

Undomesticating Political Ecologies in Miriam Pirbhai's *Outside People*¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Miriam Pirbhai's 2017 short story collection, *Outside People*, as a narrative guide to the political ecology of Canadian bordering practices. *Bordering* describes the ways in which human and non-human beings get marked for inclusion or disposal, protection or exploitation. The essay focuses on the mode of bordering that Ghassan Hage calls "generalized domestication": a practice of homemaking that is "paradoxically... also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation" (91). *Outside People* highlights the ways in which the selective domestication of the world outside Canadian borders works to support the settler-colonial good life. The collection depicts the lives of migrants navigating the environments of racial capitalism to forge connections across cultures, languages and species. The stories also highlight the spillover, through tourism, mining and international adoption, of extractive domestication practices beyond the borders of Canada. In addition to exposing the mechanisms of domination that underlie myths of Canadianness, *Outside People* tells stories that evade extractive and liberal-national capture and make alliances in support of alternative, undomesticated forms of inhabitation.

Keywords

Bordering; Domestication; Migration; Race; Environment; Ecology

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1. Introduction

Mariam Pirbhai's 2017 short story collection, *Outside People and Other Stories*, encompasses a diverse range of settings: a house in an upscale Vancouver neighbourhood, the streets of Montréal, a poultry processing plant in rural Ontario, a Mexican resort. The characters who inhabit those places all can be said in some senses to occupy the category of *outside*. Pirbhai describes those characters in an interview as:

some of the most 'invisible' segments of our so-called 'visible minority' population. Those whose stories rarely get told: people of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds navigating the Canadian or trans-national workforce as temporary migrant workers, bankers, chambermaids, civil servants, teachers, and the like. ("Mariam Pirbhai Interview").

From her own "multi-ethnic and multinational" vantage point,² Pirbhai portrays migrants from diverse regions, noting in response to her interviewer's praise that she strives to: "captur[e] some level of authenticity in things outside my realm of experience." While one might read that statement as attestation of Pirbhai's successful illumination of invisibilized migrants' experience in the light of legible Canadian personhood, I want to suggest that the accomplishment of the stories is something different and more difficult: to highlight the space surrounding, and regulated movement across, the unstable border of *inside* and *outside*. I read this movement between inside and outside through the concept of what Ghassan Hage calls *generalized domestication*. Defined as "a mode of inhabiting the world through dominating it for the purpose of making it yield value: material or symbolic forms of sustenance, comfort, aesthetic pleasure, and so on" (87), domestication is a mode of homemaking that is "paradoxically... also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation" practiced on those who are deemed sub-or not-human (91).

A critical aspect of Hage's use of this term is the connection it highlights between racism and environmental destruction. In his 2017 book, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, he argues persuasively that: "practices of racial and ecological domination have the same roots" (ix). Hage characterizes as racist "any bundle of practices which aim at problematizing, excluding, marginalizing, discriminating against, rendering insecure, exploiting, criminalizing, and terrorizing and harbouring exterminatory fantasies against an identity group of people

2. Pirbhai was born in Pakistan and lived in England, the United Arab Emirates and the Philippines before her family immigrated to Canada in the late 1980s.

imagined as sharing a common and inheritable determining feature" (12). As a means of demarcating outside and inside, racism lends ideological support to practices of border control. Gargi Bhattacharya uses the term "bordering" to describe the multiplication and integration of machineries of border control into everyday life (126). Geopolitical borders subtend the symbolic categories of identity and belonging, demarcating who and what is part of *us*, in what way and to what end. Bhattacharya emphasizes the role of environmental crisis in shaping the current iteration of racial capitalism. Following Hage, we can extend this observation to consider how practices of bordering work in the service of overlapping forms of human and non-human instrumentalization (31).³

In its primary (though not exclusive) focus on migrants, *Outside People* is an exposé of the related processes of bordering and generalized domestication that underlie myths of liberal Canadian homemaking. Pirbhai's stories reveal the multifarious operations of domestication, which works to maintain the home/nation not only by the selective incorporation of outside/outsideers, but also through the extra-territorial forms of extraction that consolidate Canada's participation in networks of global capitalism. *Outside People* also invites us to stretch the concept of domestication beyond its usual frame of reference by highlighting its operation in the process of rendering foreignness both legible and palatable through dominant narratives. While they expose the mechanisms of domination that underpin those narratives, the stories in Pirbhai's collection evade capture and make alliances in support of alternative, undomesticated forms of inhabitation.

