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“Get in Touch with Mother”: *Future Home of the Living God* and a New Leper Village

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Future Home of the Living God by Louise Erdrich clearly establishes themes of total control and the restriction of women’s autonomy through the course of the novel. Though there is limited scholarship available, critics have read Louise Erdrich’s novel as a commentary on proleptic mourning and relationality (Martínez-Falquina), or to exemplify the importance of Native authors writing about their experiences (Mootz). These scholars interpret the novel as a metaphor for an overlying connectedness, either between the author and audience or the characters with each other. While this analysis is worthwhile, I fill a gap in the research by highlighting the isolation in the novel, specifically as it relates to the heavy surveillance present throughout. This society allegedly elevates women, but actually isolates them through oppressive surveillance technologies to maintain control. Read in light of Foucault's concept of the “leper” and the “panopticon” from *Discipline and Punish*, Erdrich's novel shows that Foucaultian power structures further oppress marginalized groups such as women of color.

Michel Foucault theorizes about established structures of power used to monitor and exclude people that a society perceives as threatening. Within this metaphor, he compares leprosy people to the marginalized and excluded in modern society. Medieval leprosy people were sent to live outside of the village and mark themselves as unclean for the benefit of the group. Foucault argues that this enables oppression, saying, “On the one hand, the lepers are treated as plague victims; the tactics of individualizing disciplines are imposed on the excluded; and, on the other hand, the universality of disciplinary controls makes it possible to brand the 'leper' and to bring into play against him the dualistic mechanisms of exclusion” (Foucault 199). This concept creates an “us versus them” mentality to push certain people out of society. In modern day, power structures such as religion, medicine, or surveillance systems are used to maintain binaries and eliminate threats. In *Future Home of the Living God*, the people in power tell the women that they are a part of the village, working together to outcast the “leper,” in this case the de-evolution issue as a whole. In actuality, the women are themselves the lepers, and the people in power are gaining their trust in order to get what they want. In the metaphor of the leper and the village, the village wants the leper gone. In a revival of this idea, the village of *Future Home* wants to utilize their lepers to develop a vaccine: to counter the de-evolution of the human race by birthing more babies with the same genetic makeup as from before this de-evolution.

One way that the government attempts this measure is through heavy surveillance, akin to Foucault’s Panopticon. In the Panopticon, prisoners are made to think that a guard surveys all of the prisoners at once, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). Put simply, it prevents anyone from doing anything wrong because they are constantly afraid of being caught. This model is used to eliminate threats and prune a society so only the most well behaved succeed. In addition, it calls for self-policing such as turning themselves in if they pose a threat to their community.

Foucault’s society is organized around a scapegoat, where a person is named a threat and everyone else gives roles out in order to eliminate that threat. The book of Leviticus defines a scapegoat as a goat used as “a sin offering...presented alive before the Lord to make atonement

over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel” (*English Standard Version*, Leviticus 16:8-10). The animal of sacrifice was burdened with the sins of the people, then sent into the wilderness to represent those sins being cast out from the village. It was meant as performance: the members of society watch an innocent animal pay for their sins as they will watch Christ do the same. Foucault identifies the folly of scapegoating in *Discipline and Punish*, saying that the spectacle of chain gangs showed “the scapegoat that is struck as it is chased away... the play of truth and infamy, the procession of notoriety and shame, invective against the guilty who have been unmasked and, on the other hand, the joyous avowal of crimes” (Foucault 259). People blamed for the actions of others, often due to their expedience, are not the only ones hurt. The society that blames them becomes polar: hating the wrongdoings of the weak, but at the same time openly claiming crimes of their own with no backlash. Although the pregnant women in the novel are not blamed for the genetic de-evolution, they have been burdened with solving it through governmental use of their bodies without their consent, taking on the role of the replacement scapegoat in the revival of this idea.

