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Editorial

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In her book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed explains how the concept of happiness is related to heteronormative notions of the "good life." Questioning the promise of a good life leads to unhappiness, but unhappiness (unlike happiness) can be productive for social change as it fosters a possibility to open to new affective spaces in the subject's life. Ahmed describes individuals' urges toward "the good life" as frequently grounded in attachments that, while often toxic and ultimately unsatisfactory, are not recognized as such by the people who engage in these negative relations. Those feelings derive from the impossible emotional fantasy of living a good life—an emotional state that Lauren Berlant aptly defined as "cruel optimism," a situation in which what people most desire is actually an obstacle to their flourishing. The cruelty comes from the fact that people tend to depend on "objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place" ("Lauren Berlant"). Both notions of the good life and cruel optimism are connected to Kathleen Stewart's "ordinary affects," a "kind of contact zone where the over-determinations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power take place" (3). For Stewart, ordinary affects happen through unexpected events which may be shocking, perturbing, traumatic, or even funny, but which offer individuals the opportunity to move forward. The ordinary and the unexpected can merge to transform individuals' lives and allow them to form new connections (95). In both Berlant's and Stewart's thinking, the unexpected has the power to redefine individuals' inner landscapes and their perceptions of self—both of which are structured by a lifelong dynamic of intimate relationships and attachments.

The aim of this issue of *Canada & Beyond* is to analyze narratives of Canada that unravel the notions of the good life (Ahmed), cruel optimism (Berlant),

ordinary affects and the unexpected (Stewart). The turn to affects writes back to the neoliberal vision of contemporary society, subjectivity and their representations. The complexity of affects and the emergence of more fluid and mobile affective clusters show how life events can be interpreted as interconnected encounters, and how they represent interrelated systems of lives. In light of this, the contributors to this issue have examined from different perspectives how these notions and possibilities articulate new places of critical potential in contemporary cultures and writings of Canada.

Meghan Mantei delves into how girls living in one extractive community face and deal with gender expectations, loyalties, ideologies and moralities within their family structures, their places of employment and their affective communities. She explores the strategies that they employ to navigate within the processes of social acceptance, belonging and notions of the "good life." **Shyam Patel**'s article analyses the novel, *The Foghorn Echoes* (2022) by Danny Ramadan. The author points out how the two refugee protagonists are obliged to face, during and after the Syrian civil war, the toxic attachments of cruel optimism and their relation to an ideal good life in Canada in the quest, among other things, for their queer romantic life. **Daniel Coleman, Lorraine York and Kathryn Waring** examine the creative potential that originates from community-based story-makers' navigation of the tension between life stories of the "good life" and the everyday, emergent strategies the storytellers invent in the midst of challenging times. **María Jesús Llarena-Ascanio** interprets the "border turn" in twenty-first-century refugee writing in Canada -Kim Thúy and Sharon Bala, respectively. By proposing new alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of disability and aphasia, the author shows how these narratives enable a new view of refugees as ontological subjects shaping history and transforming their characters' subjectivity in their search for a *Good Life*. In his analysis of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of* God, **Jesús Varela-Zapata** shows how the protagonist of the novel encompasses all the trappings around the notion of cruel optimism: her fantasies of the good life are linked to the feeling of suffocation in her life that she will have to dismantle to move on with her life story. **Sheila Hernández-González** presents an intersectional reading of Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child* (2001) by drawing on Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. The author shows how the affects and expectations presented in the novel become monstrous because of the protagonist's abusive childhood as a racialized migrant in the Canadian Prairies; it is when she chooses to let go of these expectations that the main character is driven towards a state of emotional healing and (encounters) new possibilities of happiness. **Sara Tabuyo-Santaclara** analyses the representations of girlhood in the recent additions to *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise: Bruce Miller's 2017 Hulu series and Margaret Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments*.

She draws on girlhood studies and Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy as a key mode of dissent to show the protagonists' encounter with the dissonance produced between the objects that are collectively imagined to cause happiness and how they are affected by them. Finally, in the interview by **Sheila Hernández-González** and **Jennifer Estévez-Yanes** to **Larissa Lai,** this celebrated contemporary author speaks of the convergence of history, myth and affects, while she offers a reflection on the circularity of time and the promise of happiness in her works.

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Articles

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I Learned to Pick My Battles: Girls Dissenting in Oil Country

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I explore how girls living in a community economically reliant on the extraction of fossil fuels navigate gender expectations, loyalties, ideologies and moralities within their family structures, their places of employment and their affective communities. I describe how girlhood(s) within resource dependent communities are composed of and configured through the social, political, and economic conditions of extractivism, and the social relations that exist within these material conditions. The meeting of the material conditions of resource extraction and the social relations that exist within these environments, can be understood as "zones of entanglement." An exploration of girls' lives within these zones of entanglement, highlights how girls maneuver within the processes of social acceptance, belonging and notions of the "good life" by engaging in various strategies that work to create opportunities, while also reinforce foreclosures. These strategies include moving between speech and silence, learning to pick their battles, taking up space, and engaging in care-work. Through engagement in various strategies girls learn to protect themselves while maintaining opportunities for hope, connection, and transformation in their own lives, and in their interdependent relationships and attachments.

Keywords
Critical Girlhood Studies; Girlhoods; Extractive Studies; Feminist Studies; Saskatchewan

1. Introduction

As I cruise down the highway in my turquoise Nissan Versa to my field site in rural Saskatchewan, I count the prolife billboards standing tall in the ditches of the prairie towns I pass. I read the infantilizing slogans directed towards those in positions of power over girls, urging them to consider the consequences of allowing a girl to make choices for her own body, such as "She can never erase the memory" and the political crusades demanding you to ask yourself, "Is your representative prolife?" I scan the surrounding fields for something else to distract my attention, and I am left counting pumpjacks.

Although I had grown up under the influence of the Catholic church, prolife propaganda, and extractive populism[1] as a girl in rural Saskatchewan, it was when I talked to Andrea, a social worker in the community, that I realized the influence and power these institutions continued to have over girls' lives. Andrea highlighted for me that there are dissenting voices, including feminists, in rural Saskatchewan, but it is not something that is celebrated or normalized. As a school counsellor in the local high school, Andrea often felt she was the only person offering a feminist perspective in the school and in the community. In working to educate students about consent, toxic masculinity, sexism, and misogyny, she regularly heard people refer to her as "the fucking feminist" who was "trying to push her agenda again."

Andrea expressed to me that despite her passion and devotion to speaking up for women and girls, she had tired of feeling like a lone voice or believing she could influence real change in a community filled with bigotry and misogyny. Despite her own feelings of defeat, she remained optimistic about work being done by girls in the community who were using social media and YouTube to educate themselves and others on issues of gender equality, feminism, and human rights. She expressed that the willingness of girls to find their own path for feminist work, often navigating difficult family and social relationships to do so, gave her a sense of hope for girls living in this industrial context, but that it didn't change her own decision to leave the community for a larger centre where she could feel more supported in her own work.

The prolife billboards, often funded by local religious institutions, provide a symbolic reminder of the reproduction of gender norms in rural Saskatchewan by humiliating, silencing, and stigmatizing "certain kinds of girls"—the *fucking feminists*. The pumpjacks represent southeast Saskatchewan's economic

1. Extractive populism is the idea that the extraction of resources such as oil, natural gas and coal, is a key component to the success of Canada's economy and is justified and necessary as it provides benefits to *everyone* within extractive zones and beyond.

reliance on resource extraction and act as symbolic objects of cultural loyalty to the extractive industries that are seen to be essential to local stability, prosperity, and growth in this context of extractive populism. Prolife signs and pumpjacks, standing side-by-side along Saskatchewan's rural roads, become symbols of white working-class rural values and subsequently represent the white working-class rural nuclear family as the "good life" (Ahmed, *The Promise* 38; O'Connell 537; Walkerdine et al. 13). These value-laden objects highlight the gendered, classed, and racialized nature of extractive populism. As symbols, they work to solidify rhetoric about the naturalness of gender and gender expectations for girls, directing them towards what is considered "good," and encourage homogenous identities of acceptance and prosperity in extractive contexts, leaving little room for ambiguity and dissent (Eaton and Enoch, "Great Again" 22; Elliot, Jaffe, and Sellers 9). To critique extractive industries where they are inextricably embedded in the historical, economic, political, and cultural fabric of the landscape, can be seen as critiquing the local culture, community and family structure, or the places where one is meant to belong (Rogers, "Deep Oil" 68).

With restricted opportunity for collective or public dissent in the process of belonging to the affective community in extractive zones, social constructs and relational interdependencies create and maintain expectations for girls' obligation to and expression of certain ideologies, loyalties, and moralities, often with an expectation to blindly invest in the objects—family and economic prosperity from extractive industries—that are framed as their path to happiness. Sara Ahmed contends, "happiness is not simply used to secure social relations instrumentally but works as an idea or an aspiration within everyday life, shaping the very terms through which individuals share their world with others, creating "scripts" for how to live well (*The Promise* 59). These gendered "happiness scripts" provide a set of instructions for what women and men must do in the local context in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good (59). In the context of rural working-class extractivism, women and girls are expected to be "good" by reproducing feminine aspects of carework, including maintaining community and kinship ties, while also being "tough enough" to accept male notions of belonging that dominate extractive culture. Who is considered a "good girl" in the local context, is dependent on a girl's willingness and ability to maintain class allegiances by "going along with it." Ahmed argues that by going along with happiness scripts, we "get along" and to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things (59). Loyalty to happiness scripts work to reduce girls' own relationships to "happy objects" as unimportant and ignorable. As Sheena Wilson writes, "women's relationship to oil… is portrayed in the mainstream media in a limited number of largely superficial ways… that either neutralize or trivialize

women's political and economic relationships to oil" (244). By recognizing the trivialization of women's relationships to extractivism, we see that girls' lives, and their social relationships within petro-cultures more broadly, are almost entirely ignored. Kendrick contends that this constitutes living an "invisible life" in the shadow of the oil and gas industry (177).

