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The Evolution of Cedar Songmaker's Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

*Future Home of the Living God* by Louise Erdrich is a science fiction novel that presents a world in which evolution is collapsing in on itself. Saber-toothed tigers roam around suburbs; birds the size of children are found in trees; and the human babies being born resemble earlier versions of humans rather than modern homo sapiens. Cedar Songmaker, the novel's heroine, finds herself pregnant and writes a series of journal entries to her unborn child, documenting the changes going on around her and her family. Cedar is also an Ojibwe woman who was supposedly adopted by white parents at her birth. Cedar's adoptive parents never tell her of her biological family and leave her in the dark about her Native identity and heritage. This lack of knowledge causes Cedar to develop her own identity and motivates many of her actions throughout the novel. Although Cedar's specific experiences are integral to who she is and who she becomes throughout the novel, she also represents many Native children who are kept from knowing about their Native identities. Living into her mid-twenties without knowing anything about her birth family or her Native heritage causes Cedar to feel alienated from those around her and struggle with creating her own identity. While Cedar finds peace with herself and all aspects of her identity by the end of the novel, she experiences conflict within herself and with others because she doesn't know who she is.

Cedar's childhood and adolescence are defined by the fact that her adoptive parents tell her nothing of her Native heritage. Despite Cedar's questions, they always change the subject or

avoid giving her clear answers (Erdrich 4). Cedar even questions the legality of her adoption because she thinks that the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) should have applied to her. The ICWA was put into place by the United States government in order to prioritize keeping Native adoptees with their biological extended families or with their own tribal nations (United States). This policy was a response to the fact that, from the end of World War II through the 1970s, many Native children were taken from their homes, often forcibly, and adopted into white middle-class families through the Indian Adoption Program (Jacobs). This was done in order to integrate Native children into white culture, and many of the white families and social workers that participated thought they were “saving” these Native children from the poor living conditions on many Indian reservations (Jacobs). Although the Native adoptees had better living conditions, many of the families that adopted through the program allowed little access to the adoptee’s tribes and biological families. As a result, many victims of the program had little knowledge of their Native identities.

It makes sense that Cedar believes this law should have applied to her. In the beginning of the novel, she fully believes that she was adopted and neither Glen nor Sera Songmaker are her biological parents. Although we later learn that Cedar was not actually adopted and Glen is her biological father, the behaviors and thought processes she goes through are just like those of actual Native adoptees. A study conducted in 1993 analyzed the different approaches of raising a child with multiple cultures and heritages. When kids are raised in an environment that promotes the abandonment of one culture for a more dominant culture, it can result in negative effects, like increased substance abuse or poor performance in school (LaFromboise et al). Although Cedar does not experience either of those effects, she was forced to be raised in a white liberal household that enforced problematic Native stereotypes. As a child, Cedar was referred to as an

“Indian Princess” and had her hair kept in braids, and her classmates and schoolteachers emphasized her supposedly supernatural connection to nature because of her Native ancestry (Erdrich 4-5). Cedar grew up surrounded by people who called her special simply because she was told she was born of Native parents, which was rare in her town. When Cedar goes to college, she is surrounded by other Native people, but she is the opposite of special. Her Native peers all have a true sense of belonging to their cultures because they know their languages, customs, and tribes (Erdrich 5). Cedar only has the stereotypes she experienced as a child, and it causes her to feel like she isn’t Native enough. She lashes out by cutting her hair and skipping classes (Erdrich 5). Even as an adult, Cedar hardly feels Native. She knows she can call herself Ojibwe biologically, but she feels no connection to her heritage and says she has “no [Native] pie at all” (Erdrich 56).

Cedar has no sense of given identity, so she goes through a journey to create one herself. A major contributor to Cedar’s identity is through the Catholic church. The church she belongs to “care[s] for the most destitute people in the city, the cast-asides, the no-goods, the impossible, the toxic and contaminated” (Erdrich 70). Cedar fits right in with this demographic since she has felt alone all her life. When she was welcomed into the church and confirmed as a Catholic, she found her place. She writes for the church newsletter, owns various religious books, and curates a magazine on Catholic inquiry (Erdrich 70, 126, 6). Even Phil, the baby’s father, comes into Cedar’s life through the church (Erdrich 78). Cedar’s adult life is formed around her religion, and it is a large source of solace for her.

Cedar’s religion is also a huge example of irony in the novel. Throughout history, Catholicism and Christianity have been instruments of the assimilation and cultural genocide of Native peoples. In Canada, many residential schools were run by the Catholic and Anglican

churches (Hanson). Though the boarding schools in the United States were not as heavily affiliated with the Church, the pressure of assimilation and integration into white culture was extreme. There are still some schools operating in the United States today, and though they are much more accepting of Native cultures, they are still harsh reminders of the troubles that Native people face simply for who they are (Bear). Even within the realm of the novel, Christianity is used as an instrument of power to take over the government and turn women into birthing machines (Erdrich 252-253).

For Cedar to rely so heavily on her own religious beliefs to carry her through her struggles and hardships is an act of quiet rebellion that solidifies her own identity. Nalo Hopkinson says in her introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*: “In my hands, massa’s tools don’t dismantle massa’s house [...] -they build me a house of my own” (Hopkinson 8). Hopkinson says this to justify and encourage the retelling and changing of Euro-American stories to fit other demographics, but this claim also applies to Cedar. Cedar takes the teachings of the Catholic church, particularly its teachings about Mary and other female religious figures, and utilizes them to lift herself up and validate her own identity. Rather than give into traditional gender roles emphasized by the Church, Cedar develops her own identity. She compares her pregnancy to the birth of Jesus and claims that the birth of her baby is a symbol of the beginning, not the end (Erdrich 6). Her personal comparison to Mary is one of the major reasons why Cedar continuously chooses to keep her baby, despite being forcibly taken into a hospital and later to a birthing center. Even her mother recommends getting rid of the child, but, because of Cedar’s connection to Mary and Jesus, she feels confident in having the baby. She also compares herself to two other Catholic idols: Hildegard of Bingen and Kateri Tekakwitha.

