

Women's Rights and Religious Bias in Dystopian Speculative Fiction: A Closer Look at Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox*

by

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May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Speculative fiction provides a perfect vehicle to examine the state of women's rights. Through the Intersectional Feminist lens, I consider the speculative projections within Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Christine Dalcher's *Vox*, as well as the impact that religious doctrines have on the possible outcomes the books illustrate. I use recent events to illustrate the type of contemporary actions that influenced Erdrich and Dalcher in their writing.

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Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox*

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2022

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I dedicate this paper to my daughters – Noelle, Autumn, and Amethyst – and my granddaughters – Mariah, Olivia, Lillyanna, Jazlynne, and Emory – may their voices never be silenced. And to my son, Taylor, and grandson, Omar – may you always support the sovereignty of women’s rights and voices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Rick Taylor for his guidance during my time in the Multicultural and Transnational Literature graduate program.

I would also like to thank Dr. Maramé Gueye for stepping in to provide me support as my Director of Thesis. Dr. Gueye inspired me to reach deeper into myself in class as well as during the process of writing this thesis.

I could not have completed writing my thesis paper without the assistance of my editing and proofreading team. I want to thank Bryan Headrick for jumping in to help and for believing in my work. I want to thank Dennes Sims – my friend since high school – his insight, knowledge, and encouragement helped me keep going when I thought I couldn't.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Richard Travers, for every bit of support he has given me. His confidence in my abilities to finish both my Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees has been invaluable. I want to thank him for spending long hours listening to me talk about every book and article, for being the first eyes to proofread my every paper, and for understanding when I locked myself away to study and write.

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Chapter I

Women's Voices in Speculative Literature

Throughout literary history, female authors' works were deigned merely "women's fiction," lumped together as a single genre and considered less-than their male counterparts. Further, there is a misconception that all successful women authors published under male pseudonyms. While it is true that some did, such as the Bronte sisters, most women used their own names – think Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. White male dominance is not only well-known, but often challenged. Nearly all movements for civil rights are attempts to remove the white-male-standard requirement for those rights. The fight for women's rights and recognition has not always been applied equally, with white women receiving most of the recognition over women of color. This standard is reflected in the delay women authors experienced gaining acceptance into literary canon, more so with women of color. The term "intersectional feminism" used to describe this dynamic was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Since then, feminist authors have made a concerted effort to ensure recognition and inclusion of every woman in the issues that affect them all.

Historically, feminism purported to be a movement for all women, but in practice this was not the case. Until the women's movement of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the focus of women's rights was visibly centered on white women. Literary studies on female authors were comprised of limited academic criticism on women's literature in general and of women of color in particular. Over the centuries since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was first published, few female writers of speculative fiction have been acknowledged compared to the abundance of male

writers. Little has been studied about the effect of female authors on society – specifically on how they advance Intersectional Feminist thought and appreciation.

As the 1960s and 70s' second wave of feminism was changing women's lives, it was clear that within the feminist ranks, not all women were treated equally. Thusly, we saw the rise of the third wave of feminism by the 1990s. Women of color were loudly demanding to be seen and heard. Intersectional feminist ideas and expectations were taking their place in the feminist canon of literature. It follows, then, that women's literary studies should take a deep look into what women authors of color have been writing about for centuries. Advancements have been made in the last thirty years or so since the advent of this third wave of feminism. Today we benefit from the body of literary criticism designed specifically for literature by women. Theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Roxane Gay, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw have given us the foundation on which we build these studies.

Before Mary Shelley put pen to paper and created Frankenstein's Monster out of a dream in 1818, there were women who wrote stories that, in today's world, would fit under the science fiction and fantasy umbrella as utopian and dystopian subgenres. Margaret Cavendish wrote *The Blazing World* (1666), a story about "a utopian kingdom that is only accessible via the North Pole" (Brubaker SDU). Using the pen name Francis Stevens, Gertrude Barrow Bennett published her novel, *Citadel of Fear*, a century after Shelley's *Frankenstein* was first published. Barrows is "generally considered to be the creator of 'dark fantasy'" (Brubaker).

The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction's webpage avers that, "After such a strong start [with Shelley's *Frankenstein*] women's contributions to the genre, while never entirely absent, were not substantial until the late 1960s." Lisa Yaszek holds a slightly different view. As a professor of science fiction studies at Georgie Tech, Yaszek teaches her students there were

more female science fiction authors and readers than were previously believed. According to Yaszek, “at least 15 percent of the science fiction community were women – producers – and reading polls suggest that 40 to 50 percent of the readers were women” (Barr Kirtley). She also believes that when the first science fiction anthologies emerged there was a pushback in response to the early feminist wave and women were intentionally left out and ignored. But in the 1960s and 70s women were not willing to quietly sit on the sidelines and pretend they weren’t in the game. Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, and Octavia Butler were three of these women who would push their way through the wall and show the speculative fiction fans that women had much to say about their place in the community. Fiction can serve as a vehicle for educating society at large. Stories set in the unknown future, or an alternate reality can be used as a platform to highlight not only the negative interactions with people of other races but also to showcase the fortitude of people who advocate for the change of the status quo.

Science fiction is an organic genre, moving and growing as it encapsulates elements from other genres to create even more sub-genres under the science fiction umbrella, such as speculative fiction. Evidence of the “males only” club in speculative fiction was apparent from the beginning. The fact that this image persevered is astonishing, given that speculative fiction can serve as a vehicle to confront and changes societal biases. In *Modern Masters of Science Fiction*, Gerry Canavan cites a quote from Octavia Butler: “I began writing about power... because I had so little.” One example of this lack of power, or agency, came from the intersectional point where being a woman in a patriarchal society collided with being an African American in a society that has relegated people of color to the back of the bus. Because its stories often speculate on the direction human society could go, speculative fiction acts alternatively as cautionary tales and blueprints for avoiding possible dystopian downfalls. Thus,

it is the perfect genre for showcasing intersectional feminist values and goals and, through these words, society is afforded the opportunity to become informed.

Certainly, there have been noteworthy women speculative fiction authors throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, as stated previously, their recognized numbers are a small percentage of the whole. Their noteworthiness lies in both the factors of their gender as well as their ability to compose fantastic stories. Too often, there has been astonishment when a woman shows her capacity to pen novels that compel men to read them. While these women can (and do) use these tales to advance feminist agendas and influence men to rethink their views on the female experience, at times there appears to be a belief that these authors still need to be circumspect else they run the risk of alienating those who balk at the idea that women still experience systemic abuse that favors men over women.

Throughout history, literary critics have dismissed prose written by women as falling short of true literature. Darko Suvin coined the term “paraliterature” to define the popular, low, or plebian literary production. (Tucker 364). Per Delany: paraliterature is the generic Other against whom literature defines itself. “Just as (discursively) homosexuality exists largely to delimit heterosexuality and to lend it a false sense of definition, paraliterature exists to delimit literature and provide it with an equally false sense of itself” (Delany “The Para-doxa interview” 205). For example, Men (the Standard) vs Women (the Other) or White (the Standard) vs Black (the Other). This false sense creates a hierarchy in literature at-large and within genre-specific writing. In this vein, there must be an Other, placed in a lower tier to venerate the standard against which to define the embodiment of the higher, more perfect, idolization of the standard. “... despite the recent language about ‘post-racialism,’ the color-line persists as a problem to be confronted as often in the twenty-first century as it had in the twentieth” (Tucker 374).

While many cultural traditions have historically held women in high esteem, contemporary societies seem to have forgotten the importance of women as leaders, inspirers, and heads of the family and community. “The palimpsestic narratives overlay and emphasize patriarchal scorn for women” (Decker FPU). Somehow, they were reduced to people whose only jobs were to procreate and take care of the family. Historically, women have been the primary caregivers, raising children with minimal assistance from the men in the house. Only the poorest women would be seen working, and even then, their jobs were often extensions of what they did at home: sewing, selling food they baked or grew at home, laundresses, and cleaning other people’s homes. Only the rare woman was able to rise and use talents that were considered too masculine. Sometimes, women chose to simply avoid the suspicion and used masculine sounding *nom de plumes*, such as the Brontë sisters, who chose the names Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell.

Along with women’s career constrictions, were misunderstandings regarding their physical ailments. Because the male doctors never suffered from these conditions, they ascribed mental health diagnoses to misunderstood conditions of the female body. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s widely read story “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an early example of feminist writing. As such, it highlights the nineteenth-century treatment most often given for what we now know as post-partum depression, the “rest cure” (Oakley). Too often, this treatment made the problem worse, as Gilman illustrated. Through this story, medical curiosity regarding women’s health and understanding their physiology finally gained some traction. Doctors, who were overwhelmingly male, began to give their female patients’ complaints the attention they needed, a needed boon for women’s health that came at a cost. To learn more about the female body, physicians needed to explore women’s anatomy up close. This was accomplished by using black women as experimental subjects, usually without consent for their “contributions” to the advancement of

the new field of gynecology. Today's female population can simultaneously show these women the respect they did not receive in their own time; appreciate the horrors they went through; and curse the doctors for their tortuous and inhumane treatment of these souls.