It is with the intention of nudging girls away from the margins and into spaces of visibility within the petro-cultures in which they live, that I engage in an analysis of girlhood(s) and zones of entanglement through critical feminist ethnography. In the following paper, I examine the ways girls living in one extractive community navigate gender expectations, loyalties, ideologies and moralities within their family structures, their places of employment and their affective communities. I describe how girlhood(s) within resource dependent communities are composed of and configured through the social, political, and economic conditions of extractivism, and the social relations that exist within these material conditions. The meeting of the material conditions of resource extraction and the social relations that exist within these environments, can be understood as "zones of entanglement." An exploration of girls' lives within these zones of entanglement, highlights how girls maneuver within the processes of social acceptance, belonging and notions of the "good life" by engaging in various strategies that work to create opportunities, while also reinforcing foreclosures. These strategies include moving between speech and silence, learning to pick their battles, taking up space, and engaging in care-work. Through these strategies girls learn to protect themselves while maintaining opportunities for hope, connection, and transformation in their own lives, and in their interdependent relationships and attachments.

I acknowledge that committing to critical feminist ethnography with girls means recognizing there indeed exist girls whose investments and desires may not align with my own, and who have different visions of a good life (Abu-Lughod 26). Engaging in critical feminist ethnography means responding empathetically to "messy" enactments of girlhood(s) and requires the practice of "hearing girls." The practice of "hearing girls" entails paying attention to the "seepages" of girls' voices, or that which exceeds dominant codes, that point to the complexity and multiplicity of their investments, commitments, and their own visions of a good life (Abu-Lughod 26; Jones 64; Khoja-Moolji 745). It is from this perspective that I explore the situated experiences of girlhood(s) in oil country.

2. Methods & Methodology

This study takes place in and around a city that I am calling Bordertown, Saskatchewan. Bordertown is an "energy city" hosting a boom-and-bust oil and

gas industry, open pit lignite coal mining, two coal fired power stations, and a sizeable agricultural industry. It has a fluctuating population of around 10,000 people depending on the cycle of boom-and-bust. For this paper, I am drawing on participant observation and ethnographic research methods conducted in and around Bordertown between 2021-2023. The methods and approaches used for this study include participant observation; open-ended and semi-structured interviews both in-person and virtually; and photovoice. My work also engages with feminist auto-ethnographic inquiry in the exploration of conducting ethnographic research "at home."

Participant observation for this project took place over 16 months in 12 rural communities in southeast Saskatchewan, including 1 small industrial city, 9 rural towns and villages, and 2 First Nation communities. All of the communities chosen for the study are heavily entangled with and economically reliant on both the fossil fuel industries (oil, gas or coal) and agriculture industries (crops and livestock). Participants represent a diverse range of racialized, gendered, classed and (dis)abled subjectivities.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted 25 semi-structured and open-ended interviews with rural girls between the ages of 15-18 and rural women, including some of the girl participants' mothers.[2] Participants were selected through a combination of convenience sampling (e.g., using personal networks in the region to identify potential participants) and snowball sampling following initial contacts.

Finally, I conducted a month-long photovoice project in partnership with a local youth centre in Bordertown. Photovoice is a methodology in which participants take photographs of what they feel is relevant in their lives and are provided an opportunity to discuss the images with other participants. The photovoice project for this research also included a community exhibition. In total 22 girls between the ages of 12-18 participated in the project, with 10 girls being from Bordertown and 12 girls from a First Nation community 45 minutes away from the youth centre.

Data was analyzed using open coding methods to identify major themes and concepts. I approached this research from the position that the concepts of girl and girlhood are cultural, historical, and social constructions. Given this approach, it is important to clarify that the use of the terms girl(s) and girlhood(s) throughout this paper does not suggest that the construction of "girl"

2. Given that I approach this research from the position that the concepts of girl and girlhood are a cultural, historical, and social construction, I do not rigidly define age brackets for what it means to be a girl versus a woman. Girlhood is a shifting material and discursive practice that is almost undefinable in everyday life.

is a homogenous category. Even within the context of rural working-class girls there are a variety of lived racialized, gendered and (dis)abled experiences. Throughout the paper I make note of different lived experiences as they are relevant to the discussion.

3. Zones of Entanglement: Girlhood in Oil Country

Girlhood, as Heather Switzer writes, is formed by and experienced within gendered and generational sociocultural relations of love, respect, care, authority, status, and power that configure family and community formations (91). She contends that girlhood is contingent on girls' situatedness in families, communities, and discursive economies of meaning that are continually in flux as sociocultural and political-economic material circumstances change around them and remain largely out of their control (91). Marnina Gonick argues that "girls become girls by participating within the available sets of social meanings and practices rooted in a particular place, cultural landscape, and historical moment" (5). Girlhoods in and around the resource dependent community of Bordertown Saskatchewan are composed and configured through the social, political, and economic material conditions of extractivism, as well through interdependent relations with family, educators and community members who maintain working-class values and mortalities deeply loyal to the fossil fuel industries that sustain their livelihoods.

In the working-class culture of rural Saskatchewan, economies remain embedded in the social relations of everyday institutions, and the use of a purely economic logic does not capture the importance of the family and the wider community to sustaining livelihood (Jaffe and Quark 241). It is within this cultural framework that the resource extraction industries are seen to be *part* of the community and an essential element to local stability, prosperity and growth (Boyd 85). The intense identification with resource extraction demonstrates a mutuality of interests in which community interests and industry interests are blurred to the point of being almost indistinguishable (Eaton and Enoch, "Oil's Rural Reach" 54). This blurring of interests and commitment to the maintenance of the resource extractive industries creates a sense of local belonging and solidarity. The social, political, and economic reliance on fossil fuels for growth and prosperity has resulted in an "extractive populism" in Saskatchewan, that reinforces a homogenous identity of support for the extractive industries but ignores the different social realities and experiences that living within extractive zones configures (Kossick 275). Lorenzo D'Angelo and Robert Jan Pijpers argue the political economy of resource extraction has been grossly depoliticized as many of the dynamics that inform how resource extraction is

entangled in social, political, economic, and physical environments are left unaddressed or obscured (4). Nicholas Bainton and John Owen contend that the social relations of resource extraction and the settings where these activities occur can be understood as "zones of entanglement" (767).

Engaging with the concept of entanglement draws attention to the specific historical, material, and relational dimensions of extractive contexts (Bainton and Owen 769). Entanglement points to the social worlds in which extraction is situated and which are shaped by extraction and helps to understand the process by which extraction materializes and comes to exist in these social worlds (769). Through an exploration of the way lives are entangled in extractive zones, we can ask questions about the people who inhabit and give shape to these environments. We can explore their aspirations, dreams, challenges, and fears, and come to understand how extraction, which generates both opportunities and foreclosures, affects their lives (D'Angelo and Pijpers 4). However, as Megan Boler argues, it must be acknowledged that power inequities, institutionalized through economies, gender roles, and social class, ensure that all voices within particular contexts do not carry the same weight (3). Asking, "whose story gets told and believed, and who does the telling?" (Solnit 83) is especially salient in the political economy of extractive populism.

Oil production generally takes place in geographically bounded locations such as boomtowns, encampments, and oil regions within larger geographical areas (Rogers, "Oil and Anthropology" 371). In bounded industrial zones in which the majority of peoples' lives are entangled with the extractive industries, the industrial imagination works to carve out the physical and social contours of the community, shaping workers sense of class, gender, community and belonging (Rubbers 119). With male workers accessing the majority of the wealth, and the associated power produced within extractive zones, male notions of belonging, masculinity, and membership are embedded in the local social and political institutions (Timsar 81). The overall patriarchal structure of the extractive industries in rural Saskatchewan work to reproduce heteronormative gender narratives through the normalization of the male "bread-winner" nuclear family. While rural working-class girls may embrace conservative working-class values imbued through "happiness scripts," rural girls may also demonstrate autonomy in the way they take on and negotiate these scripts by contesting the reproduction of heteronormative gender and class constructions (Riley 248).

Despite what appear to be scripts of the "good life" produced and reproduced by those living within the physical and social contours of extractive populism, Bainton and Owen argue that research focused on the social landscape of extraction demands more reflexive dialogical strategies that favor the voices of a diverse set of participants, and that avoid portraying local encounters in simple homogenous terms (771). This allows for attention to be drawn towards the ambivalences

and ambiguities that characterize these spaces (770). Emily Eaton and Abby Kinchy contend that in rural Saskatchewan, ambivalent perceptions towards the oil and gas industry, combined with a paucity of organizational capacity and political opportunities, may lead to extractive zones being viewed as sites of consent (22). However, in speaking with residents of these zones, they argue that there are residents who do have grievances with the industry, but that rather than collective mobilization, residents often act out their grievances by individually confronting the industry or maintaining a public silence on the issues they face (24). Due to the danger of speaking out against the socio-cultural implications of extractive industries, Eaton and Kinchy argue that researchers working within zones of entanglement need to "listen for the quiet voices" of dissent within these communities, which often take more of an individual rather than collective approach to protest (29). The complexity of the social landscape that are encountered when researchers become involved in research around mining and extractive operations requires researchers to move beyond binary or homogenous explorations of industrial zones and seek to better understand the ways entanglement in these zones impacts differently situated lives. By moving girls from the shadows of invisibility within extractive zones, we can come to better understand girls' own ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and desires about the so-called "good life," and the various strategies they engage to navigate the twists and turns of social acceptance and belonging within these zones of entanglement. This includes engaging in messy strategies that open them up to both opportunities and foreclosures.

Participants Ellie and Grace, both high school students with fathers working in the oil industry, described a "culture culminated" around Bordertown that generates sexist, racist, homophobic, Islamophobic and bigoted ideologies. As Ellie stated, "especially in spaces like the oil field and like shop talk and things like that. People still use fag as a slur and use gay as a slur and all that kind of stuff and it is still very anti-women and also just like anti anything liberal." Grace confirmed this assessment stating, "a lot of it has to do with the oil… because a lot of the girls I hear from, their dads are oil riggers, so they, that is the environment they have culminated down here, I guess. Like every dad works in the area, like they all talk the same, they act the same, like my boyfriends' dad is the same as my dad." Navigating through economic inequality, rigid gender norms, homophobia, racism, sexism, and misogyny in this context of extractive populism, girls demonstrate that while there is generally little room for public dissent in the process of belonging to the affective community, girls find agentic ways to challenge ideologies, loyalties, and moralities they disagree with by, as Grace describes, "picking their battles." She stated,

> I am grateful for what [living here has] taught me, which is how to deal with people like my dad, with bigots and racists, cause even though I hate it, and I have been

> growing up around it my whole life, and it has just, like every time I hear it, it is just anger and just like this pit in my stomach, I hate hearing the things I hear coming out of some people's mouths down here, this blue collar atmosphere, but it has taught me how to pick and choose my battles… so now I know like I don't have to fight everybody, even though I want to, like it gives me a fire in my belly, I can still be like reassured in myself… I think it drives me.