2. Domestication in Support of Liberal Nation-Building

Canadian dreams of belonging float through many of the stories in *Outside People*. Janet, in the story "Corazon's Children," is a Japanese Canadian who has achieved success as a psychiatrist—"a *Canadian* professional with a *Canadian* degree" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 43), married to a white engineer. Umara, the middle-aged Pakistani-Canadian protagonist of "Bread and Roti," has a less exalted career, but is no less proud of her integration into Canadian society. She is thrilled to receive

3. Bhattacharya argues that ecological crisis, including the dynamics of scarcity, "inform[s] an escalating rush to divide humanity into the worthy and the disposable" (31). Racial capitalism also reflects and advances "extractive regimes and their epistemological counterparts," as Christine Okoth has shown (380). Ecological crisis imaginaries do not shut down extractive regimes but shape their expansion in the service of a conscientiously sustainable mode of racial capitalism.

her first paycheque as a worker in the Genetti Family Food Corporation. "[I]ssued in the name of Umara Haroon Siddiqui," the cheque "was so official... so Canadian," making her "feel like her own person" (82).

Janet and Umara's pride and gratitude in their accomplishments, solidified with the imprimatur of *Canadian* success (a degree, a paycheque), reflect liberal/Liberal ideas of the nation, which elaborate on the familiar theme of Canada as a "mosaic," in contrast to the US "melting pot" (Liberal). As this familiar story of Canada goes:

Many families came here to build better lives and be part of building Canada... Together, we have been partners in building communities based on shared values of fairness, solidarity, responsibility, resilience, and sustainability. This shared mission has made Canada strong and is an economic advantage. (Liberal)

A key component of this celebration of multiculturalism is the gentle reminder to immigrants of the conditions of their welcome: they're here to build, to fortify that economic advantage.

The imperative of economic usefulness inflects all the values listed in the liberal vision, including sustainability, whose capacious scope embraces the Canadian mythology: "Nature is who we are" ("Nature").⁴ The Liberal Party of Canada's platform props up this mythology with a remarkable commitment to heeding "the wisdom of Indigenous tradition" in its treatment of nature—a commitment that quickly unravels in the elaboration of a transactional plan to: "Protect nature where it protects us, including by implementing nature-based climate solutions which deliver measurable carbon sequestration and biodiversity benefits, while supporting community resilience" ("Mark Carney"). Admittance to the fold of protection is conditional on a return on investment. Where nature fails to deliver or impedes economic development, we presume that it will be managed differently, neglected or even destroyed. Humans coded as outsiders are also subject to vacillating categorization as resource and "ungovernable waste" (Hage 46).⁵

4. In a 2025 EKOS poll, 89 % of Canadians identified nature as key to their national identity. Nature topped the list of quintessentially Canadian things, beating out the flag, medicare and hockey ("Nature Tops List").

5. Hage describes "the polarity between the racism of exploitation and the racism of extermination" that structures colonialism (31). Though not a focus of *Outside People* or this essay, it is critical to recognize (as Pirbhai does in her 2023 book, *Garden Inventories*) the centrality of genocide against Indigenous people to the domestication of Turtle Island.

The instrumentalist logic that informs this national project of homemaking becomes clear in "Bread and Roti" when Umara as a racialized immigrant is diagnosed with cancer and has to stop working. Umara's first concern on learning the news "was the prospect of losing her job and becoming the government's charity case" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 82). The neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility is reinforced by her doctor's barrage of lifestyle questions. When her son, Kashif, explains that she doesn't smoke or drink, that "'We're Muslim. It's Haram'" (85), the doctor asks her about salty or preserved foods, and then about her work. She proudly explains that she works at a bakery, which Kashif qualifies: "'It's not exactly a bakery... She calls it that. It's a factory that manufactures Italian cookies... the ones that break your teeth'" (86). The doctor eventually "mumbled something about the possible link between cancer and environmental hazards at the workplace" (86), providing a glimpse of a structural reality at odds with the story of upward mobility through hard work. The reality also doesn't quite sync up with the Canadian Cancer Society poster in the doctor's waiting room, featuring "smiling people wearing matching T-shirts and holding up banners with the slogans, 'proud supporter' and 'celebrating survivors'"—an image with which Umara can't identify (95). Though she is moved by the "soft colours" of the poster and the "yellow daffodils with white centers" that adorn the poster, "the faces [hold] little appeal" (95).