Gradually, women started raising their voices, banding together to demand society recognize their worth and contributions outside of home and hearth. Literature began to reflect this change toward women's suffrage. In the early 1960s, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* as a middle-class (mostly white) response to the standard that a woman's place is in the home raising children, keeping house, and taking care of her husband. Friedan found that most women were unhappy and feeling unfulfilled in their lives. Many of those women earned college degrees they never used. At the end of the 1950s and early 60s, the women's rights movement received a swift kick and reboot.

Much as this activism moved society closer to a semblance of equality, within the female population there was still a hierarchy to the amount of respect conferred upon them. To this day, white women receive more privilege and respect because society has been taught to believe in a natural superiority of all white people above every other race across the globe. During the days of slavery, black women were the ones washing, cooking, and cleaning for the white landowners. Several novels brought this issue into mainstream literature, including such works as the nineteenth-century *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the mid-1930s *Gone with the Wind*, and the 1976 novel *Roots* by Alex Haley. Slavery was prevalent across the United States, a still-nascent country with much to learn about the people living within and without its borders, such as the indigenous people who populated the land long before any Europeans arrives at its shores. To many of the new arrivals, these indigenous people were uneducated, illiterate, unintelligent savages to be conquered, confined, or taught, as the needs of the white people dictated.

Consensus holds that even after emancipation, African American men were still treated as second-class citizens. Native American men were the contacts and speakers for their tribes, not truly considered citizens of the United States, even as the country grew around and through them. Eventually, the white male population created schools to send the sons and, to a lesser extent, the daughters of the “savages” to teach them how to conduct themselves in the white society who were taking over their lands, homes, and way of life. The sons and daughters of the former slaves were not afforded even this consideration. They were banned from attending classes with their white counterparts. Eventually, the African American community would create their own schools, one of which was the Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers (later renamed as Tuskegee University). Booker T. Washington was its first principal and his vision for the school was to expand its original mission from solely teaching its students to be educators for the rest of their communities to teaching its students how to be self-reliant – including ideas ranging from personal hygiene to agricultural practices. Regardless of their race, most students in elementary, high school, or higher education were male. Despite the odd girl who made it into the classroom, women were often kept uneducated and illiterate.

Beginning with their ancestors’ abduction from their African homes to serve as slaves for Europeans around the world through the American Civil War and the fight for their equal rights, the African American Experience could be written as dystopian fiction. Yet one would be hard-pressed to call it fiction since it was and still is reality for the vast majority of African Americans. There is nothing to speculate about and little is necessary to create from one’s imagination. The only fiction within such stories is as it pertains to creating a character from scratch, but the actions and situation are not simply real, they are horrifying to a compassionate

and empathetic person. Creating fiction from these stories serves as a vehicle of education for society at large.

Speculative fiction authors can take intersectional feminism and craft stories recognizing that racism and anti-feminism converge to further marginalize non-white women in both social movements. Intersectional feminist critical theory endeavors to acknowledge these women's experiences to rectify their inequality in society. One method for bringing about this awareness is through social gatherings, such as rallies and parades. Another is through literature via unexpected genres. By the fact that it is dominated by mostly white men, speculative fiction is ripe for social justice novels by looking at possible futures through the intersectional feminist lens.

In *Mapping the Margins*, Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote, "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend differences... but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (1242). Within any group lies people of difference: different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientation, interests, education, class, etc. Instead of ignoring these differences, they should be celebrated and welcomed into the fold. Historically, feminism paid lip service to women of color, relegating them to the margins with promises that their day would come. For the first hundred years or so that women formally came together to advance the cause of women's rights, the movement was centered on white middle-class women. Issues for women of color began to be recognized in the mid-twentieth century. But change moved slowly. Kimberlé Crenshaw used the term "intersectionality" to point to the fact that women in the feminist movement were multidimensional beings, not cardboard replicas of each other. This idea of multilayered, multifaceted women brought into sharp focus the fact that only a portion of the issues women face was being addressed. Certainly, all women face some of the same

exclusionary issues – such as, unequal pay and sexual harassment – but within this context were problems that only some of the women faced, primarily racism and economic depression.

Crenshaw stated that her focus on the “intersection of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Acknowledging women of different backgrounds, races, classes, etc. should not diminish the experiences of one woman over another. Instead, this should shine on the rich tapestry of women within the feminist movement. Too often, white middle-class women have been positioned as the standard set for various policies intended to assist women in need or to identify issues within women’s lives.

Intersectional theory allows us to view social, economic, gender, or physical inequities from the standpoint of two or more marginalized or suppressed groups. For instance, in *Future Home of the Living God*, Erdrich showcases what could happen if the government takes control of women’s reproductive lives, as well as the marginalization of Native Americans in society. In *Vox*, Dalcher also highlights an act of the government controlling a woman’s body by curtailing her right to speak. This act places a woman at an economic disadvantage. Because they are only allowed to speak up to one hundred words per day, women are effectively blocked from holding down a job, much less having careers. In her article about N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*, Suzanne Moore wrote that “(w)omen’s bodies, their lives, their choices are expressed with nuance and sensitivity and no one identity is prioritized over the other.”

In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous threw the sex of the author aside and focused on the sex of the *writing* instead. Women have subtly and overtly been taught to write with a masculine voice, because femininity is construed as weak. Erdrich and Dalcher write from women’s point of view, showing that the feminine voice does not have to equate to stories about

weak women who need saving. They illustrate how women show their resilience and strength daily.

Anger is seen as an emotion of the powerful. In terms of gendered emotion, anger is the purview of men and boys. Women and girls who show anger are viewed as being overly emotional. In *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*, Soraya Chemaly states, “[a]nger is an ‘approach’ emotion, while sadness is a ‘retreat’ emotion” (5). Sadness is more commonly attributed to woman and girls, as opposed to men and boys. By reclaiming their right to be angry, women become agents to direct the necessary changes to oppression they experience at the hands of others. In contemporary society this oppression appears primarily as the loss of a woman’s right to make decisions for herself without the interference of government or conservative right-wing Christians.

Women who strive to be more than the scripturally prescribed woman, subconsciously subsume their femininity in deference to acting more masculine. This “mask” is employed to advance in a society dominated by white men. This thought process culminates with woman-thought (whether vocalized or internal) that they are not girly-girls, as if being a girl is an inferior position to be in. “Look! I’m not so much of a girl, I can keep up with men” is a thought-process that pushes girly-girls to the bottom while elevating and strengthening the patriarchal standard as the goal to attain. Society teaches us, women must act more masculine to advance in their careers. However, these behaviors come with a caveat: women who show their masculine side and that they can “play with the Big Boys” are labeled as overbearing and aggressive when standing their ground, standing up for themselves, or simply expecting an equal footing as their male counterparts (Dimmit, Kray).

Stories set in the unknown future or alternate reality can be used as a platform to highlight not only the negative interactions with people of other races but also to showcase the fortitude of people who change the status quo. I will be discussing stories by Louise Erdrich and Christina Dalcher, and how they can inspire women to effect change without losing the ground we have already gained.

Louise Erdrich included in *Future Home* feminist issues that include women's agency and their right to choose their own path in life from the viewpoint of a Native American woman who has just begun her journey into her ancestry and motherhood. Erdrich's parents came from very different ethnic backgrounds: her mother was a Chippewa Indian and her father was German American. As part of the first class that included women, Erdrich graduated with her B.A. from Dartmouth in 1976. She then went on to complete her M.A. at Johns Hopkins in 1979. Since then, Erdrich has published several volumes of poetry, along with short stories and full-length novels. She taps into her Native American heritage and experiences as a woman in many of her works, including *Future Home of the Living God*. In *Future Home*, Erdrich puts forth a dystopian view of what might come to pass if the government were to take control of women's bodies and reproductive choices from the viewpoint of the protagonist, twenty-six-year-old Cedar Hawk Songmaker. Cedar, the adopted daughter of a modern-day liberal hippie couple, unexpectedly discovers that she is pregnant, prompting her to find her birth parents and learn about the heritage from which she came. I will discuss how Erdrich's speculative novel could easily become the future of our present, how it ties into intersectional feminism, and why we should pay attention.

Christina Dalcher's background is centered squarely on linguistics, having earned her PhD in theoretical linguistics from Georgetown University. Appropriately, her novel, *Vox*, is

concerned with speech, or lack thereof. Specifically, the novel is another dystopian look at what could happen if the government takes control of the female body. However, in Dalcher's narrative, the government takes away women and girls' right to talk, eventually limiting them to a mere 100 words per day, controlled by a counter on their wrists. Much like a Fitbit keeping track of steps, these counters keep track of their words. As they close in on the daily allotment, the women and girls are given warnings; going over the allotment results in being shocked to the point of losing control of their muscles and passing out. This edict is only one of the restrictions that women face in this alternate reality, for instance, women are forced out of the workplace. I will discuss how this story is itself a warning to contemporary women to safeguard their voices and agency, how today's political climate could lead to the crisis in *Vox*, and how Dalcher's words apply to intersectional feminism.