When searching for the Panopticon and scapegoat in Erdrich’s novel, it is clear that Mother fulfills the former. Readers see this after Phil smashes the computer and it still pleads, “‘We don’t seem to be communicating very well... Please get in touch with Mother. Please get in touch,’ it says, in pieces on the floor” (Erdrich 186), and the line immediately following, “They have us,” (Erdrich 189), once she is taken. Cedar being captured immediately after denying the computer information proves that it has a way of surveying the women in order to maintain control over them. Women will not be able to escape or hide - even through an unusable computer, Mother will know where they are. This is not the only source of surveillance in the novel. The government clearly believes that a higher power surveys them, evident by the streets being named after Bible verses (Erdrich 158), and the title sign predicting the landing place of God (Erdrich 19). The hospital clearly views God as the ultimate panopticon to inspire self-policing. Cedar reflects that “It isn’t hard to get a Bible in this place. Even the Slider approves my request and smiles thinly as she hands over The Zondervan Compact Reference Bible” (Erdrich 215-216). This is a part of the self-policing authority framework - for people to regulate themselves based on the rules laid out by the Bible. Phil also seems to believe that a higher power ultimately surveys them, which readers discover when Cedar said she “asked who was in charge. Phil said God. I said that was the most terrifying thing I’d ever heard and he said, ‘Yeah, me too. That’s why I bought the Bushmaster’” (Erdrich 137). The government surveys its people through drones, as well. Cedar attempts to hide from one, saying, “Then something flickers around me, a tiny bird, clicking and whirring. And a transparent oval floats past my clasped fingers... [I] keep the blanket around me and fall stiffly into the car. I already know what’s happened. I’ve been seen” (Erdrich 359). The society of Erdrich’s novel is always watching, and always for the purpose of regulating the population’s behavior.

However, surveillance finds its root in places far deeper than the sentient computer or religious beliefs of the characters. Stephanie Hammer reflects on sci-fi technological absence in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which holds strong similarities to Erdrich’s novel, saying, “this apparent technological absence... is not what it appears to be. Instead, a very different kind of technology is at work here-insidious because it is at once invisible and all pervasive-and that is, very simply, the technology of power which Michel Foucault has called discipline” (Hammer 45). Though this commentary was made on Atwood’s novel, the same reigns true for *Future Home*. Hammer goes on to say that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and novels like it “warn us of the imperceptible technology of power, of the subtle domination of women by men, and of our

unconscious imprisoning of each other and ourselves by ourselves” (Hammer 47). The issue of dystopia is not that an outside threat tunnels in, but rather that humans continually exercise power over the weak in their own burrow. Ultimately, the topic of discourse is inconsequential so long as maintaining the argument also maintains an imbalance of power. Foucault says that the prison riots of his time are about “it’s very materiality as an instrument and vector of power; it is this whole technology of power over the body, that the technology of the 'soul' - that of the educationalists, psychologists and psychiatrists - fails either to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it is one of its tools” (Foucault 30). Foucault argues that discipline, punishment, and surveillance transcend from the school yard to the jail yard; it is an invisible technology that perpetuates imbalance. Though *Future Home* is not sci-fi in the way of having advanced technology, it remains dystopian by showing Foucaultian structures of power that control society in much the same way that technology would control a sci-fi world. Though actual technology, artificial intelligence, and religious power structures are at play, the most dangerous technology in the novel is the imbalance of power.

The patriarchal society in *Future Home* cycles between elevating and isolating women in order to oppress them. First, the women are given a special role that only they can fulfill to make them feel important to the cause. This is seen when Mother first requests that Cedar turn herself in, saying, "They failed to destroy Mother. I will always be here for you... I wonder if you have the courage to save the country we love. We need you to be a Patriot. We need you to volunteer. If you are a woman, if you are pregnant, go to any of our Future Home Reception Centers" (140-141). In addition, even calling herself Mother is meant to invoke a familial sense of loyalty that might make the women want to come out of hiding. Mother claims to *need* the women, not for herself but for the betterment of the nation as a whole. When in the Stillwater facility, the staff says, “Women are powerful... women are heroes, Superheroes, in fact. I care about each and every one of you one hundred percent and forever” (Erdrich 397). This manipulation through the form of compliments and love bombing is an attempt to distract and sway the women who were just kidnapped.

They also appeal to women of color’s maternal instincts, emphasizing the priorities to preserve the well-being of the babies. Cedar hears this sentiment targeted specifically towards women of color on the radio, when the woman on the other end said that they “took the leftovers. The embryos not labeled Caucasian. We’re going to have them all and keep them all. All are sacred” (141). The promise to be there for the women listening is a manipulation tactic to make them feel as though the people in power have the women’s best interests in mind. These embryos are clearly not prioritized, even being referred to as the embryos that were left over after the Caucasian babies were taken. This is another example of the government cycling between elevating and isolating women of color. They first demean women of color’s role by prioritizing the white babies, but also assure the women that all are sacred. It is clear that this manipulation works in some respects because of the role of Bernice. When meeting Bernice, Cedar said that she was “either...a very good person and incredibly deluded, or else she is completely evil” (Erdrich 194). Cedar sees Bernice, another woman of color, as having to either be evil or stupid in order to side with the government. Her response shows a tendency to see women of color as a monolithic group in their response to governmental oppression.

