

“A child isn’t born bitter”: (In)human Relations and Monstrous Affects in Hiromi Goto’s *The Kappa Child*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an intersectional reading of Hiromi Goto’s *The Kappa Child* (2001) through the lens of Affect Theory. Particularly, I draw from Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* to analyze the role these notions play in the novel. I focus on the economy of affects that circulates among the characters and the affective significance of their interactions as well as the novel’s engagement with Ahmed’s notion of the promise of happiness and Berlant’s cruel optimism, specifically in relation to female, racialized, and migrant subjects both at a personal level and in the context of the settler colonial nation. My main argument is that the affects and expectations presented in the novel are monstrous. I defend that the protagonist’s affective monstrosity is a direct consequence of her abusive childhood as a racialized migrant in the Canadian Prairies and that choosing to let go of her expectations leads to emotional healing and opens new possibilities towards happiness.

Keywords

Affect Theory; Hiromi Goto; Promise of Happiness; Cruel Optimism; Trauma; *The Kappa Child*

1. Introduction

The affective turn has brought a shift in critical theory through the interconnection of different disciplines and their relation to affects or emotions and, in the words of Marianne Liljeström, “feminist research on affects has specifically aimed at exploring the connections among affect, gender, sexuality, class, and race in terms of power, regulation, and control” (17). Many theorists have attempted to define and delimit what affects are and have used this notion to explain social, political, and economic phenomena. In literary analysis, affect theory has been used by feminist academics to discuss identity and power relations and, regarding the context of Canadian literature, Marie Carrière states:

Women’s writing in Canada is about affect when it problematizes gendered, racialized, or sexualized bodies. It is about affect when it performs vulnerability, resistance, and queerness; when it represents the immersion of bodies in material reality and in language; and, ultimately, when it expresses ways in which these bodies inform literary expression. (9)

Particularly relevant and central to this analysis are the approaches of Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant, who use affects and emotions as practical tools to understand issues that manifest in the fabric of society. Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* explores the role affects and the notion of happiness play in the maintenance of the social status quo and how they are used against marginalized communities. Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* also questions the weight of expectations placed on the promise of the good life and the way in which these expectations become cruel as they inevitably lead to disappointment. This article offers an investigation of the (de)construction of happiness and the good life and the representation of affects in Hiromi Goto’s novel *The Kappa Child* (2001). I refer to these affects as “monstrous” on the basis of their ugliness and the fact they are experienced by and among monstrous (i.e. non-normative) subjects.

For Brian Massumi emotion is understood as the naming, narrativization and linear organization of affect for the purpose of communication (qtd. in Clough 209). Thus, affect is presented as the biological and physiological experience of feeling, a view shared by thinkers like Rei Terada (4), while emotion is our intellectual rationalization of the mental and bodily experience, that is, the name we give to our affective experience. However, as Ahmed explores, the distinction between affect and emotion seems almost anecdotal and “though one can separate an affective response from an emotion . . . , this does not mean they are separated in practice. In fact, they slide into each other; they cohere, even when they are separated” (“Creating Disturbance” 32). Thus, given the weight of Ahmed’s theories in this analysis, it seems appropriate to use “emotion” and

"affect" as almost synonyms as she does in her own work. Moreover, I also rely on her perception of affects as "contagious" and "sticky," or, in Eve Sedgwick's words "attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions and . . . other affects" (18-19). This creates what Ahmed calls an "economy of affect" in which affects circulate among bodies creating points of contact that influence subjects and their environment. In other words, affect is not only the experience of what we feel, but the consequences of it and everything it produces and so "affect then is connected to becoming, that is, to the on-going transformation of subjectivity, and to action, that is, the capacity for bodies to intervene in how we shape and are shaped by the world around us" (García-Zarranz and Ledoux-Beaugrand 5).