Conservative Christians have parlayed their presence in American government to insert their biblical beliefs into others' lives. To do this, these Christians repeatedly return to Genesis, Titus, 1 Timothy, and 1 Corinthians as examples of women's place in society and how men and women are equal, but different. Both sexes are loved by God, but they have different roles that are based on gender. For example, men are expected to be leaders and providers, while women are expected to be nurturing and raise children (Anderson). I contend that while mothers love their children equally, as scripture says God loves us, acknowledging their gifts should not be restricted along gendered lines. Girls should be able to grow into women who publish their own periodicals or find a cure for aphasia that gives the silent sufferers their voices back.

It is for women who have not had a voice to procure their own agency that writers put words together, to create sentences that make up the stories about the plight of our mothers and grandmothers; sisters and cousins; daughters and granddaughters. Brave women who write for

the benefit of all, highlighting the history we came from and the possible future we are heading toward if our gains are lost, and more progress is not made. Louise Erdrich and Christina Dalcher are two authors who write about strong, resilient women who survive, thrive, and inspire others. They write for our intersectional feminist voices, urging women to continue the fight for all our equality and to remember we are important contributors to more than our local communities. We are the architects of humankind's progress.

Chapter II

Future Home of the Living God:

Appropriating Women's Bodies; Mother as Motif; and Gender-Race Inequities

Over the last two centuries, women have fought to be recognized as intelligent, productive, and essential members of society. The road to the twenty-first century was not a smooth ride and the feminist agenda was called out for not striving toward equity between white women and women of color. This inequity created walls between white women and ethnic women, causing the women of color to walk away from the movement that should have considered every woman's concerns. When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectional feminism* the feminist curtain was drawn back to expose the absence of inclusivity necessary for the movement to truly be one of and for all women. As seen through the lens of the Europeans who began inhabiting the country more than five centuries past, the traditional role of women in American society was limited to tending house, procreation, and raising children. Essentially, women's role has been a backstage Mother. Men have been the face and voice of communities across the country for most of those five centuries, spawning the phrase, "Behind every man is a good woman" and its many variations. Oppression appears in myriad forms. What was possibly intended to be complimentary toward women comes across as another way to keep women out of public venues. While still underrepresented in political arenas, women have slowly taken seats in local, state, and federal government, including the election of the country's first female and bi-racial occupant in the White House, Vice-President Kamala Harris. Feminine power is growing in the United States, but women's rights are still under attack, at times by women using religious

doctrine for their supporting tenets. The seeds eroding women's rights are being sown today and could conceivably bloom into the impending dynamic seen in *Future Home*. During the Trump administration, women not only saw the erosion of some rights and the threat of the elimination of others, but they also saw a president who was an admitted womanizer and sexual harasser in the Oval Office. During this presidential term, women came together *en masse* to peacefully demonstrate their displeasure at such a man prevailing politically. Women have had to fight for their rights for too long to simply sit back and accept the real possibility of their advances being rolled back to the mid-twentieth century "ideal" woman in the form of June Cleaver.

Released in 2017, *Future Home* made an auspicious appearance, an appropriate response to the ideology and religious doctrine making increased inroads within a political landscape determined to invade the personal lives of all American women. Louise Erdrich takes her readers to a dystopian future for the United States, where everyday life becomes surreal and the government is taken over by religious zealots. The story is told through journal entries from Cedar Hawk Songmaker to her unborn child. At the beginning of the novel, Cedar is four months pregnant, and it appears that evolution was "running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways, in a way as yet ungrasped" (Erdrich 1). Society is in the middle of some sort of biological change – evolution, devolution, or fallout from climate change – that neither scientists nor religious scholars understand. What this novel does is showcase the consequence of religion and politics on the social and private lives of women.

Appropriating Women's Bodies

We learn early in the book that Cedar's mother is Native American and Cedar has been raised by her adopted parents, who are white. In the novel, Cedar sets up a time to meet her birth mother and, on the way, she comes upon a sign that reads, "Future Home of the Living God."

This sets off existential thoughts about the future of humanity in Cedar's mind: "If it is true that every particle that I can see, and all that is living and perhaps unliving too, is trimming its sails and coming about and heading back to port, what does that mean? Where are we bound?" (Erdrich 14-5). In the context of the story, the regression of human babies also sets off a regression of women's rights, agency, and autonomy. To preserve humanity, the government (which has been taken over by religious zealots who rename the United States, calling it The Church of the New Constitution) gains control over women who have or can theoretically produce "normal" babies.

In the world of *Future Home* humankind is devolving genetically, and doing so without regard to race, ethnicity, or social class. Fewer babies are surviving birth and most who do so resemble early versions of human beings. This crisis is affecting everyone equally, consequently placing people into two camps: either the camp that is more concerned with saving the whole of humanity, or the camp filled with radical evangelists. In the Bible there are fourteen instances where God speaks to people and tells them to "be fruitful, and multiply." Twelve of these are in Genesis alone¹. Because this exhortation is said to come from God, it would be appropriate that conservative Christians would willingly follow the directive, as well as expect non-Christians to do the same. In *Future Home*, this results in a takeover of the United States Government to facilitate forcing women to become servile wombs to replenish the human population with viable people, free from whatever is causing the evolutionary fall.

That Erdrich uses religion as the justification for sanctioning the appropriation of women's bodies is not a surprise. Since *Roe v Wade*, right-wing religious factions have redoubled their effort to tell women what they cannot do with their reproductive lives. From birth

¹ Gen 1.22, 1.28, 8.17, 9.1, 9.7, 17.20, 28.3, 35.11, 47.27, 48.4; Lev 26.9; Jer 23.3

control to abortion, religious die-hards take to their bully pulpits to sermonize what they believe the Bible says about procreation. Within the last two years, several states have enacted laws that severely restrict a woman's access to a safe and legal abortion. In her book *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay discusses creating an underground network for women, giving them access to contraception and safe abortions. Erdrich created something much like this in *Future Home* by constructing a system to smuggle women, especially pregnant women, out of the U.S. and into Canada, anything to help women avoid the necessity of hiding themselves from the government. Although not everybody makes it out and we see our heroine of the story, Cedar, is caught twice.

When the reader first meets Phil, Cedar's boyfriend, he brings the revelation that women are being rounded up, thanks to a Congressional vote that gives the government the authority to "seize entire library and medical databases... to determine who is pregnant." Cedar goes on to write that the surgeon general was replaced with one who "has announced that pregnant women will be sequestered in hospitals in order to give birth under controlled circumstances" (Erdrich 82-83). They have given this a name: "female gravid detention" (Erdrich 84). Gay writes in the chapter titled *The Alienable Rights of Women*, "Too many politicians and cultural moralists are trying to define and shape the boundaries of the female body..." (Gay 274). In *Future Home*, Erdrich writes about women's reproductive rights and how the government has taken control of women's bodies, turning them into breeders when they've been discovered to have the right genes to create those babies who are expected to further the human race. To help facilitate this, a militant group raids a fertility clinic and gathers embryos still in the clinic's deep freezer. As Cedar and Phil are listening to the report on the radio a woman's voice cuts in and says, "We took the leftovers. The embryos not labeled Caucasian. We're going to have them all and keep them all" (Erdrich 105).

Once caught, women in the story are transported in retrofitted UPS trucks, renamed to reflect the Unborn Protection Society. They are confined to hospitals and repurposed prisons and reduced to a basic biological function: to propagate humanity. If, after being sequestered, a woman is unable to bear a healthy child (after a certain number of inseminations, the reader is not told what this number is) she is summarily terminated. The woman is not “fired” or “let go,” she is murdered. She becomes useless to mankind. Thusly, the other women are caught between desperately hoping for the elusive “normal” child and wishing for a way out of the nightmare.

In a very real way, the recent legislation in Texas effectively removing a woman’s right to a safe abortion is a pertinent example of a first step toward the dystopia in *Future Home*. Texan representatives and state senators designed a law to remove a woman’s inherent right to make her own decisions. In *Bad Feminist*, Gay wrote, “There is no freedom in any circumstance where the body is legislated, none at all.” Women should have the sacred right to make reproductive choices as they pertain to their own bodies. This should not be left to those politicians and biblical moralists whose individual concerns are to force everyone into conforming to their doctrinal box.

Mother as Motif

Cedar’s parents are fanatic conspiracy theorists: don’t trust the government, cell phones, or the “Man.” In 1984-esque fashion, they believe Big Brother is listening and watching everything everybody is doing. Instead of Big Brother, Erdrich imbues the novel with Mother. Mother is watching and can appear on your computer at will. In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi wrote about women authors, “... hers is a *puissance féminine* derived directly from the mother, whose giving is always suffused with strength” (Moi 113). *Future Home* is suffused with women who house this *puissance feminine* – feminine power – within themselves. How they use

it is a matter completely dependent on their goals. Erdrich directs the power in the form of mothers. Mothers are expected to be nurturing toward their children, to teach them how to survive in general society, and to pass to their daughters the knowledge of this feminine power.