As the story progresses, Umara loses her tenuous grip on her sense of herself as a productive Canadian citizen and other frames of meaning come into view. Never fluent with English idiom, Umara is confused when the doctor tells her "it would be quite a while before she was 'out of the woods'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 82). Looking at herself in the mirror, she sees "a mountain after monsoon season: treeless, muddy, and beaten down by a landslide. At least that's what she saw when a section of her tongue and cheek—oral cavity, as they called it—was cut out to prevent the cancer from spreading" (82). Umara's literal reading of the phrase works, like her failure to identify with the faces of survivors in the Canadian Cancer Society poster (95), to expose the outside of dominant spaces of Canadian identity and community. Her attention turns habitually to the edges of the picture she's meant to be looking at. As the story opens, she awakens to notice, first the pain on the side of her face, then a sparrow that on the ledge of the apartment balcony (80). Later in the doctor's office, she looks up at the sound of a loud tap to see a bird crash into the window behind his desk. She comments, "'Bichari'" [poor fellow], while Kashif, who had also seen the bird, ignores it, continuing to talk to her doctor about her treatment plan. Left out of the conversation, she continues to focus on the window: "Wo parinda kahan gay hai?" she said to no one in particular, wondering where the bird had gone" (87). The bird's collision with the window recalls Umara's own situation in which "the world kept sneaking up on her like a car's headlights in

a dense fog" (81). In this moment, Umara is rendered, like the bird, invisible and vulnerable to the infrastructure of the economy of which she was once a productive part, to which she has sacrificed her own vitality.

3. Mutual Benefit: The Levity of Dreams and Inevitability of Sacrifice

Umara is not entirely without resources. As Kashif reminds her, deductions from her paycheque will support "[t]he hospital bills, the time off work... you've been paying into those benefits all these years" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 82). This, he reminds her, is the payoff for doing things "the right way" (82). Umara's situation illustrates an essential component of domestication, which is the assumption of "mutual benefit" (Hage 89). Hage stresses that this concept:

is not some kind of mystification of the truth that aims to 'overshadow'... the relation of power in which domestication is grounded... Seeing 'mutual benefit,' with a kind of 'Marxist' eye, as so much mist hiding a real 'reality,' ends up itself actually hiding what is a crucial reality of domestication: it is a relation of domination that aims to be lived as a relation of nondomination. Its appearance is not what hides its essence but is part of its essence. (90-91)

For many of the protagonists in *Outside People*, citizenship holds out a promise of belonging that is false without being entirely empty, offering protection without full enfranchisement.

This is the case for the unnamed protagonist of the opening story, "Air Raids," a Pakistani-Canadian woman who is struggling with grief over the death of her father, and questions about her own identity, as a Canadian and loosely observant Muslim. Her father had been a grateful new Canadian, joyfully at their citizenship ceremony, where he proclaimed to his daughter: "This is your country now" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 2). The privileges of belonging are less obvious to her: she questioned the anglophilic overtones of the citizenship ceremony and hates the cold weather of Montréal (2). More significantly, she has had to postpone her dreams of studying painting and art history to pay off her parents' mortgage. As their only child, she "bear[s] the levity of dreams and the inevitability of sacrifice in equal measure" (80). The story traces the trajectory of a process of questioning that ends in a qualified affirmation of autonomy and freedom.

That emotional journey parallels her walk through Montréal to a date with a man she met on the Métro. Along the way, she navigates a protest against Bill 21, Québec's Charter of Values legislation, a law that sought to curtail religious freedom, with the effect—perhaps the primary intended effect—of barring hijabi

women from government employment. Like the bird in "Bread and Roti," which distracts Umara in the doctor's office, the protest occupies the woman's attention even during the date, with its placards, bearing phrases like "'LA DIVERSITÉ EST UNE RICHESSE'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 10) dominating the view from the window of the restaurant they are eating in. As she walks home from the date, where differences between the relative degrees of religiosity turned out not to be the barrier she feared (her date is a devout Muslim; she is more casual), she finds inspiration in the crowd: "'My Right,'" "'My Life'" and "'My Choice'" (14). The ending seems to embrace the last phrase, confirming, against the racist aspirations of Bill 2,1 the protagonist's ability to move hopefully forward, into the relationship and her future as a free Canadian citizen.

The affirmation is haunted, though, by notes of disquiet; the "mutual benefit" of domestication flickers (Hage 89), occasionally revealing the force that is its crux—like the presence of the RCMP, "ready to shield the crowd against itself" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 7). "Am I a threat to myself?," the protagonist wonders (12). Citizenship confers benefits, but those are qualified by metrics of racial belonging: having the wrong skin colour puts you back on the outside, turning you into the object of danger from which the home must be guarded.

