

ANOTHER MOM BITES THE DUST:  
MOTHERHOOD AND FUTURITY IN A LITERARY  
POST-APOCALYPSE

by

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This thesis explores presentations of motherhood during and after literary apocalypses created since the turn of the century. I argue that writers like Margaret Atwood, Claire Watkins, Louise Erdrich, and Megan Hunter challenge traditionally masculine ideas about surviving the end of the world by highlighting the role of the mother in gesturing in the beginning of a new world. Using scholarly criticism from writers like Lee Edelman and Rebekah Sheldon, this text illuminates connections between the image of mother and child as redemption and renewed purpose, a deep entanglement with the natural world and the sublime, the interplay of religion and spirituality with ideas of beginnings and endings, the missing or insufficient father, and concern with memory and transference in the age of the Anthropocene. Each of these elements work to uncover a vision of what motherhood means both at “the end” and in the first two decades of this millennium.

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## Introduction

“The first thing that happens at the end of the world is that we don’t know what is happening” (93) Louise Erdrich writes. In her novel, *Future Home of the Living God*, saber-tooth cats devour small pets and reptilian birds soar outside the protagonist’s window. Evolution is sliding backward, societal structures breaking down, a Christian authoritative regime rising, and pregnant women contemplating both their new role as stewards of the future and the nature of the beings within their wombs. Endings, as much as humankind imagines them over and over again, are never fully predictable precisely because they are also the beginning of something new. Post-apocalyptic texts do not end with the end but use it as the start of navigating a strange and altered world. Megan Hunter’s book, *The End We Start From*, opens with a line from T.S. Eliot: “What we call the beginning is often the end/ And to make an end is to make a beginning./ The end is where we start from.” For this thesis, I will be beginning with the end and also ending with the beginning, exploring the ways in which post-apocalyptic writers like Louise Erdrich and Megan Hunter create new life and meaning through an apocalypse and demonstrate the ways in which some things may change, perhaps irrevocably and with a great deal of confusion, but persist nevertheless.

In 1826, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* opened the gates to an entirely new genre to discuss social politics, one that operated through the veil of a post-apocalyptic futuristic setting in which few (or only one) were left standing. Since then, creators of novels, movies, video and board games, comic books, and the like have employed speculative science fiction and the concept of an apocalypse as means of theorizing about human fate and the projection of contemporary social and ecological trends. The

possibility of an end to civilization and mankind is an idea that serves as a crucial foundation of religious texts, popular entertainment pieces, environmental conservation efforts, and scientific and technological advancements. Imagined post-apocalyptic environments, whether captured within the pages of a book or adorning the television or computer screen, have often presented a patriarchal structure as the default setting of a born-again civilization rather than using the environment as an opportunity to fracture and deconstruct modern societal norms. Typically masculine traits unfailingly appear favorable if not necessary to survival in the midst of such futuristic wastelands while “feminine” qualities like hysteria, sentimentality, and domesticity deem an individual submissive, weak, and utterly incapacitated. Within these exaggerated patriarchal structures, women are linked to a failing, stagnant past while providing the only true form of creation: motherhood. The turn of the twenty-first century brought a burst of new post-apocalyptic media, likely because the “ends of centuries or millennia inevitably lead to questions, speculations and pronouncements about what has ended and what might be beginning” (qtd. in Schmitt 2). Furthermore, increasing scientific awareness of and political focus on human environmental impact, particularly in regard to the relatively newfound recognition that humans “have the means to destroy our planet (or have done enough to damage the environment irreversibly)” (Schmitt 7), has driven the concept of an apocalypse home harder than ever, making it unlikely that the fascination with our imagined endings will dwindle.

Despite its feminine beginnings, the apocalyptic genre has historically been defined by white male domination, perhaps as a reaction to the masculine and colonial concepts a post-apocalyptic environment invites- that is, survival, conquest, selective

emotional attachment, and violence. In “Science Fiction’s Women Problem,” Bronwyn Lovell of Flinders University explores the reasoning behind why men have perpetually dominated the science fiction arena. Men’s works, she writes, are widely lauded as remaining truer to the “hard sciences,” extrapolating from “real scientific theories and physical laws as they are currently understood” (Lovell), such as in Andy Weir’s *The Martian*, rather than exploring more psychological and social areas of thought, as “soft science” fiction like Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* does. The fact that women tend to stray towards the softer sciences when writing about the future often deems their works as weaker, less virile, and more whimsical than the “true” science fiction that men write. This perception has a lot to do with the limited representation of women in the genre. With men constituting three-quarters of all science fiction writers (Lovell), male characters appear far more often and in more forgiving and glorifying lights than female ones do. The male protagonist in the typical apocalyptic media piece is relatable and likable, while the women are scantily clad and poorly developed male fantasies. Forbidden Planet’s list of “50 Science Fiction Books You Must Read” includes a meager three women, with one appearing twice, while Goodreads’ “Best Science Fiction” contained ten women in a list of one hundred (seven, accounting for repeated authors), most of whom wrote male protagonists (Lovell). However, despite having issues with including and representing women, speculative science fiction has the potential to be a rich genre for feminists in that it presents the opportunity to reevaluate structural inequalities and cultural myths with a sharp political edge, bringing absurdities and tragedies inherent in contemporary society to light.

According to Peter Adams from the University of Massachusetts Boston, the “ultimate purpose of speculative fiction,” or that which deals with the future by extrapolating from current societal trends, “is to inspire the reader to look at the world with new eyes” (10). The 2006 novel, and later, film, *The Road*, demonstrates how the marginalization and dismissal of the feminine can be depicted as necessarily central to a post-apocalyptic environment. Because a post-apocalyptic world is one devoid of rules, women can be used however men want to- for example, as inferior sexual playthings or stereotyped versions of femininity, incapable of actually challenging men with the notion of equality. A female character is almost always reduced to one (or, more often, a combination) of these four figures: the distant mother, the elusive temptress, the slave, or the whore. A post-apocalyptic setting is a particularly potent arena for the solidification of such highly gendered stereotypes precisely because such an environment allows the author control over how people stripped of modern conventions inherently act. Often, this results in the reassertion of women’s inferiority to men as being integral to human nature, as evident in the “natural” social structure left standing when everything else has deteriorated around it. Many recent post-apocalyptic works penned by women, however, flip the narrative by dealing with this future through “themes of sterility and childbearing in concert with ecological balance” and “the danger of men usurping” women’s “procreative power” (Adams 7). In her 2003 novel, *Oryx and Crake*, for example, Margaret Atwood presents a society ravaged by men’s abuse of power and destruction of the environment, which is protested by women like the protagonist’s mother, who abandons a typical domestic role to become a politically active, albeit absent, individual. New York Times writer Sloane Crosley in “It’s the End

of the World as She Knows It,” observes a tendency for women to invest more in memory and the interior following cataclysmic events, while male writers tend to jump to issues of physical struggle, often “that unholy trinity of rape, murder and cannibalism.” Unlike the typical male approach to a post-apocalyptic landscape, women like Margaret Atwood display how mere survival is not enough. The difference, Crosley argues, doesn’t stem from the fact that female writers are “in denial of the brutalities of a lawless world” or “more nostalgic than their male counterparts,” but from varying societally-ingrained fears and how those are projected onto a futuristic environment. Because women “don’t need to destroy the world in order to imagine what it might be like to feel unsafe in it” (Crosley), they are less likely to fixate on the threat of violence in a narrative form, concerned instead with interior, “soft science” issues like psychological and cultural preservation.

This thesis explores how, using the amplified lens of speculative fiction, authors Margaret Atwood, Claire Vaye Watkins, Louise Erdrich, and Megan Hunter question and invert certain literary tropes to reevaluate preconceived notions about male dominance, femininity, and motherhood, specifically in interaction with an apocalypse. Through an analysis of *Oryx and Crake*, *Future Home of the Living God*, *The End We Start From*, and *Gold Fame Citrus*, I will decipher how women can utilize speculative fiction to offer insight into the meaning of motherhood at the end and the beginning.

## Chapter 1: Children of the Anthropocene

### The Child

In *The Child To Come: Life After the Human Catastrophe*, English professor Rebekah Sheldon explores how the image of the child has come to represent the fate of the human species as it moves onward into the future. The questions the novel posits are particularly urgent given our current relationship to the planet in the time of the “Anthropocene.” Sheldon refers to this term as “a neologism” coined by scholars in the humanities and social science “to name the geological epoch during which human activity came to have geoscale impact” (viii). In an era “riven between unprecedented technoscientific control and equally unprecedented ecological disaster,” the image of the Child as resource, she argues, is not only “freighted with expectations and anxieties about the future,” but is also “tethered to a future that can no longer be taken for granted” (Sheldon 2-3). All of the books this thesis analyzes have some basis in humankind’s shifting relationship to nature, particularly in terms of highly consequential destruction caused by humans, a literary trend unsurprising given the eco-political climate over the past couple of decades. With the wide scale increase in recognition of environmental degradation caused by global industrialization since the 60’s, the average person is well aware that scientists have been warning against continuing current rates of consumption and modes of production. In fact, it seems that we could be in the process of ushering in our own apocalypse.

Officially, according to the International Union of Geological Sciences, 2018 still lies in the Holocene epoch, which began 11,700 years ago following the last major

ice age. Many stratigraphers dismiss the idea of a new epoch without any clear evidence- that is, a defined boundary in the rock strata. However, ever since atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen popularized the term in 2000, “Anthropocene” has become the new “environmental buzzword” (Stromberg) appearing in nearly 200 peer-reviewed articles and entering discussions in even elite scientific circles. Will Steffen of Australia National University’s Climate Change Institute suggests defining the Anthropocene’s beginning with either “the advent of the industrial revolution in the early 1800s or with the atomic age in the 1950s” (Stomberg). However, while the atomic era “has left traces of radiation in soils around the globe,” and “agriculture’s signature in Europe can be detected as far back as A.D. 900,” there has yet to be a scholarly consensus on the Anthropocene actual starting date. Without a definitive dated geological basis, many argue that the Anthropocene is really “more about pop culture than hard science” (Stromberg).

Regardless, humans have arguably witnessed more environmental and technological change in the past century than in the previous 250,000 years (Green et al.). Our immense influence over the biosphere is undeniable and will only continue to expand. Progressing with current rates of consumption and modes of production, the world will only be capable of supporting a population of 2 or 3 billion people who enjoy the same standard of living as the average American citizen does- a far cry from the projected 2.6 to 5 billion increase within this century from the 7 billion who already occupy the earth now (Green et al.). In many ways, the idea of the Anthropocene is evidence that humans have already entered an age of apocalypse. According to John Green in the video series “Big History Project,” “if humanity were to suddenly

disappear and aliens were to land on Earth 500 million years later and start excavating, even if they saw no sign of the humans on the fossil record, they would see a mass extinction event rivaling the five most devastating mass extinctions in pre-human history.” While populations are stabilizing in developed nations, developing areas are dealing with increasing population rates. Population growth can be leveraged by economic development but developing areas will likely have to resort to using inexpensive and less eco-friendly forms of fuel. Because of this, and the general unwillingness to decline into a less complex, more subsistence-based living, there is no easy solution to saving the human race. Perhaps a miraculous new technology will rescue us, similarly to how the industrial revolution “lifted humanity out of the recurring cycles of famine in the agrarian era” (Green et al.). Or perhaps it won’t. Either way, the functions and structure of our human societies are bound to undergo dramatic shifts in the next fifty years, and apocalyptic media will continue to flourish as we speculate about the possible avenues of demise and survival headed our way.