This novel has different iterations of mothers. There is the traditional Mother Nature and then the government's 'Mother.' Cedar has the mother who raised her and the mother who made the difficult decision to give her up. Cedar is a mother-to-be and, regardless of what happens with her baby, she is now counted among the mother ranks. Then there are all the other mothers and potential mothers who the government kidnaps and confines.

The new government regime takes advantage of the idea that women are more likely to follow another woman's voice by creating Mother. She can appear on a computer screen and speak directly to the person at the monitor. In one of Mother's missives to Cedar, she says, "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. WV [Womb Volunteers]. Our chefs are waiting for you!" (Erdrich 104). In a chaotic world that is falling apart around them, this appeal from Mother plays on an inherent need in many people to create order. In its simplicity, this is a ploy to pull in unsuspecting women looking for stability. The women who do not succumb to this tactic are forcibly removed to either a hospital dedicated to house pregnant women, or a prison repurposed to hold "womb volunteers." In hospitals, women are given what they believe are vitamins, but in truth are drugs intended to keep them pliant and hide from them the reality of their situation. Once Agnes Starr, Cedar's first roommate after being caught, tells her to stop taking the pills, she sees not the vision of a 5-star hospital with exquisite meals but a rundown, paint-peeling, slop-feeding prison

with Stepford-nurses whose constant cheeriness borders on mania. In this circumstance, women reach deep into themselves to pull out the strength they inherited from maternal ancestors.

Meanwhile, on the reservation where Cedar's birth family lives, at the intersection where Native American beliefs and Catholicism converge, a saint has been appearing to people in a corner of the casino parking lot, "Kateri Tekakwitha, Lily of the Mohawks, patron saint of Native people" (Erdrich 24). Like a good mother, Saint Kateri was forthright and accusatory, "appear[ing] to nobody but the feckless" and admonishing them to be and do better (Erdrich 27). After Cedar's rescue from the hospital-prison, Cedar and Sera make their way back to the reservation. With society outside of the reservation in turmoil, the Ojibwe people become more organized and focused. Eddy is their new war chief, and he tells Cedar, "We are not giving up our pregnant tribal members. Our women are sacred to us" (Erdrich 273). The men do not disappear *en masse* from this new world order. Strong men stand alongside women, assisting when needed but not wresting control from them. However, weak-minded men only make abbreviated appearances in the novel, for example, Phil's itinerant presence. In Phil's initial appearance, he supported targeted women by hiding them from the Unborn Protection Society; but Phil ended his tenure in the story with an eye on a position of power. As he tells Cedar, "...you have a treasure... if our baby is normal. We would be in charge of things. Rich. Super rich!" To which she responds sarcastically, "We could seize power and found a dynasty." Phil turned the focus from the wider problem of women fighting for their agency, to what he could get out of being the father of a normal child. Personal economic power over *puissance feminine*. With her rejection of Phil's self-serving plan, Cedar retains her feminine power and (elusive) control of her life.

Gender-Race Inequities

Erdrich uses both parts of Cedar's identity to examine the effects of social change on both White and Native Americans. Erdrich has taken the reality in *Future Home* and reversed the positions, in a way. The opening pages center the reader in Cedar's world, to understand what it is like to reside in a culture that you cannot completely own because of being viewed as Other. Cedar is the adopted daughter of Sera and Glen Songmaker and is having a crisis of self – she had created a romanticized image of her Native American origins and she is now contemplating meeting her birth mother. We learn that prior to the onset of the novel, Cedar had no desire to meet her biological family. To do so would shatter her idealized version of her origins. Becoming pregnant changed that position. Being a white woman is not the benchmark of desirability; in fact, being a woman of color places a woman at the forefront. Furthermore, the ability to conceive and give birth to biracial children are the qualities that this government covets.

In the story, Cedar attends an ultrasound appointment to check on her baby's health. Everything seems to be going well, with the exception that neither the doctor nor the assistants will address her directly. Suddenly, the doctor tells his assistants, "We've got one" (Erdrich 57). Only then does he assure Cedar that her baby is perfect, while also telling her that they need to keep her there. As soon as the assistants have left the room, the doctor's demeanor changes, and he tells Cedar to hurry up and get dressed. The doctor tells Cedar to tape him to the chair and asks her if she has any special ethnicity. After telling him she is Native American, he asks if the father of her baby is white. "As milk," she replies. "Then get the hell out of here," he tells her. This is the first overt example of how society's devolution is reductive toward women, attempting to claim their bodies, and basing it, at least in part, on racial lines.

To understand what inequities Native American women experience, we need to acknowledge that their concerns, first and foremost, lie in their Native American communities. As a group, the European colonizers did far more damage to these Native Nations than taking land and spreading diseases that killed Native people. They insisted on forcing them to adopt European gender roles. While contemporary Native women experience gendered expectations regarding their roles in American society, their primary concern lies in regaining knowledge of their culture, suppressed beneath Native American oppression. Most of these presumptive positions are experienced in White American society. Native women have, for many generations, been subjected to forced sterilization, thus fewer Native babies were born. The Native American population had been steadily dwindling until 2010. According to the U.S. census for 2020, the Native American population grew by 86.5% in the previous ten years from 5.2 million to 9.7 million, representing approximately 2.9% of the U.S. population (*2020 Census: Native Population Increased by 86.5 Percent*, 2021). According to *Indian Country Today*, this was due to more Americans self-identifying as Native alone or in conjunction with another ethnicity. In *Future Home*, the new federal government's party line is that they are actively looking for non-white women to carry babies to save humanity. The doctor who helped Cedar escape made it clear the new government prioritized not only women of color but any woman who successfully brought to term bi-racial babies. Wilson Bellacoola wrote, "[The] new millennium approaches and the survival of the earth is at stake, Native women hold the key to the survival of human beings as a species" (27). Erdrich gives this belief a voice through Cedar.

To many Native American women, what would be seen as women's issues championed by feminists, are considered their community's issues. Because Native American culture is a holistic one, women's issues are treated as everyone's concern. Bellacoola wrote that Janet

McCloud, a prominent activist in Women of All Red Nations (WARN) argued that “feminism’s perceived focus on male supremacy as their main and most pressing problem does not fit for Native Americans.” Furthermore, Bellacoola quoted Renee Senogles, a Red Lake Chippewa, as saying, “*The difference between Native women and white feminists is that the feminists talk about their rights and we talk about our responsibilities. There is a profound difference. Our responsibility is to take care of our natural place in the world*” (Bellacoola 18, italics the author’s). One of the ways Erdrich addresses this in *Future Home* is to show how the Native Americans take back the land that had rightfully been theirs, with an intent to cultivate it for the advantage of everyone in the tribe. In turn, Eddy tells Cedar, “We are not giving up our pregnant tribal members. Our women are sacred to us” (Erdrich 273). This statement illustrates the dynamic of tribal tradition – women are both equal members and considered sacred.

Popular stereotypes of Native American people, whether through literature, television, or movies, revolve around the idea of the male native. White people, mostly men because they tended to dominate these areas, thought in terms from their patriarchal lens. As far as the white men were concerned, Native American people who went to war, conversed with political leaders, or generally steered their societies were always men. They viewed Native women much the same way they viewed white women – second-class, and generally as either Madonna or Magdalene. Paula Gunn Allen, author of *The Sacred Hoop*, proposed the expectation that many Native American women’s voices would join her throughout the 1990s, ushering in an era in which “the facts of tribal gynocracy or powerful woman-focused traditions” would impact how we study and teach Native American literature, as well as opening new avenues for these women to access female traditions. As Gunn Allen wrote, one of the benefits of studying Native American prose from the female axis is that “the materials become centered on continuance rather than

extinction” (Gunn Allen 308). For instance, Iroquois Matrons “held so much policy-making power traditionally” (Gunn Allen 251-52) that they demanded its return when they felt the men were overstepping bounds.

Gunn Allen wrote in *The Sacred Hoop*, Native American writers “use cultural conflict as a major theme” in their stories. *Future Home* exemplifies this idea as well as Allen’s assertion that the protagonist in the novel is “in some sense bicultural and must deal with the effects of colonization and an attendant sense of loss of self” (Allen 102). Regardless of their openness and attempts to the contrary, being a white couple, the Songmakers could only give Cedar a cursory glimpse of the Native American culture she comes from. Inside the suburban bubble where Cedar lived, she was extraordinary and unique in the sense that she was the only Native American surrounded by white people. She was the “Native girl! Indian Princess!” (Erdrich 4). She was an oddity in a sea of pale faces. In October 2018, a judge in Texas struck down the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which placed a preference on Native men and women for adopting Native children. The act was cited as being unconstitutional and discriminatory against potential non-native adoptive parents. This is problematic because approximately 407,500 children were in foster care in 2020 and only 117,470 were waiting to be adopted (see table 1). Of these children approximately 9,850 were Native Americans and 2,300 were waiting to be adopted, small numbers compared to the white and black children in foster care (175,870 and 92,240, respectively) and available for adoption (51,130 and 25,260), according to reports from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. There does not seem to be a pressing need for non-native parents to adopt the Native children, as compared to white and black children. *Future Home* was published almost a year before this judgement and, as far as Erdrich would have known, the Songmakers could not have adopted Cedar. If the reader is aware of this

contingent, then they could assume that one of her adoptive parents is actually a biological parent. But the larger concern is Cedar losing the opportunity to learn about her Native American ancestry.