4. Choice, Property, Personhood

"Air Raids" ends with the protagonist joining in with the protestors at the final part of the chant: "'My Choice'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 14). In a liberal capitalist society, *choice* figures prominently as the mark of an inequitably allocated freedom premised on self-ownership. As Bhattacharya explains, racial capitalism operates through a mix of coercion and desire, ensnaring even the most im-miserated in dreams of self-actualization. Beyond the lures of crude consumerism, Bhattacharya notes that:

it is far harder to resist the framing of one's self as a precious object of property... In a world of constant depletion, every resistance revolves around the belief that I at least own my self and my own life. When every other mode of productivity is barred or escaped, we are mocked by the inescapable injunction to take productive stewardship of our own selves. (165)

The urgency of the injunction is intensified for those with the least chance of achieving its aim.

"Corazon's Children" explores that dilemma as it plays out in the racialized politics of reproductive *choice*. Janet, the Japanese-Canadian psychiatrist, is a success by most measures, two generations and one "*Canadian* degree"

(Pirbhai, *Outside* 43) removed from her grandmother, who was imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp during the Second World War (44). The one metric of achievement that has eluded her is motherhood, so she is undergoing expensive fertility treatment. Janet's situation is contrasted with that of her Filipina maid, Corazon, whose income supports the two young children she has left at home (37). The symmetry of the women's suffering with difficulties surrounding motherhood is undone by unequal dynamics of choice. Janet persists with fertility treatments against her doctor's warning of little chance of success, reasoning: "what choice was there but to continue?" (41). Corazon works under the terms of the Live-In Caregiver Program that will eventually allow her to apply for permanent residency and sponsor her children to come and join her.⁶ As time goes on, the prospects of reunification grow dimmer, but she reckons she "had made her choice. There was no going back" (38). Both women have indeed made difficult choices around motherhood. But in one case, the way forward is bolstered by relative economic ease—the cost of the fertility treatments is negligible for Janet in comparison to her desire to have biological children, while in the other, it is constrained by poverty.⁷

The women's different situations are also illuminated by the contours—and limits—of Janet's determination to be a good employer, assuaging her guilt at having hired Corazon through a relatively cheap "domestic workers' placement agenc[y]" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 45). When Corazon calls her "Mrs. Hartman," she corrects her, saying "in fact, my name is Murakami-Hartman—Dr. Murakami-Hartman—but you can call me Janet" (32). The gesture at familiarity is lost on Corazon who, having never called a boss by their first name and struggling with the pronunciation of "Murakami," continues to call her employer "Mrs. Hartman" (32). In another display of generosity, Janet leaves a box of pastries in the fridge for Corazon every week—a perk that Corazon has come to expect and enjoy. One week, she rummages in vain through the fridge for the pastries—the "gift of something sweet" (39), which Janet has forgotten to buy because she is distracted by her fertility struggles. The pastries are a nice touch, but they are not part of the terms of Corazon's employment, over which she has no control; their provision is totally at Janet's discretion and there are no consequences for her omission. The difference between Janet's and Corazon's situations is not

6. The Live-In Caregiver program closed to new applicants in November, 2024.

7. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild put it, "Women choose to migrate for domestic work. But they choose it because economic pressures all but coerce them to. That yawning gap between rich and poor countries is itself a form of coercion, pushing Third World mothers to seek work in the First for lack of options closer to home" (27).

that Janet has choice and Corazon doesn't; they are differently positioned within the racial capitalist logic of domestication, of which the Caregiver Program is emblematic. As a third-generation Japanese Canadian, Janet still strives to "take productive stewardship of [her] own self" (Bhattacharya 165); her exploitative relationship with Corazon works in service of that striving.

A hallmark of domestication is its invisibilization of economics; nowhere is this truer than in the intimate space of the home, where relations of domination are masked by proud or defensive claims that the nanny or housekeeper is *like part of the family* (often one microstep below the dog or cat who, according to most owners, *is part of the family*). The home is not only considered to be separate from the world; it represents a space where the ruling class cleanses itself of the dirtiness of the business of running an empire. As Ann McClintock has observed, the cult of domesticity was a central plank of the nineteenth-century British colonial project. Through its rituals, which were "increasingly global and more often than not violent, animals, women and colonized peoples were wrested from their putatively 'natural' yet, ironically, 'unreasonable' state of 'savagery' and inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men" (McClintock 35). Those rituals persist into the twenty-first century, their delineation of inside and outside space and relations of domination enfolding a new global geopolitics, expressed in gendered formations like the inexpensive "domestic workers' placement agencies" that bring women like Corazon to clients like Janet (Pirbhai, *Outside* 45).