The tendency to place the image of the Child at the forefront of hope for futurity is an idea that occupies the work of both Sheldon and Lee Edelman, author of *No Future*. Their novels are intently focused on the idea of reproductive futurism, or “the investment of all our hopes for the future in our children” (Hollinger), a “two-sided salvation narrative” that both proposes that “someday the future will be redeemed of the mess our present actions foretell” and that “until then, we must keep the messy future from coming by replicating the present through our children” (Sheldon 35). While this thesis is primarily concerned with the image of the mother, both Sheldon and Lee

Edelman offer useful insight into how ideas about a successful future are intricately linked to those of reproduction and heteronormativity.

How, then, has the Child figure come to signify hope for the future of humanity? In the simplest terms, Sheldon says, it is because “children are the very stuff of survival, of course” (vii). Without reproducing, a species is bound to go extinct. But if one individual is as likely to advance into some part of the future, why would they exert their energy ensuring the survival of a younger individual, one who may die before or after that “future” has been reached? What drives our society to regard the figure of the Child with anything other than basic compassionate instinct? In other words, what compels us to rely so heavily on the Child as the ultimate time capsule of the present and symbol of the future?

Sheldon suggests that the ideology of Child as future stems from the advent of the “recapitulation theory,” a historically flawed concept formulated in the 1820’s that proposed that an embryo’s development progresses through successive stages representative of those in the evolution of the embryo’s ancestors. Its importance in this case relies on the idea it set forth into motion in terms of eugenic historiography: that the link forged between the Child and the species “focalized reproduction as a matter of concern for racial nationalism, and made the Child a mode of timekeeping” as well as a summarization of the “deep biological past of the species” (Sheldon 3). Furthermore, in recognizing the Child’s “own reproductive potential... within the broader story of generational succession and lineage,” the developmental model made the Child “legible not only as a record of the past but as a recipient of specific biological inheritance freighted with consequence for the future” (Sheldon 3). Steeped in connotations of

innocence, purity, and potential, the Child gradually became the ultimate signifier of the ideologically-transcendent and biologically-progressed future.

In her review of Sheldon's book, Veronica Hollinger writes that our society views the Child as a "kind of archive," one that "anticipates the future from a moment in the present," sent as a "guarantor of our continuity, of our immortality, of our extension into a time we cannot foresee." It is not just the Child we are saving, but ourselves in the Child. The Child is a "shard of the future," calling back to us, "I am already your future... I am already in the future. Save me from the future. Make this a different future" (Hollinger). The need to protect the Child from the future is both a measure of self-protection and continuity, for in saving the Child from the future and saving the future for the Child, one is calling for a perpetuation of their current social order and a halt in the forces that drive one into the unknowable and unsafe. As Sheldon puts it, "the figure of the Child stands in for a futurity that strips the future of everything but repetition and yet insists that repetition is progress" (36). For example, current environmental policies aim not for change but stasis or regression, preserving a future "fit for life as it is presently lived against the emergence of the new" (Sheldon 51). Progression in reproductive futurism is actually just a form of recycling, a "closed loop" formed "via generation" (Sheldon 29).

McCarthy's *The Road* serves as a perfect example of reproductive futurism entombed in literature. Even before the first chapter, McCarthy asserts the book's function as "an object of patrilineal transmission" in dedicating it to his son, thereby "bind[ing] the post-apocalyptic world of the novel to the world of its composition" (Sheldon 91). Following a man and his son along the roads of a post-apocalyptic

wasteland, *The Road* is a novel entirely centered around the generational transference of knowledge and life in assurance of a patriarchal-structured future. In Naomi Morgenstern's article, "Post-Apocalyptic Responsibility: Patriarchy at the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," she argues that by representing the passing of Cold War era masculinity and American hegemony, the man works as a figure struggling to uphold patriarchal traditions through insistent opposition between good and bad. While the novel offers a vision of mourning that illustrates a relinquishment of patriarchal grandiosity with the man's eventual death and the son's subsequent temporary independence, it also features a consistent denial of mortality and a reliance placed on inscribing patriarchal ideals on the child. Furthermore, after the father's death, the son is reinstated into an ideal post-nuclear family when a husband and wife with two children approach him and lead him off into the sunset, "establish[ing] hope where we always hope to find it: within the structure of familial-" and hopelessly patriarchal and heteronormative- "relationships" (Zibrak 104). It is "a story of generational inheritance of knowledge gleaned from watching and imitating" (Sheldon 95), fraught with fantasies of masculine immortality as the man attempts to call his father's house, share stories of his boyhood, visit his old home, and, most importantly, impart an ideology of patriarchal omnipotence to his son. This cultural dictatorship over the son creates an atypical reliance bond, and because the father knows there is no real hope for the future, he uses the boy as an extension of his ideological life, demonstrating a movement forward without any real purpose (Zibrak). Yet the ideologies the man passes on have scarcely any relevance in the world they occupy, only offering belief in a greater purpose outside of their bleak existence. An ethical

dilemma also lies in the father's absolute control over the boy through the fear projected onto "those who occupy the position of queer: nonreproductive, antisocial, opposed to viability, and so as threats to the child who assures and embodies collective survival" (Morgenstern 41). This means that the boy is given no information or contact with the world outside what his father prescribes him. The "death drive," as Morgenstern calls it, that is projected onto the queer begins with a "disturbing investment in getting rid of the mother" (41), an act which allows for a kind of utopian relationship between the father and the son of a strength and positivity that would otherwise be impossible.

Many scholars have argued that McCarthy's hit novel exemplifies the intensified discourse of fear, particularly concerning male vulnerability, that entered popular culture and political discourse following 9/11. The event, Jennifer Skinnon contends in "Redemptive Motherhood and a Discourse of Fear in Contemporary Apocalyptic Film," produced a "re-glorification of traditional gender roles" in response to "a perceived fall of U.S. masculinity" that appeared in early 2000's pre and post-apocalyptic films as the image of the pregnant female body "(and by extension the social construction of motherhood)" (57-58) as a fantasy of redemption. In the postmodern world, she argues, the "horrors of 9/11, environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina, and a widespread economic crisis" (Skinnon 58) all contributed to an environment of constant alert and anxiety for which the possibility of new life provided a temporary peace of mind. Yet despite the woman figure being the means of producing new life, if she becomes too powerful, she also operates as a "castration threat," one which must be "dealt with in a variety of ways, most often with the subordination of the woman" (61). The mother in *The Road* fits this mold perfectly: she produces an emblem of redemption, the son,

whose preciousness to the father crosses over into godliness, then quickly evacuates the novel to give room for the father-son journey.

### **The Mother**

The insistence of patriarchal ideals, one of the most prominent features of reproductive futurism, that runs rampant in post-apocalyptic media is made possible only by both the labor and dismissal of women. “The child always also points to the woman who bears him,” Sheldon writes, and therefore “the founding assertion that the present must endlessly attend to the future interpolates women into sacred and sacrificial reproduction” (56, 57). In other words, through the lens of reproductive futurism, the burden of the future rests entirely on women and their ability to forego their bodily autonomy. Their sense of control over their reproductive capacity at the end of the world suddenly becomes “a luxury that cannot be sustained in the state of emergency that attends the specter of extinction” (Sheldon 56). By insisting on using the Child-as-future signifier in making decisions about operating in the present and therefore, placing reproduction as the necessary operation for salvation, the standard post-apocalyptic society reasserts an aggressively patriarchal hierarchy that punishes those who don’t adhere to its standards.

If the Child is the figure upon which the human species depends, one would be inclined to think that the mother of that Child is of equally pressing importance. Yet the overwhelming absence of mothers in literature and film is a troubling trend that permeates a wide range of popular culture, particularly within apocalyptic media. *The Road* presents a woman who refuses to follow the typical motherly standards and is therefore rejected from much of the novel. Among the incredibly scarce number of

women gleaned from the pages of McCarthy's novel, almost all of them are illustrated as submissive, weak, and tied to a failing, decaying world. The character of the mother is presented as the direct antithesis to the male protagonist: a figure that refuses to continue "carrying the fire." McCarthy's description of her giving birth is entirely removed from her, becoming instead an emotionally detached process "always so deliberate" (59), solely focused on the man receiving "his son" (McCarthy 59). His wife's cries "meant nothing" (McCarthy 59) to the man because she was no longer relevant to him- her purpose had been served. Later, the man recalls her pleas to kill themselves and their son in order to escape the ravaged earth and the fate she believes awaits them, a desire that stemmed from the need to protect her son from suffering she knows will exceed the pain of suicide with the intuition that "sooner or later [others] will catch us and they will kill us... they are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it" (McCarthy 56). Rather than presenting the mother as yearning for a preservation of goodness through sacrifice, McCarthy quickly and harshly condemns the woman as a force positioned against "the good guys" in refusing to face the future or care for the child. Throughout the remainder of the novel, the mother represents nothing but a figure that solely exists in memories of a decimated past as a "call of languor and death," filling the man's dreams as a "pale bride [coming] to him out of a green and leafy canopy" with "her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white" (McCarthy 18). She is reduced to a seductive trap, a distracting and dangerous imaginary figure molded with lifeless clay by the male protagonist's mind.

McCarthy depicts other women throughout the novel as also being necessarily submissive to a patriarchal order. At one point, the pair encounters a caravan of

“wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites ill clothed against the cold and fitted in dog collars and yoked to each to each” (McCarthy 92). These women are equated to cattle, goods or objects to be paraded and possessed by the men. Furthermore, like cattle, the offspring they produce are intended to be consumed. The cannibalistic consumption of their children distinguishes their group from the man and his son, “the good guys,” but the intentions behind both forms of generation (caring for the son versus raising babies for slaughter) aren’t entirely different. Both use the Child and the act of giving birth detached from the actual mother as some form of sustenance. They allow a prolonging of the patriarchal system and “produce the future” (Sheldon 101), either through the passing down of knowledge and purpose onto the boy as an extension of the man, or as literal fuel for the continued survival of the male leaders.