When Native traditions are passed down from one generation to another, every tribal member is connected to the ancestors before them. These traditions are both spiritual and social, they become a part of their everyday life. Without having experience living with these traditions, non-native parents have limited access to this knowledge, effectively cutting Native children off from their heritage. Later in the novel, Cedar's sense of self takes another hit when she finds out that her biological father is not an idealized version of a Native American father. He is in fact, the white man who has raised her under the guise of her adopted father, Glen. Despite having been raised in her suburban bubble, Cedar's white heritage had been hidden from her, effectively denying her another aspect of herself.

Early on in *Future Home*, white women appear to have the privilege of movement, the ability to be in the public sphere with less fear of being caught, only because they are less desired than women of color. Eventually, any woman of childbearing age will be captured, regardless of race. Erdrich's use of this contrast to contemporary social order coincides with Paul Kivel's contention that "[w]hiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to certain benefits from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white" (Kivel 19). Erdrich turns conventional hierarchy on its side and creates a different normal in which white people are less preferable than the genetic diversity found in women of color.

As Cedar watches a newscast at home, two items stood out. First, there is a dearth of information available to the public. The people on television are disseminating news about an

apparent genetic recombination. They are speaking at length, without contributing much by way of intelligible facts or ideas. Cedar notices this and thinks to herself, "...there is something about this wash of information that strikes me as *too much*, and what I mean by that is the information seems flimsier, with bouts of ... *cuteness*" (Erdrich 48-9). Depending on one's political views, an argument could be made that current major newscasts are at this level already, though perhaps without the *cuteness* factor. The public relies on the news from television and newspapers to give accurate information to the public without bias. In *Future Home*, the accessibility to truthful information dwindles as newspapers are closed down, active radio stations become sparse, and television news becomes less coherent. All the information from existing mediums becomes fascist, state-run mouthpieces, ushering in an era of dissemination and oppression of the people, in this case – primarily women.

Second, Cedar slowly realizes that the people on the newscasts are not the same people who had been there before the evolutionary breakdown started – when it seemed like they were interchangeable, despite their racial makeup. Now, all the news commentators are white. She notices that there are no brown people in anything else on television. Not only is human procreation on a reverse genetic slide, but it seems as if society is regressing as well. For their protection, women of color are being hidden from the government. Logically, this could influence light-skinned African and Native Americans to enter in the game of "passing" as white to survive in society. Ironically, considering the level of whiteness on television, at this point the reality was that white women were safer to be out in the open because women of color are coveted for their diversity. Cedar's baby is mixed-race, a combination of Native American and white, as well as perfectly normal, which makes Cedar a highly valuable commodity. So, even

though their diversity is highly valued, the women of color have to hide from authorities and if they are lucky, they will be beneficiaries of the new Underground Railroad.

Women everywhere deserve to make choices for their reproductive lives without either governmental or religious interference. Like dandelions allowed to go to seed, standing by and saying nothing while dogma under the guise of political ideology is left unchecked will eventually choke women's rights until none remain. We should use *Future Home* as a cautionary tale and be vigilant when elected officials support denying rights while using their religious beliefs as the basis for such moves. Women can stop further erosion of the groundwork laid down over the last two centuries and reverse damage already done by working together for the benefit of all. We need more women who support women's rights in legislative seats across the country.

Chapter III

Vox: Silencing Women Through Scripture in a Public Sphere

Speculative fiction can be used not only to tell stories of the wonders the future could bring, but also as a reflection on possible horrors contemporary religious beliefs could be propagating on future societies. There are two frame stories in Christina Dalcher's novel, *Vox*: The larger one shows the results of the Pure Movement taking over the government, while the second one is about Wernicke's Aphasia. These are connected through the loss of personal agency. Whereas Wernicke's Aphasia is caused by damage to an area of the brain, one of the Pure Movement's goals is to silence women as well as male dissenters. Dalcher relies on her background in theoretical linguistics and, appropriately, *Vox* is primarily concerned with speech, or the lack thereof. Specifically, this novel is another dystopian look at what could become of the United States if the government takes control of the female body, as seen through the eyes of the main protagonist, Jean McClellan. This time the government takes away the female right to talk, eventually limiting them to a mere one hundred words per day, controlled by counters on their wrists. *Vox* imagines a domino effect, beginning with a slow erosion of gains the feminist movement has made over the last century and ending with the total subjugation of the female population. Through her novel, Dalcher provides a warning to today's women: Fight to stop the loss of our rights or we could literally lose our voices.

Silencing Women

In *Vox*, women's voices and opinions have been stifled, and they are allowed to speak only one hundred words per day. To enforce this, both women and girls must wear a special

counter on their wrists that is set to recognize their particular voice. When they exceed their allotment, the counter delivers an electric shock. In a very real sense, these counters are much like the shock collars that people use on dogs. If a dog tries to roam out of their boundaries, a shock from the collar reminds them of their place. For the females in the story, their place is at home and silent. Consequently, girls are only taught arithmetic because they “will be expected to shop and run a household, to be a devoted and dutiful wife” (Dalcher 2). Reading and writing are considered unnecessary skills for girls to learn, effectively removing girls’ voices because girls who learn to use their voices grow up to become women who stand up for themselves. The only approved reading for women was the Bible, even then they were restricted to pink Bibles. The inference here is that these are modified Bibles, so as not to inspire independent thought.

Jean McClellan reminisces about her college roommate, Jackie Juarez, who was an activist long before the Pure Movement took power. Before women were muted, Jean and her family saw Jackie on a television show warning women about what was coming. “Think about where you’ll be – where your daughters will be – when the courts turn back the clock. Think about words like ‘spousal permission’ and ‘paternal consent.’ Think about waking up one morning and finding you don’t have a voice in anything” (Dalcher 10). Because her message seemed so far-fetched, most of the public ignored her. In our reality, young women in their 20s to mid-40s, do not remember when women had to have their husband’s permission to open a bank account or get a car loan in their name. Many, I believe, are not aware that this was normal less than fifty years ago.

Famed philosopher George Santayana wrote in *The Life of Reason: Introduction; Reason in Common Sense; Reason in Society*, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I would extend that to those who willfully ignore it, too. Jean tells the reader, “One

thing I learned from Jackie: you can't protest what you don't see coming" (Dalcher 20-21), or what you refuse to acknowledge as existing. Thinking that you could never lose your rights, while also remaining apathetic, is dangerous. People do not want to believe that something on such a grand scale could happen. Indeed, when actions such as those Dalcher writes in *Vox* do happen, they advance slowly in the background first. As Jean reported, she "learned that once a plan is in place, everything can happen overnight" (Dalcher 21). In the time before the Pure Movement, women could gather with their friends to discuss everything from books to politics, from their families to career aspirations. According to Jean, "We were, in [Patrick's] words, the voices that couldn't be hushed" (Dalcher 7). That is, until the day they and their daughters were silenced. When Jean's voice was first restricted, she wrote notes and occasionally looked in books. However, after Sonia saw a message Jean had left on a mirror for Patrick, she resorted to writing her notes on scraps of paper and burning them afterward. All to hide her "rebellion" from the world outside of their home (Dalcher 15).

Within the story, women not only learn to couch their words, but they must also keep their thoughts in check or chance voicing them in the heat of the moment. If the dynamics we see in *Vox* were to be inserted into contemporary American society, they would eventually change the female population into biological automatons. The removal of women's voices takes away more than the identity of self. The symbolism reminds the reader that everything women have gained can always be taken away, as if men have graciously granted women the ability to speak for themselves. In Jean's flashbacks we can see how she "remains passive and chooses not to vote at all in the elections" despite the warnings from Jackie (Pinakoulia 201). This is an example of not appreciating the fight of all the women who finally got the government to grant women rights that men were granted automatically via divine proclamation. The 19th

Amendment was a hard-won achievement for the Suffragettes, and it would take a few more decades for the non-white female population to regularly have the opportunity to cast their votes as well. As she relates her story to the reader, Jean regrets not acting earlier and believes that if she had then, “Maybe things... wouldn’t have turned out the way they did” (Dalcher 13).