This affective dimension and, especially, the monstrosity of the affects in *The Kappa Child* become particularly relevant in the context of the novel as a work of speculative fiction. However, despite speculative fiction's popularity among readers and its potential as a space to explore social issues and the concept of otherness, it has sometimes been deemed as unworthy of study in academia, especially regarding authors from the margins. Elisabeth Anne Leonard highlights the many social and economic barriers that prevent marginalized people from engaging in the science fiction genre, which has long been dominated by white authors (253) and, additionally, Belén Martín-Lucas explains how, despite the newfound interest in speculative fiction in Canada, there is still a remarkable lack of existing research focused on non-white authors. She quotes Ralph Pordzik to explain how scholars and readers of speculative fiction have generally ignored the huge body of utopian writing by authors from the margins ("Posthumanist Feminism" 106). For these reasons, it feels important to bring *The Kappa Child* back to the front. This speculative fiction novel written by a Japanese Canadian author becomes an ideal space to explore identity and, as Larissa Lai explains, undo racist stereotypes from colonial and imperial contexts to create better representation ("Familiarizing Grist Village" 6). This is particularly relevant in our contemporary context, marked by the recent global pandemic that resulted in the targeting of East Asians,¹ the current environmental crisis, and the rise of conservatism. This reinforces the importance of speculative fiction and the need for diverse voices and experiences. This study aims to contribute to the closing of the existing gap regarding speculative fiction from the margins while participating in the ongoing theoretical discourse of affect theory from the perspective of literary analysis.

1. A recurring topic in dystopian novels, a relevant example being Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018) which, in an almost prophetic manner, was published shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Kappa Child tells the past and present of an unnamed queer Asian Canadian woman, who is marked by trauma and an unnatural and unexpected pregnancy. Thus, the novel presents three different timelines as the reader learns about the protagonist's present everyday life as a shopping cart collector in the city, her abusive childhood as an Asian immigrant growing rice in the Canadian Prairie, and a collage of different moments from the recent past. Among these snippets of her life, we learn how she becomes pregnant after a non-heteronormative sexual encounter in the form of sumo wrestling with a genderless and racially ambiguous kappa that she refers to as the Stranger.² In addition, there are different narrative levels as certain short chapters are narrated by the kappa fetus the protagonist is impregnated with, and the novel presents an explicit intertextual relationship to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*.

This paper offers an examination of the way in which *The Kappa Child* presents affective reactions by looking into how the protagonist and other characters interact with each other and their environment, participating in an economy of affect that shapes their identity. I am also interested in exploring the novel's engagement with Ahmed's promise of happiness and the idea of the good life. I will argue that these relationships and expectations prove to be monstrous as they are marked by abuse and trauma, producing an affective monstrosity that connects with the protagonist's physical monstrosity as a queer Asian woman in a settler colonial state and the carrier of a monstrous fetus bred from a non-heterosexual encounter.³

2. Family Dynamic and its Promise of Happiness

The Kappa Child is a book about identity, as the first line of the novel anticipates: "I am a collector of abandoned shopping carts" (emphasis added). Specifically, Goto expressed in her interview with Notkin that this was a novel about

2. The kappa is a demon from Japanese mythology that inhabits rivers and other bodies of water and is often represented as a human-like frog with a turtle shell and a bowl of water at the top of its head. The creature is a recurring figure in fiction, and it also appears in Goto's *The Water of Possibility* (2001). She talks about it in the following terms: "The kappa is a complex creature that seems to inhabit shifting spaces between human, amphibian and demigod. It is a fascinating creature in itself" ("Cross-Cultural Creatures" 17).

3. In this sense, *The Kappa Child* presents multiple points of contact with Goto's collection of short stories *Hopeful Monsters* (2004), where monstrosity and reproduction play an important role in connection with affective responses.

becoming (18). And, as scholars like Martín-Lucas, Jess Huber and Nancy Kang have explored, one of the most important aspects of the novel is the protagonist's childhood, her family dynamic, and the way she interacts with other characters. In general, Goto's protagonist is presented as a lonely and pessimistic person. During her childhood we only see her interact with her parents, her three sisters, and her neighbors (Janice and her son Gerald). In her present daily life, she occasionally interacts with four people: Gary (her boss), her two friends (Midori and Genevieve), and Bernie (a female Korean shop owner she is romantically interested in). Aside from that, she has little contact with her family as she only visits them during holidays, which she dislikes as "everytime we come home, we slip into our childhood roles" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 28). She is ignorant about their lives, and she has made an effort to keep them out of hers. She is often resentful, cynical, and overall sad. As she is constantly remembering and going back to her past experiences, the reader realizes that most of her present life is marked by the trauma and abuse experienced in her family's dysfunctional dynamic during childhood. In her own words: "My childhood spills into my adult life despite all my attempts at otherwise and the saturation of the past with the present is an ongoing story" (215).