Women, therefore, are not only irrelevant to the system the man strives to maintain through the boy, but harmful and utterly unwanted. The exception lies in the new mother who rescues the boy at the end, who serves only as “a third party to the encouragement and continuation of the man’s myth,” and a reestablishment of the “proper heteronormative order ruptured when the boy’s mother died” (Zibrak 123). Some critics such as Nell Sullivan, the writer of “The Good Guys: McCarthy’s *The Road* as Post-9/11 Male Sentimental Novel,” contend that the novel offers atypical gender performances; the ushering, abandonment, or grasp on new and old ages; and a transference of power from a matriarchal system to the realm of the male homosocial. Yet there is no matriarchal system of power existing in the novel in the first place, and

the man's "feminine" bouts of sentimentality are overridden and excused by his constant need to exude hyper-masculinity. Additionally, abandonment of the domestic scene in the novel does not work as a means of claiming a superior position over a "woman's domain" or escaping traditional gender roles taught in the home, as Sullivan suggests, but is used as a strategy in which McCarthy reinforces sexist ideas about gendered spheres and strengthens a patriarchal system of power that is utterly ambivalent about motherhood.

Margaret Atwood's novel, *Oryx and Crake*, takes a contrasting stance, challenging Sheldon's "assertion that human life acquires meaning only by producing human lives" (61), curiously, also through the figure of the absent mother. One of the only human survivors, Snowman, as he's known to the super-human race he looks after, or Jimmy, as he called pre-apocalypse, experiences Atwood's post-apocalyptic environment through flashbacks and present narratives. As he embarks on a journey to search for more survival supplies, he recalls the events that led to his childhood friend, Crake, orchestrating the end of the world. Crake and Jimmy grew up playing graphic video games and watching porn, and later attended different academies, Crake studying bioengineering and Jimmy focusing on the humanities. Crake eventually confides in Jimmy about his creation of a humanoid species, the "Crakers" as Snowman calls them, and secretly entrusts him to their caretaking when he develops a plague to wipe out the rest of humanity. Atwood uses Crake and Jimmy's paths to grapple with themes of destructive masculinity, natural destruction, and greed in a world not too unlike our own.

Jimmy's mother, Sharon, doesn't factor too much into the novel. Yet her absence signifies something vastly important. Although Atwood's book also contains far less influential female characters than male, she significantly departs from McCarthy's ambivalence or disdain of the feminine by shedding new light on the impact of the absent mother. Growing up, Jimmy's desire of a reality in which Sharon "was like a real mother and he was like a real child" (Atwood 30) is unfulfilled due to the gendered expectations placed on his mother in her home and the obvious mental trauma she experiences living in the Compound, the community of rich scientists built around the corporation Jimmy's father works at and separated from the lower-class "pleeblands." The corporation, where Sharon also once worked before quitting out of disgust for its inhumanity and greed, performs biological experiments on animals for the good of humans, raising giant pig-like creatures called "pigoons" as a resource for harvesting human organs. Jimmy constantly causes his mother anguish, playing "Righteous Mom weeping in the kitchen because her ovaries had burst," while his father brushes off her feelings of imprisonment by stating that she just doesn't "understand the reality of the situation" (Atwood 60, 53). Her emotional breakdowns, objection to the pigoon project, and nostalgia for a past that valued "making life better for people- not just people with money" (Atwood 57) cause Jimmy to grow to resent her, despite the fact that he shares several similar views on the direction of bioengineering and inner workings of their society. Sharon's attempts to be a "real" mother for Jimmy, "carefully dressed, her lipstick smile an echo of the jelly smile on the sandwich" (Atwood 31-32), only put both at unease in their failed performances to please the other. Eventually, Jimmy resorts to harassing her until he gets a reaction, a

relational dynamic that “brings out the absurdity of the tenets of ‘new momism’- ‘a highly romanticized but demanding view of motherhood’ that promulgates ‘the myth that motherhood is eternally fulfilling or rewarding... that there is only a narrowly prescribed way of doing it right” (Banerjee 239).

Eventually, Sharon leaves her husband and Jimmy, taking his pet “rakunk,” Killer, a genetic combination of a raccoon with a skunk, and smashing Jimmy’s father’s computer. Jimmy finds a note she left behind:

Dear Jimmy, it said. Blah blah blah, suffered with conscience long enough, blah blah, no longer participate in a lifestyle that is not only meaningless in itself but blah blah. She knew that when Jimmy was old enough to consider the implications of blah blah, he would agree with her and understand. She would be in contact with him later, if there was any possibility. Blah Blah search will be conducted, inevitably; thus necessary to go into hiding. A decision not taken without much soul-searching and thought and anguish, but blah. She would always love him very much.

Maybe she had loved Jimmy, thinks Snowman. In her own manner. Though he hadn’t believed it at the time. Maybe, on the other hand, she hadn’t loved him. She must have had some sort of positive emotion about him though. Wasn’t there supposed to be a maternal bond? (Atwood 61)

At the end, she tacks on, “*I have taken Killer with me to liberate her, as I know she will be happier living a wild, free life in the forest,*” which enrages Jimmy, but later, looking back, he admits that she “must have been right,” for “how else to account for the annoyingly large population of them now infesting this neck of the woods” (Atwood 61)? Because her actions so radically depart from what is expected of her not just as a mother but as an individual in their society, Jimmy questions whether she even loved him. Yet her note suggests the difficulty with which she made the decision to leave him. Despite being mistreated and resented by Jimmy for so many years, her choice to leave

and fight against the system signifies the compassionate belief that both she and her son deserve to live in a more ethical and free world. Therefore, while her abandonment of Jimmy enrages and confuses him, she actually presents “an instance of ‘mothering’ that both underlines the lacunae in the sexist ideology of motherhood and gestures towards an alternative” (Banerjee 236). Through the Sharon-Jimmy relationship, Atwood satirizes society’s expectations for mothers, and through Snowman’s more enlightened reflections looking back, advances “a critique of the neo-conservative American model of perfect motherhood” (Banerjee 238).

Atwood illustrates the degree to which Sharon’s actions deviated from cultural dictations through Jimmy’s description of his father following her departure: “His father was rattled, you could tell; he was scared. His wife had broken every rule in the book, she must’ve had a whole other life and he’d had no idea. That sort of thing reflected badly on a man” (Atwood 64). At the time, Jimmy is incapable of even processing that she was able to do what she did and that she was not the unextraordinary mother he thought she was, telling the Corpsmen, “His mother was just a mother... She did what mothers did. She smoked a lot” (Atwood 63). Yet in finding the courage to escape this carefully dictated prescription of motherhood and building a subterranean resistance to the biotechnology regime, the very force that Crake ultimately uses to destroy civilization, Sharon demonstrates how the role of mother “is also an individual player in a society” (Banerjee 241), capable of enacting change and challenging the abusive patriarchal social structure in spite of the domestic constraints placed on them. Even the seemingly insensitive act of stealing Killer works as a reminder to Jimmy “of one of the major evils- rampant gene-splicing- that led to the end of the world” (Banerjee 242).

Sharon demonstrates what it means to be “explicitly and profoundly political and social’ and aims at making mothering... a ‘site of empowerment and a location of social change’” (Banerjee 243). While Jimmy does not fully escape the expectations of a patriarchal society, he is, at least, as a product of Sharon’s motherhood, “able to evince a salutary ‘femininity’ that subverts the sexist gender dichotomy fostered by patriarchy” (Banerjee 244). Perhaps this sensitivity was innate, Suparna Banerjee argues in “Towards ‘Feminist Mothering’: Oppositional Maternal Practice in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” but the fact that he was “mothered by an ethically sensitive mother and has grown up in a household” that debates “the morality of such biocapitalistic activities like organ-farming” (242) cannot be ignored. Jimmy’s love for language and art within a society that deem them useless, dedication to ensuring the Crakers’ wellbeing, and sympathy for the pigeons at a young age are all in spite of society’s expectations and his father’s parenting. Later, after college, writing promotional advertisements for a corporation called Anooyoo, Corpsmen present Jimmy with a video of his mother. In what first appears to be a “routine execution” (Atwood 258), Jimmy watches as a woman in loose grey prison clothing is approached by a shooting squad, signifying a crime of treason. “Pan to close-up: the woman was looking right at him, right out of the frame: a blue-eyed look, direct, defiant, patient, wounded. But no teas. Then the sound suddenly came up. *Goodbye. Remember Killer. I love you. Don’t let me down*” (Atwood 258). Again, Sharon reminds him of the dangers of biocapitalism and a male-dominated society, the length to which she was clearly willing to go to fight against them, and her desire for him to do the same. By the conclusion of the novel, Atwood reveals Jimmy’s recognition of his love for his mother

and suggests that she offered the only real protection and sense of reality in an otherwise distorted world. “He never dreams about his mother, only her absence...” Atwood writes, “but he’d hugged his arms around himself all the same. Her arms” (277).

The vision the audience receives through Jimmy’s early impression of Sharon as a hysteric, failing mother unable to adapt to the modern world is parallel to *The Road*’s portrayal of the protagonist’s dead wife. Both women are both depicted as cold and detached, lacking the necessary commitment to serve the figure of the Child and therefore the future, making them irrelevant if not dangerous to the progress of society. Their actions demonstrate Edelman’s idea of queer positionality against reproductive futurism in that they refuse to choose the Child, the “passing of generations as stages on the road to better living,” or “sacrifice now for the sake of future generations” (qtd. in Edelman 31). Both mothers recognize that “civilization alone is mortal” and that “the future is mere repetition and is just as lethal as the past-” reasons for which, Edelman asserts, the Child “as futurity’s emblem must die” (31). Because the mothers gave birth, they fulfilled their purpose in the reproductive cycle, and are therefore not fully categorizable as the queer other, those who fall to the “fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning” and are therefore “responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (Edelman 13). But their contradiction to the social order following their reproductive labor does mark these characters as nonconforming. In wrenching away the responsibility of social order from the hands of the Child and thereby changing the notion of the social order’s function in the first place, these mothers reject the idea that

a “notional freedom [should be] more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself” (Edelman 11).

In the case of *The Road*, this oppositionality is clearly not meant to be read as a form of empowerment, although it is possible to see it as such. One can see the mother’s seemingly monstrous desires as stemming purely from wanting to protect herself and her son and in taking her life, she succeeds in gaining her freedom from the horror and pain of a post-apocalyptic world. When asked about the absence of women and the “dead girlfriend motif” running through his novels during a 2007 interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy replied, “Women are tough. I don’t pretend to understand women. I think men don’t know much about women. They find them very mysterious” (qtd. in Sullivan 90). Women, to McCarthy, and in the realm of reproductive futurism, are only required, understandable, and representable as breeders, a notion which extends beyond the post-apocalyptic wasteland into a wide range of popular media, even within the stories children grow up with. Deleting the mother doesn’t only mark her as just a womb to pump out babies, but elevates the status of the father to an often unrealistic level.

