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“I feel that, instead of the past, it is the future that haunts us now.” – *Future Home of the Living God*

This fall, I've shared a series of posts here on a literary tradition that centers the reproductive body. This is a tradition, I argue, that marks literature of the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by humanity's geological and environmental impact. The reproductive sublime in Anthropocenic literature depicts human power over the natural, supernatural, and divine and the horror attendant upon that power by evoking the messy play of life and death, control and lack of control that always haunts generation. In recent months, I've made a loose case for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a seminal text in this tradition and traced a rough theoretical history of the sublime to suggest that it can help us think through this literary tradition in helpful ways. Now I want to consider what is perhaps the most recent addition to the canon of the Anthropocenic reproductive sublime: Louise Erdrich's 2017 *Future Home of the Living God*, published last month by Harper Collins.

Erdrich's novel imagines a near future in which climate change has progressed and evolution has scrambled. Chickens seem to be producing their reptilian ancestors and something like a saber tooth lion is on the loose in the suburbs of Minneapolis. This devolution seems governed by no consistent chronological logic and our pregnant protagonist, 26-year old Cedar Hawk Songmaker, does not know whether she is carrying a human, a primate ancestor, a strange next-step in our evolution, or simply death. Rates of infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, and death in childbirth seem to have skyrocketed; or, perhaps, that brief golden moment in Western history when pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period were not necessarily attended by the stalking specter of imminent death has receded. Though “it is the future that haunts” these characters, it is not so much “instead of the past,” but the future *as* the past.

Cedar's first-person epistolary narration – the novel is a letter to her unborn child – borders on the hallucinatory. Cedar's computer speaks to her in the uncanny voice of a “Mother” trying to convince her to turn herself in to the authorities rounding up pregnant women. Some shadowy form of this

“Mother” later searches for her where she sleeps at night. There is certainly real trouble in Cedar’s world, but whether “Mother” is real remains inscrutable, as do many of the elements of setting and plot. But the threat of madness that stalks the novel seems to drive an insistence about the terrible beauty that lives in our confrontation with the kind of pain that refuses narration and the kind of fear attendant upon radical perceptions of the incomprehensible.

This is perhaps nowhere so clear as in the novel’s early ultrasound scene. Right before the world as she knows it truly starts to crumble, Cedar visits a doctor’s office for the ritualized viewing of the fetus:

At first there is only the gray uterine blur, and then suddenly the screen goes charcoal and out of the murk your hand wavers. It is detailed, three-dimensional, and I glimpse tiny wrinkles in your palm and wrinkle bracelets around your wrist before your hand disappears into the screen’s fuzz. There is something about your hand, just a feeling, and I am upset for a moment. Just a hand—but a sense of clarity and power. I want to get off the table. I want to say Enough, no more, but at the same time I want to see you again. The way you waved, just that second, and disappeared—I am so overcome I can hardly breathe.

...I see the arch of your spine, a tiny white snake, and again your hand flips open, pressing at the darkness. The technician touches out knee bones, an elbow. Then she goes in through the thicket of your ribs. The heart, she says. I see the hollows of the chambers, gray mist, then the valves of your heart slapping up and down like a little pan playing a drum. Your whole heart is on the screen and then the technician does something with the machine so that your blood is made of light moving in and out of your heart. The outflow is golden fire and the inflow is blue fire. I see the fire of life flickering all through your body. (49-50)

This scene is the center of the book, the moment Cedar returns to again and again, the image she tapes to the front of her journal, the image evoked in the novel’s cover. Although ultrasounds have become a normalized practice during the pregnancies of women with access to advanced medical care, Cedar’s reaction, amplified by the intensifying chaos around her, evokes a sublime combination of wonder and terror. Like the “fire” she sees rushing through the fetus’s image, Cedar’s body bears both life and death, breathtakingly beautiful details that remained invisible for most of human history made visible and “upset[ting].” Cedar both desires this sight of the hidden and unknown (“I want to see you again”) and resists it (“*Enough, no more*”). The control Cedar and the technician have over the secrets of reproduction does not translate to any control over the reproductive apocalypse that threatens their world; they can only watch, rapt and horrified, at a remove and caught up.

Responses to *Future Home* have been mixed, but both positive and the negative reviews emphasize the obvious comparison to Margaret Atwood’s 1985 *The Handmaid’s Tale*, an important text in the Anthropocenic literary tradition of the reproductive sublime I’m arguing for. In Erdrich’s novel, the

evolutionary past that rises up to threaten the future through reproductive bodies evokes a generic trope of the Gothic literature that emerged alongside modern theories of the sublime in the second half of the 18th century. Negative reviews of *Future Home* take issue with the novel's incoherence, but this incoherence is one of the ways that the novel makes space for the experience of horror so key to both Gothic plots and sublime experiences. I think that *Future Home* stumbles most over the literary past that haunts it, unnamed. The problem isn't that Erdrich's novel works in necessary conversation with *The Handmaid's Tale*, the problem is that it gives its reader no framework for confronting that conversation. Such a framework for reading is one of the things offered by a perception of an Anthropocenic literary tradition of the reproductive sublime.