Ahmed's promise of happiness explores how normativity and the maintenance of the status quo are presented to us as the only path towards happiness. In this context, the reader is aware that the protagonist will not benefit from this promise. As a queer Asian woman with a pessimistic attitude and a traumatic childhood, we know she does not fulfill the happiness script. Not only does her identity distance her from the white heterosexual norm, but she makes no effort to integrate or become a happy subject. Ahmed states that: "For some, deviation from the happiness script is itself an inheritance; you inherit unhappiness by not being the blue-eyed ones" and that "unhappiness becomes an inheritance of the violence of history" (*The Promise* 80). This is true for Goto's protagonist not only in the sense that she is a Japanese immigrant in a settler colonial state, but also in the sense that her unhappiness is inherited from her family's dysfunctionality, her father's physical abuse and their history of failed reproduction of Japanese crops in the Canadian Prairies.

The family's dynamic where everyone is subject to patriarchal sovereignty and abuse requires that every individual fulfills the role that has been assigned to them, which in the case of the father implies control through violence while for Okasan and her daughters means obedience and submission. A failure to fit into your particular box brings discomfort to the established structure. This creates the false promise that, if you follow the rules, there will be peacefulness and happiness. It is clear, however, that every member of the family remains unhappy. This is Ahmed's promise of happiness on a smaller scale: Instead of at a national level, it applies to the family structure. In *The Promise of Happiness*,

Ahmed explains how happiness for migrant subjects often requires embracing the nation: “The freedom to be happy is premised on not only the freedom *from* family or tradition but also the freedom to identify with the nation as the bearer of the promise of happiness” (137). Moreover, “happiness is imagined as what allows subjects to embrace futurity, to leave the past behind them, where pastness is associated with custom and the customary” (137). In this case, the father’s abusive character is linked to his attachment to his past life in Japan, his inability to leave the nation of origin behind and his refusal to embrace the Canadian way of living, even when he proclaims to be a Canadian man. This abuse, indirectly connected to Japan, is a source of unhappiness for the protagonist.

However, her attachment to the idea of North America as presented by Wilder in *Little House* and the way this representation conflicts with reality also becomes an unhappy agent for her. As Berlant explains “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. . . . These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). Similarly, she explores how “the good life” is based on “the attrition of a fantasy, a collectively invested form of life” (11). In this sense, the life presented in Wilder’s *Little House* becomes an agent of cruel optimism for the protagonist as it is an unattainable fantasy that participates in her oppression and creates expectations that impede her satisfaction and fulfillment. Thus, her direct attachment to the nation in the case of Canada and her father’s physical and verbal abuse linked to his attachment to Japan are both sources of unhappiness, which means that both family and the nation are central to her trauma. In this context, Goto’s protagonist must leave behind two aspects of her past. Firstly, she must “kill” Laura Ingalls and reject the attachment she has developed to the perfect prairie life narrative installed in her mind by the settler story. That is, she must overcome the white colonial past. And secondly, she must get over the childhood trauma inflicted by her father, whose source of suffering is the attachment to the nation of origin. Thus, she must overcome both the white North American homestead narrative and her personal narrative as an abused Japanese immigrant.

3. Blood is not Thicker than Water

Throughout the novel, we see how the protagonist uses Wilder’s *Little House* during her childhood as a coping mechanism and how her perception of the text gradually evolves as she grows up, thus increasingly rejecting the ideas promoted by the settler narrative. As a child, she is constantly reading it and

comparing her own situation to the one portrayed in the book, as Martín-Lucas has explored. Wilder's novel highly influences the protagonist and functions as a model for her. It represents the ideal white settler narrative that reinforces the status quo of the white settler colonial project. It is an example of what is right, of the way things should be, of the "right path" towards happiness and the "good life." As Lai explains, Goto uses *Little House* as a repository of everything that is wrong with colonialism and the myth of the frontier, but one that remains a site of desire (*Slanting I, Imagining We* 156). Goto's protagonist believes in and longs for the fiction depicted in *Little House*, but eventually realizes that "it's not the same as real life" (169). This awareness comes not only from the fact that her experiences as a Japanese immigrant subject in an abusive household cannot correlate to those portrayed in the books that she reads, but also from the eventual realization that the narrative represented in Wilder's story is too narrow and lacking in possibilities. She exclaims: "How beautiful the land was. Had been beautiful before Laura Ingalls ever noticed, before her Pa plowed it under" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 168). And in doing so, she shows that she is progressively becoming aware of the fact that the book does not delimit or determine reality and that reality has many more options than the ones offered by Wilder. She starts to realize that there are other paths towards happiness. However, this is just an instance of recognition as the question and eventual rejection of the ideas portrayed in the book is a gradual and nonlinear process that influences her ambivalent relationship with her father.