In her assessment of the "blue collar atmosphere" culminated in the oil industry, Grace highlights how conservative discourses are produced and reproduced in everyday institutions and interactions. For Grace, this context has taught her that it can be just as important to not speak as it can be to speak.

In the next section I will continue to explore the ways in which girls challenge expectations to instinctively invest in the moralities, ideologies, and values that the social and cultural landscape of their lives expects of them. Through silence, taking up space and care-work, girls work to develop and maintain opportunities for hope, connection, and transformation in alliances and relationships, while at times accepting dis-connection, unhappiness, and foreclosure. Engagement in these navigation strategies requires that girls pick their battles and decide how to battle when negotiating the messy enactments of girlhood in zones of entanglement.

4. Learning How to Battle

In discussing the in-betweenness of speech and silence, anthropologist Susan Gal has argued that studies acknowledging gender as a structure of social relations reproduced and challenged in everyday life must attend not only to words but to the interactional practices and the broader political and economic context of communication in order to understand the process by which women's (and girls') voices are routinely suppressed and how they manage to emerge (178). She stated, "if we understand women's everyday talk and linguistic genres as forms of resistance, we hear, in any culture, not so much a clear and heretofore neglected 'woman's voice,' or separate culture, but linguistic practices that are more ambiguous, often contradictory" (Gal 178).

The girls in my study discussed their own experiences of being in-between speech and silence and choosing various strategies at different times based on the social and political implications of their response to ideologies and moralities misaligned with their own. As Gal contends, women's (and girls') everyday use of speech and silence shows a range of responses including acceptance, resistance, subversion, and opposition to dominant, often male, discourse (193). She argues that the process by which women (and girls) are rendered

mute or manage to engage in resisting discourse requires a broader analysis of the political, economic, and institutional contexts in which this reality is negotiated. For many of the girls, institutions such as school and family structures, require a level of acceptance and learning to "just take it" to maintain interdependent relationships and access to social spaces. As Grace stated,

> like I have learned over the years with my dad, like so many opinions that I have, where I just learned to keep quiet… cause maybe that is what my mom has done too, even though she is very strong, like it is ridiculous, because she is very strong, very powerful… so seeing her just take it, maybe I internalized it and realized, ok, I got to do that too.

Ahmed argues that to avoid creating awkwardness, and being associated with bad feelings, there exists a social pressure to maintain the signs of "getting along" (*The Promise* 59). Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies "go along with it," to avoid creating awkwardness and to fit in (59). Ellie discussed navigating "shop talk" as the only girl in her welding class at school,

> a counsellor at my school… she told me, never let them know they upset you, don't show any emotion, don't tell anybody when you are upset because that gives them power… So, I definitely think I learned it subconsciously as a coping mechanism. To just kinda let it slide… I just had to be really chill and not bring up much of a fuss, because then people didn't like me because I was a 'problem' and because I made waves and because I screwed up their little all boys club.

The girls discussed how they learned from their mothers, and other women in their lives, that silence could be used a tool to negotiate oppressive power structures that they encountered. As Royster argues, "silence is a tool of protection, respectability, and rebellion" (176). Although the girls were aware of the contradiction between what they perceived to be women's strengths and their passive response to the power structures they encountered, they recognized that remaining silent and "just taking it" could also be an agentic strategy to maintain their relationships of care and create opportunities for them to access social spaces that they may otherwise not have had access to. It could be argued that their mothers and school counsellors coached the girls towards the agentic strategy of "getting along" as a tool of protection and resistance. As Sheena Malhorta suggests, "There are moments when speaking, speaking out, voicing one's truth, claiming the space of visibility is of greatest importance. However, there are different contexts in which silence can be an act of resistance, when silence can open up spaces that words would have closed

out" (227).[3] As social worker Andrea had encountered, speaking out could be a lonely, isolating, and demoralizing act, and it is prudent to think that mothers and women in supportive roles very likely wished to protect the girls from these forms of alienation. Despite the girls' acceptance that resisting dominate discourse necessitates a form of self-muting or agentic silencing at times, girls also discussed how this protective strategy did not always allow for the active response to power structures that they sought. As Ellie stated,

> My mom, though she is very strong and a very powerful woman, she is also very passive in a sense, like she always taught me to be like, take the high road, take the moral high road and don't cause problems… so in that moment, I took myself out of that situation cause I would be like, 'look mom I took myself out of this situation I didn't cause problems,' and she would be like, 'yeah good for you!' but then I was like, ah, I wish I had caused problems, like it was one of those things that, that I regret not trying to speak up about it or trying to say something or telling them to fuck off or something like that.

Gal argues that in their resistance to attempts to be muted or supressed, women and girls perform many different forms of resisting that are influenced by race and class (181). For working class girls in zones of entanglement, we are reminded that demonstrations of their agency and resistance should not be limited to visible public venues of activism and protest, often supported by adult leaders, but instead consider the "micro-politics" of everyday resistance that they demonstrate by taking up space in male dominated zones and by engaging in rough "masculine" language to speak back (Bae and Ivashkevich 6; Butler 178). For example, Vanessa, an Indigenous girl who had moved between her First Nation community and other small communities around Bordertown throughout her life, expressed that one of the main challenges for girls was the ability to speak out and to have their opinions taken seriously. She stated,

3. Despite attempts to remain open to the various ideas and opinions expressed by participants, I am aware of the ways in which power weaves through the research process, and how my own position as an adult woman may have caused some participants to feel social pressure to "get along" with what they perceived I was looking for in their answers. I am aware that some of the participants could have used silence in the research process as a way of avoiding awkwardness in expressing opinions and ideas that they felt differed from my own as the researcher. The way that silence was used by girls within the research process can be speculated on but not fully addressed within the scope of this paper.

> I think one of the challenges is like using your voice. Like that is the main thing cause if you are a girl, you just get shut down for your opinion. And that goes for all girls. Your opinion is irrelevant, especially when there are a lot of dudes.

Although Vanessa expressed that this was challenging for all girls, she found it particularly challenging as an Indigenous girl, even within her own family structure. In order to have her voice heard, Vanessa described learning to "not take shit" and to sometimes "be mean to get [her] point across." She stated,

> yeah, my dad is white. And my sister too. Umm, but they watched their mouths around me. They would not say anything after I told them, I will fucking fight you… And well I don't blame [them], cause sometimes you just say shit and you don't mean it… people don't really realize what they are saying until you address it. That is why I say shit.

Vanessa's forms of everyday resistance required working-class toughness to challenge the racism she experienced in her everyday life. Her willingness to speak out and "say shit" resulted in a shift in behaviour from her white family members, even if it resulted in their own silencing.

Alternatively, Kasey described that although she was both white and working-class, like her co-workers, her gender was the defining factor that limited her inclusion and acceptance at her job as a summer student working in the coal mine wash pit. Kasey described the way she attempted to demonstrate her agency through a combination of "rough" language and silence in resistance to the way men spoke about women, and how they responded to her opposition. She stated,

> So I would be the only girl in the shop… and [the guys] would talk about just vile things about women and just how men are when it is a group of men, and they think it is fine and it is not… But like, the things they would say, just like sexual things and things like that, and if I was standing there they would be like, well if you don't want to hear it, then leave. And I am like, why don't you just watch your fucking mouth. Don't talk like that. Then they would pretty much just tell me to get fucked. In those words.

In taking up the men's language, Kasey attempted to speak back and create space for herself in an environment that was being signaled as not for her, despite being white and working class like her co-workers. Although she tried engaging in class-based speech to talk back to the men, she eventually stopped fighting back after she "cried everyday and got called a piece of shit a lot." While Kasey's subversive disagreements with the men did not cause

them to stop their vile conversations, her very presence in the wash pit disrupted the "comfort" the men had taken for granted in their ability to engage in sexist and misogynistic rhetoric. Kasey's presence made her the cause for the men's unhappiness, effectively "killing their joy," and making her their "kill joy," Kasey's body in the shop became a symbol of gender trouble and disturbance (Ahmed, *The Promise* 68). As in Butler's theory of gender, the female body itself can be seen as a site of disruption. The "micro-politics" of the body to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence—in this case sexist and misogynistic discourse in extractive environments—by simply being present in forbidden territories (178). In simply being present, Kasey performed a form of *lived* affective agency in which disruptions to the dominate scripts, arise from within the terms of the scripts (Bae and Ivashkevich 7).

Michelle Bae and Olga Ivashkevich have argued that public forms of resistance may be too threatening for girls in particular contexts, such as speaking out against extractive populism and anti-feminist moralities within extractive cultures, as previously discussed in this article (6). Therefore, girls learn to pick their battles and decide what is the appropriate approach to resist, dissent, to battle, and when to "get along" and just take it. This messy negotiation of agency between speech and silence requires an understanding of what is at stake for girls in resisting dominate ideologies, moralities, and loyalties, and how moving back and forth between dominate and subversive scripts may be a necessary process in maintaining the supportive and generative aspects of belonging in their families and communities.

Shenila Khoja-Moolji contends that doing the work of hearing girls requires listening for the "seepages" within their stories that reveal how they negotiate, develop, and maintain different kinds of alliances, relationships, and investments (745). This requires listening for the ways girls work to preserve relationships, while also standing in their own convictions (Cox 30). Khoja-Moolji argues that in maintaining intimate relationships and attachments, girls may engage in multiple navigation strategies simultaneously, many of which may even seem in contradiction to each other (759). In doing so, girls create space for relational tensions to exist and allow themselves opportunities to encounter and engage with others who may not hold similar values to their own. As a politics of belonging, this process acknowledges the multiplicity and situatedness of individual attachments and how these relations are re-articulated and re-negotiated in day-to-day practices (Youkhana 10). This entails understanding that the sites of belonging that girls in extractive contexts engage, can be both sites of support and opportunity, as well as sites of restriction and foreclosure. Appreciating girls' own concepts of the good life, requires exploring how girls continue to invest in, maintain and strengthen their complex relations within circles of care. In the next section I will explore the way girls engage in

care-work as a strategy to develop alliances and maintain a sense of hope and connection in their lives.