The space of the missing mother, many critics argue, is what allows for a place of character development, masculine bonds, and plot progression (Boxer). It is not the mother that is necessarily important to such stories, but the force or person that can take over following her death or disposal. Often, this is a single, adventurous, protective paternal figure that forges a familial vision that directly contradicts actual U.S. domestic statistics of household and child-rearing involvement. 67 percent of U.S. households with children are headed by married couples, 25 percent by single mothers, and only 8

percent by single fathers, half of whom live with their partners (Boxer). Furthermore, fathers only spend an average of twenty minutes a day with their children and “contribute no more than 30 percent of domestic services and child care” (Brydon 133) even when the wife earns more than half of the family income. Out of eleven different child-rearing tasks, only 22 percent of fathers assumed at least one, with only 8 percent assuming two or more (Brydon 133). The media fixture of the fun-loving, cool dad who is able to do everything on his own is thereby wildly inaccurate concerning the demographics of the audience these pieces of media are actually marketed to. Why, then, do we keep killing off the mother? “The dead-mother plot is a fixture of fiction so deeply woven into our storytelling fabric that it seems impossible to unravel or explain,” Sarah Boxer writes in “Why Are All the Cartoon Mothers Dead?” Despite a fictional medium being one where creators have total omnipotence, books and films like *The Road* keep displaying “the same damned world- a world without mothers” in which the author can “assert the inalienable rights of men” (Boxer). As in many male-authored apocalyptic texts, masculinity, even when it is altered or presented as atypical, is seen as the means of succeeding in a changing world- not the nurturing of motherhood. Whereas nurturance “given out of love, inclination, or a sense of responsibility” is automatically associated with “a woman’s biological nature,” when the same acts are so rarely performed by men, they are therefore seen as “extraordinary” (Brydon 142).

While the mother can be discarded after giving birth, she cannot rightly be classified as a “Mother” without performing the mothering, a task that both *The Road*’s mother and Sharon fail to successfully complete. For a true mother, “reproduction alone

is insufficient” (Brydon 133) in terms of social duty. As Suzan Brydon writes in “Men at the Heart of Mothering: Finding Mother in *Finding Nemo*,”

If women do not engage in and embrace what some would call ‘intensive mothering’ – staying home full-time, investing hour after hour into extensive, hands-on interaction each day – they are to blame for social problems and can be assured that their children will end up, at best, not performing to their intellectual and creative capacities and, at worst, in real physical danger... Decades of covert (and sometimes overt) messages targeted toward women position those who put themselves (read their career aspirations) ahead of their children as only doing so because ‘feminism ... con[ned] [them] . . . into abandoning their children’... To raise children as fully functioning members of a patriotic and capitalist society, women must wholeheartedly embrace the physical and emotional labor involved in childcare and domesticity. (133)

Performing “intensive mothering” is the ultimate sacrifice to the cause of reproductive futurism. In some ways, the “Ultimate Mother” character is not unrealistic, at least in terms of the character society insists women should strive to be. While the image of the independent working woman or single mother is far less uncommon or ostracized than it would have been even a decade ago, the pressure to stay at home and raise children is certainly still present. Contemporary scholars note the “frustration and suffocation some women find in motherhood, the loss of mind and (sometimes) loss of life some women, upon believing their only option is to stay homebound with the children, experience mentally and physically” (Brydon 132). By continuing to present the image of the happy mother in this situation, popular media perpetuates the myth that functioning as the “Ultimate Mother” is always attainable. “Cultural wisdom impacts how we view pregnancy, childbirth, mothering and fathering,” Brydon writes, adding, “I would argue that in contemporary society, media wields enough power” (140) to impart this wisdom and powerfully shape ideas about parenting and gender delegations.

The vision of the “Ultimate Mother” proposed by the reproductive futurism fantasy Western society has so thoroughly bought into relies not only on women’s sacrifice of bodily autonomy, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, but also of their entire social lives. When “mothering is the most crucial social function a woman can perform,” women find themselves positioned to either be ostracized in some form or constantly striving to fulfill the impossible standards of being “solely responsible for living lives of selfless morality” and “retain[ing] responsibility for raising good, moral citizens, and not much else” (Brydon 132). This task can become enormously more urgent in the realm of a post-apocalyptic wasteland given the scarcity of human beings left to uphold the remnants of civilization and the dubiousness of how much time one has left. Ironically, the same facts give cause to reject this mindset, as Sheldon and Edelman do in their novels. What point is there in perpetuating the tenets of a society that has largely been wiped off the face of the earth? Why continue to adhere to certain predicated social standards in a social-less environment? One could argue that the trope of the dead or absent mother, which abounds in speculative fiction as a whole, could be seen as a release from the constraints of the gendered cultural roles and the image of the “Ultimate Mother.” Yet the fictional fathers that so often slip into the space previously occupied by the mother, as in *The Road*, often absorb the same responsibilities, and because “Western cultural messages define mothering, not fathering or parenting, as the performance of nurture” (Brydon 132), in a sense they perform the role of the mother, simply without any of the social consequences. In this way, reproductive futurism is still upheld as a fantasy in which a woman’s body is only briefly needed and then discarded while men are free to pass on their ideological torches to the next generation.

## Chapter 2: The End That's Not the End

One important facet of writing about the end of the world is that it usually requires at least one survivor to observe what remains. Therefore, the end is never truly the end, only the beginning of an altered state of existence. The fact that these authors have written anything at all attests to the existence of something. Novels like the ones this thesis examines depict a “lasting and more subdued form of apocalypse, one... that does not put an end to the world but makes adjustments to it, and forces us to see it differently” (Schmitt 2). It is not the “end of the game” but the addition of a “new set of rules,” with some people being “better at this new version of the game than they were at the previous one” (Schmitt 3). Trapped in a moment which is “both the past and the future,” an unrecognizable world “and yet, probably for a brief moment, still ours” (Schmitt 9), the post-apocalyptic character must traverse the familiar and the unknowable, using what they knew from before to navigate the after and the after to examine the before in new, previously unfathomable ways. The apocalypse is never just about the apocalypse, but about how one can, or fails to, change.

In addition to *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road*, this thesis examines *Future Home of the Living God*, *Gold Fame Citrus*, and *The End We Start From*. The first, written by Louise Erdrich, is set in an indeterminate future in Minnesota in which, for unknowable reasons, evolution has begun to turn back the clock. Cedar Hawk Songmaker, a 26-year-old member of the Ojibwe tribe adopted by a white couple at an early age, narrates the story as a sort of letter to her unborn baby as she unravels secrets about her origin, the father of her baby, and the fate of society. Four months pregnant, she decides to contact her birth mother for the first time to gather genetic information and is disappointed to

discover that her Native beginnings are not as magical and mysterious as she imagined them to be. Her real name is Mary Potts, after her birth mother and grandmother, her half-sister is hooked on meth, and her mother's boyfriend, Eddy, keeps a list of reasons not to kill himself on any particular day. When agents of the new religious government, "The Church of the New Constitution," begin to hunt down pregnant women, Cedar attempts to lay low with the father of her baby, Phil. Many critics have compared the novel to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and for good reason: both deal with the restriction of female autonomy concerning childbirth by an authoritative Christian regime. Erdrich's departs from Atwood's work in a few significant ways, however. First, she highlights issues of race alongside gender by asking who belongs in the future and in what capacities. Secondly, the discourse of fear running through the novel stems not only from the environment and those in positions of authority but also from what grows inside of her. Fear of the unknown, especially regarding whether her baby will be "normal" or a product of backward evolution, underscores the narrative.

Claire Vaye Watkin's *Gold Fame Citrus* also grapples with the fear of the unknown in the form of the "Amargosa sea," a stretch of desert spanning thousands of miles eastward from California. The protagonist, Luz, lives in a starlet's abandoned estate atop a desiccated Santa Monica with her boyfriend, Ray. Referred to as "Mojavs," Californian citizens are regarded as refugees, trapped between the Pacific Ocean, militiamen guarding the borders, and the harrowing dune sea. Before the total destruction of the state, the government adopted Luz as the half-Chicana, middle-class poster child for their campaign to save the environment from drought and climate

change. Referred to as Baby Dunn, Luz acted as a representative for her entire generation, appearing in newspaper clippings like:

GOVERNOR SIGNS HSB 4579; EVERY SWIMMING POOL IN CALIFORNIA TO BE DRAINED BEFORE BABY DUNN IS OLD ENOUGH TO TAKE SWIMMING LESSONS. BABY DUNN STARTS KINDERGARTEN TODAY WITHOUT GREEN FIELDS TO PLAY IN. LAST CENTRAL VALLEY FARM SUCCUMBS TO SALT: BABY DUNN, 18, NEVER AGAIN TO TASTE CALIFORNIA PRODUCE. BERKELEY HYDROLOGISTS: WITHOUT EVACS BABY DUNN WILL DIE OF THIRST BY 24. (Watkins 11)

Now surrounded by other wayward survivors struggling to make ends meet, Luz spends her days sifting through the starlet's lingering Hermes scarves and traipsing down into the valley with Ray to purchase slimy handfuls of fruit for hundreds of dollars on the black market. On one such trip, the couple spies a rare toddler waddling among the assorted junkies through and hovering by the fires and drum circles. Impulsively, they decide to kidnap the child and, later, escape across the desert to find a more habitable home. As one critic put it, *Gold Fame Citrus* "sidesteps the question of 'What are we gonna do?' to examine instead how the conditions of drought and climate change might transform a land and how that might, in turn, transform a people" (Klein).

*The End We Start From* sits on the opposite end of the disaster spectrum- dealing with the threat of a flood that sets a mass evacuation into motion and encases London in water and silt. Megan Hunter's debut novel begins with the protagonist giving birth, quickly followed by her Northern migration with her husband, R, and baby, Z. Written in the present tense, the book serves as a kind of diary parsed into isolated sentences which are separated by asterisks signifying the end of a thought or moment like a "series of stepping stones across the blank expanse of an unknown future" (Jordan). Punctuated by brief snippets of creation myths, *The End We Start*

*From* allows its unnamed protagonist to document the first year of her son's life as she flees to her husband's parents, refugee camps, and an island out at sea.

What binds all of these female authors and their works together is the central theme of an apocalypse, the image of mother and child as redemption and renewed purpose, a deep entanglement with the natural world and the sublime, the interplay of religion and spirituality with ideas of beginnings and endings, the missing or insufficient father, and concern with memory and transference. The following sections will examine each of these topics and their communication with one another to uncover a vision of what motherhood means both at "the end" and in the first two decades of this millennium.