In her analysis, Martín-Lucas notices the clash between the protagonist's dysfunctional and disorderly family and the edulcorated images of the ideal North American family portrayed in Wilder's book ("Burning Down" 31). Wilder's narrative promotes indoctrination into courage, heroic survival, and resilience in the face of hardship, which is masculinist and prevents the expression of emotions and emotional distress, as that would be a sign of weakness (38). These ideas shape the protagonist, affect the way she perceives her situation, the way she sees herself, and the way she interacts with others while at the same time she gradually recognizes the disparity between the reality presented in Wilder's novel and her own reality. Thus, her father, whom she despises due to her own victimhood and experience of physical and verbal abuse, ironically becomes a role model and sometimes even an object of admiration as he represents the masculinist view promoted by the novel. This demonstrates the weight that the normative ideas of masculinity portrayed in the novel have on the protagonist and how they conflict with her own experience. We can see this ambivalence on multiple occasions when the protagonist talks about her father as she constantly refers to him in both negative and positive terms simultaneously, such as "he was a bastard all right, but a poor and generous one" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 173). We see, then, how her hatred and love for him

intertwine. Similarly, she states: "It isn't like I feel an overwhelming surge of affection whenever I think of our father, but, I don't know, an emotion I can't name stays small and silent in the depths of my heart. I can't cut out my feelings for him, my monster, my hero" (245), revealing not only her ambivalence towards her father, but also the affective monstrosity of their relationship.

Because of this ambivalence, the protagonist ends up resembling her father in her aggressive character, the rejection of her own vulnerability, and an intolerance towards those who show theirs. Therefore, when her neighbor Gerald kisses her, she reacts violently to her own emotional confusion and insults him by referring to his "effeminate weakness" (Martín-Lucas, "Burning Down" 38-39). While Martín-Lucas attributes this reaction solely to the masculinist values ingrained in her by Wilder's story, I would argue that it also has to do with her ambivalent relation to her father and the fact that her parents' abusive marriage also functions as a relationship model during her formative years. Growing up in an environment where she has not been taught how to love, how to manage her emotions, and where feelings are seen as a weakness and expressing them results in punishment, she is unable to cope with affection to the point that she flinches when her mother tries to caress her (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 230). Her lashing out in such a cruel way at Gerald when he expresses his emotions is a response to her own inability to recognize and deal with her feelings. Goto's protagonist can somehow see this and becomes physically disgusted with her actions and perceptions since she sees her resemblance to her father, whom she hates for his cruelty. Kang sees the protagonist's father as her most powerful and complex adversary (27), which Huber claims is related to how the narrator sees herself "reflected in the image her father portrays" (150). She awakens, thus, to the way her father's monstrosity is present in her. As she recognizes her father in herself, she ends up hating herself too and "it is not until the narrator begins to accept and perform her pregnancy that she starts to live a gentler, less violent and obstructive life" (Huber 150).

It seems remarkable how, as Martín-Lucas states, "her violent father and her mother's submission function as harsh models of gender propriety that their four daughters will internalize and resist in different ways" ("Burning Down" 31). One might argue that the fact that Goto's protagonist identifies with her father instead of her mother in this gender dynamic could be a sign of her queerness and gender ambivalence. Nevertheless, her relationship with and perception of her mother are also affected by this dynamic and the discourse in *Little House*. Just like the four sisters, under the father's rule, the mother has her own role to fulfill. As Martín-Lucas further argues, while the protagonist suffers the violence of her father in her parents' marriage, she admires the apparently peaceful and egalitarian relationship of the Wilder's marriage. However, when one of her sisters asks her if the father ever hit the mother, her perspective slightly shifts and she interpolates her own submissive and apologetic mother to the Ingalls