In the *Vox* reality, conversations between parents and daughters consist of the fathers asking the girls yes-or-no questions. Mothers are relegated to listening from the sidelines, constantly reminded of their insufficient allocation of words. As this requirement is foisted only on the female members of United States society, we can also assume this applies to the “born as female” members. When the Pure Movement took over, they declared that all relationships must be one man and one woman. All LGBTQ+ relationships or sexual identities become illegal and subject to severe punishments. These punitive actions are not out of the realm of possibility, even today we can see a political contingent of the conservative party pushing to “correct” the behaviors of the LGBTQ+ community and bring them in line with “proper” biblical teachings.

The next step after segregating women (socially, not physically) from men could be resegregating women by skin color. If the trend were to reverse engineer acknowledged and granted rights, it would make sense that the first attack would be women’s rights, then civil rights based on race. The bridge between those steps lies in *Loving vs Virginia*, the Supreme Court case that struck down the unconstitutional laws banning mixed-race marriages. In the novel, Jean meets Sharon, a black woman married to Jean’s mail carrier, a white man named Del, and the couple have three daughters. Sharon poses the question: How long before the Pure Movement decides that black and white people are different, too? She believes her concerns are larger than how many words she has to say in a day. I argue that her concerns go beyond her daily word allotment because without the ability to speak for herself she cannot stand up for her

family, either. “A woman without voice totally loses her sense of freedom and autonomy. However, the function of language is also subversive. While it is used as a tool for enforcing control on women, it is also the means to inspire resistance” (Pinakoulia 193). Resistance is the only way to stop one group of people from continuing to force their personal beliefs into others’ lives.

Cecelia Ridgeway, a professor at Stanford University and author of *Framed by Gender*, wrote that the force pushing against the advancement of gender equality is gender stereotyping based on individual and social beliefs. I further posit that, on the more conservative side, these beliefs are entrenched in religious doctrine, sitting to the far right of the political spectrum. These belief systems view men as assertive and better suited to wield power in both the economic and political arenas. Whereas women are expected to be demure and are only suited for keeping house and minding the children. In American society, first and foremost, men set the standard and this often does not include equality for women. In *Vox*, one way we see this played out is regarding adultery. A couple of months before the beginning of the novel Jean was unfaithful to her husband. In this new society, men are allowed to participate in sexual relations outside of a marital contract, whereas women are not. We know this because the government has taken control of prostitution, creating a legal avenue for these men and a place to put women who either cannot or will not marry a man.

Jean is an adulterer and like most women who cheat, her reason is not so much a desire to have sex with someone else as it is looking for or finding an emotional bond, something she is lacking (real or imagined) in the marriage (Weiss). For Jean, it was because of a perceived shift she felt in her husband. Something that she recognized as his inability or unwillingness to stand up for her, a weakness in his personality. This perception of his personality appeared to be

correct when the government began putting the counters on all females. He didn't object when it entered their house. He has a go-along-with-it attitude, to the point that he agree to be one of the president's advisors. Certainly, there are men sympathetic to women's plight in this alt-reality. Men who go along with these circumstances because they must, despite being furious with this new status quo. In the Pure Movement, adultery – which, by their definition, is only committed by women – ranks high in crimes, along with murder. The penalty for adultery is to be sent to a convent or work farm. In this story, Jean's neighbor, Annie, was turned in by her husband as an adulteress. On television, officials showed Annie as she was handed off to the women who were taking her to a convent in North Dakota, where she would “live out her life with a wrist counter set to zero” (Dalcher 119).

Scriptural Doctrine

America is a culture of a multitude of belief systems, particularly regarding religious beliefs. Within the Protestant Christian umbrella alone there are dozens of separate religious affiliations. Today we are witnessing fundamental Christians working to dictate how people should properly behave, live their lives, and conduct their spiritual beliefs. On the surface, it would appear that all Christian women are given the same level of respect and responsibility that the men receive. I do not believe this is an accurate picture. While there are women in positions of authority, their numbers are small. Men still command an overwhelming majority of those seats. Consequently, the men frame the messages to their congregations.

In *Vox*, the Pure Movement takes directives from the Bible to construct their list of “beliefs or affirmations or declarations of intent” (Dalcher 83). Jean's introduction to this list came when she initially declined to return to the lab to complete the creation of the serum. This new counter would require her to recite the Movement's list once a day. They were gracious

though; the words would not count against her daily tally. The Pure Movement created this list from various verses in the Bible. The following are three salient statements in the list relating to restricting women's rights by dictating their relationships with men.

The first statement read: "I BELIEVE that man was created in the image of God, and that woman is the glory of the man, for man was not made of woman, but woman was made of man" (Dalcher 82). In the King James Version of the Bible, which I will use exclusively for all biblical quotes, I believe the correlating verse to this first statement is: "For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (1 Cor 11.7-9). To many Christians, these passages elevate men above women, as well as explicitly stating that women were created for men. Which also ties into the next statement: "When we obey male leadership with humility and submission, we acknowledge that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of every woman is the man" (Dalcher 83). For the corresponding chapter and verse I turn to 1 Corinthians 11:3, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." As the Bible states that the husband is head of the wife, many people take meaning from this verse literally.

In the mid-1980s, a group of Protestant Christians met to create a doctrine to guide church members, explaining what they viewed as the biblical response to growing feminism and its influence on gendered roles. This doctrine used various points in the Bible to define these roles for men and women. The result is known as The Danvers Statement and the term used to encompass this theology is "complementarianism," the idea that men and women are equal in the eyes of God but have separate roles and responsibilities that complement each other. In *Vox*, this

appears as a strict delineation of the roles and spheres in which men and women were to reside. Men are the leaders – in economy, government, and all spiritual matter – and women are the caregivers of the family. Dalcher illustrates this hierarchal concept as women were removed from their jobs and sent home. As it happened, Jean was removed during a seminar where she was presenting her team’s findings in their research (Dalcher 82, 107).

To further support complementarianism, Christian author Hannah Anderson wrote in an article for *Christianity Today* that “the greatest challenge facing complementarianism is not that patriarchal doctrine hides around every corner. The real problem is that *paternalism* is out in the open, often unnamed and unchecked” and “[c]omplementarians believe in a particular type of male authority in the church and the home.” She supports this assertion by separating paternalism from patriarchy, stating that paternalism is problematic because it can manifest in both men and women, thus ignoring the Latin root of both words – *patr*, meaning *father*. Paternalism is connected to gender when those in authority are inherently all male, such as found in churches where men have the authority to lead over women; or in homes where men have biblical authority to lead their wives. The society portrayed in *Vox* requires men to manifest their divine authority over their wives as controllers of knowledge (books are locked away) and spiritual police (men are expected to report women’s “immoral” behavior).

From the other side of the complementarianism debate, Beth Allison Barr – professor at Baylor University and a pastor’s wife – states in her book, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, “Patriarchy by any other name is still patriarchy. Complementarians may argue that women are equal to men... Yet their insistence that ‘equal worth’ manifests in unequal roles refutes this.” In other words, no matter how much one pretties up the words, it is still subjugation of women. Despite Anderson’s attempt at

deflection, in evangelical Christianity women are to keep themselves in orientation below men. And, as Barr also points out, keeping this viewpoint contained within either church or home walls is unrealistic. Church members live in the public sphere, not inside cult fences, and they will take their beliefs with them. Which would be fine, until those beliefs begin to infringe upon other people. One manifestation of this in *Vox* is the insertion of an AP Religious Studies class into public high schools. By definition, public schools are secular and no particular system of religious belief should be introduced into the curriculum. However, once the conservative Christian Pure Movement is entrenched in all aspects of government, they then have the ability to plant Christianity anywhere in society they see fit. Thus, indoctrinating children and teenagers in the biblically hierarchal nature of men and women.

The final statement I will attend is, “We are called as women to keep silence and to be under obedience. If we must learn, let us ask our husbands in the closeness of the home, for it is shameful that a woman question God-ordained male leadership” (Dalcher 83). The nearest Bible verse that correlates this thought is, “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing (*sic*), let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (1 Cor 14.34-35). It is interesting that, within *Vox*, this is on the list because women are so limited in their ability to speak, there is little chance they would use their precious few words to ask biblical questions. Thus, they will be silent and obedient, following what they are told to do by men, technically following what the Bible says while adding a bit more to the missive by extending the ban outside of church. Furthermore, the apostle Paul also wrote, “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjugation, But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim 2.11-12). Paul is

reiterating that women are not to have authority over men and are to be silent while men are sermonizing to them, which we see several men doing in the novel. Reverend Carl is unsurprisingly condescending when he speaks to women, as evidenced by how he speaks to Jean. There are also men outside of the clergy who delight in the new normal of *Vox*'s world, one of whom is Morgan LeBron, Jean and her team's new supervisor. From Jean's descriptions, we know that Morgan is a subpar scientist, with less than adequate intelligence. His elevation to team supervisor came after Lin Kwan's removal, during the culling of women from the workforce.