Hildegard of Bingen was an anchoress in the twelfth century and was one of the first women who was recognized for her gift of prophecy by the pope. Beginning at age twelve, she completely isolated herself in a cell connected to the Church, where she could only write and listen to church services. She was known for her various contributions to the Church, including song composition (Grant and von Bingen 557). Cedar relates to Hildegard because her experiences at the end of the novel are similar. Cedar is being kept in a cell and usually only has herself to communicate with. She experiences many metaphysical occurrences in the form of songs and vivid dreams (Erdrich 250, 257-258, 264). Thinking of Hildegard's writings helps Cedar through the last part of her journey in the birthing center and helps Cedar feel at peace after her son is born (Erdrich 257-267).

Although Cedar feels a strong connection to Hildegard, her connection to Kateri is stronger and therefore plays a more prominent role throughout the novel. Kateri Tekakwitha was a Mohawk woman who lived in the seventeenth century and was eventually canonized by the Catholic church. She converted to Christianity as a child and fled from her village after persecution for her beliefs. She dedicated herself to renouncing sex and marriage to live a life of religious purity (Greer 262-263). She was canonized as an image of purity and a symbol of a "primordial American essence that was the antithesis of industry, immigration, urban grime, and class conflict" (Greer 262). Like Kateri, Cedar finds her religion in a time of crisis and when she has been alienated by those around her. Cedar feels even more drawn to the saint when she is hiding on the reservation from the government and even some of her peers (Erdrich). Kateri is a guiding light for Cedar when she feels like God has abandoned the world.

Her connection to Kateri also helps to spark her relationship with Sweetie, her biological mother. At first, Cedar's relationship with her biological family is a source of conflict. Cedar's

first contact with her birth mother is a letter she receives when she is 22. Cedar does not respond to the letter or try to contact her mother until the beginning of the novel, a year after she receives the letter. When Cedar first reaches out to her birth mother, she feels disillusioned because her mother is seemingly “normal.” She and her husband own a gas station and live in a house on a reservation (Erdrich 6). Cedar is angry at them because they forced her to recognize that they aren’t the mystical Native parents that Cedar imagined throughout her childhood (Erdrich 6). Cedar’s reaction towards her birth mother is common among Native adoptees. According to a study analyzing the initial reunions between Native adoptees and birth mothers, most negative reunions happen because the adoptee does not have a strong sense of social identity with their tribe (Landers et al 25). Cedar knows nothing of her birth mother before receiving her letter, so her frustration and anger towards Sweetie at the beginning of their relationship is certainly justified. Upon their first meeting, Cedar tries to be as distant as possible: she refuses to call her by her known name; she tries to leave on multiple occasions; and she throws quick judgments at the entire family (Erdrich 10). If it weren’t for her pregnancy, Cedar likely would not have even tried to contact her birth mother (Erdrich 5-6). Cedar only begins to open up and bond with her birth family when she accompanies Sweetie to a tribal meeting and learns of the shrine to Kateri that Sweetie erected (Erdrich 22-28). Kateri is a source of connection between Sweetie and Cedar throughout the novel and helps Cedar to embrace her Native identity.

Cedar embraces her Native identity more after she is rescued from the hospital in Part II of the novel and when she gets to the reservation in Part III. She chooses to get a tribal ID; she prays at the Kateri shrine regularly with Sweetie; and she even attends a tribal meeting (Erdrich 238, 213-215). The tribe becomes a source of solace for Cedar. She is no longer alone; she has a whole community she belongs to that protects her from being taken again. Her time with the

tribe allows her to explore her Ojibwe heritage and identity. She even finds out who her biological father is at this time, and she uses this information to develop her identity into what it is: a “grab bag” of white, Ojibwe, and Catholic. After Cedar is kidnapped and taken to the birthing center, she prays to Kateri and devotes herself to the female Catholic figures to whom she relates (Erdrich 249-253, 257-259). However, Cedar also hears and participates in a song that all the women of the center share (Erdrich 253). Cedar knows this song because it is a song that mothers share with their children. It is the song that Cedar calls “the Word:” the word that sparked the Incarnation of Christ and sparks the connection between mother and child (Erdrich 64, 263). Earlier in the novel, she knows nothing of a song (Erdrich 64-65); at the end, she knows the song well and sings it on a regular basis in the last few weeks of her pregnancy (Erdrich 257-258, 263-264). Much like the people in the study by LaFromboise et. al., Cedar feels less conflict when she knows all aspects of her identity and is able to combine them the way she wishes, not the way others tell her to. Before she escapes the hospital and joins her tribe, Cedar questions her baby and herself. By the end of the novel, she is more at peace and has the answers to the questions she had posed before.

Although Cedar’s world is set in a time that is unfamiliar to readers, her struggles with her identity are familiar, especially to Native people who were victims of the Indian Adoption Program. Just like Cedar’s knowledge of her heritage is crucial to her identity, Native peoples need to know their own heritages and tribal affiliations so they can have complete identities. Native peoples not knowing their heritages promotes and condones the continuous cultural genocide that is still systematically happening today.

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