mother, resulting in her calling her 'ma' instead of Okasan ("Burning Down" 38). In any case, the outcome is a mother that endures abuse and does not fight back. While the protagonist shows some respect and admiration towards her father's aggressive character, she only experiences disdain towards her mother. She is seen as weak and resented for not protecting her kids, for allowing her husband to abuse her and for sometimes showing affection towards him. While the father is presented as the provider, the mother acts as caregiver and, I would argue, turns herself into a happy object. Goto explains this submission in the following terms: "Many women within the system continue to perpetuate the system even as they are fixed in a position of disempowerment. We have been taught the behaviour and are rewarded for replicating it. The machinery is quite remarkable that way ("Trap Door" 29).

This idea is further supported by feminist critics who use affect to examine gender oppression. Ahmed, for example, explores the myth of the happy housewife and claims it is used to justify gendered labor in the name of collective wish and desire by presenting female happiness as the result of their work and sacrifice for the wellbeing of others (*The Promise* 50). She argues that "... happiness is not so much what the housewife has but what she does: *her duty is to generate happiness by the very act of embracing this image*" (53; emphasis in original). Women are seen as furniture, as having to support the family from the background, as having to choose between happiness and life, as having to renounce desire (63). All of this applies to Okasan in *The Kappa Child*. She serves her family to exhaustion without complaining while at the same time trying to "force a happy face" (25). Even when she is unhappy with her daughters' behavior, her anger is the silent type. More importantly, her passivity towards abuse can be interpreted as her fulfilling her role, allowing her husband to use her as a punching bag to keep the peace in the home and specially to attempt (though unsuccessfully) to prevent that violence being directed towards her children. She takes everything that is thrown at her to create comfort, to become a happy object in the home. It is not until the end of the novel, when Okasan breaks out of the box she has been placed in, that the protagonist's perception of her mother is shattered. In an unexpected twist of the plot, Okasan rejects the established promise of happiness and, after being abducted by aliens, abandons her normative and nuclear family to run away with Janice, her queer neighbor, in search of others like her (that is, non-white people that have supposedly been in contact with extraterrestrial life). Thus, not only does she reject the burden of being a happy object and housewife, but she breaks the established heteronormative nuclear family structure in favor of a kinship relationship that might be of a homoerotic nature. Her relationship with Janice, whom she initially judged for her non-normativity and refusal to accept the role of happy housewife, becomes a refuge from the suffocating norm.

When the protagonist eventually learns that her mother physically attacked her father before leaving him and running away with Janice, she reflects: "My Okasan has become a person I never imagined. How is it possible?" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 241). This points not only to Okasan's breaking of expectations, but also to the way in which the protagonist's self-centeredness and preconceptions blind her to the growth and depth of others. This is also perceivable when she meets her sisters as adults. Remarkably, when it comes to Mice, a sister she often describes in a sort of eternal child-like state, she wonders: "How has Mice turned scholar when I only saw her as a dog?" (246). Similarly, the protagonist is often unfair to Slither, her older sister, simply because she cares about her appearance and is more in touch with her emotions, which the protagonist sees as a weakness. For that reason, Slither is seen as a shallow "wimp" (28) and the protagonist believes she cannot count on her for support even when Slither is constantly caring for her sisters and, in an analogous way to Okasan, tries to keep the peace in the home. Thus, as Laura Torrado-Mariñas has studied, family roles are explored through a relationship of both alienation and dependency. The narrator fails to grasp how her sisters have grown and is unable to perceive the changes in them. For her, they are stuck being the nicknames she gave them as kids. When they return home, they re-adjust to their old roles and are unable to fully interact. They are trapped in their own family construct like their mother is trapped in the family home (Torrado-Mariñas 260). This state of imprisonment does not allow them to be happy as "freedom to be happy involves, at least for some, the moral and emotional labor of becoming unstuck" (Ahmed, *The Promise* 138).

