality, irregular rhythms, ironic un-cyclicity, slipstream, parodies of linear pragmatism, eternity, among many others."<sup>81</sup>

## 5\_In Lieu of a Conclusion

Despite fearing that in the future stories may cease to exist, Cedar hopes her letter will extend beyond her and her child's life, that it will, hopefully, survive them both. For all she knows, such narrative might not even involve language and its transmission might require no technologies. On the run after escaping her first imprisonment, Cedar witnesses the stillbirth of her friend's Tia's baby. "The silence and the stillness of this baby is godly," Cedar observes as she watches its mother hold it still.<sup>82</sup> During the loss of pregnancy and stillbirth, Völkle and Wettmann observe, "the strong orientation towards the future, that characterizes pregnancies, becomes apparent in a critical manner."<sup>83</sup> In Erdrich's novel the stillbirth, an imagined future that will not come to pass, opens up to a sense of time that is at once focused on the present moment as well as expands to include other temporalities. As she holds her baby, Tia begins singing a song, as a last communication and maybe a last communion with her still-born child. As she listens, Cedar writes down the following about Tia's communicative efforts. Tia's, Cedar notes, was "[n]ot a song composed of words, but a song made up of sounds [...] Sounds that were made a hundred thousand years ago, I am sure, and sounds that will be heard a hundred thousand from now, I hope."<sup>84</sup> It is the song Cedar later hears during her own childbirth. Cedar's letter can be read and heard as a re-echoing of this wordless and worldless sound. Even if her child will not be able to read the letter, it will have created a space of encounter.

While epistolarity is associated with written communication, Erdrich's novel emphasizes it as a space of encounter between "I" and "you" no matter the communication technology. Atwood's meditation on the nature of her encounter with her not-yet-born reader illustrates this particular understanding of interpersonal communication:

I picture this encounter—between my text and the so-far non-existent reader—as being a little like the red-painted handprint I once saw on the wall of a Mexican cave that had been sealed for over three centuries. Who now can decipher its exact meaning? But its general meaning was universal: any human being could read it.

It said: Greetings. I was here.<sup>85</sup>

Erdrich's novel demonstrates how words, writing, and technologies might fall away, be wiped out of existence, but that something essential remains, nonetheless. What remains is not intact, but reverberates throughout before, now, and after. For, to reiterate Stanley's words: "[the] 'present tense' aspect of a letter persists—the self



that writes is in a sense always writing [...] and their addressee is ‘always listening’ too.”<sup>86</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the trope of a future reader in Anthropocene narratives in particular see Pieter Vermeulen, “Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene,” in *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (2017): 867–885. Doi: [10.1080/0950236X.2017.1323459](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1323459).
- <sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of the art project, see the website Katie Paterson, “Future Library,” accessed February 15, 2023, <<https://www.futurelibrary.no/>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, “The Booklet,” Future Library, accessed February 18, 2023, <[https://assets.ctfassets.net/9sa97ciu3rb2/2hdAyLOYmESc0eYemIEcm2/09772ac1c62defc7ccf50fe6ea207a83/Margaret\\_Atwood.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/9sa97ciu3rb2/2hdAyLOYmESc0eYemIEcm2/09772ac1c62defc7ccf50fe6ea207a83/Margaret_Atwood.pdf)>.
- <sup>4</sup> Atwood, “The Booklet.”
- <sup>5</sup> Historically, epistolary narratives have been defined as narratives written in letter form. In this article, I use a broader understanding of epistolarity that draws on Liz Stanley’s concept of “letterness” that opens the possibility of examining other forms of interpersonal writing as epistolary. For a more detailed account of Stanley’s definition of epistolarity, see Liz Stanley, “The Death of the Letter? Epistolary Intent, Letterness and the Many Ends of Letter-Writing,” in *Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 2 (2015): 240–255. Doi: [10.1177/1749975515573267](https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975515573267).
- <sup>6</sup> Atwood, “The Booklet.”
- <sup>7</sup> Atwood, “The Booklet.”
- <sup>8</sup> Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (London: Corsair, 2018 [2017]), 31.
- <sup>9</sup> Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (London: Corsair, 2018 [2017]), 31.
- <sup>10</sup> Atwood, “The Booklet.”
- <sup>11</sup> Silvia Martinez-Falquina, “Feminist Dystopia and Reality in Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* and Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks*,” *The European Legacy* 26, no. 3–4 (2021): 270–286. doi: [10.1080/10848770.2021.1878634](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1878634); Anna Kembell, “Biocolonial Pregnancies: Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” *Med Humanit* 48 (2022): 159–168. Doi: [10.1136/med-hum-2021-012250](https://doi.org/10.1136/med-hum-2021-012250).
- <sup>12</sup> Silvia Martinez-Falquina, “Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*: Uncertainty, Proleptic Mourning and Relationality in Native Dystopia,” *Atlantis* 41, no. 2 (2019): 161–178, here: 174–175. Doi: [10.28914/Atlantis-2019-41.2.08](https://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2019-41.2.08).
- <sup>13</sup> Julia Siepak, “Dimensions of Decolonial Future in Contemporary Indigenous Speculative Fiction: Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* and Rebecca Roanhorse’s *Trail of Light*,” *ANGLICA* 29, no. 1 (2020): 57–74, here: 59.
- <sup>14</sup> Siepak, “Dimensions of Decolonial Future,” 59, 72.
- <sup>15</sup> Bridgitte Barclay, “‘My Heart Slowly Cracks’: Making Kin and Living through Extinction in Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” in *Fiction and the Sixth Mass Extinction: Narrative in an Era of Loss*, ed. Jonathan Elmore (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 67–86, here: 102.
- <sup>16</sup> Barclay, “‘My Heart Slowly Cracks,’” 97.
- <sup>17</sup> Barclay, “‘My Heart Slowly Cracks,’” 114.
- <sup>18</sup> Kristen Shaw, “Reproductive Futurism, Indigenous Futurism, and the (Non)Human to Come in Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” in *Technologies of Feminist Speculative Fiction: Gender, Artificial Life, and the Politics of Reproduction*, eds. Sherryl Vint and Sumeyra Bu-