Charged with keeping the domestic space clean, these workers are also tasked with erasing evidence of their own presence, making cleanliness appear natural. In "Corazon's Children," this imperative appears in the differential significance of Pine Sol. The cleaner whose "artificial scent" "assault[s] Janet when she comes in the door" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 40) represents for Corazon pleasing "proof of a job well done" (39). Symbolically, the cleanness of the home conceals the inequality of the women's relationship under the illusion of intimacy and generosity—at least for Janet; Corazon is just glad for tangible proof that cleaning is hard work. The literal and symbolic meanings of cleanliness converge in the myth of a kind of cordon sanitaire separating the home (read: settler, white) space from the dirt and disorder of the outside (Hage 100; McClintock 33). "Outside" encompasses the spaces of production that invisibly support the operation of those *home* spaces, their racialized labourers even more precarious than those who enjoy the meagre benefits of the Live-In Caregiver program.

The poultry processing plant in the story, "Chicken Catchers," represents such an outside space, to which dirt and brutality are outsourced and invisibilized. Migrant workers at the plant have one job: to "Catch the chickens and hold onto them by their necks just long enough... to inject them with antibiotics

or some cocktail of drugs, with dosages strong enough to turn even the most unyielding creatures into a sad, lifeless lump of flesh" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 25). The imperative for speed increases the risk of accidents, such that Reggie, the protagonist, is "quite certain" on a few occasions that "the needle had missed a chicken and pierced through his gloves" (25). The story relates Reggie's experience of a day spent back in the shed caring for another worker who is ill—likely due in part to their living conditions: the shed workers sleep in is damp and mouldy and clean, hot water often unavailable.⁸ The brutality of the operation starkly undermines the image of sustainable consumerism conveyed by the Dumfrey "family" farm's "free-run" chickens (25), bred top heavy to maximize the white meat that Canadian consumers bizarrely prefer. ("Here," the men lugubriously joke, "dark meat sells cheap" [26]). Puncture wounds are not the only danger workers face. "Chicken Catchers" ends with the arrival of a supervisor, who wordlessly begins emptying all the lockers of their contents. When Reggie protests, saying "That's not your property, lady!" (29), she corrects him "This is my property. All of this is my property!" (29) Only after all the lockers are completely empty does she inform Reggie of the accident that killed all but one of his co-workers.⁹ Beneath the reassuring aura of the "family" farm (Pirbhai, "Outside" 25), "Chicken Catchers" highlights the capitalist machinery that enmeshes, sometimes fatally, racialized humans along with animals.

That machinery includes the bordering technologies that relegate *unskilled* immigrants to the temporary track through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Distinctions between Canadian immigration tracks are "both managed and obfuscated by the language and ideology of skill," as Bridget Anderson notes—a metric based on arbitrary qualifications such as "specialization" (4). By this criteria, "those who can turn their hand to everything—construction workers who dig and plaster today and lay foundations and build walls tomorrow, domestic workers who clean and cook at the same time as caring for an older person—are 'unskilled' and... consigned to precarious work and status" (4-5). Anderson cites Natasha Iskander's observation that: "By denying the unskilled the more abstract, more agentic, and more subjective registers of personhood, these representations reduce the unskilled down to their bodies" (5). The line between humanity and animality becomes murky here.

Within the framework of the SAWP, the unskilled labour pool occupies a specific geographical area. Launched in 1966, the program was initially based

8. Several studies identify significant health risks associated with the housing conditions of Canadian migrant agricultural workers (Caxaj et al.; Salami et al.).

9. The story is dedicated to the ten migrant workers who died in a car accident on a rural Ontario road Ontario in February, 2012, and the three survivors (15).

on an agreement between Canada and Jamaica and later expanded to include Mexico and other Caribbean nations. Through a simplistic lens of labour markets, the SAWP represents a neat confluence of interests: Canada has an agricultural labour shortage; many countries in the Caribbean have a labour surplus; need meets need, to the benefit of both. This perspective overlooks the dynamic of domination internal to SAWP and the global networks of racial capitalism in which it operates, both exploiting and entrenching uneven development. Bhattacharya explains: "The associative chain between populations, territories and resources works to transform some spaces into geographical incarnations of racialised populations" (73). Racism sticks to places, such that "particular populations [come] to be regarded as embodiments of depleted territories. Even when displaced from regions 'classified as underdeveloped,' bodies are read as already depleted, economically and 'mentally' (by which we might understand 'culturally')" (73).