This notion of imprisonment connects to the character's identity as non-white individuals in a white settler colonial nation. As Martín-Lucas states, the white Canadian normative citizen is constructed in a way that presents all Others as visible minorities "on the physical and political ground of the body" ("*Of Aliens*" 121). The father in *The Kappa Child*, for example, feels the need to defend his Canadianness when a motel receptionist mentions the internment of Japanese subjects in North America during World War II (70). Himani Bannerji also comments on multiculturalism as marked by exclusion and categorization based on skin color. She explains that "for non-whites in Canada, their own bodies are used to construct for them some sort of social zone or prison, since they can not crawl out of their skins, and this signals what life has to offer them in Canada" (112). Thus, we see how the characters in *The Kappa Child* face double imprisonment both at a national and at a personal level. They are trapped in their Asian bodies, subject to both state violence and parental abuse and, therefore, victims to both the national and familial structures. Goto's own comments seem remarkably relevant in this regard. She states that "the family unit becomes particularly important to immigrants who find themselves isolated in a mainstream culture not of their own. And when this 'safe haven' becomes dangerous terrain

the sense of isolation increases exponentially" ("*Cross-Cultural Creatures*" 18). Thus, as Kang states, the novel deconstructs the assumption of the home as a safe space (28). This idea is clearly expressed when the protagonist is thinking about her situation and reflects: "Okasan would never leave Dad, she couldn't save herself, let alone her children, and that was that. Going to white outsiders wasn't an option for an Asian immigrant family like us. If you ditched the family, there was absolutely nothing left" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 199).

However, as I have explained, Okasan breaks expectations by abandoning the familial structure and her role as caregiver to travel with Janice. She defies her role as a submissive mother and as object of happiness and, in doing so, acquires the agency of her own destiny. She chooses life over conventional happiness and finds her own path towards new models of happiness. Here, Janice, just like Gerald, functions as a catalyst for change in their lives. The main character evolves through her interactions with Gerald as he (and his mother) challenges the preconceptions promoted by Wilder's narrative. The protagonist's vision of the Prairie changes, the literary tradition is challenged, and she calls for new modes to depict the Canadian reality. She tries to do this by burning the book and, metaphorically, killing Laura Ingalls and what she represents. We could read such a reaction in Berlant's terms and claim that she burns the book to destroy the myth that gave her false hope and expectations and, in doing so, she also destroys the relation of cruel optimism. Similarly, Okasan is transformed through her friendship with Janice. While she initially distrusts her because of her lifestyle as she lives alone and is open about her homosexuality, eventually they become friends and form a bond that leads the reader to believe they are sexually or romantically involved. This relationship shows the importance of kinship and how friends can support and love better than family. For Torrado-Mariñas, they defy the traditional models of family and give an alternative to standard conceptions of love and belonging (259). In the same way, the protagonist's bond with Midori, Genevieve, and Bernie at the end of the novel also functions to challenge the importance of the nuclear family in the happiness script. As Torrado-Mariñas states:

The artificiality of family ties is exposed as another way of praising individuality and denouncing the false dependencies on the family in which many women have been raised as yet another means of control. At the end of the book, the human-made links between the four friends are portrayed as being more important than blood ties, something which is exemplified by the metaphorical communion of the four friends as the Kappa under the rain. (260)

In other words, *blood is not thicker than water* and promoting the opposite becomes an obstacle for female happiness as family love stands as

an obligation. Thus, kinship relations become central to the creation of new modes of happiness.

4. Non-human Affects

Human affects are not the only bonds created in the story. The use of aliens and mythological creatures that lead to seemingly impossible physical consequences such as pregnancy place the novel inside the posthumanist discourse defended by Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman*, which opens the door to ideas of interspecies subjectivity, multiplicity, and collectivity. As Martín-Lucas has stated, the novel presents interspecies affect, which I read as monstrous, in a positive light and it ends hopefully as humans and kappas dance together. For her, the final lines of the novel and the brief epilogue that follows represent the novel's celebration or, at least acceptance of posthuman hybridity ("Post-human Affect" 160). Indeed, the erotic encounter with the kappa creature, who is described as ambiguous in terms of gender and sexuality, not only determines the protagonist and the novel's queer nature, but also functions as a way of negotiating modernity and myth, society and nature. The kappa not only challenges the heteronormative modes of existence through its ambiguity but also temporal and spatial borders. As a Japanese mythological creature, its (dis)placement in the Canadian Prairies destabilizes the established norm and defends its right to existence whenever, however, and wherever it wants. This ambivalent and non-normative existence is monstrous in the sense that it challenges the status quo and is, therefore, socially undesirable. The kappa's engagement in the novel's economy of affects embodies the affective monstrosity present through the protagonist's emotionally dysfunctional life.