However, if the women do not fall for this false illusion of choice, they are forced to participate in the leper role to find a solution regardless. When hiding for their freedom, the women are forced into isolation in much the same way as Foucault’s original leper. Foucault says that the hatred of the leper causes the village to put their differences aside and divide roles up amongst

themselves in order to outcast them effectively. As Foucault explains, “Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, and organization in-depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power” (Foucault 198). This method is used in the novel by the new government, when Phil points out that “They’re offering rewards now for anyone who turns in a pregnant neighbor, acquaintance, family member, whatever. There’s billboards. Ads up on lampposts. It’s true” (Erdrich 133). When it becomes clear that the leper cannot be convinced that they are needed, the village must work together to hunt them down. Cedar is caught and taken to the hospital to be used as a womb warrior. In a revival of the leper/village analogy, where the leper is used as a vaccine, the new government switches between elevating the women’s importance and roles in the new society, to then removing their autonomy in a total show of power. This ultimately leads to further oppression of women of color and further advancement of those already in power.

The novel has a clear theme of the restriction of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. Dorothy Roberts contests that women of color are often portrayed “only as victims of population control policies. It assumes that...women of color play no part in the politics of reproductives, except by their exclusion or exploitation” (Roberts 785). Society often depicts women of color solely as victims of policies related to controlling population growth. Andrea Smith came to a similar conclusion, when a woman she knew was asked what she thought about reproductive rights and she answered, “Who cares about reproductive rights; we don't have any rights, period” (Smith 135), Smith followed this anecdote by saying:

What her response suggests is that a reproductive justice agenda must make the dismantling of capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism central to its agenda, and not just as principles added to organizations' promotional material designed to appeal to women of color, with no budget to support making these principles a reality (Smith 135)

The culprit behind women of color being targeted by the pro-life and pro-choice movements alike is not the women, but capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. Ultimately, this reduces them to victims rather than allowing them to play a role in shaping reproductive politics. This is reflected throughout the novel as women are not trusted to take control of their own reproduction.

Erdrich’s novel shows that these theories and power structures are not effective at maintaining order or safety for marginalized groups. Women of color are not only suffering themselves, but as the leper in the village, they are forced to bear the burden of others suffering. Readers see this when Phil returns and reveals he was tortured into revealing Cedar’s location. Cedar reflects on Phil’s admission of sacrifice, saying “Someone in this world will always be suffering on your behalf. If it comes your time to suffer, just remember. Someone suffered for you. That is what taking on a cloak of human flesh is all about, the willingness to hurt for another human being” (Erdrich 376). Not only are the women stripped of *their* bodily autonomy; they must also commiserate for the people tortured on their behalf. She explicitly connects this to the pain of childbirth. Rather than finding a way to terminate the pregnancy, she chooses to continue her pregnancy and suffer on her child’s behalf, even framing it in religious language like the incarnation. With Cedar’s initiative, it is clear that Erdrich believes women of color should be agents in their own reproduction, rather than passive victims that are acted upon. The Foucaultian model of society does not leave room for the leper to respond, Erdrich’s novel does.

Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* shows that Foucaultian structures of power oppress women of color. By examining the Panopticon and the leper and the village, a clear parallel appears. The women in the novel represent the leper, and the society is the village that

outcasts them. However, in this revival of the Foucaultian idea, the women are burdened with the responsibility of saving the village rather than fully being exiled. The Panopticon is clear within the story as well, with the women constantly being surveyed by technology, artificial intelligence, religion, and the government. Not only are the women of color in the novel forced to be the solution to this society's reproductive apocalypse, but they must also shoulder the burden of knowing that if they do not comply, others will suffer on their behalf. The importance of this analysis lies in the modern connotations of reproductive politics, mass over-surveillance, and scapegoating women of color. The novel, through Foucaultian power structures, reflects real life power structures that are used to oppress women of color.

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