5. Extra-Territorial Bordering

The circular logic that marks bodies from "depleted territories" (Bhattacharya 73) out for certain kinds of *unskilled* but essential work in the global North does not acknowledge the role of the global North in underdevelopment. In "Chicken Catchers," for example, Reggie left Jamaica when his father's dairy farm was devastated by powdered milk imports (Pirbhai, *Outside* 23). Like many of Pirbhai's characters, those in "Chicken Catchers" are triply displaced: first, by what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" of "the loss of land and resources beneath them... leav[ing] communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19). Migration represents a second process of displacement, which often culminates in a third displacement to the fringes of major population centres, far from people, commerce and mythologized Canadian green space.¹⁰

From the moment they're driven from Pearson airport to their work sites (Pirbhai, *Outside* 20), Reggie and the other men know virtually nothing about

10. Harsha Walia uses the term "border imperialism" to describe a constellation of processes that begins with "displacements as a result of the coercive extractions of capitalism and colonialism, and the simultaneous fortification of the border—often by those very same Western powers that are complicit in these displacements" (28). Other key and intricately connected elements of border imperialism are: the criminalization of migration, the enforcement of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-sponsored exploitation of migrant labor (8).

their surroundings: they're picked up early and returned after dark (20); the shed they live in has a "single set of windows placed at an elevation that no one could see out of, except from a distance" (23); and there's nowhere to go on the three-hundred acre farm during breaks. The surroundings are dominated by poultry barns and another massive shed containing pesticides. When the recruiting agent in "Chicken Catchers" jokes about workers becoming "arts patrons" (21), due to the farm's proximity to the site of an annual Shakespearean theatre festival, it is a dig at their distance from "the arts," both their perceived lack of culture and the nature of their work, which prevents any engagement with the town beyond infrequent trips to a strip plaza to purchase work clothes and wire money back home (21). Their situation reflects the reality that, under the SAWP, "the requirement that migrants live on-farm, their long working hours, and lack of access to transportation, combine to create racially segregated communities in which Black and Latino migrants are restricted to very few, and often hidden spaces" (Cohen 140-41).

In highlighting those hidden spaces, the stories in *Outside People* highlight dynamics of bordering through which human and non-human beings get marked for inclusion or disposal, protection or exploitation. At issue is not the relative openness and closedness of borders, but how their regulated porosity supports the settler colonial and racial capitalist project of Canadian nation-building. Bordering practices permeate the everyday lives of racialized migrants within Canada. They also define in a converse way the relative freedom of wealthy Canadian tourists to enjoy the places that have become unlivable for migrants like Reggie. The story "Sunshine Guarantees" highlights these inequities from the perspective of Lucita, a maid at a Mexico resort. Like the poultry farm and industrial suburb, this location has been denuded of its local characteristics and, engineered in harmony with other properties in the Siete Mares Resort and Spa (Pirbhai, *Outside* 63)—in effect domesticated—to provide tourists with an experience that strikes the perfect balance of familiarity and difference from their everyday lives. The machinery of capitalism that is in full view in the poultry processing plant is invisible at the resort, at least to the guests. Workers, on the other hand, have to reconcile efficiency measures such as the "only one complimentary toiletry item per customer per day," policy, enforced by regular inventory checks to guard against employee theft (63-64), with the command to "always put the guests' needs first" (64), including demands for an extra bottle of shampoo. "You know how much the *gringos* love free stuff," Lucita's friend Angélica reminds her (64). This principle finds its most extreme expression in the resort's "sunshine guarantee," whereby a day without sunshine guarantees guests "something free, like a day at the spa or a snorkeling lesson" (64).

The distance between abundance and poverty, freedom and constraint, is measured along an intersectional spectrum that operates in complex relation

to bordering. Lucita observes a distinction between lighter-skinned, English-speaking “visible staff”—the poolside animators, the fitness club trainers, the lifeguards, the bartenders—who fraternize with the guests, and “the invisible army of chambermaids, security guards, busboys, gardeners, dishwashers, and sweepers, who were not meant to be seen” (Pirbhai, *Outside* 72-73). Race is not the only biometric determinant of privilege. As a single mother, caring for her own aging mother, Lucita is stuck in place, unable to contemplate moving to Canada, as her brother and family have done. Like Corazon was with a previous employer, she is subject to “inappropriate advances” from guests, and, like Umara, who is addressed pejoratively by her boss as “Aunty” (91), she is reminded frequently of her age. “If you think you’re irreplaceable,” her manager reminds her, “I’ve got a filing cabinet filled with applications from younger workers to prove otherwise” (63). For Reggie in the poultry processing plant, it is his sexuality that keeps him in his place. Absorbing the message that, as a gay man, he is “bad for business” (24), he feels compelled to take a job that he has been warned is “a new kind of slavery” (24).¹¹ The slavery that happens in Canadian agribusiness is noteworthy as a specific instance of brutality. It is also enmeshed, and operates to secure Canada’s place, in global networks of racial capitalism.