The kappa also becomes a companion for someone who is alone most of the time. First, in their nocturnal sexual encounter and, later, as a constant presence inside the narrator through her pregnancy. Before the pregnancy and the awakening it brings forth, the protagonist is *alienated* from a world that does not see her as who she really is, but as a prefabricated idea and expectations of what she should be (Torrado-Mariñas 261). This obviously affects the protagonist's perception of herself, who states that "you never see your own face," that your reflection is not your real self, and that "all you know is how you are treated" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 14). Regarding the latter, Huber points out how the narrator is more often than not alone and that "if indeed, all she knows is how she is treated, then we as readers need to read her as a very unreliable narrator" since, despite her abusive childhood, she is still treated well by "friends who love her and sisters who want to know her as an adult" (148). We know more about how she treats herself than how others treat her and we see how, in

her adult life, she is the only one mistreating herself as she continues the cycle of abuse she learnt during childhood.

The "company" and effect of the kappa brings emotional transformation and changes the way she perceives herself and others. In other words, the kappa brings healing. In a way, as Martín-Lucas argues, "she has touched herself through an/Other; the inner and outer spaces coalesce" ("Posthuman Affect" 160). Thus, the literal monstrosity of the kappa and the unnatural pregnancy become a path towards healing the affective monstrosity that acts as a prison for the protagonist. Similarly, Okasan's liberation is also connected to the presence of aliens in her life. Physical monstrosity becomes a space for possibilities that liberates them from the affective monstrosity of the cycle of abuse and the promise of happiness, allowing them to create new modes of happiness.

5. Economy of Affects and the Cruelty of Expectations

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explains how bodies are affected by other bodies and that our individuality is formed by contact with others (4). She later describes affect as "contagious" to reference how emotions pass between bodies and how our feelings can affect other people's feelings (218). *The Kappa Child* is a novel that explores human relationships and, as a result, overflows with affect. Following Ahmed's perception of affect as "contagious," we can see how Goto creates an economy of circulating affect through her characters' relationship and interactions with each other. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the sisters' parents, whose emotions and behaviors affect their daughters and ultimately determine who they become. After all, in the protagonist's words, "a child isn't born bitter" (13). And, more importantly, the relationship the protagonist has with the kappa and its presence inside of her affect her to the point of transformation. We see, then, how in this economy of circulating affect every character is somehow conditioned by others and how that shapes their individuality and emotions.

On a similar note, Ahmed explores the role that affects play in the lives of migrant subjects and the space they occupy in the settler colonial state. She has established how proximity to happiness is often based on proximity to whiteness, which in this case is illustrated through the ideals set by *Little House*. Thus, following Ahmed's conception of affects as "sticky," we see how the white and colonial prairie narrative is associated with positive affects and values, while the Japanese immigrant experience is marked by the trauma of the internment of the Japanese Canadian community during World War II, which in this case is added to the protagonist's personal history of childhood abuse. As I have established, *Little House* presents a model that is seen as "the good life" and "the

right path" to happiness and, as the protagonist compares the book to her own circumstances, she realizes not only that the promise is unfair and false, but also that what is presented in the prairie narrative is not as idyllic as it seems. Therefore, we see how affects are present both at the personal level and at the level of national discourse. David L. Eng and Shinee Han ask "how do Asian American immigrants negotiate their losses? And how do their offsprings inherit and inhabit these losses?" (680). Thus, we can understand the father's behavior as a result of his own traumatic experiences of loss as an immigrant and how the inheritance of those losses creates a cycle of abuse. Or, in Kang's words: "Just as genes are passed down from parents, so too are traumas" (34). Moreover, as Ahmed explains, before we are affected something happens that creates an impression on the skin, "things are already in place that incline us to be affected in some ways more than others" (*The Promise* 231). These "things already in place" can be understood as a mixture of our past individual experiences and the historical past. These are at the same time connected in the sense that the historical past will determine our individual experiences based on different identity markers like race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. In this context, the protagonist's father is also shaped by his own historical and personal history. The protagonist's ambivalence towards her father is linked to the recognition of her father's struggle. In fact, this is clear in the text when she ponders: "Dad dreamed a futile dream but one he never gave up. Is that respectable? Maybe it was the ultimate challenge, the last immigrant frontier: to do the impossible in a hostile land" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 192).