5. More Hate Only Feeds the Cycle: Choosing an Ethic of Care

Joan Tronto has stated that an ethic of care is a practice that takes place in context and location (154). Care and care relationships are located in, shaped by and shape particular spaces and places (Milligan and Wiles 736). Approaching a study of girlhood relationally means being interested in the complexity of girls' relationships within the circles of care in their lives that emphasize the multifaceted and relational nature of their dependency and agency (Meloni et al. 107). Girls' lives do not emerge in a vacuum, but from the interactional context in which they are deeply entangled including their family stories, their social landscapes, and their relationships of trust (107).

In rural Saskatchewan, social relations have historically been maintained through the paid and unpaid care work of rural women and girls. Given the traditional nuclear family structure of rural life, rural women and girls' labour is unescapably linked to their relations of kin, with their social value being assessed through their contributions to family and community (Birk 354). The strong social fabric that has historically existed among working-class rural communities in Saskatchewan, exists because of the mutual aid and volunteerism performed by women and girls to maintain community and family networks (Jaffe and Quark, 241). As a practice embedded in social life, care is shaped by other practices of social life, and points to the process by which life is sustained (Tronto 154). By taking on the life sustaining care work of maintaining family and community relationships, the girls in my study demonstrated strategies to create individual, familial, and community transformation from the inside out by using their positions within local structures and institutions to influence change. Engaging in an ethic of care created life sustaining opportunities to not only maneuver within sociocultural relations and maintain social value as a "good worker and a good citizen" (Rubbers 119), but also supported their own feminist aims of transitioning feelings of anger and hate into opportunities for connection and relationality. As Grace stated,

> Like I've heard my dad say all those things and I'm like I have no doubt their dad says the same thing… I went through a phase of all guys suck. But then I realized, ok, well more hate, as a feminist, more hate does not, it only feeds the cycle, it does not contribute to making anything better… so once I actually told some of the guys about things that I knew and whatever, then they were like oh cool, and then they would actually understand. Because that is the first time they have

> heard anything other than what their parents have to say, so I have experienced that with several of my guy friends, so, it is interesting, even with my little brother I had to do that with.

Grace's willingness to see the boys in her life as potential allies, demonstrates how girlhood is formed and experienced within gendered and generational sociocultural relations of love, care, authority, and power that configure family and community formations (Switzer 91). Girls' agency within zones of entanglement is demonstrated through the capacity to inhabit existing and constraining norms in ways that slowly shift cultural meanings and enable new possibilities within local notions of empowerment (166). In this case, through Grace's willingness to move through a "guys suck" phase and open to the possibility that she could work to raise the consciousness of her peers, even if she had to choose silence in order to "get along" with her father. Although we cannot know whether the boys' "oh cool" response signals a shift in consciousness and the forming of new sociocultural ideas about gender, what it is does highlight is how girls find micro-opportunities to work towards social change in the messy interdependences and indeterminacies of their social relations, that demonstrate positions of both agency and suppression (Bent and Switzer 134).

Jesse, a young woman in her early twenties, described how she, and others of her generation, are working to support transformative change in their communities, by acting as a cultural bridge between what she viewed as two opposing generational viewpoints,

> Like my generation is on the cusp of the millennials that know things are acceptable but also know that the older generation does not understand that they are acceptable. The people around my age are really on that edge between both of the large generations, this new 'gender openness' generation and then the older generation. So, I think it is a lot of people my age who are helping the older people to be more open, but also helping the youth to be more understanding that the older ones don't get it.

Jesse's work to create change within her community is not one of force, but instead built on sustaining and creating understanding and relationality between generations. Switzer suggests that for girls, "a fundamental element in shifting the gendered relations of power within families and communities is less the explicit rejection of conventional gender roles, rights, and responsibilities and more the manipulation of these expectations and assumptions in ways that create possibilities for localized change, even as they can also create new forms of localized exclusion" (166). Nicholas C. Burbules contends that it is not sufficient to attempt to change mistaken views simply by criticizing them as wrong,

or simply by giving counter evidence to them (xxviii). Rather, changing such attitudes and beliefs requires following the process and rationales by which they were formed in the first place, and that requires having some patience with hearing out views that one might find deeply objectionable. Furthermore, it requires an act of imagination to ponder how it might be that people who are not fundamentally wicked or hateful, people who we might care about, might come to hold such views (xxviii).

Girls in Bordertown are caught "in-between" systems for securing social legitimacy, in honoring their own personal values and beliefs, and fulfilling social obligations in the context of bigotry, racism, homophobia and sexism in their homes and communities. The girls I spoke with engaged in various tactics to navigate conventional gendered expectations and create possibilities for localized change. Small shifts in gendered power can only come from maneuvering in-between dominate and subversive scripts, and through a multiplicity of commitments, aspirations, and desires (Switzer 116). Through the process of belonging, girls acknowledge the multiplicity and situatedness of their individual attachments, and how through the re-negotiation of these relations in everyday life, they are working to create change from the inside out.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that doing the work of hearing girls in zones of entanglement helps to answer the questions posed by D'Angelo and Pijpers that call for a more attentive analysis of the people inhabiting and giving shape to extractive environments, and asking how the sociocultural implications of extraction affects their lives (4). My research with girls living in and around one extractive boomtown in Saskatchewan, suggests that the physical and social contours of the community, shaping gendered, raced, and classed notions of "the good life," are carved through an industrial imagination that works to relegate girls' thoughts, beliefs, values, and even bodies, to the shadows of industrial life. Despite their marginalization within extractive zones, girls demonstrate active resistance to the sexist, racist and bigoted effects of extractivism through negotiation strategies that allow them to maintain their relations within communities of care, while working against a culture of coherence of extractivism culture. Rather than understanding girls' resistance in binary terms, my research suggests that girls' responses are multiple, complex, and at times, contradictory.

Doing the work of hearing girls, requires that we make space for diverse ways of being a girl, that allows space for the messy enactments of girlhood that include moving back and forth between dominate and subversive scripts (Khoja-Moolji 745). For girls in Bordertown, this includes learning to pick their

battles through moving in-between speech and silence in their sociocultural relations of love, care, authority, and power. As Bae and Ivashkevich argue, being open to girls' messy enactments of agency and dependence, draws attention to our own contradictory subjectivities and daily performances of gender that do not fit the feminist agenda. We can engage in a deeper understanding of what being a female, and a feminist, actually means and how our "being a feminist" is not always rational, but engages our fantasy, desire, and pleasure, and requires us to move back and forth between dominant scripts and subversive disruptions (4). They write, "once we begin to acknowledge our own incompleteness and the affective complexity of constantly moving between our own messy femininities and feminist impulses, we become more accepting of the girl subject within ourselves, and consequently of the girls that we encounter" (Bae and Ivashkevich 4). When we really do the work of hearing the quiet voices in extractive zones, we move beyond gendered stories of victimization and oppression, and open ourselves to stories of hope, reconstruction and resourcefulness (Eaton and Kinchy 29; Khoja-Moolji 760). As we open ourselves up to conversations with girls, we open up to the full expectation that we will, at least, be changed and perhaps together develop "collective strategies for living fuller, self-defined lives" (Cox 8). Like Andrea, whose lonely "feminist agenda" resulted in the strategy of choosing her own un-happiness and un-belonging as a pathway to create social change, this might mean opening ourselves up to being known as a "fucking feminist." By demonstrating disloyalty to the happiness scripts of "the good life" through our own negotiation strategies, we allow ourselves the ability to pick our battles and respond to what moves us. For me, this means taking an interest in the spaces of meaning-making that girls enliven and create daily and working to challenge and disrupt homogenous constructions of girlhood, working-classness, rurality and extractive communities.

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How to End a War: Remnants of Hope and Terror in Danny Ramadan's *The Foghorn Echoes*

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ABSTRACT
In the novel, *The Foghorn Echoes* (2022) by Danny Ramadan, readers are introduced to two young men, Hussam and Wassim, who love each other but whose lives are forever changed by a terrible event. Though this event marks the beginning of their end, they are met with several encounters that continue to separate them, as they grapple with what it means to be queer in Syria and what it means to be refugees elsewhere. Both their stories, told back and forth between the two young men, reveal the cruel optimism that is situated in the relationship between the good life and the queer struggle of romantic life. In other words, their desire for a better life as queer refugees becomes cruel when it becomes an obstacle in and of itself. For Hussam, readers witness this devastating blow as he is haunted by the death of his father and then by his separation from Wassim, as he struggles to build a better life in the nation-state of Canada. Wassim, on the other hand, has become a refugee in his own homeland, in this case, Syria during the Civil War, and he comes to view himself as a problematic object. Through both of their lives, it is revealed that the reality of queer Syrian refugees is inseparable from the complicated and oppressive histories that mark them such as the war and their forbidden love, whether they remain in the homeland or seek to build a good life somewhere else.

Keywords
Cruel Optimism; Good Life; Queerness; Refugeeism; Romantic Love; War

1. Introduction

"Damascus was a rippled city that ricocheted history back at its people, and every era was marked on its map" (Ramadan 15).

And thus, Hussam and Wassim's story begins, as they negotiate their adolescence against the backdrop of Syria during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the nation-state known as the United States. All while their romantic and sexual intimacy brings forth another struggle—one just as catastrophic and deleterious—that defines their lives forever. Such a rupture occurs when Hussam's father catches the two young men kissing on a rooftop, and what happens thereafter changes their lives in a way that cannot be undone. To be more precise, Hussam and Wassim are at once afflicted by the following: "They would forever remember whose foot kicked Hussam's father, the sound the sole Wassim's shoe made against the man's face… Then, as if in slow motion, he slipped off the side of the building" (Ramadan 17). In a few sentences, Danny Ramadan's novel, *The Foghorn Echoes* captures the event in the two young men's lives that cannot be erased, anchored by the death of Hussam's father, and what unfolds is a gripping story about forbidden love in a war-torn country.