6. A Pattern That Is Hard To Ignore

Outside People works to refocus the picture of Canada, to highlight the faces of those who make up the “invisible army” (Pirbhai 73) that is enmeshed by its bordering operations. In “Corazon’s Children,” this refocusing works via the juxtaposition of Janet’s and Corazon’s photos. Janet’s immigrant success journey is marked by the series of professionally matted, black-and-white silver-framed photos that adorn her wall, marking milestones such as her wedding, her honeymoon, and her graduation (32). The series culminates in a tenth wedding anniversary photo, taken, Janet tells Corazon, “just a few weeks before the Agency sent you to us” (33). In Janet’s narrative, Corazon figures as a provision sent to her to fulfill a need. “Corazon’s Children” flips that narrative, subordinating the significance of Janet’s picture wall to the power of the one crumpled up photo Corazon carries with her. It’s a “terrible picture” by Corazon’s own estimation, in which the sun is “too bright,” her children squinting

11. Interviews with workers in Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program concur with a 2023 UN report that describes such workers as “vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery” (Cohen 138; United Nations).

and unsmiling, with their grandmother smoking a cigarette in the background (35). For Janet, the wrinkled photo that mysteriously turns up on the kitchen counter is at first an emblem of neglect: "She would never let her photographs look so beaten up and worn out" (45); then a portrait of deprivation, as she sees the children standing in front of "a dilapidated one-room house on stilts," the girl wearing a "worn-looking" *Dora the Explorer* t-shirt and the boy barefoot, in front of a background that was "a mess of the deepest greens in a mountainous terrain" (46). She sees all this before realizing that these are Corazon's children.

It is tempting to say that in this moment, Corazon's children become the subjects of the story, their humanity, along with their mother's, granted central place, but it doesn't quite work that way. In opposition to conservative white nationalist rhetoric, liberal immigrant stories make racialised immigrant lives legible by offering proof of their aspiration to the condition of agency, belonging and access to the good life embodied by the citizen. *Outside People* challenges that convention explicitly, through the example of Janet's struggle as a psychiatrist to help her clients tell better stories, to navigate stuckness and move forward confidently into the future. "Close your eyes, she'd tell [them]. Turn away from the past. Then imagine a future uncluttered by present desires. Imagine something entirely new for yourself there" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 42). She has converted the ten-step program she has used to guide her own path forward into a book manuscript that is ready for submission, but for her inability to come up with a title. While she chastises herself for missing the publisher's deadline over a "minor detail," the missing title suggests that something in the story that echoed "the anatomy of potential" she once felt in her athlete's body now fails to cohere (42). The stories in *Outside People* are difficult, not just emotionally, but also formally, in their refusal to conform to straight trajectories of longing, hope, or progress.

The context for that refusal emerges most forcefully in the final, titular story, which is the only one with a first-person narrator. Constance lives in an orphanage in an unnamed Caribbean country. Her life is shaped by Canada in ways that at first seem random, as in the unannounced arrival of a couple she calls the "Outside People," carrying a big bag that has "a sticker on it with two red stripe and one white stripe and some kind of pointy red flower in the white stripe" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 135). The couple, who are there to adopt a baby, are disappointed to learn that many of the "orphans" actually have family, who may turn up to collect them someday. The situation is complicated, the House Mother explains, "'when plenty family live outside'" (142)—"outside" meaning "'up there where you come from'" (142). Constance, whose mother has emigrated to Canada, falls into this category. Not just the destination for out-migrants in the story, Canada is also implicated in their displacement, via resource extraction projects like the gold mine where Abdul, the orphanage manager used to

work. House Mother relates the story of his escape from the mine, following his exposure of workplace abuses and toxic dumping—running, as another staff member puts it, “from one Outside organization to another” (the orphanage is also a foreign, implicitly Canadian, operation). “What can I say,” House Mother replies “Nothing makes much sense in a place where the water never run clear” (139).

What might read as a throwaway line about life in a place that’s been subject to one disaster after another takes on a wider significance in the context of the collection as a whole, which implicates Canada in the murkiness of the water and all its associated problems: a global extraction industry that displaces Indigenous communities, exploits workers, sanctions sexual violence and contaminates the environment; the destruction of local ways of life, resulting in poverty, out-migration and consequent community fragmentation; the exploitation of migrants—all in the name of nation-building. The stories further suggest that the problem of incoherence—“nothing makes much sense” (Pirbhai, *Outside* 139)—isn’t confined to the global South to which it is often imputed. Bordering practices are technologies of political economy that are also supposed to make sense, to make legible an already existing natural order. Building on Mark Fisher’s conception of capitalist realism, whereby capitalism forecloses what can be known or imagined, “seamlessly occupy[ing] the horizons of the thinkable” (12), racial capitalism establishes terms of intelligibility around categories of nation, nature, and race that naturalize the process of domination via domestication. *Outside People* unravels the sense of racial capitalist realism that defines both liberal policy and popular stories of a nation in which migrants come gratefully to know their place within prescribed currents of mobility. The stories highlight the brutality of an extractive economy and a white supremacist ideology to which racialized migrants are sacrificed along with non-humans.