Expectations also play an important part in this economy of affects. As we know, Ahmed's promise of happiness and Berlant's cruel optimism are based on the placement of expectations: we expect to reach certain goals that will lead to "the good life" and supposedly bring us happiness. As Ahmed explores, we are taught that we will be happy by following a normative path in life and reaching certain milestones, which is seen as "being good" and works to maintain the status quo. Thus, we believe that by "being good" and following the path that we are supposed to follow, we will reach happiness. If we do not achieve what is expected of us, we will be disappointed and we will disappoint others. But achieving it may also result in disappointment in that it does not bring the happiness it promised. Similarly, Berlant presents the attachment to objects of desire as "a cluster of promises" and explores how "the object of desire and the things it promises can be clear or good for us, or not" (24). Thus, we are often moved to action based on optimistic promises and expectations. The protagonist is aware of the cruelty of hope and expectations, as she states that "dealing with my own expectations is hard enough" (Goto, *The Kappa Child* 138) and talks about a "sadness gland" that is "triggered by longing for things that cannot be. Or things we fear to hope for" (116). To hope and expect is to be subject to disappointment.

In addition, she tends to isolate herself to avoid painful experiences. If, as Berlant tells us, "all attachments are optimistic" (23), we see that the protagonist is aware of the vulnerability of attachment and the pain that it can bring when its promises are broken. This idea is supported in Goto's novel by the way the narrator explains her reasoning for distancing herself from her family: "No family member knows my address, just my unlisted phone number. Because I don't want to deal with unwanted surprise visits from the people who are the most likely to hurt and disappoint me" (243). She is, then, aware that attachments and expectations are cruel. She bases her relationship with her family on resentment and hatred because she knows the potential power of their bonds and how attachments are often marked by hope that can easily evolve into disappointment. Thus, she will do anything to protect herself from disappointment, even if that means renouncing the possibility of happiness and connection. Eventually, liberation of the happiness script arrives: "When I stop expecting an answer, I am suddenly free" (220). Once the protagonist starts healing and rejects the imposed happiness script and "good life" in favor of her own path towards happiness, she is liberated. Thus, as I have explored in this article, she needs to abandon her desire for traditional family bonds, which create a relation of cruel optimism, and allow herself to be who she really is and to embrace other forms of kinship, regardless of whether that fits into the happiness script or not. When she rejects what has been imposed on her and embraces herself and those around her, she is liberated from the shackles of expectations.

6. Conclusion

The Kappa Child narrates a process of becoming unstuck, of learning to let go, of challenging established preconceptions and finding happiness outside the happiness script. As we know, "the melancholic subjects expect to be hurt and are unable to love, to form new attachments" (Ahmed, *The Promise* 141). This is true for Goto's protagonist for most of the novel and until the final scenes as she navigates her trauma and the monstrosity of her relationships as well as the monstrosity in herself, how she is affected and how she affects others. This monstrosity stems not only from the cruelty of her childhood, her isolation, and the cruelty that she performs herself. It also has to do with breaking the norms; with choosing to ignore the "right path" towards happiness and redefining that concept; with the unconventionality of it all; with the constant transgression of dichotomies and the defense of ambivalence. It is remarkable the connection between this digression from the norm and the concept of monstrosity, which is not only present in the form of emotional ugliness but also as literal monstrosity in the character of the kappa and even the mention of aliens in relation to

Okasan. This connection between emotional ugliness and the corporeality of monstrosity is an aspect of the novel that I intend to develop in future analyses.

The present study offers a reading of *The Kappa Child* while engaging in the ongoing theoretical discourse about affect theory and it contributes to the inclusion of texts from the margins into the corpus of academic research. The novel questions the binary oppositions between past and present, fiction and reality, Japanese and Canadian,⁴ myths and modernity, and victim and perpetrator, among others. As Berlant states, “crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (10). And in the end, after the challenging of these established dichotomies and the self-discovery and self-acceptance journey, the protagonist can finally let go, create new attachments, and grow.

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4. Although this dichotomy is explored more in depth in Goto’s first novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994).

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