Ten years later, their lives are further torn by the Syrian Civil War. What started as a peaceful uprising in response to the regime of Bashar al-Assad turned into a militarized rebellion (van Veen et al. 15). Though the ongoing war is complex, it can be described as emerging from a conflict between pro-government civilians and its opposition "that turned into a violent civil war when the dissidents met heavy repression from the Bashar al-Assad's regime" (Akhtar and Nageen 7). As the authors explain, the situation is much more multifaceted, involving various other forces, and Hussam and Wassim are two of the millions of Syrians who are affected by the violence. So, in the way that Ramadan describes Damascus, so too are the lives of Hussam and Wassim, who straddle life under the guise of a war as they struggle with questions about belonging, loss, queerness, refugeeism, and war. For Hussam, it is his life in Vancouver as a queer Syrian refugee, haunted by his father's spectre, that he attempts to overcome as he rebuilds himself. Wassim, however, remains on the other side of the world in Damascus, where he is a refugee in his own homeland during a war that he cannot escape. And, as Damascus ricochets history back to its peoples, this is an examination of Hussam and Wassim's shared but different lives, ushered by Ramadan's descriptive and provocative writing, to reveal the complex and sometimes ineffable struggles that confront queer Syrian refugees in particular.

This paper examines the question of whether or not migration supports a bearable life and the haunting aftereffects and vestiges of a forbidden love in *The Foghorn Echoes*. Reading Ramadan's novel in that context can alert readers to the cruel optimism of a good life and romantic love among queer Syrian

refugees, touching on themes of belonging, loss, queerness, refugeeism, and war. I argue that the novel is a significant piece of work that also asks us to consider what it means to confront a queer displacement that is categorically accompanied by erasure, invisibility, and marginality, as Ali Bhagat suggests. More specifically, *The Foghorn Echoes* demonstrates the difficulty Hussam and Wassim experience in constructing a life beyond the complicated and oppressive histories that mark them in juxtaposition to the love they desire but which they cannot attain because of their inevitable separation, leading to affective injustices and a feeling of dislocation and unbelonging both in Canada and Syria.

2. The Burden of Cruel Optimism

As the novel goes back and forth between the two young men, the predicament of cruel optimism becomes particularly evident, read in almost every sentence and word, jolting readers along the way. According to Lauren Berlant, "[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to flourishing" (*Cruel Optimism* 1). Berlant largely borrows from Eve Kosofsky Sedwick's contributions on affect and attachment theory, contending that an attachment to an object of desire is cruel when the optimistic hope of being able to obtain the desire becomes a form of impediment instead. A prominent example of cruel optimism that Berlant provides is that of a "good life," which for Sara Ahmed "is imagined through the proximity of objects" (*The Promise* 90). Though Berlant suggests that individuals have their own articulations and forms of the good life, upward mobility is often described as one of its markers (*Cruel Optimism* 2), or, said differently, it is a proximity to a good life. The American Dream is one such example, imagined through a promise of upward mobility based on the falsehood of hard work, or the seduction of a nation-state like Canada or the United States as bearers of the good life. The fallacy of a good life, such as the American Dream, is thus described as cruel optimism when the hope for the object of desire renders the desire unattainable.

For Hussam and Wassim, cruel optimism cannot be divorced from the category of refugee, defined as an object of repression who experiences abuse and violence (Fassin 221). In seeking asylum elsewhere, the search for a good life becomes a prominent feature among migrants. To borrow the words of Leila Dawney et al., they "hope for small things to change, and hope for a liveable future" (3) or a desire for what Ahmed refers to as a bearable life. However, migration and mobility have been framed as forms of cruel optimism because, like the American Dream, they do not necessarily bring forth a good life. The feeling of being "out of place" can become a familiar experience as a consequence (Held 1906). The description of Ahmed's "melancholic migrant" is

significant here, which the author describes as a racialized figure whose racialization is used to categorize someone like Hussam, a refugee, as not belonging to the nation-state. Through such exclusion, migrants can encounter a certain degree of desolation, contradicting the happiness that is promised through a good life in a place like Canada.

The novel also exposes the struggle of romantic love between Hussam and Wassim, which adds to their melancholia. As both Ahmed and Berlant suggest, romantic love can also be categorized as a form of cruel optimism. In the case of the two characters, their desire to be in a queer relationship with each other, described as forbidden love in the context of Syria, becomes an obstacle in and of itself. Ahmed's work, *The Promise of Happiness*, is helpful here as it encourages an examination of the good life and the struggle of queerness. It is to ask, as such, whether the notion of fleeing Syria affords Hussam and Wassim a semblance of a good life while being queer. Does migrating to Canada, for instance, offer Hussam an opportunity to be openly queer and to also live a bearable life? The insights from Ahmed and Berlant's works are an overture to this question: it can be difficult to ascertain a bearable life in a capitalist and heteronormative society that privileges non-queer and non-migrant individuals. That is, to be queer or a refugee, and to make life bearable against the iterations of capitalist and heteronormative hegemonies, is contradictory, since a good life is characterized by hegemonic forces that exclude marginalized peoples from fully participating in the nation-state.

3. Escaping Terror and War

For Hussam, his life in Vancouver is far from what he had expected after fleeing from Syria. Readers are introduced to him as an adult, almost ten years after the incident in 2003, as the ghost of his father still haunts him. As Ramadan writes, "[m]y father stands in the corner of the club, angry, dark-featured, hard eyes and sharp features pointing at me" (23). Hussam, unable to remove the account of his father's death from his memory, is able to recall the incident vividly. From his father's face covered in blood to Wassim's foot kicking his father, he can imagine it all, remembering every detail from beginning to end like the back of his hand. Even the thud that his father's body made when it hit the ground, or the wailing sound that Hussam let out right after, are engraved into the crevice of his recollection.

Along with his father's face, the remnants of terror and war that he encountered in Syria cannot be escaped either as Hussam describes a scar on his body: "It's the wicked smile of the Syrian regime agent who placed the edge of the knife on my side and sliced it" (Ramadan 77). In an almost seizing manner,

these words are a window to a frightening encounter described in a short but evocative sentence, as the imprint of brutality is archived and contained both on Hussam's body and in his psyche. Though he states that the scar is no longer visible, Hussam is clearly scorched by its memory, as he can still evoke the face of the man who held the knife against his body and pierced it through his skin. Even now, as he undresses in a locker room and examines his naked body through his reflection in a mirror, he remembers everything: how the assailant clenched his teeth when the blade touched Hussam's torso to the wicked grimace on the face of the assailant as he made the incision. So, even as the scar fades, the cruelty of war, as well as its imprint, remains present and ongoing in Hussam's life miles away from Syria. This is where the desire of a good life in Canada, in bits and pieces, can be framed as cruel optimism as his migration to Canada does not necessarily allow him to escape the war.

To recognize the emotional inundation of this affect, listen here to the words of Warsan Shire: "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" (24). Refugeeism, put differently, is another term for forced migration, and many Syrian refugees fled their homeland due to concerns about their safety and security (Alrababa et al. 8). Indeed, refugees make the decision to leave their homes to escape terror and war. But, as Hussam leaves his homeland, the monstrosity follows him to Canada, nonetheless, maimed by a past that Hussam cannot exonerate himself from. It is placed on his body, etched into memory, and reminded of it over and over again. The touch of the blade, its sharp edges that now contour part of his body, as such is always there, perforating Hussam in an invisible but pronounced manner. It is like the air that we breathe, whose particles are unseen to the naked eye, but we know it is there because we feel it enter and exit our bodies, and, for Hussam, that air suffocates him with every breath he takes from one land to another.

How does this affect his queerness? Hussam's intimate and sexual encounters, which almost seem like attempts on his part to break free from his war-torn life in Syria, are equally weighed down by the past. In the locker room at the gym, for example, when a man in red underwear glances at him, he can register the moment, attending to the interaction with detail, but the face of the man who left the scar on his body is just as prominent, if not more so. And then, as always, his father reappears: "The ghost of my father hides behind the lockers, a black shadow pulsating at the edges with eyes sparking yellow. He moves like electricity across the room" (Ramadan 78). It can be gauged from this description that his father does not only appear as a silhouette, manifesting in one place but as a spirit that transcends itself, materializing in one location and then in another at an inexplicable pace, haunting Hussam from all angles. It seems as though his father is present in the face of every man Hussam encounters, reminding him of Syria wherever he goes as well as his father's rejection of his queerness.

The man in the red underwater, as Hussam learns, is named Robert. When Hussam speaks with him at first, he imagines a life with the stranger in front of him, as he thinks about making coffee for Robert in the morning or watching a romantic comedy together with him. Hussam even thinks, "[h]e looks as though he's about to propose to me, and it's crazy but if he did I'd say yes" (Ramadan 82). This moment reverberates Ahmed's discussion on "unhappy queers," who envision a good life, relegated to a happiness that is attached to heteronormativity (*The Promise*). For instance, Hussam's imagination posits marriage, commonly defined by heterosexual representations of a good life, as something that would bring him happiness with Robert. Though this attachment is not explicitly stated in the novel, it can be assumed that Hussam's desire, shored up in the fleeting moment he meets Robert, is indicative of the following situation that Ahmed describes here:

> There is no doubt that the affective repertoire of happiness gives us images of a certain kind of life, a life that has certain things and does certain things. There is no doubt that it is hard to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledom, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy. (*The Promise* 90)

In that manner, an attachment to a problematic object like Robert, although a brief rumination and an imagined one, speaks to the way in which Hussam's view of a good life is embedded in a heteronormative orientation, despite the fact that it never seems to take form.

Even as Robert pushes his face against the mattress, and pins Hussam down when he informs this stranger before him that he is not ready for something intimate and sexual, Hussam thinks about the domesticity that Ahmed attends to in her work. Hussam, faced down and with Robert's weight on top of his body, contemplates suggesting something like the following, although he is unable to express it out loud: "A comedy about straight white people falling in love, or a horror movie, so that I can scream and burrow into his chest like a teenage girl" (Ramadan 87). Here, it is more explicitly stated that Hussam frames the good life in relation to heteronormative standards, confirming what Ahmed and Berlant have theorized. What takes place, however, is far from what Hussam pictures with Robert:

> His cock is a dagger stabbing my insides. My mouth is dry. I want him to stop. I want to scream and push him off me. He's stronger than me, but I'm strong too. I can push him off against the wall and free myself. I can punch him in the face if I have to. I look up, and I see the ghost of my father, his arms crossed. He walks toward me and covers my mouth with his palm. He has a wicked smile on his

> shattered face, and his fingers smell like poppers. I deserve this pain. I should just let this man do whatever the fuck he wants with my body. I groan with closed lips. (89-90)

In one way, as his interaction with Robert reveals, Hussam's imagination of queerness and a good life is both denied and impeded. What begins as a cordial encounter between the two men turns into something terrible instead, unfortunately. Then, Robert starts to bite Hussam's lips and remove his shirt, ignoring Hussam's suggestion that they talk for a bit instead (85). Soon after, Robert does as he pleases, paying no attention to Hussam's protests when he tells Robert that he is not prepared for anal sex, but his opposition is not heard or taken seriously.