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) posted an article in May 2020 entitled *Women in the Pulpit?* written by Guy Prentiss Waters, which explains the complementarian position behind excluding women from sermonizing. For this article, Waters takes readers back to 1 Timothy, chapter 2. According to him, verse 14 is a cautionary tale, reminding Christians of what happened when Eve disobeyed God's directive and ate one of the forbidden fruits. Waters writes, "... women should not try to pursue what God has forbidden them. They should commit themselves to what God has called them to do." Which is to say, most women are expected to *marry and have children*.

Public Sphere

The novel refers to President Obama throughout the story, as well as his Presidential administration (Dalcher 255). Dalcher indicates the story is set approximately twenty years after Obama's administration, during which time Jean, Patrick, and Jackie were in graduate school. The implication being that the Pure Movement grew out of moves by contemporary far-right conservatives, and supported by the middle-right, leading to their confidence and brazenness in creating a pure society following their interpretation of biblical tenets. While *Vox* was published

in 2017, there are current examples that make the likelihood of this occurring a real possibility. For instance, conservative Christians in Texas have been busy lobbying their legislators for changes in their state. Within the last year they have managed to effect change in abortion laws, as well as initiate attacks on families with transgender teenagers. These efforts are how conservative Christians use the government to tell American citizens how to live their lives, even as they rail against “Big Government” creeping into their own homes. This agenda has nothing to do with being pro-family and everything to do with pushing their religious beliefs onto others. The Bible commands Christians to go into the world and tell people about Christ, it does not say to force their beliefs onto others (Matthew 28.18-20, Mark 16.15). The Pure Movement promotes pro-creation and denies the general public access to all birth control, with the exception of brothels (or “private clubs” as they are referred to in *Vox*). Only in these places could condoms be found (Dalcher 120). As Jean said, “The pharmacy shelf that used to hold [condom] boxes is stacked with baby food and diapers” (Dalcher 119). The implication being that the logical outcome is more babies to teach the ways of God, from the Pure stance.

In *Vox*, Jean realizes she is pregnant at about ten weeks gestation. Among her concerns is her fear of bringing another girl into the “Pure” society, but abortions have been outlawed so that avenue is not an option. She believes this attitude toward abortions goes beyond the right-wing’s usual opposition, as “[t]hey have to put limits on choice for other reasons, for pragmatic reasons. The way things are... no one would want a girl. No sane parent would want to choose a wrist-counter color for a three-month-old” (Dalcher 167). In our current climate, Americans could very well be seeing the first slide toward the reality espoused in *Vox*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 2021 right-wing Christians in Texas continued their bid to eradicate *Roe vs Wade* and successfully convinced their equally right-wing lawmakers to ban abortions after six weeks

gestation. Furthermore, “[t]he law has a unique private-enforcement mechanism that empowers private citizens to sue anyone who, in the law’s language, ‘aids or abets’ an abortion” (Klibanoff), creating a situation in which anybody can sue any person involved in the abortion process even if the plaintiff has no actual connection with the woman who sought the abortion.

The religious right is pro-family, but only as they define what a family is. Further, because biology dictates that creating another human requires both a sperm and an ovum, the command to marry, as seen in 1 Timothy, is intended to be one man and one woman. In *Vox*, anyone who is found to be either gay or lesbian is sent to “camps” set up in former prisons (Dalcher 98, 120, 135, 247). It did not take long for Pure followers to realize that segregating the men and women would create unintentional consequences. By incarcerating each gender with those to whom they are attracted, they were defeating their intended reason for arresting these people. The Pure solution to this quandary was to place one man and one woman in each cell. “They’ll get the idea soon enough,” Reverend Carl remarked (Dalcher 98). This move was counter to the conservative Christian position admonishing sexual relations outside of marriage.

Leaning heavily on the words in the Bible, conservative Christians pluck out verses to bolster their views. For example, Proverbs 6:16-17 talk about what God views as abominations, including “shed[ding] innocent blood.” But Romans 3:23 states, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” which Christians equate to say that there are no innocent people, everybody is a sinner. So, on the one hand, Christians believe that abortion is tantamount to killing an innocent, which God abhors; but, on the other hand, nobody is innocent. The Bible talks about marriage between a man and a woman, as well as their duty to have children, thus creating a family unit. This ignores those families that fall outside of the binary, nuclear, biblical ideal – single fathers; single mothers; children who are raised by aunts, uncles, or grandparents;

and childless couples, whether by choice or biology. The arguments against abortion and LGBTQ+ people are less about family than about pro-creating.

One avenue that could take the country to a reality in which LGBTQ+ people are ostracized for being “different” and living a life outside of proscribed scripture is to legislate their immorality. Recently, Texas enacted a law that its citizens could earn a minimum of \$10,000 for each family they report as being supportive of their transgender child, which has been deemed as child abuse. This directive from Texas Governor Greg Abbott effectively made every conservative Christian Texan a bounty hunter (Bouranova). Furthermore, Mr. Abbott’s order bypasses law enforcement officials by giving the citizens the “responsibility” to contact child protective services and taking away an investigator’s “freedom to determine that a given report involving a transgender child was likely not in fact a case of child... and she said investigators were not able to close the cases” (Goodman). In *Vox*, concentration camps are set up for members of the LGBTQ+ communities who refuse to conform to hetero-normative relationships. On the surface this sounds like a far-fetched idea, but the United States government has a history of creating detention camps to hold its citizens and citizen-hopefuls. Japanese, Chinese, German, Italian, African, and Native Americans have, in turn, been held within various iterations of these camps within the United States borders by the directive of the federal government.

We learn from *Vox* that women must remain vigilant to the machinations of right-wing, conservative Christian goals to eradicate women’s rights as they are now and should become in the future. In the novel, women who speak up for themselves are not tolerated because it would weaken the argument for male superiority. While, to many, the arc from the contemporary religious right to the society in *Vox* is clear and, if left to flourish, will lead back to men’s

complete domination over women, as their interpretation of the Bible says is the natural order of things. Staying silent allows zealots to believe in their divine right to tell everyone else how to live.

Chapter IV

Conclusion: Coming Together

Women's bodies have been considered a source of public concern for centuries. One of the greatest advancements of the mid-twentieth century was the creation of birth control in the form of pills. Suddenly, women had relative control over when they wanted to become pregnant. Church leaders (who were all men) preached about the dangers of these little pills, from rampant immorality to the thwarting of God's will. The fight over a woman's right to make personal decisions for herself in all areas of her life was just beginning to ramp up. As the women's liberation movement was gaining traction, an opposing force came together to stand in their way. Conservative Christians voiced their self-righteous indignation that the feminists steering the liberation will destroy the scriptural fabric of traditional family units.

Barbara Christian, author of *New Black Feminist Criticism*, wrote, "If movements have any effect, it is to give us a context within which to imagine questions we would not have imagined before, to ask questions we might not have asked before" (7). An author writes to release stories from their imagination and to share them with the world. *Write what you know*. These four words have been uttered so often they are almost cliché today. Yet the maxim still holds a place in any author's toolbox. Louise Erdrich and Christina Dalcher are no exception. They wrote for society's benefit, if people are willing to hear these cautionary tales of what our society might become. While each novel is told from the viewpoint of one woman – Cedar Hawk Songbird in *Future Home of the Living God* and Jean McClellan in *Vox* – the impact of the respective inciting events on all women is vividly illustrated.

The most obvious difference between *Vox* and *Future Home* is their focus on separate issues that affect or could affect contemporary women: their right to make their own reproductive choices and their ability to speak for themselves. These are different issues that have the same outcome: the oppression of women. All the rights women have gained since the early twentieth century are dangerously close to disappearing. Over the last two years, conservative Christians have systematically chipped away at a woman's right to choose what is best for herself. Access to safe and legal abortions has been so restricted that in some areas of the country, a woman must travel hours to reach a clinic, sometimes in another state altogether. In both Erdrich's and Dalcher's novels, religion is the catalyst for the inciting events, thus tethering them to previous views of a woman's place in society. In this way, as illustrated in the novels, women's bodies and choices are controlled by people who insist on imposing their beliefs upon society at large. This type of control inspires a reaction in the oppressed women that pushes them into fighting to regain control of their own lives. History is replete with examples of such resistance: The Boston Tea Party, the underground railroad, the Harper's Ferry Raid, Stonewall Riots, and Suffragettes, to name a few.

Looking through an intersectional lens, both Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Dalcher's *Vox* show possible outcomes after women have lost their rights, namely their right to bodily autonomy. This area is where the conservative Christians have begun their assault on women, in both reality and the novels. We see this in the news, with women's right to choose being severely restricted in very conservative states. In April 2022, Oklahoma House Republicans passed Senate Bill 612, making performing abortions completely illegal except when saving the life of the woman. The penalty would be assessed on the physician, as "a felony punishable by a maximum fine of \$100,000 or maximum 10 years in state prison, or both"

(Stracqualursi). However, limiting or removing access to safe, legal abortions, rather than render them obsolete, will drive women to the back-alley abortions thought lost to the annals of history. In *Future Home*, the new government has declared a state of emergency and imminent domain over women's wombs. In the beginning, the Church of the New Constitution created Mother, who urges women to become Womb Volunteers (Erdrich 104). When this tactic was not successful, they began to kidnap pregnant women as well as women who were of child-bearing age. In an odd twist, these same people who want to safeguard babies to save humanity do not simply kidnap women and lock them in hospital wards, but they feed the women rotting, rancid food. The hospitals manage to get away with this by drugging the women, making them believe they are in luxurious environments with 5-star meals. This is how the new government machine makes women compliant. In *Vox*, compliance is maintained by the wrist counters that shock a woman who has spoken too many words.