### **Moment of Birth, the Natural World, and the Sublime**

Hunter's novel opens with a description of the protagonist going into labor: "I am hours from giving birth, from the event I thought would never happen to me, and R has gone up a mountain" (1). The moment of birth on the verge of the apocalypse is a moment filled with hope, happiness, and fear- traits that also factor heavily into the Romantic poets' idea of the sublime. The sublime is inextricably linked with the power of the natural world and presents itself to the human observer in flashes of awe-inspiring and overwhelming beauty and terror, observable in poems like "Kubla Kahn" and "Mont Blanc." It did not die with this generation of poets, however, but continued to echo into contemporary art. In a genre so interwoven with issues of the environment, the overwhelmingly new, and the possibility of miracles, the sublime is bound to factor in somehow.

First, I want to focus on the association of the natural with the female body. Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is the study of women, culture, and nature which emphasizes a connection between the treatment of women and other underprivileged categories and that of the environment, calling on the annihilation of the patriarchal power structures that uphold the continued pattern of abuse on both. Some feminist scholars propose that the division between men and women, mind and body, and society and nature results from the distinct sense of self felt by both genders. While men typically hold a sense of self as separate, they argue, women tend to maintain one of interconnectedness. This has led to two different ethical systems—the separate self, operating on the basis of an ethic of rights or justice, and the interconnected self, which makes moral decisions on the basis of an ethic of responsibilities or care (Percec 47). According to this view, the woman as the interconnected self is automatically assigned to the role of nurturer, not just of the domestic scene but of the world itself. Images like “Mother Earth” and “Mother Nature,” which continue to permeate Western cultural dialogue, can be traced as far back as the third millennium BC when various myths of the nature goddesses Inanna and Ishtar adorned Mesopotamian tablets. The personification of nature as a woman appears in a vast variety of cultural histories and religions, including the mythologies and legends of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, the indigenous people of the Americas, and Buddhism. The word nature itself comes from the Latin word “natura,” meaning birth or character. It is from Mother Earth’s womb that all nature sprang, according to most legends. Bouson insists that “nature is envisioned, contrastingly, as a ‘Wordsworthian’ good mother and a ‘Darwinian’ bad mother” (18). She appears in conservation efforts as both a figure of immense power

and one calling for help and change- sentiments that could be said to echo those of feminist groups as well.

For this thesis's purpose, I want to look closely at how these specific texts pull meaning from this common association. *The End We Start From* certainly forms this link from the very beginning. The protagonist's description of giving birth is highly animalistic and linked to the natural force of water, comparing herself to a "lumbering gorilla with a low-slung belly and suspicious eyes" (Hunter 1). She states, "I growl. I growl more and more, and finally I am waterless, the pool of myself spreading slowly past my toes" (Hunter 1). Despite her husband not being there, the woman says that the two of them have meticulously planned a "water birth, with whale music, and hypnotism, and perhaps even an orgasm" (Hunter 3). The fact that the apocalypse is arriving via water adds a deeply symbolic level to her preferred method of birthing. As the end is ushered in by nature in the form of towering waves, the baby (and the future) is announced by the breaking of the protagonist's water. The way in which Hunter writes about the moment of birth could easily be used as a description of the coming apocalypse: "My usual cynicism has been chased away by the fear of pain, of losing control, of all things bloody and stretching. The moment of birth looms ahead of me like the loss of my virginity did, as death does. The inevitable, tucked and waiting out there somewhere" (3). In many ways, the apocalypse and the moment of giving birth are not too different. The subject of both has heard of and must undergo the pain that accompanies the event, has been preparing for its arrival but does not fully know what to expect, and must adapt to an entirely new way of living if they survive it.

During Hunter's protagonist's moment, she finds herself suddenly in a moment of simple sublimity. "I gaze at the wooden floor," she notes, "I have never noticed how beautiful it is before. It is perfectly dusk-coloured, and the whorls are rising like dark little planets through its glow. Between the waves of disemboweling wrench the world is shining. I feel like Aldous Huxley on mescaline. I am drenched in is-ness" (Hunter 5). The peacefulness of the event is contrasted with pain, too- once Z is born, she is too "exhausted to hold him," her eyes aching from "three hours of pushing" and her "undercarriage" a "pulp" (Hunter 6). While she was already, at thirty-eight weeks, warned that she would have to move from the "Gulp Zone," it is then, as she is recovering and feeling like she could, "all things considered, conquer the world" (Hunter 8), that news of the flood reaching London flashes on the one o'clock news. Again, linking the atmosphere of the apocalypse to giving birth, or more generally, motherhood, Hunter states that "a list of boroughs" affected in London appears on the television screen "suddenly as perfect and tender as the names of our children. Ours" (8). The children in the hospital, and by extension, the future, are housed in what "now seems to be a ship, a brightly lit ark housing all the new ones aloft," and it is the mothers, "the women in the open-backed gowns, bursting stitches in the bathroom- [who] are their escorts" (Hunter 9). The image of the ship and its connection to Noah's ark reappear throughout the text (later, the protagonist notes that their baby was almost named Noah, a "popular choice" (Hunter 10)), further highlighting the idea of the mother as protector and nurturer of all natural life, carrying what will literally propagate the future through the violence of her surroundings.

Following Z's birth and the family's trek northward, the protagonist continues to make varied connections to herself and her baby with animals and natural forces. "I have started to think of myself like a bear, with my young clinging to my neck" (Hunter 17) she confesses, "And I put his head against my head and smell the point just above his ear, the smell that makes me want to eat him" (26). She portrays Z as having a "tiny cat skull" (Hunter 13) and "shark eyes" (7) with a body that curls "like a shrimp, like a spring, like a tiny human yet to straighten out" (27). She describes herself as being filled with "a certain calm. Bovine or not, I cannot tell" (Hunter 27) and later, the pair lounges outside like "beasts in the sun" (35). By forging these connections, Hunter emphasizes both the assertion of control over the natural that is inherent in women as well as the mother and child's placement in an ambivalent environment in which they are as much at the mercy of nature as shrimp are.

Cedar's interactions with nature in *Future Home of the Living God* are less directly concerned with her child and more focused on her surroundings as a whole. The concept of backward evolution or whatever is plaguing humanity is never fully explained, so the reader, along with Cedar, is left to wonder what exactly is happening. At one point, Cedar muses, "the world as we know it is coming to an end and nobody knows what the hell is going on or how our species is going to look four months from now" (Erdrich 26). One television station displays a "swirling set of graphics-humanoid figures growing hunched as they walked into the mists of time, while in the background Beethoven's Fifth Symphony dissolves into a haunting series of hoots and squawks" (Erdrich 52). From the safety of her home, Cedar spies several wildly morphed creatures prowling outside her window, including a reptilian, lizard-like bird

and a saber-toothed cat. Everything from the foliage to the animals to the humans are bound together in one inexplicable metamorphosis- “the pines, the maples, the roadside malls, insurance companies and tattoo joints, the ditch weeds and the people in the houses-” all balanced on a “cusp between the now of things and the big, incomprehensible change to come” (Erdrich 13). Both Erdrich and Hunter’s descriptions of the environment remind the reader of humankind’s shared vulnerability and intertwined-ness with the natural world.

When Cedar finally gives birth imprisoned in a government facility for young women, her moment is also tied to water and the sublime. It is frightening, confusing, and even seemingly supernatural. Erdrich writes,

One by one the saints entered the room. Over the next hours thousands of spirits were admitted. We were surrounded by a jungle of plants... I could see myself reflected in the stainless steel panels. I was in an ocean shooting sparks of light. The waves were pain. I was flung up, dashed down. Over and over to infinity and then when I thought I must have died, I took a breath, and I was surprised. The ocean also took a deep breath. The day was gone... The pushing went on forever, until, with a violence I didn’t know was in me, I pushed you out. (264)

The act of giving birth in both author’s cases demonstrates a transcendence of earthly experience and a privileged connection to realms normally outside human comprehension. Like the image of “Mother Nature,” Cedar sits between the divine and those of her world, watching the saints enter “one by one” into the same room in which her reflection shines from the stainless steel panels. In Cedar’s case, she quite literally becomes part of nature. She is not only in the ocean “shooting sparks of light,” but is tied to the ocean itself, breathing the same “deep breath” and feeling the same crashing waves. It is through her harnessing of the ocean’s power that she is finally able to push her baby out.

Luz in *Gold Fame Citrus* clearly does not have a similar experience in terms of giving birth, seeing as she kidnaps her “daughter,” Ig, but she does come into contact with the sublime through nature and her child. The first time she spies Ig occurs shortly after purchasing black market blueberries in the valley. She recalls the moment as such:

Descending the smooth dusty pitch of the canal, she looked down at the bonfire and then beyond it, where someone had set off a bottle rocket. She saw the little puff of smoke and heard the snap. Just then- at exactly the instant the snap reached her, so that the moment was ever-seared into her memory as a tiny explosion- something slammed into her knees. She looked down to see a shivering, towheaded child wrapped around her legs.

Luz could not remember the last time she’d seen a little person. The child was maybe two years old. A girl, Luz somehow knew, though she wore only a shoddy cloth diaper, its seat dark with soil. She looked up at Luz with eyes like gray-blue nickels, sunk into skeletal sockets. Her skin was translucent, larval, and Luz had the sense that if she checked the girl’s belly she would be able to discern the shadows of organs there.  
(Watkins 30)

The Romantics often distinguish the sublime as something they can retain in their minds and their memories but not ever fully reproduce. Ig’s entrance into Luz’s life accompanies a snap and a “little puff of smoke,” searing it forever into her memory and marking it as a life-altering event from which she can never turn back from. The rarity of seeing a small child also makes the event extraordinary, and the eerily beautiful way in which Luz describes her paints an image of a faltering, slightly frightening, and pale butterfly, one which Luz will pin down and cherish forever as her small sliver of the sublime.

Watkin’s portraits of the dune sea are similarly both entrancing and disturbing. A “sandshow mirage” that is “yawningly vast” (Watkins 85), the Amargosa strikes fear and solemn contemplation of the sacred in Luz and Ray. As they drive east, they

encounter an odd paper-mâché like forest along the way like a “cemetery” in which they could trample “flimsy giants, pulverizing the ghostly gray cellulose carcasses and sending up great clouds of dust” (Watkins 88). When they finally stop, standing in a field of their debris as the smiles melt from their faces, “a supernatural stillness overtook them, the fear they had tried to laugh away” (Watkins 88). As both a reminder of life and an image of death, the forest encompasses the feelings of joy, helplessness, and violence that characterize the sublime.