As this encounter unfolds, it also contains Hussam's supposed rationalization of the pain he experiences in his queer intimacies and relations as his punishment for what happened to his father. Hussam is convinced he does not deserve a good life as a result. This, too, makes Hussam an unhappy queer, for he is never free from his father's dissenting and watchful eyes. His father's apparition and haunting disapproval, in that way, gestures queerness as an epithet of an unbearable life. And so, as the story goes on, it becomes evident that Hussam's status as a refugee makes it difficult to forget the past, wrought by warfare and violent ramifications, and the struggle to be queer does not resolve itself either. Thus, the opening chapters of the novel reverberate the following message: the optimism of a good life are made cruel for Hussam because the optimism it claims to beget cannot be isolated and severed from the echoes of the war—both physically and the one in his mind that has him convinced he deserves the pain inflicted upon him.

4. Naming the Unnamed

His father's face emerges throughout Hussam's story, but it is most affective when he wakes up in the middle of the night, shaken by his partner, Ray, who sponsored him to Canada and with whom he has an open relationship, or at least what is described as one. Hussam, unaware of what is happening to him as he is awakened by Ray, claims to hear a noise. It is a noise that for someone like Hussam is etched into his memory:

> Sometimes I dream of my father, waiting for me at an imaginary border, a dotted line on a gigantic map. I try to avoid him; I jump across the dotted line back and forth as if it will hide me from him. He appears on all sides of the line, and his hand always holds me by the collar. Sometimes I dream of a rocking sea that

> I've never seen, or at least can't recall. Sometimes I am a boat, my wet wood pressured by the grip of the sea. The waves slap me, and I mourn my emptiness. I'm a hollow boat without an oar or a soul, and my journey is infinite. I'm a boat that won't sink. I can't sink. I'm a boat forgotten on a rocking sea until my wood is rotten and disintegrated into the salt. (Ramadan 149)

The foghorn—the sound that warns a boat or a ship of hazards—is perhaps the noise that contains the cruellest resonance of them all. It is in this moment, as the sound of the foghorn echoes past continents and oceans, that one can discern how the remnants of unresolved grief and trauma remain a permanent fixture in the life of a refugee.

Accordingly, this is where the interaction between the cruel optimism of a good life and refugeeism is most striking. Hussam's nightmare, lost in the agonizing and distressing violence of history, makes clear an unnamed entitlement to a good life: white privilege. His partner listens, for sure, but he cannot begin to grasp the extremity of the repercussions Hussam carries. For, to be both queer and a refugee, means to be out of category in one place as well as another (Held 1905). One can feel compassion for Hussam, disappointed then when Ray shares this advice as Hussam's eyes begin to water: "'I'm sorry you went through, but you're here now. You're safe and sound. You need to stop reliving this and move on'" (Ramadan 157). So, as Hussam is imprisoned by the shackles of his past, Ray can only offer a language that is all too revealing: a grammar of privilege, divorced from the aftermath and repercussions of the devastation and decimation that comes with war. Ray does not understand what it feels like to attempt to cross the Mediterranean to Greece and even less so what it feels like to be detained (149). He cannot fathom what it is like to make it past several checkpoints and then fasten a useless vest around one's body to journey through shallow waters. Unlike Hussam, he has not felt the sharpness of a blade run against his torso.

However, as it seems, Ray is an attachment that Hussam holds onto because his life depends on it. Ray can be seen as someone who is not only an object of desire for the content "of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" ("Optimism and Its Objects" 21), but also "the cluster of things that the object promises" to borrow the words of Berlant (20). For sure, Ray is able to provide Hussam with economic and financial support, but he is not able to be present for Hussam emotionally, as his curt response demonstrates. Nonetheless, Hussam remains with Ray even when Hussam on his own volition attempts to leave him time and again. Berlant is onto something when writing the following: "cruel optimism's double bind: even with an image of a better life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working" (*Cruel Optimism* 263).

To provide further context, "[w]here cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place" (21). Distraught by the uncertainty he experiences in Canada, as well as wanting to leave behind his life in Syria, Hussam attaches himself to Ray while not immediately realizing or understanding that it leads to his despondency and unhappiness.

The privilege of whiteness is conspicuous not only from this one nightmare and Ray's response but also from Hussam's encounters with racial discrimination that Ramadan offers in snippets, having been jokingly asked if he is Aladdin (27) and shortening his name to Sam (25), something more English-sounding, for those who butcher his name otherwise. Later, when Hussam talks to one of his past lovers, Arda, the only other man he has felt a connection to aside from Wassim, he reveals the following: "'I thought I would find comfort here'" (159). He is lonely, he tells him in reference to Canada, and there is a heaviness in his words that cannot be denied, for Hussam's admission, unravelling towards the latter part of the novel, is both raw and unquestionable. This is evidenced, as well, by the snippets Ramadan offers about Hussam's struggles in Canada such as being unable to find a job despite having a degree in English literature (83). The nation-state, as Hussam's lived experience illustrates, does not, to borrow the words of Berlant, secure his happiness (*Cruel Optimism* 126). Instead, Hussam experiences a mismatch between what comprises a good life and the conditions that make it unattainable (Coates 474). However, as Arda reminds him, Hussam has forgotten what it is to live on the other side of the world (Ramadan 160). Thus, and most devastatingly, Hussam's life in seeking asylum and queer liberalism remain sites of ongoing contestation (Raboin 126). And, for sure, the disparate forms of queerness between Hussam and Ray further demonstrate how harrowing it is to be a queer Syrian refugee who runs from home and who is out of place elsewhere.

5. Optimism in its Cruellest Form

Of course, Wassim also follows Hussam wherever he goes, but it is not until much later in the novel that he reveals the weight that he carries from their romantic love: "Being with Wassim had been like holding fire with closed palms. My heart caught fire, too, and after him it blew away like dust. A metal cage had taken its place. I put every man I touched after Wassim in that cage and locked the door" (Ramadan 162). While he makes this confession, he also recognizes that his love for Wassim is like an everlasting burning coal (92), speaking to their complex and tumultuous relationship as their love is both eternal and withering like a flame.

Although Wasim is unlike any of the other men that Hussam has met whose names dissolve as soon as they touch the tip of his tongue, it is their separation that burdens Hussam the most. This recognition is imbued with a feeling of regret as Hussam blames himself for becoming detached from Wassim in order to flee Syria. When it comes to this remorse, it is only almost toward the end of the novel that Hussam divulges what he has carried for so long. All those years ago, on a rubber boat that would be the beginning of his eventual journey to Canada, he had done something that consumes him to this day:

> The smuggler pointed his gun at me, ushering me to the side of the boat. I stood and looked at the sea. I dug my nails into the bag I had beside me. It felt alive between my hands, like the back of a person who ached under my forceful grip. 'Goodbye,' I whispered as I pushed it off the boat. It plunged deep into the water before surfacing again, waving at me to the gentler rhythm of the sea. A departing ex-lover. A clinging past. The sea slowly lured it away toward darker horizons. (Ramadan 212)

What he reveals shortly thereafter is what unsettles Hussam the most: "'I pushed Wassim'" (217). The luggage that he thought he had pushed overboard was in fact the man he loved the most in this world, and, like his father slipping and making a thud against the ground, Hussam's body, he believed, had drowned in the water.

There are no words that can be written to narrate Hussam's pain and sorrow here. Only Ramadan's words can discern the regret that takes form here, as only he can write what Hussam carries as a burden: "My father's blood stained my hand, and the salty waters of the sea sloshed against my wounds. And Wassim. What I did to Wassim sends shivers through my body. There is no redemption for this, no happy ending. This is rooted in my skin like birthmarks" (157). This, without doubt, is the heartache that Hussam lives with despite the desire for a good life and the promise of happiness that a nation-state like Canada purports. Nothing, absolutely nothing can mend the unresolved grief that Hussam lives with, enveloping his every move and turn, and it is for this reason that his love for Wassim is what is perhaps the most agonizing and cruel object of them all.

In that way, the nation-state presents itself as a reminder of the cost of optimism that Hussam accepts. As Ramadan writes, "[l]eave everyone behind, I told myself. Leave them all to rot in that war and go find a place for yourself far away" (151). He let his father go, he sold the gold necklace his mother had given him, he parted ways with Syria, and, above all else, he left Wassim stranded and potentially drowning in the middle of nowhere. Canada, as such, is a representation of everything he left behind in order to find a good life and to imagine his queerness outside of a forbidden love, all, of course, at the devasting blow of letting go of everyone who once loved him.

6. Promises One Cannot Keep

"'I'll take care of you, I'll take care of this'" are the words that Wassim whispers to Hussam when their lives are forever changed by the death of Hussam's father (Ramadan 19). This sentence also holds a promise that Wassim cannot keep, and like Hussam's belief that he could not save his father or Wassim, this vow, for Wassim, is the cruellest thing of them all. When following Wassim's journey from the unexpected event at the beginning and then throughout the rest of the novel, readers are made aware that he is defeated by his inability to protect Hussam.

When they are caught by Wassim's father while sleeping in the same bed together, as Hussam falls asleep with his head on Wassim's chest (Ramadan 131), Hussam is kicked out of the house and so the broken promise surfaces almost immediately in their relationship. As Ramadan details, Hussam sleeps in the cold streets for two days and returns with a black eye, bruised by muggers, begging Wassim's father to forgive him for what he had done. Wassim stands there, as he watches his father give Hussam some money, asking him to never return to their home. The promise of "I'll take care of you," of a good life and of romantic love, becomes distant and forgotten.

Wassim, not to be left without any consequences of his own, is subject to an arranged marriage with a young woman. On their wedding night, Wassim and his wife are intimate with each other, their "bodies merging and breaking, while we whispered sighs and hushed aches to each other" (Ramadan 136), but it is still Hussam who appears in front of him, at least in his imagination. When his newlywed wife Rima tells him that she loves him, Wassim can only think about one thing: "Hussam said that to me every night before bed. The thought of him felt like a stab" (136). The metaphor in the latter sentence is accompanied by the guilt that Wassim feels both from letting Hussam go and then for allowing himself to be intimate with a woman whom he barely knows at all.