By contrast, heterosexual women in *Vox* are not being forced to procreate, but this does not lessen the expectation that they will be fruitful and multiply. The women who are being forced into this position are the lesbians, as some may choose to marry gay men to avoid being sent to the camps (conversion prisons) holding LGBTQ+ members of society. In this case, they would have children simply to keep up the pretense that they have found their way to the Bible and, consequently God. In *Future Home*, the zealots glom onto the evolutionary crisis to force these same expectations of women. Whereas the women in *Vox* are forced out of their jobs to be homemakers, the women in *Future Home* are held in prisons and expected to be societal incubators. However, in Cedar's world, women are still allowed to hold certain jobs, such as the nurses she meets when she is confined to a hospital instead of her home. In both cases, their voices have been silenced, although more literally in *Vox*.

Both novels unabashedly show scenarios of what could happen if one religious viewpoint were to make inroads in the government and, essentially, stage a coup. As Maria Pinakoulia points out, Dalcher presents a dystopian society determined to not only monitor a woman's vocal output, but also nonverbal communications. The CCTV cameras that are ubiquitous in our current society suddenly become the literal eye of Mother, who will send in the police when women are caught using a form of sign language to communicate. Individuality becomes stymied in a culture that expects its people to conform to expectations based on religious scripture.

Where *Vox* shows an extreme form of religious control on people, *Future Home* offers a contrast between personal devoutness and religious strangulation. Cedar, much to the consternation of the parents who raised her, is a devout Catholic, despite her obvious diversion into premarital sex that resulted in her becoming pregnant just prior to the novel, as well as a much earlier pregnancy that she ended with an abortion (Erdrich 4). In the current state of the Church of the New Constitution, a woman who has an abortion is subject to capital punishment (Erdrich 296). Cedar's faith does not drive her to impose her beliefs onto other people, which makes her easier to hear when she does discuss some aspect of her religious devotion.

Each novel shows women being forced to rely on men to take care of them, to protect them, and to speak for them. This appears in *Vox* as an economic prison when women are barred from holding jobs and as an emotional prison when women cannot speak. The ability to vocalize thoughts is left to the men and boys, while women and girls are only able to listen quietly, as when the McClellan family is around the dinner table in the opening pages. Unlike Jean, who can leave the house and run errands, Cedar becomes a virtual prisoner in her own home. She is forced to rely on Phil to bring groceries and news when she cannot leave her house for fear of

being picked up by the pregnancy police. Jean and Cedar are strong women who have learned to tackle problems on their own, without waiting for a man to save them.

In both stories, the public is encouraged to turn in women for supposed infractions of their new laws. In *Vox*, this is seen as a moral imperative, especially when turning in a woman for immoral behavior, such as all sexual encounters outside of marriage. Steven turned in his girlfriend, Julia, as inciting their sexual encounter, yet he was not arrested at the same time. One of Jean's neighbors was turned in by her husband when he discovered her affair. In both cases the women were taken away and appeared on the television to stand as examples of what happens when a woman acts in opposition to scriptural exhortations. There are more than thirty verses in the Bible that speak to sexual relations outside of marriage, one of which is Hebrews 13:4 – "Marriage *is* honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." The government in *Future Home* encourages citizens to report pregnant women, because there should not be any outside of the hospitals and prisons-turned-camps. This is how Cedar is discovered and the pregnancy police show up at her home to take her into custody the first time. The second time happens on the reservation, as Cedar and her birth mother are praying at the shrine for St. Kateri. A couple who had also gone to the shrine to pray realized that Cedar was pregnant, and they would receive a monetary reward for turning her in. In Texas, a directive from the governor encourages citizens to turn in parents who support their transgender children, an act that could net these citizens \$10,000. Whether turning in a pregnant woman or parents of transgender children, the idea of having people turn on each other in this way merely encourages a vigilante mentality, accompanied by a moral self-righteousness.

Neither novel cites racism as primary motive for discrimination. Race does seem to be a secondary factor for the control over women in *Future Home*, as interracial babies are desired

due to the assumption that their genetics are escaping the evolutionary reversal seen in the general public. But, as Sharon pointed out to Jean in *Vox*, that does not mean that racism was eradicated. Sharon's concern was that using the Bible to reduce or erase women's rights could be the beginning. What Sharon suggests is that the Pure Movement is working backward to remove civil rights and, after women's rights – the right to control what happens to their bodies, to open a bank account without their husband or father's permission, to get a loan – the next law to reappear would be miscegenation.

Both novels espouse the idea of *puissance feminine*. The idea of feminine power is that when women come together to fight for their rights, all women benefit. The misunderstanding is in the assumption that all women will be forced to exercise those rights. Conservative Christian women are anti-abortion because they understandably believe this is what the Bible tells them, and this is their right. Other women may find that having access to safe abortions will be to their benefit. Problems occur when one side decides that they should impose their beliefs on the other side, forcing all women to live under their tenets. This is what we see in *Future Home* when women are forced to become pregnant and in *Vox* when women are forced to silence their voices. Today, another iteration of female power can be seen in the fact that women can choose to be stay-at-home mothers, to become career women, or to be someone in between. We can thank the power of our mothers and grandmothers for those options. I am reminded of a commercial from the late 1970s in which a woman sings that she can “bring home the bacon and fry it up in a pan.” That line not only stuck with me, but it also informed how I view women's roles in society.

Cultural traditions inform how a community lives together. For instance, Native American tradition believes women are sacred, as Eddy told Cedar. Women lead as often as men, and they work together to benefit the whole community. In Christian traditions, men and women

have certain roles they are expected to fulfill. Men are the church and community leaders, the elders, and the congregation teachers. Men are expected to provide for and protect their families and lead them spiritually. Women are expected to assist their husbands when needed, procreate as they can, and take care of the family and home. Problems occur when one community makes the decision to impose their traditions and beliefs upon others. When *Vox's* Pure Movement infiltrates the government, they take control of Congress and, eventually, the White House. This is how the movement positioned itself to successfully pass restrictive legislation and impose their interpretation of the Bible onto the public. *Future Home's* government was taken over in a coup, out in the open with a bang rather than silently sliding into position under the cloak of darkness.

Vox ends with Jean in Italy with her family, far removed from the United States where people are working to put the country back together. Jean tells the readers, "The radios and televisions came to life again; the presses started to roll out the newspapers. Women marched in silence until their wrists and words were freed" (Dalcher 326). With radios, television, and newspapers freed from the constraints placed by the Pure Movement, communication bursts with information about what the government had been doing. One of the greatest rights we have in the United States is the freedom of the press to inform the country on important topics, including what our legislators and presidential administration are doing. Any attempt to silence a member of the press should not be tolerated, even if the reporter does not align with one's beliefs.

Released from the constraints of a rigid society, Jean waits for her child to be born in Italy. Yet, at the end of *Future Home*, Cedar is left in a maternity prison, where she gave birth to a healthy child who was promptly taken away from her, bound to an unknown destination and future. She has no hope of leaving the facility outside of a casket. Instead, she is forced to wait to be implanted with an embryo salvaged from a fertility clinic.

Christina Dalcher and Louise Erdrich ended their novels in very different ways. One concluded with a decidedly optimistic bent, tied up in a ribbon of hope. The other finished without a discernable resolution, leaving us imprisoned in a cell with our heroine. In feminist dystopian novels, authors take what they see happening in society and imagine how badly everything could turn if we take for granted what women have gained without considering how quickly they could disappear. Erdrich and Dalcher have taken this idea and in their novels, they present us with examples of how far astray society could roam. The question they pose is, “How far will you let your rights be dismantled before you take action?”

In her essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* Audre Lorde wrote, “My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you.” An important right that American citizens enjoy is the freedom of speech. Women have the responsibility to use their voices in protest of unjust treatment, to demand that their rights be recognized, and to take to the streets when the officials we elected do not listen. For centuries, women have been told, in action if not words, that their voices are not welcome, and their ideas have no worth. The goal of Intersectional Feminism is to bring all women to the table. Every woman has a voice and an opinion; every woman deserves the chance to speak their truth.

A common refrain from conservative Christians, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, was that feminists want to make women into men. But what feminists are truly striving for is a society in which all contributions by women are appreciated as equally as those by men, without relegating women to gendered roles based on scripture. In this manner, the only expectations that society should put upon its members are that they contribute to the whole based upon their strengths, abilities, and desires.

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