On one hand, Watkins personifies the earth as “Mother Nature opening her legs and inviting Los Angeles back into her ripeness,” an invitation that, “like the disks of water shimmering in the last foothill reservoirs patrolled by the National Guard, evaporat[ed] daily” (7). Another section, however, describes the dune sea as “the devil incarnate” (Watkins 121), a “sutureless gash where the Mojave Desert used to be” (114), but then also the “wide, open eye of God” (121). The pages of Watkin’s novel brim with contradictory and somehow complimentary pictures of the ravaged earth: “both siren and jagged reef, its good vibes a blessing, its curse just as likely” (125) exerting a “chemical pheromonal, elemental” pull that “beckoned the chosen, they said” (124), representing both life and death. When Ray abandons the car and Luz and Ig to search for help (or leave so as not to have to watch them slowly die), Luz imagines the sand devouring him, leaving only his bones to bleach in the sun. And yet, when Luz and Ig are rescued by Levi, a new-age prophet of the dunes, they find themselves part of a thriving, vibrant community. Even the sea, Levi reveals to her, is not as dead as it seems. He keeps a neofauna primer filled with sketches of bizarre creatures that lurk in the dunes. For Luz, the primer turns “the world once shriveled into a locus of succour...

a land of could,” and a world “made of unseen wonders, what we might call miracles” (Watkins 202).

Levi claims that he was sent by the government to “find nothing” (Watkins 206) so that the nuclear industry could establish it as a wasteland in which they could base a national nuclear repository. Later, however, Luz discovers that Levi lied about a lot of things, including the contents of the primer. The fruits he brought her weren’t conjured from the earth but purchased likely from somewhere far away, a discovery which brought “the last of her whole lush and infinite miracle world” crumbling into an “impossible pile of sand approaching an unforgiving range” (Watkins 312). However, the dune’s lessened ability to sustain certain life doesn’t diminish its sublime quality. Luz also learns that Ray survived, captured by Levi and his crew, but alive and able to find Luz and Ig nonetheless, attesting to the dune sea’s lack of total violence and apathy. The sea is still a force of immense power, as much a character in the novel as Luz or Ig. At one point, having joined the colony, Ray decides to surf the waves of sand, and “instead of terror he grasped what made the dunes a sea, and for the first time felt the serenity of that” (Watkins 269). Furthermore, Ig’s later injury, when she is stung or bitten by some creature, proves that the dune sea is not entirely dead, only hidden and mysterious in its multifaceted ways. *Gold Fame Citrus* adds to Hunter and Erdrich’s insistence on nature’s immense power but also demonstrates that humans are not always able to match or even understand its overarching influence. Perhaps because Luz did not experience the moment of giving birth like the other protagonists, she is not given access to that specific avenue of the sublime, and therefore can never be fully attuned to

others and her environment, having not been a part of the exclusionary circle of biological mothers that seem to be privy to “Mother Nature’s” cycle of creation.

*Gold Fame Citrus* is also the only one of these three novels to close with a certain end for the protagonist. Levi lets Luz and Ray depart from the colony unharmed only on the condition that they leave Ig behind so that she can be the colony’s new “Baby Dunn,” the poster child of the New World amid the sandy sea. Finally, having torn themselves away from Ig, they board a jeep equipped with supplies to get them out of the desert when suddenly,

The flood came upon them like an animal, like a vengeful live thing, earth-colored and savagely fast. Ray took it for a sandalanche at first, as the wriggling fingers surrounded the lorry. Its true properties came to them both at the same time. They looked at each other.

“It’s water, Ray. Is it water?”

Ray attempted to pronounce “Everything’s okay,” but his withered cords did not permit it. The flood lifted the lorry. The truck was afloat, no longer their own, and silty dun water around their ankles proved it.

Luz leaned over the edge of the lorry and baptized her hand.  
“Beautiful.”

... she said, coolly and with a hard grace, “I have to go, baby.”

Ray lunged for her. But she was out of the lorry, stepping to her waist in the opaque rage of water. It pushed her and she lurched, nearly fell, but her face was serene. Ray scrambled to pull her in, but she would not allow it.

She would not allow it. Ray’s phrase years later, in Wisconsin, the Carolinas. In Greencastle, Indiana, where the soybeans no longer grew.

“I’m okay,” Luz shouted back over the miraculous roar of water, all those prayers answered late. “I’d be okay” she revised, smiling before she slipped forever under, “if I could just get my feet under me.”

(Watkins 338-339)

Having served as the symbolic figure of her generation’s relationship to the earth, Luz returns to it in a rush of water like a sudden birth. The earth itself has come alive in the same way Luz’s world did with the arrival of Ig. It is conscious, awake, and filled with

purpose, with a force both as terrifying and amazing as the journey of motherhood. Whether she intended to let herself be drowned by the flood is not altogether clear, but the way in which Watkins paints the moment as peaceful and even religious in its sublimity, as well as Luz's defiance of help, indicates a choice for an end on her own terms. And as we know, no end is truly the end, but a transcendence or tumble into a new state of being, perhaps one in which, this time, she'll manage to get her feet underneath her.

### **Renewed Purpose and Insufficiency: An Imperfect Mother Mary**

A common thread throughout all of these novels is the sudden renewed sense of purpose coupled with feelings of insecurity and insufficiency gained through mothering a child. For example, the fact that Luz stole Ig to some degree indicates her lack of responsibility and inability to correctly fill the role of the "Ultimate Mother." While she had few options, and Ig's people were obviously mistreating her, an impulsive kidnapping is probably not the most morally correct choice. She even states that the words she heard Ig's people using like "whore, ream, fuck rag, cum dumpster" were ones "Luz herself used, and whose explicitness had always delighted her, but which seemed now repugnant and unequivocally inappropriate" (Watkins 38). Later, seduced by Levi, Luz proves to be just as negligent as the people she stole Ig from despite the supposedly superior love she has for her. While Luz gets high with Levi chewing on a whole sack of the highly addictive "brute root," Ig stumbles off and is later discovered with an infected bite, her face "flame-red and slick as the flesh of some lost fruit" (Watkins 295). "Luz tried to comfort Ig," Watkins writes, but "the tantrum continued, frenzy and agitation rippling like waves through the baby's whole body... 'Shhh,' Luz

tried. She didn't know what the fuck she was doing and never had" (295). While Luz decides to give up the root and Levi, by this point she has realized, "I was supposed to be better than her people, but I'm not" (Watkins 304).

The power of the mother, then, is not all-encompassing and all-powerful, no matter how much the mother might think or wish it was. When Ig first crawls into Luz's lap, she immediately thinks of the child as hers. She calls Luz a "baby" despite her apparent age of two years and muses that "she's a relative baby meaning maybe that she was closer to being a baby than a girl, or meaning maybe that they just got her and so she was newborn to them" (Watkins 67). When Ig wanders off to crawl over another strange woman, Luz feels "betrayed, somehow" (Watkins 36) and comes to the decision that "some evil was going down here and Luz knew she was the only one who could see it. For the first time in her life, she was absolutely essential. 'I am acutely engorged with purpose,' she whispered" (38). In some ways, Luz's desire to rescue Ig make her suitable for the role of Ig's "mother," but her sudden feelings of possessiveness and unique insight also reveal a delusion of ownership and selfish desire in the face of an object that could give her something- that is, a new purpose in life.

Fulfilling a motherly role proves messy for Luz. Caught in "The Ig Show, an onslaught of enslaving cuteness" (Watkins 52), Luz finds herself filled with a type of happiness she never knew possible. She wants her new child to "see every see every new and magnificent thing in the world. Already there was no limit to her yearning on behalf of the baby" (Watkins 86), and yet she is not equipped to deal with Ig in the manner required to mother her through seeing all of these things. At one point, after one of Ig's outbursts, Luz silently calls her a cunt, then "captured Ig's other hand and held

them both in a sticky nest,” squeezing “hard, hard enough that it felt good” before whispering “love and apology and contrition and affection into her neck” (Watkins 93). She also becomes obsessed with anyone finding out about Ig’s true origin story, an indication of her lack of security and projection of self-worth and purpose onto Ig herself. Luz is not all bad- she loves Ig immensely in an imperfectly human way and provides her with the means to survive. But the imbalance of what the one gives to the other is apparent during Luz’s departure. While Ig imbues Luz with a sense of urgency and importance and a belief in something, Ig is content staying in the arms of another woman of the colony. Luz “wanted Ig to reach for her, to plead for her, to fling herself from Dallas’s arms and wail... but Ig was silent, luminous as a candle, still and indifferent” (Watkins 336). Refusing to touch Ig for fear that “it would be her undoing,” Luz steps away, watching with Ray as Ig’s “pale halo dissolved into the blinding glory of the dune” (Watkins 337). Ig still operates as the image of the Child as savior, serving as the symbol for the desert and their people just as Baby Dunn did, a Jesus figure with a literal sun halo, but Luz is only human. Rather than being elevated to the status of a Mother Mary figure, Luz’s journey demonstrates how the apocalypse is not necessarily “an opportunity for redemption” and not everyone is “ennobled by it” (Mandel). At the end, “the world might be irrevocably altered, but we’re still us” (Mandel).

Hunter paints her protagonist in a much more forgiving light. The pregnancy itself comes as a surprise, for she is a “geriatric primigravida” (Hunter 4), making the birth even more of a miraculous event. Similarly to Luz, Hunter’s woman feels as though her baby has given her a purpose, stating, “It seems that he is feeding me, filling me with a steady, orange light” (27). “The world inflates and deflates with him, a giant

bellows,” (52) Hunter writes, emphasizing the supposed importance of the baby, not only to the mother but to the whole world. Although young children aren’t as much of a rarity in Hunter’s literary world as they are in Watkins’s, the approaching apocalypse sheds new light on the idea of new life. Having reached the commune, the woman notes how “They react. I am unsure, I realize if they do this anymore. If a baby is still something. It is. They react” (Hunter 45). She seems to think that the coming flood would make people immune to the inherent pull a baby seems to have on others, being too focused on their own survival, but the opposite is true. Some do look at Z “as though he is a disability” (Hunter 113), a hindrance to the onward march of the woman who must care for him and for the whole group, but the protagonist quickly finds solace among other mothers at the camp, particularly one named O. With her, she discovers and revels in the varied facets of being a mother.

Like Luz, at times the woman feels desperately inadequate, calling herself a “terrible mother” (Hunter 57) when Z falls, unhurt, during a brief lapse of her surveillance. However, the other mothers in the commune quickly comfort her, assuring her that “it happens to everyone” (Hunter 57). As the book progresses, she matures from highlighting her lack of extraordinariness as a mother (“I hold my breast in my hand like a medieval painting, pushing the nipple towards his clenched mouth. It’s all I have. I am a one trick mother” (Hunter 80)) to realizing that, really, “there is no skill. There is only another person, smaller than you” (93). The possibility of mothering, the character finds, is both an innate knowledge and a possibility for anyone. Mothers possess an inner “hysterical strength,” the woman asserts, evident in how the group of them in the camp have “learned to stay half-awake, like horses standing up” (Hunter 61), combined

“superhuman powers” that mothers can sometimes develop “when their children are in danger” (51). Here, again, the mother is placed somewhere between the divine and the human, granted access through the act of giving birth and raising their children with care. However, this in-between quality also means that they are not fully invincible. At one point, the woman recalls,

I thought having a baby would stop the fear. When I was a child, my mother told me she would die for me, of course. I asked her all the time. Tested her. The fear of ending woke me up, it choked me. It rendered me incapable. I thought a baby would stop it. Give me something to die for. (Hunter 68)

While she wouldn't hesitate to die for her baby, the new feelings of protectiveness and love are not accompanied by the total lack of fear she thought her mother had. The fear of the end still rattles her. This is an instance in which, lacking confidence as a mother, she believes herself rendered utterly “incapable.” As the reader witnesses, however, this is not true. She is capable of protecting and providing for her child throughout the novel, eventually bringing him home to desiccated remains of London. The presence of fear isn't what makes a weak person or mother, she reveals, but the courage to push through that fear. “When you have a child, the fear is transferred, my mother could have told me,” Hunter writes several pages later, “In a way, it is multiplied, she could have said” (73-74). The mother battles not only the fear of one individual but of two, a feat that the woman describes modestly as “the closest I have come to bravery” (Hunter 31). The mother is a site of giving and taking, battling with her insecurities and fears while providing herself for the child while gaining the strength and meaning that comes from attaining that role.