Similar to Hussam, it is Wassim's desire and longing to be with his first love that hinders him the most. He runs into Hussam months after the wedding and after he has consummated his marriage, with him and Rima now expecting the birth of their child while Hussam pursues his studies. As he stands before Hussam, noticing the space between them, Wassim wants to tell him he misses him and that he will always be his (Ramadan 140). But, as he reveals in the same moment, "'I'd never felt this far away from him in my life, and he was close I could touch his cheeks'" (141).

The words that are exchanged between the two past lovers also alarm Wassim. Hussam, befittingly, expresses that he is trying to avoid Wassim (Ramadan 141). What stings Wassim, even more, is what Hussam expresses next: "'I want nothing to do with you anymore'" (141). He is pierced by this exchange in such a

manner that Wassim experiences an attack that same night and is taken to a hospital, where "they inserted a tube down [his] throat and into [his] lungs" (142). So much is the weight of his encounter with Hussam that Wassim's entire body fails him, having to be resuscitated from breaking down altogether. Perhaps this is what Francisco Gallegos considers affective injustice: "actions, practices, and circumstances [that] bring about harms and disadvantages specifically to relation to emotions, moods, feelings, affective dispositions, and other 'valanced' states" (185). For Wassim, the sadness he carries shapes his emotional life in deleterious ways. He is unable to breathe, for example. The thought of Hussam overtakes his body and his psyche, and it renders him momentarily lifeless.

He, too, views himself as an object of blame as the search for a good life and romantic love with Hussam continues to be perilous. For example, he later sees Hussam at a protest and tries to convince him to leave; instead, Hussam is arrested. As this happens, Wassim thinks of himself as a curse in Hussam's life (Ramadan 146). Before Hussam is arrested, Wassim tells him he still loves him and that he wants to spend the rest of his life with him, willing to leave behind his wife and soon-to-be-born child, but the outcome is nonetheless cruel. Here, Wassim's account cannot be read without feeling sympathy for him. In his attempts to express his love for Hussam, his imagination of a better life remains an empty promise. It is an emptiness that weighs him down such that he is always in a state of despair and sorrow defined by his inability to move past the regret he holds onto and the separation that exists between the two men.

And for Wassim that distance is one he seeks to close, at least when Hussam is still somewhere close to him. Once, he stands outside a refugee camp and tries to find Hussam there. His search can be described in the following: "A small river split the city into two, and I walked it up and down searching for Hussam's face in the crowds" (Ramadan 224). He is unsuccessful, however. The next day, Wassim learns from a fixer for a journalist that Hussam is in Istanbul, who also informs him "that Hussam still had the marks of the Syrian government police on his body" (225). Hearing this news, Wassim travels to Istanbul, but he is again at a loss, until in the early hours of the next morning, he finds himself next to Hussam. As the two men sit next to each other, Wassim learns that his father bailed Hussam out of jail and warned him to never return to Syria.

He confesses that he loves Hussam, but the former does not budge. Wassim tries to express his love again, but Hussam pushes him away, asking him to leave instead and make his way back to Syria. Wassim, of course, refuses and he is eventually able to convince Hussam to take a boat from Izmir in hopes of making it to Europe. It is Wassim who tells Hussam, "'I'll find a job, and you'll decorate our little apartment. We will have our happy ever after, I promise you'" (Ramadan 229). Who can condemn Wassim for such a desire? For sure, Ahmed and Berlant might suggest it is a fantasy of a good life iterated

by heteronormativity, but the tragedy that befalls the two men makes it difficult to criticize Wassim's imagined life.

Even when there are obstacles that confront them, Wassim's love for Hussam remains constant, registered in his body. Nowhere is this more resounding than when Wassim expresses the following as he details how he feels when he is intimate with his wife: "My father could have removed the earth and the sky, but he couldn't remove the smell of Hussam from my skin" (Ramadan 134). It is ultimately his attachment to Hussam that leads him to propose that they both flee Syria, believing a good life for two queer men is possible elsewhere. This decision, pinned with an emotional appeal and as is already situated from Hussam's story, does not bode well for Wassim.

Surely, anyone who plunges into the novel hopes that Hussam and Wassim can make it work. There must be optimism that the two young men can finally leave behind their lives in Syria and start anew. At least for a hopeful person, there is a belief that the two can reconcile, or that they can repair their relationship such to move forward without the past coming back to haunt them. Perhaps this is an optimism which is "a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself as ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 14). The optimism is terse, however. Their reunion is short-lived, as readers might even be left to tears, relegated to an unhopeful outcome, but what hurts, even more, is Wassim's ascription of deserving this unfortunate fate:

> I deserved it. I deserved his hands pressing against my chest. I deserved the imbalance as I lost my footing and fell back into the water, surrounded by the bags and baskets of others. I'd known it since the day his father fell off the rooftop that I would be punished for it. I knew that it was my true sentence for killing his father all those years before. (Ramadan 230-231)

Who can read Wassim's surrender without a pang of emotions overcoming them? As he screams to the people in the boat, his howls can be heard against the waves. When salt water enters his mouth, the desperate plea for help being washed away can be felt. And, most of all, when he surrenders to the waves, his love for Hussam is indeed partitioned by cruel optimism, but it can never be drowned away. This event is the final blow in the romantic love he desires, but which ultimately remains a permeant fixture in his queer struggle.

7. Refugee on the Run

Along with his unyielding love for Hussam, Wassim's story is also wanting in other ways, as the word cruel becomes a familiar visitor, as the war becomes

a central part of his story. It is the way in which the Syrian war permeates in everyday life that Ramadan exposes through Wassim's voice: "'It's in my morning commute and in my evening stroll. It's in the food I eat and the coffee I drink. War has infused every aspect of my life. The conversations with friends, the place I call home. It's in the jets dotting the night sky and the call for prayer interrupted by an explosion'" (264). Indeed, the war is everywhere.

As Hussam navigates his life in Canada, Wassim's sense of belonging is restrained by a similar cruel optimism as a refugee, although in a different context and perhaps one that is even more stifling. He is a refugee in his own land who sleeps on a dirty mattress in an abandoned house. The question of returning to his home is unthinkable because his queerness is framed as a sin, and he is ostracized by his father for his queer sexual orientation. Clearly, Hussam's father did not approve of queerness either, but Hussam's life in Canada takes place in relation to his sexual encounters and hookups while also being openly queer. On the other hand, Wassim's category of refugee exists in his own homeland, where his refugeeism is more prominent as he lives in an abandoned house and readers follow his excursions on the streets. This speaks to how the immediate proximity to war, at least geographically, makes his refugeeism categorically more pressing in terms of the events that unfold in his life.

Most of Wassim's narrative about displacement and loss is revealed through his conversations with a ghost, Kalila, who lives in the house and whom he befriends. When he first arrives at the house and meets Kalila, having run away from his home, his father, his wife, and his son, he describes himself as being unkempt. In fact, we are also informed by him that he smells like a carcass and that a bruise has developed such that it runs across the left side of his body (Ramadan 40). It does not help that there is no warm water in the house either, but he takes a shower anyway and then dries himself with his dirty clothes.

This is what Wassim's life has become, desolate and dishevelled, and it is also through the particular where he meets Kalila becomes a symbolic figure in his world. At first, she does not speak with him, but he slowly draws her in, and they form a bond that is indisputable. For Hassim, Kalila is not only a companion, but she also becomes somewhat of a saviour. When a group of pro-regime protesters chase after him, it is Kalila who rescues him, telling him when to run and when to jump over a fence (Ramadan 65). When he thinks to himself, "[t]his city's people hate me. They chewed me up and spat out my bones" (65), it is Kalila who reminds him that he will always be safe in her house (66).

Although he finds solace in his conversations with Kalila, the good life and queerness are two things he can no longer conjure and imagine. Though he sought to escape the war with Hussam, going as far as risking their lives to do so, he inevitably becomes left behind and trapped in Syria. His arranged marriage can be viewed as a symbol of this confinement, and it is this predicament

that makes him run away from home. His fate is thus one of an unhomely state, drawing here from Homi Bhabha's work. This is not necessarily a disposition of being without a home, but it is a result of subjugation: "To 'un'-speak is both to release from erasure and repression, and to reconstruct, reinscribe the elements of the known" (Bhabha 146). Thus, unhomeliness can be understood as a site where the instability of identity is inexorable.

Later on, when he meets someone he knows, Jamal, it is assumed that Wassim has been in Canada with Hussam all this time. Jamal, feeling sorry for Wassim, describes him as someone who has been "rejected by the world around them" and "you are who you are" (Ramadan 177). Jamal does not express these remarks in a demeaning way, but his comments do speak to the displacement that someone feels as a queer person, especially when their sexuality is denied and suppressed. Therefore, one can also think about Wassim's queer struggle as another war that never comes to an end. Though there comes a time when the sound of bombs is no longer frequent or the terror of military threat ends, the repression of his queerness does not afford him the same silence.

Indeed, Wassim's life can be characterized as melancholic, for sure. Listen here to the words of Ahmed: "The melancholic is hence a subject not only of loss but of desire, where the desire can be for the loss of what is desired" (*The Promise* 140). What is most melancholic is that he considers himself a "catalyst of all the pain" in the lives of people around him (Ramadan 171). He considers himself, in other words, the reason for their sorrow and suffering, as well as that of his own. As a result, Wassim relegates himself of his existence and presence in the lives of others, to a problematic object, marked by the idea that he is the cause of their demise. Alas, most tragically, Wassim loses his desire for love or his once optimism in love, as it is mostly cruel and at times unbearably unfortunate for him.

Aside from intimate and romantic love, the loss that he has confronted also makes it difficult for him to build connections with other people. For instance, he runs from a guard who offers him coffee when he remembers that he is a curse to everyone he meets (Ramadan 172). Indeed, "melancholic subjects expect to be hurt and are unable to love, to form new attachments" (Ahmed, *The Promise* 141), and in the case of Wassim, he expects he will hurt others instead.

It is Kalila who encourages Wassim to think again and to form attachments such that he does not run from people. She tells him, "'[s]top drowning into people" (Ramadan 202). It is the presence of her ghost, taking notice of Wassim's life as a refugee on the run, who reminds him to slow down. It is Kalila who informs him that he does not have to be shrouded by a world that does not accept who he happens to be. She is not interested, as she once says, in living in "a world where people are ashamed of who they love" (243). As she says this, she slowly starts to disappear, bidding Wassim farewell, and it is in this departure that we finally notice some hope in Wassim's life.