That isn’t the whole story, though. Within the diffuse and complex materiality of bordering, *Outside People* highlights places of tension and porosity as potential openings for transformation. “Air Raids” offers cues to both reading and undermining the political ecology of domestication, via the protagonist’s pedestrian experience of the city of Montréal. Crossing the “invisible border” that separates the anglophone western side from the francophone eastern side, she reflects on its symbolism, representing “the clash not of civilizations but of two founding nations still shackled to the trajectory of conquest, when empires fought on the high seas for sugar cane and slaves” (Pirbhai, *Outside* 2). The walk through the city also illuminates its more recent history of gentrification. The protagonist’s Plateau Mont Royal neighbourhood:

had belonged, not so long ago, to the new immigrants and to the workers, as much as any set of streets, parks, schools, shops, and houses could belong to anyone. One community squeezed out the other... No one ever referred to it as a cause-effect relationship but, like the green-and-white flowers block-printed on her summer dress, the pattern was hard to ignore. (3)

The pattern, once you see it, is hard to ignore. *Outside People* is a guide for looking beyond the markers of individuation—clothes, food, lifestyle choices—to pay attention to patterns not usually talked about: historical, ecological, geographical patterns that result from practices of bordering, both official and unofficial. Attending to patterns recasts the terms of the realist narrative to focus on the occluded contexts of the particularities of everyday national life. As a way of noticing otherwise, it also creates openings for imagining ways of configuring life outside the logic of racial capitalism.

Umara's noticing the bird in "Bread and Roti" represents one such opening. More than metaphorical, the moment of identification is an occasion for reciprocal sustenance in the face of her unsuccessful assimilation into the dominant culture, even as a "'celebrating cancer survivor'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 95). When told at the end of the story that her body "has failed to respond favourably to her last round of treatments," Umara "wasn't sure if she understood correctly. "'Failed' seemed to suggest that it was her fault the treatment had not worked. Had she done something wrong?" (98-99). Her thoughts return to a moment earlier in the story when she used all her strength to open the door and toss some bread onto the balcony (95). "She thought of the sparrow, comforted that at least she'd had a few crumbs to throw its way before leaving" (99). Not exactly a happy ending, this is more of an instance of what Ocean Vuong describes, in reference to the modes of care he has witnessed between precarious workers in the US, as "kindness without hope." While *Outside People* doesn't present a way out of the terrible conditions that mark temporary farm workers and others for fast and slow death, it does make space for modes of loving relationality that counter those mythologized in sites like the "family" bakery/food corporation (86, 81) and farm/poultry processing plant (17).

In "Chicken Catchers," Reggie stays with his ill coworker, Amaru in the knowledge that he'll have his wages docked for staying behind (Pirbhai, *Outside* 17). Moreover, to show care for Amaru he has to tread carefully around the matter of his sexuality—he doesn't know what Amaru's attitudes are. He also faces the challenge of language: he speaks Jamaican English and Amaru speaks Spanish. The stories contain multiple instances of translation in service of non-Anglo characters communicating with one another, not of indulging Anglo readers. A glossary, translating words in Hindu, Urdu, Tagalog, French, Spanish, Haitian Creole and Jamaican Creole, appears at the end, outside the world of the

stories. It thereby reminds the Anglo reader of their qualified belonging to this world, as such performing a vital counter-bordering role. This effect is accentuated in the final story in which, in spite of their relative wealth and power, it is the white Canadians who are in this instance the "outside people" designated by the collection's title (Piribai, *Outside*).

Part of the accomplishment of *Outside People* is to remedy what Anita Girvan and Rina Garcia Chua call the "e-race-sures" that permeate Canadian spaces, including academic spaces. Thinking human and non-human agencies and mobilities together, the collection contributes to what Chua calls a migrant ecocriticism that "will give not only voices to [migrant] species and subjects, but a physicality too—one that stresses that they do exist; that they are never just there, they are *here*" (218-19). *Outside People* complicates the *hereness* of here by highlighting the operations of bordering and domestication that selectively incorporate elements of the *outside*—racialized migrants and non-human nature—into the space of the Canadian home. While the collection centres the perspective of migrant characters that are missing from mainstream media and policy representations, it emphatically doesn't offer them up as empathy fodder for white liberals. If part of the process of domestication involves making the strange familiar, *Outside People* refuses to lend itself to this goal, dissolving the myths of Canadian homemaking into a political ecology of domination, from which emerge imaginings of solidarity and resistance.

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