More so than these other two novels, *Future Home of the Living God* positions its protagonist as the biblical Mary figure, carrying the light and hope of the world. The title, gleaned from a church billboard Cedar snaps a picture of, immediately forges this connection. Because Cedar's child may be one of the only "originals" (Erdrich 245) left, meaning it has not been affected by the rewinding of evolution, Cedar finds herself carrying cargo that is potentially vastly precious to the fate of the human species as a whole. Yet she is still a normal woman, oscillating like all these other mothers between the transcendent and the earthly, "a woman, a dweeb, a geek, a pregnant degreeless dilettante," but also someone who is "straddling not just millennia but epochs" (Erdrich 66). Not unlike any other biological mother, her body "is accomplishing impossible things" (Erdrich 68), spinning a "collage of DNA and dreams, all those words made flesh" without even any "act or will" (239) on her part. The process of growing life from one's self is a miraculous event made only more astounding by the possible rarity of what Cedar holds inside her: a normal baby. Early in the novel, Cedar writes in her journal,

Imagine what it was like for the young woman, Mary, to feel the extraordinary kicks and shocks of her unborn child and to know that she harbored a divine presence, the embodiment of God's Word. Yet, what she felt was probably little different from what all pregnant women have felt, throughout time, ever since we could both feel and be aware of our feelings. This bewildered awe for the mysterious being we harbor certain borders on a mystical apprehension... pregnancy is a wilderness of being... In this wild state the markers are so ordinary and mundane that the grandeur I feel as well seems delusional. Perhaps at all times and in all countries women with children are actually at risk. At some level we are quite insane. (Erdrich 67)

Here we enter back into the sublime, that insane grandeur that both escapes total comprehension and strikes a deep chord of understanding. Like Mary, Cedar creates and

carries a force that will shift the future of humanity. The act of one's body forging millions of new cells and creating a whole human being within one's self verges on the mystical and the wild (although, yes, it initially required the help of some sperm). The "ordinary and mundane" markers that date the stages of a pregnancy contradict the spectacular nature of what is actually taking place, Cedar argues, making, on some level, all women "insane" as they teeter between the ordinary and the miraculous.

Just as the woman in *The End We Start From* finds solidarity with O, Cedar bonds with one other pregnant woman in particular, Tia, who she escapes from her first facility with before being captured again. When Tia is in the bouts of an enduring and painful labor, Cedar asks her adoptive mother, who helped them escape, whether Tia would die, to which she replies, "Oh honey that's normal" (Erdrich 182). The pain that women experience giving birth, one of the most naturally physically torturous experiences that human beings can go through, is rendered, through the eyes of another woman who has given birth, entirely ordinary, demonstrating the ridiculous and incredible nature of mothers' power- that part that makes them all just a bit "insane." Later, before Cedar gives birth, her mother tells her that she will know when she begins labor, to which she replies, "Isn't that always the way women are supposed to know things, by 'knowing' things" (Erdrich 231)? Again, the reader finds that the power of mothers is something that both escapes understanding and is collectively, innately learned.

The newly established government in *Future Home* uses the unique position of pregnant women during the time of uncertain humanness to establish an image of them as patriotic heroines, the pioneers needed to forge forward into the future. One

announcement proclaims, “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” (Erdrich 90). In the eyes of the authoritarian government, it is the women’s duty to serve as martyrs of the future. They are the ultimate sacrifices to reproductive futurism, sentenced to churn out babies in the hope that one will be normal. In one of the final scenes of the book, Cedar describes how the imprisoned women, in their own way, protest and lament the likely passing of another peer (it is widely understood that most women die from giving birth at the facility or are disposed of after unless they are healthy enough to be inseminated again):

There is a rustle of whispers all through the dining room, a swirl of motion in one corner. The burly redheaded woman is standing up in front of the wall of women. She is holding her belly. Her silence commands everyone’s attention. Tears shining in her eyes, she nods and all at once, all together, the women start to hum. It is a beautiful, powerful, all-knowing sound. They open their mouths to sing a song that I already know. The song must be in me. Is it the song I sang to Tia? Maybe we all learned it in former lives, deep places, gathering grounds, caves and huts of sticks, skin houses, prisons, and graves. It is a wordless melody that only women sing. Slow, beautiful, sad, ecstatic, we sing a hymn of war and a march of peace. Over and over, many times, we continue singing as the guards take away the redheaded woman. (Erdrich 253)

In this paragraph, Erdrich reinstates the role of mother as a sacred title and a form of social capital that grants access to a particular group. Despite their imprisonment, the members of that group still have a sense of empowerment in their solidarity with one another. Like a chorus of angels or lurking nymphs, the women somehow join together in one song, one rooted deeper in them than anything logical or mortal can explain. It is a song that stretches back generations and across blood ties or land markers. It is deeply connected to the earth, woven into the “deep places, gathering grounds, caves and huts

of sticks,” and bursts beyond mortal or physical confinements, the prisons and graves that these mothers’ bodies are discarded in. Its sadness stems from the pain and sacrifice that so often accompanies motherhood and womanhood, particularly in a situation like theirs, and its ecstasy from the joy and beauty of new life, of that sacrifice, of their unity, and of the connections that can’t be broken by death. Erdrich’s wordless song represents the rootedness, fluidity, and power as well as the lack of it that comes along with motherhood. The song cannot save the redheaded woman the guards usher away. It cannot ensure a perfect life for the women’s children. But it does ensure a bond of immense strength and imbued with immense meaning, the chain of a string of earthly Marys experiencing one small miracle after another.

While *The End We Start From* peppers in snippets of more ancient creation myths, it is important to note that all three of these novels primarily engage with and forge connections with Christian images of the transcendent. As a religion historically fraught with legacies of colonization and patriarchal structural inequalities, it is interesting that these authors do not stray from something that has likely contributed to their oppression in society at least on a gendered level. In some ways, their focus on the image of the Mother rather than God perhaps or just the Child Savior and the imperfection within the power contradicts and questions typical Christian narratives and the importance of each figure. Yet by still operating in this framework, they perpetuate the use of the Christian narrative in looking at sublimity, strength, and correctness rather than looking for alternate and perhaps more empowering ways to explore such ideas.

## **The Father**

The significance of the fatherly role in these three novels is a far cry from McCarthy's patriarchal fantasy. In all three books, in fact, the father figure disappears for a notable amount of time and proves himself to be incapable of fully assuming the responsibility of parenting. Cedar's co-parent is the most egregious of the three. The reader's introduction to Phil is Cedar's statement, "The father of my baby is an angel" (Erdrich 32). Despite this glowing description, her feelings towards him are clearly complicated. When Phil joins her to camp out in their stockaded home, she muses, "So do I love him at last? Child, I need him. It is hard to tell the difference... I haven't ever had to depend on anyone like this since I was a child- for food, shelter, safety. I don't want to depend on anyone now in this way" (Erdrich 80). Cedar at least recognizes that her feelings towards him don't entirely stem from selfless love, but because she is relying on him for her survival, there isn't much sense in her contemplating the degree to which true love factors in the equation. She does want her independence, however, if not completely from him then from having to depend on him.

This wish soon comes true when Cedar is captured and taken to her first government birthing facility, from which her adoptive mother helps her escape. In her mother's rescue plan note, she mentions that Phil was the one who turned her in. "I crawl into bed, breathing hard, my heart dead, my breath skipping, burning my lungs. Phil was the one who betrayed us. Angel Phil... I don't cry. Crying's for the little things, I guess" (Erdrich 137). With little time to pour into grieving, Cedar escapes with her mother and Tia and makes it back to her family on the reservation. Eventually, the government finds her there, and after one narrow escape from capture, Phil shows up

and steals her away in the middle of the night. Too stunned and exhausted to protest, Cedar sits solemnly in the car as they drive away, eventually stating, “You turned me in” (Erdrich 241). In response, he urges her to feel the knotted scars running across his body. “‘I’m like that all over,’ he says, ‘and it’s worse inside. I don’t even remember giving them your name. I thought I was a hero, but I’m not’” (Erdrich 242). As Cedar grapples with the fact that he was helping the government and Mother, the deceptively nurturing and trusting title of the ruthless figurehead of the movement, Phil explains to her how, once he was captured and eventually released, he returned to get their guns, which he brought to Eddy, then found the woman who took Cedar into custody and killed her.

“Wait,” I say. “You said you were with Mother. Now you say you’re wanted. Which is it?”

He stutters, filling me with fear.

“It’s both... I stole a car from them and got away.”

“Aren’t they arresting enough women? What do they want me for?”

Phil looks at me in surprise.

“You don’t know?” he asks.

“Know what?”

... “You might be carrying one of the originals,” he says.

... “So my baby’s okay.”

He doesn’t answer for a while, then says, “Our baby. I’m the dad. Remember?” (Erdrich 245-246)

It isn’t until this point in the novel that Cedar begins to fully recognize Phil’s untrustworthiness and her lack of need for him. She no longer depends on him to take care of her baby. It is only the status of the baby, she discovers, that has kept Phil chasing after her. “‘You have a treasure, Cedar, if our baby is normal,’” Phil presses, “‘We would be in charge of things. Rich. Super rich! We’d be safe. If we somehow

worked out genetically, I mean, to have a normal child the sky's the limit or us” (Erdrich 246). His insistence on his part in a collective experience that he has barely participated in, using “our” and “we,” derive from his greediness, not his concern for the child. Cedar, realizing the obvious gap in intentions and values, quickly calls for Eddy, and this is the last the reader hears of Phil.