- ran (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 321–344, here: 341.
- 19 Shaw, “Reproductive Futurism,” 341.
- 20 Kaylee Jangula Mootz, “The Body and the Archive in Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 31, no. 2 (2020): 263–276, here: 268.
- 21 Mootz, “The Body and the Archive in Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” 271.
- 22 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 3.
- 23 Linda. S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 228.
- 24 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 90.
- 25 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 4.
- 26 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 90.
- 27 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 92.
- 28 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 105.
- 29 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 258.
- 30 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 4.
- 31 Martinez-Falquina, “Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” 165.
- 32 Martinez-Falquina, “Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*,” 165.
- 33 Ruth Franklin, “A Timely Novel of Anti-Progress by Louise Erdrich,” in *The New York Times*, November 21, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/21/books/review/louis-erdrich-future-home-of-the-living-god.html>>.
- 34 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 3.
- 35 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 3.
- 36 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 62.
- 37 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 63.
- 38 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 125, 136.
- 39 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 92.
- 40 It is important to note here that historically notebooks and diaries were personal writings that were often used for interpersonal communication. One example is the genre of mothers’ legacies. For more detailed information of the genre and its purpose, see Jennifer Heller, *The Mother’s Legacy in Early Modern England* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 41 Richard Wagamese, *For Joshua: An Ojibwe Father Teachers His Son* (Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2020 [2002]), E-book, n.p.
- 42 Wagamese, *For Joshua: An Ojibwe Father Teachers His Son*.
- 43 Wagamese, *For Joshua: An Ojibwe Father Teachers His Son*.
- 44 Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2010 [2003]), 5; 32; 61; 89; 116; 146.
- 45 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 171.
- 46 For an account of the significance of women storytellers in Indigenous cultures in particular see Ana Belén Pérez García, “Female Native American Storytellers and Contemporary Native American Women Writers: Leslie Marmon Silko,” *The Grove: Working Papers on English Studies* 22 (2015): 121–133. Doi: [10.17561/grove.v0i22.2701](https://doi.org/10.17561/grove.v0i22.2701).

- 47 The Indigenous worldview expands the Western understanding of dialogue and relations often highlighted in epistolary narratives as dialogical and interpersonal. As Richard Wagamese explains, one of “the father’s responsibilities” in Ojibwe culture is to explain to his child that they are “a brother or a sister to everything and that there was no need to fear anything because they were all relations.” The Ojibwe understanding of relations opens to other kinds of encounters.
- 48 Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 117.
- 49 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 88.
- 50 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 88.
- 51 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 3.
- 52 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 3.
- 53 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 246.
- 54 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 5.
- 55 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 122.
- 56 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 118.
- 57 Liz Stanley, “The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences,” in *Auto/Biography* 12, no. 3 (2004): 201–235, here: 208. Doi: [10.1191/0967550704ab0140a](https://doi.org/10.1191/0967550704ab0140a).
- 58 Stanley, “The Epistolarium,” 208.
- 59 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 63.
- 60 Stanley, “The Epistolarium,” 208.
- 61 Stanley, “The Epistolarium,” 208.
- 62 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 49–50.
- 63 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 124.
- 64 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 127.
- 65 Altman, *Epistolarity*, 118.
- 66 Laura Völkle and Nico Wettmann, “The Process of Pregnancy: Paradoxical Temporalities of Prenatal Entities,” in *Human Studies* 44 (2021): 595–614, here: 596.
- 67 Völkle and Wettmann, “The Process of Pregnancy,” 596.
- 68 Völkle and Wettmann, “The Process of Pregnancy,” 596–597, 605.
- 69 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 50.
- 70 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.
- 71 Mark Riftik, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.
- 72 Riftik, *Beyond Settler Time*, 2.
- 73 Riftik, *Beyond Settler Time*, 2.
- 74 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 265.
- 75 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 239.
- 76 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 5.
- 77 Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 5.

- <sup>78</sup> Kyle P. Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crisis,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 224–242, here: 228–229. Doi: [10.1177/2514848618777621](https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621).
- <sup>79</sup> Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene,” 229.
- <sup>80</sup> Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene,” 229.
- <sup>81</sup> Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene,” 229.
- <sup>82</sup> Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 185.
- <sup>83</sup> Völkle and Wettmann, “The Process of Pregnancy,” 609.
- <sup>84</sup> Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 185.
- <sup>85</sup> Margaret Atwood, “The Booklet.”
- <sup>86</sup> Stanley, “The Epistolarium,” 208.