Hunter and Watkins’s men leave in a slightly different fashion. They, too, are incapable of appropriately directing their efforts towards caring for their child, but unlike Phil, they leave with somewhat of a guilty conscience. In *The End We Start From*, R departs shortly after arriving at a refugee camp with the protagonist and the baby. Hunter writes,

R drives away on a sunny day, the day it is our job to help with breakfast. He has not been sleeping. He eats like a feral cat I once had, stealing scraps to hunch over in the corner. G and N. The calamity, and the further calamity - disasters breed like rabbits - and now this, crowded by strangers every long hour. I count the reasons.

... He says it will only be for a week or so. To get a break. To look into other options. He says we should stay, that it is safer. The relief is hanging from him, a loose shirt. I look at the car before I lose it. (49-50)

The protagonist frantically searches for possible excuses or “reasons” that he could have left- his parents, G and N dying amidst the violence of chaotic crowds, for example, or the crampedness of the camp. R chooses to frame his departure as a noble venture, a sacrifice, but the woman’s acknowledgment that the relief hangs from him like “a loose shirt” illustrates that they both know he left out of weakness. He feels unable to deal with caring for his partner and his child, so instead of addressing his problems, he chooses to abandon them. Apparently, this isn’t uncommon, either. When talking to another woman, P, about R’s “time away... she nods. She lost hers south of the border”

(Hunter 52). Later, wandering the ruined streets of London, the protagonist notices the rare few (and exclusively heteronormative) “families, men and women and children who have managed to stay together” (Hunter 112). Eventually, she becomes part of one of these families, reuniting with R once she finds him on a hospital list, apparently only needing “polite apologies, and all that lives beneath them” (Hunter 127) and their child, who seems to make R happy, to move on and re-establish the perfect heteronormative nuclear family unit.

Watkins presents a similar narrative, although less perfectly wrapped and topped with a conclusive bow. Once Luz and Ray’s car breaks down in the desert, Ray decides to leave her and the child, also under the guise of looking for help. He later admits that he just couldn’t stand to watch them die. Luz eventually finds relief in his disappearance, stating that “with Ray gone he would never tell Ig her rotten origin story, as Luz had feared and known one day he would. Ray was dead and thus the secret dead inside Luz” (Watkins 161). Later, once he has escaped the mine Levi and his men dumped him at and made his way to Luz, he reveals his trepidation about Ig: “I just have this feeling like she knows... We shouldn’t have done it, Luz. We shouldn’t have taken her... I’m afraid of her, I think. Of Ig. There’s something... odd about her” (Watkins 313). In not feeling competent to care for other people, or even himself, Ray projects his sense of uneasiness onto the figure that propelled him and Luz to leave their home in Santa Monica in the first place: Ig. When members of the camp congregate to beat up Ray, spurred by Levi and his jealousy disguised as protecting his community from a menace, Erdrich writes,

Ray welcomed the beating. The way he saw it he had all kinds of evil shit inside him and perhaps the blows might knead it out. For example: he hated Ig... He hated her for being so fond of him and for, yes, ruining his life... To hate Ig was to stop the spiral of his rage. Her innocence was the boundary, the vessel, for to hate her was to hate himself, to allow all the blackness inside him to pool around him, to skip his lifetime's worth of middlemen, to concentrate on her strange skin, her amphibian eyes, her haunting moans, repulse himself with them and punish himself this way.

... Luz sat beside Ray, but did not touch his wounds. What could she have done for him that he could not do for himself? She sat; he lay. Wisconsin a mirage, burned off. They both grieved it in silence. (333)

Ray views the child as an extension of himself in radically different ways than the tenets of reproductive futurism propose. Her utter innocence and inability to defend herself, as well as her connection his separation from Luz and the violence that followed, make Ig the optimal symbol for Ray's struggle. Precisely because she is unable to do anything about the environment or their situation, Ig infuriates Ray, who also feels out of control but is unfortunate enough to be aware of his lack of power. The couple's image of Wisconsin as a paradise in which they could raise Ig away from any troubles shatters as both come to realize that just because they became parents doesn't mean they changed the core of who they were or the degree to which they can shape their future. As one critic wrote, *Gold Fame Citrus* "looks hard at how disaster does and doesn't change us. Though Luz and Ray seek deliverance beyond the bounds of Los Angeles, an apocalypse doesn't necessarily generate heroes and saviors" (Valente 3).

Watkins, Erdrich, and Hunter's novels reflect, if perhaps to the extreme, the degree to which the responsibility of care and moral upbringing falls to the mother. By banishing the fathers and focusing on the courage and strength needed to be a mother, these authors highlight certain gendered injustices experienced by women while also naturalizing the very narrative they are critiquing by supporting the notion that women

are more inherently attuned to nurturing. This calls into question whether the image of the sublime and imperfect mother truly serves as the solution, so to speak, to the predominantly patriarchal genre or whether this is simply showcasing and even glorifying another viewpoint of the same limiting structure.

### **Issues of Intersectionality: Gender, Race, and Bodily Autonomy**

Both *Gold Fame Citrus* and *Future Home of the Living God* bring up important issues of intersectionality within feminist fiction as a whole. Dealing with specifically mixed-race protagonists caught in a war regarding female bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, both books examine what it means to be a woman and a person of color in society and at the end. In a time where women's reproductive labor and ability to mother is key to the salvation of humankind, the subjugation of women, as does every societal interaction, will likely heavily involve racialized treatment.

"Reproductive politics inevitably involved racial politics" (157) Sheldon writes, for women of color have historically been allowed very little control over their own bodies. Erdrich, in particular, drives this notion into the future, elevating the punishment for abortion to death and demonstrating how the desperate urge to repopulate society with "normal" babies inevitably means a quest for white babies. When Cedar visits a doctor early on in the novel, upon learning that the father is white, making the baby highly desirable, the doctor urges her to run and go into hiding before someone can take her in. Ultimately, she is captured and is forced into slavery along with several hundred other women, at least some being women of color, trapped in a cycle of insemination and the labor giving birth to valuable white babies until they are deemed useless or cannot survive the consequences and die.

Watkins also illustrates the value of being white, particularly in times of desperate, apocalyptic need, through Luz's identity as a "Mojav" refugee and the increased difficulty it would be for her to escape California because of this status. Luz recalls a careless statement from Ray the first time they met:

Your people came here looking for something better. Gold, fame, citrus. Mirage. They were feckless, yeah? Schemers. That's why no one wants them now. Mojavs.

He was kidding, but the word still stung, here and where it hung painted on the signage of factories in Houston and Des Moines, hand-painted on the gates of apartment complexes in Knoxville and Beaumont, in crooked plastic letters on the marquees of Indianapolis elementary schools: MOJAVS NOT WELCOME. NO WORK FOR MOJAVS. MOJAVS KEEP OUT... But Ray smiled and his kind mouth once again soothed Luz. 'We're stick it out people,' he said, but what he really meant, she knew, was they could be Mojavs together. (Watkins 23)

Despite being white, Ray attempts to relate to Luz's marginalized experience as a person of color, which she accepts only because he seems to lower himself to her level, an idea that is problematic, to say the least. Later, when leaving Ig, Luz notes how "what she felt, beyond the painful range of Ig, was the astonishing relief of quitting. Taking her rightful position in that long line of runners and flakes" (Watkins 337). Luz's experience as a "Mojav" has clearly depreciated her sense of self-worth, which allows her to accept her inability to keep Ig as a natural result of being the type of person she is. The fact that Watkins is white, however, adds a critical layer to the depiction in that Luz's depiction functions as a re-assertion of inequality from a privileged standpoint. Neither Luz or Cedar are granted happy endings, but the reader does at least receive the rare science-fiction glimpse into a racialized apocalypse, the struggles that persist through and past the end and the immense strength needed to

overcome them, and an insistence of who belongs in the future as a projection of how Western society views them now.

Another important aspect about these novels that I was unable to explore further in depth in this thesis is the lack of nonbinary characters or figures other than cis women who fill the role of the mother. By excluding characters that would allow for the discussion about the spectrum and fluidity of gender, while they do offer a perspective typically marginalized in the science fiction and apocalyptic field, these authors also solidify the same notions of oppression and exclusion that one would think they were attempting to work against.

## Conclusion

The end in speculative fiction is never truly the end but the beginning of a new state of being. What, then, follows the end? If not of the world, then of one's individual life? Reproductive futurism insists in investing one's legacy in the Child, but what else can be imprinted onto the future to serve as a reminder of one's existence? There are moments of normalcy in the end- playing with a toddler in the dust, watching the shadows of clouds flickering over the sand, sitting in on a tribal council meeting and lounging on the couch listening to Grandma's stories. But there is also an element of urgency and acute awareness of impending or increasing loss. The persistence of some form of normality in attempting to make sense of such a grand shift and the inevitable fear of change and what it can bring merge to create a strange half-mourning, half-clinging state that the typical character of the genre lives in. Erdrich's novel deals with this through a distinct concern with the written word as the signifier of our humanity and ability to connect with one another. "I fear that we are heading into a lightless future devoid of the written word," (Erdrich 31) Cedar muses. "As I descend into welcome unknowingness, I bob up, once. There is something I have to do, I think. And the next morning I remember that I have decided to write this- your diary- a record and an inquiry into the strangeness of things" (Erdrich 62). Writing for her baby gives her purpose and hope. The diary is a vessel she can send into the future that holds fragments of the past, memories that the child was not yet a part of.

Hunter, too, discusses memory as a way of preserving the past, albeit imperfectly and partially. She writes, "Memories are starting to leak... these are the remains of a life, it seems" (Hunter 33). She later refers to the process of navigating the

“after” as one of “learning our own language” (Hunter 91), one in which “home is another word that has lost itself” (104). Just as Erdrich does with Cedar’s diary, Hunter illustrates how language can be representative of its time, molded to adapt and make sense of change, and used as a form of projecting oneself or one’s story into the future. Through the generational transference of memories and ideologies, the Child serves as a vessel of language to communicate these things, much in the same way these books do.

Post-apocalyptic novels such as *Future Home of the Living God*, *Gold Fame Citrus*, and *The End We Start From* are capable of implementing speculative fiction as a magnifier of contemporary social and environmental trends. They reveal the draining gendered standards that form the foundation of Western society and the image of the successful heteronormative family unit while also, in some ways, reinforcing those same ideas. They demonstrate the ways in which women think about themselves as worthless individuals or commodities if they fail to meet these impossible standards. They also illuminate the ways in which certain mothers’ distinct experiences provide them unique and powerful insights and connections that otherwise could not be forged. These novels testify to the notion of motherhood and writing as opportunities not only to deliver something into the future but also to find oneself and recognizes one’s own limits and amazing capabilities. Mothers can be creators, teachers, warriors, nurturers, imperfect humans, and independent individuals. Each learns on their own and from the mothers that precede them ways to carry on, whether the apocalypse has arrived or not. Towards the end of *The End We Start From*, Hunter describes a moment between mother and son: “Of course, he likes it when I cover myself in a tea towel, and reappear.

Like my mother did. Like her mother did. The revelation that something can come back, again. And again. And again” (84).

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