8. Conclusion

From one chapter to another, readers are made witness to the ways in which barriers and difficulties, sometimes ones that are ineffable and horrendous, are confronted by Hussam and Wassim at every turn, with each sentence and word containing more emotion than a page can hold such that no one can deny the evocative pull of Ramadan's writing. Through the two men's portrayals, one can realize that to end a war, whether to escape the violence in a nation-state or to forget it altogether, seems almost impossible. The carnage, as Aparna Mishra Tarc suggests, is affixed to the imaginary life even when a war is over. So, when the decimation and destruction come to an end, the pain and terror of war are loaded and trafficked elsewhere, lodged into one's body and into their psyche. For Hussam, we can recognize the cruel optimism he confronts, making his way all the way to Canada where life, although far away from the Civil War in Syria, remains precarious and uncertain. Living in Vancouver, he finds himself incessantly haunted by the ghost of his father, and, most of all, he is unable to attain a queer good life. Wassim, on the other hand, who remains in Damascus, is unwanted for being both queer and a refugee in his own homeland. He is similarly wounded by the promise of happiness that he presupposes with Hussam.

Both of their narratives also reveal romantic love as a form of cruel optimism, as they are met with an inexorable event that changes their lives forever, followed by even more tumultuous encounters that keep them apart from one another. Their desire for each, as such, becomes cruel and insidious in a way, separated and distanced by miles and time zones, yet intricately connected to each other forever. Through Hussam and Wassim's story, Ramadan compels readers to recognize that the cruellest optimism of them all is the promise we make to the people we love, and the ways in which we break those promises. For queer refugees, more specifically, it is even more difficult to build a life that is exonerated from a complicated and oppressive history—one that denies Hussam and Wassim's belonging and connectedness both in Canada and Syria. Yet, as the novel comes to an end, there is something hopeful even in the most catastrophic moments of one's life as Hussam and Wassim ultimately begin to confront their unresolved grief and trauma. And it is the way these two young men, connected by their ability to be vulnerable about their love for each other, that makes *The Foghorn Echoes* a masterpiece that must be read over and over again.

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"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 ("Posthuman 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 *alien*ated 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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Refugee Worldbuilding in Broken Times: (Re)Creating Self-Location in South(east) Asian Canadian Narratives

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ABSTRACT
This paper is focused on interpreting the way in which twenty-first-century refugee writing in Canada is currently approached critically and theoretically. It proposes new reading strategies that contest the influence of nation-state powers over literary production deployed with an aesthetics of cosmopolitanism. In particular, this article takes up refugee writing by Kim Thúy and Sharon Bala, respectively, in order to show how its search for a "Good Life" leads to the transformation of the characters' subjectivity. This transformation responds to an epistemological shift which confronts issues of Western complicity in foreign human rights abuses and poses questions about alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of healing and trauma recovery in the aftermath of mass violence.

Keywords
Refugeetude; Borderscapes; Hospitality; Relocation; Worldbuilding; Kim Thúy; Sharon Bala

1. Introduction

> (Po)ethics is what surrounds you like your house, it's where you live.
>
> —Fred Wah, *Faking It*

Border imagery and "borderscapes" have moved from "third-space" stasis to a mobility discourse that tries to understand new interpretations of cultural memory and border aesthetics. This "border turn" entails a dynamic conception of social and cultural constructions which have cross-pollinated with a parallel liminality turn, threshold studies and liminality studies (Freedman; Benito and Manzanas; Gatrell; Nail; Schimanski and Nyman). This border aesthetics "turn" revolves around the notion of the borderscape, which I will call *homeSpace,* a performative space where new forms of political agency and affective participation can be developed. Y-Dang Troeung's *Refugee Lifeworlds* and Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman's *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings* are, in this regard, two of the most relevant contributions to the understanding of how refugee voices are changing borderscapes. This shift reveals the new notion of *cripistemology* to humanize the marginalized subaltern subjects, combat compassion fatigue, and counteract negative stereotypes which have been recurrent in migrancy literatures for thirty years (Piepzna-Samarasinha; Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*). In this epistemological shift "democratic iterations" (Benhabib) come through among collectivities who complain through different art expressions and institutions, knock on doors and defy the marginal resilience that searching for a "Good Life" implies (Brambilla; Ahmed, *Complaint!*). In other words, new voices appear to turn away "from readily available discourses of victimhood and commonplace knowledge of refugees to highlight how refugee subjects gain awareness, create meaning, and imagine futures" (Nguyen, "Refugeetude" 111).

This article attempts to deconstruct the current use of the concept of refugeeness and explore the "borderscape turn" that revolves around a new space of "subjecthood," reenacted as a knowledgeable experience that is both psychic and affective (Freedman; Puar; Nguyen, "Refugeetude"; Troeung, "Refugee Race-Ability"). This re-location of border subjectivity creates a new space of dissension and agency in order to contest previous attitudes of assimilative resilience to national policies (Rancière). In this *homeSpace* migrancy narratives fight against the notion of refugees as invisible forces of production "subjected to biopolitical structures that obliterate their very existence by turning them into a paradigmatic example of alienated subjectivity, radical alterity and vulnerable embodiment" (García-Zarranz 119). In turn, as Ana María Fraile-Marcos

contends, there are "potential new paths to (self)understanding, knowledge, hope, and positive agency opened by contemporary resilience narratives and the nascent field of critical resilience studies" (2-3). My essay is divided into three central notions, "Negotiating Unsettlement," "Relocating Refugeetude," and "Parenting Optimism" which explore questions of *cripistemology* and affective worldmaking in the search for a "Good Life" in the voices of Kim Thúy and Sharon Bala. Through their narratives, these writers mobilize the misguided assumption that the South(east) Asian genocide is a foreign trauma, an event that happened solely "over there" and that has nothing to do with the lives of Canadians (Troeung, "Witnessing").

2. Negotiating Unsettlement

> We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism… There has always been resistance to all forms of oppression, as we know through our bones that there have simultaneously been disabled people visioning a world where we flourish, that values and celebrates us in all our myriad beauty.
>
> —Piepzna-Samarasinha,
> *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*

In these mobile borderscapes migrancy narratives can gain glimpses of a better future, provide safety and hope, if not happiness, and an opportunity to be heard. There, boundary and threshold art expressions provide a new interpretation of contemporary refugee narratives and give different responses to calls for interdisciplinarity in border studies, where humanities perspectives have been underrepresented. One result of this has been the development of a field of "border aesthetics," closely connected with thinking around the borderscape concept, and offering a new sense of relocation towards "an alternative spatiality" (Amilhat Szary). In these threshold/liminal places the diasporic subject is allowed to refashion their identity and rebuild their future in places of cultural polyphony and creativity. This principle of hope and agency applies not only to border-crossers, but also to borderland dwellers (Gatrell; Nail; Mani).

This productive understanding of migrancy reaches back to the focus on margins and transgression in thinkers such as Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle and is strengthened by postcolonial theories of the uncanny in Latin American Studies (Llarena-Ascanio, "'Another Way";

"Bodies Becoming Pain"). It goes beyond the current political categories where borders and borderlands are recognized as spaces of exception and beyond nation states rather than just between them (Agamben). In 1951 the Refugee Convention provided a clear definition of the term "refugee" and a legal basis for protection claims; individual refugee determination procedures, however, are the exception rather than the rule.[1] Those fleeing South(east) Asia, many of them by boat, were held in detention centers where officials decided who qualified as refugees. UNHCR participated in this deterrent regime, securing the agreement of these countries to a "Comprehensive Plan of Action" which denied refugee status to "boat people" unless they could prove persecution (Gatrell 204). Those who were able to flee communism or war were doubly victimized, not just by communist regimes but by being forced to spend years in camps prior to resettlement. Refugees now belong to the mainstream of history rather than the margins, "the migrant remains the constitutive dimension of social motion upon which society divides, organizes, and circulates" (Nail 14). This society, however, has been misguided by assumptions about refugees' incapacity to give a credible account of their experience. They are muted, traumatized or silenced by officials or misinterpreted by nonprofessional interlocutors in long hearings. In this respect, silence has become a kind of defiance, a deliberate refusal to confess one's private thoughts or, why not, a calculated decision to wait until the time is right (Gatrell; Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*). The refugee's urgency to recover agency is key to understanding the physical and emotional distress that comes with unsettlement, locating it at the intersection of languages and spaces of translatability. This unsettlement makes national states accountable and should be addressed regarding the difficult reconciliation of intersectional identities (Mani 33).

Kim Thúy's *Ru* (2012) and Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018) contain these affective manifestations in their protagonists' fantasies about the possibility of living what Sara Ahmed calls "the Good Life" (*The Promise* 6). While being trapped geographically and linguistically, the narrators struggle to be attached to conventional good life fantasies and imagine a lifeworld that might be possible (Nussbaum 5). The refugee, however, enters a complex fabric that cannot escape the pressure towards "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality" (Berlant 2-3). As a result, they become a figure who "comes into being only through arrival in the asylum state, [when] whiteness enters the frame as an adjudicator of the refugee humanity" (Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds* ix). In order to elude Eurocentric definitions of disability and aphasia, Troeung distinguishes three key terms in refugee life: debility, maiming, and

1. See https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr.

cripistemology, viewed as physical and psychological conditions where "the force of muteness, the amplitude of silence, and the force of performative blindness and deafness, [are] strategic tactics to safeguard one's self and loved ones against further death and debilitation" (109). I agree with Troeung in that refugee subjecthood demands a form of relocation from the current victimization, or static trauma, to that of collective disability or *cripistemology*, understood as "both a lived embodiment and system of differential impairment of racialized and gendered bodies" (13). This alternative paradigm of impairment interrogates the very system that makes the refugee vulnerable and analyses the "multivalent ways in which refugee life and disability come together in the afterlife of war" (279).[2]

I think Troeung's strategic breakdown in the refugee language and psyche, in their bodily communication, means an alternative way of "race-ability" to know and be attuned to the afterlife of loss. As Ahmed has explained regarding the duty of happiness of the migrant, the process of understanding the wretched implies a deprioritization of compassion. When we listen to those who are cast as wretched, perhaps their wretchedness would no longer belong to them. The sorrow of the migrant or refugee might give us a different angle on happiness because it might estrange us from the happiness of the familiar and make us complicit (Ahmed, "Happiness"). It is with this epistemological shift in mind when Vinh Nguyen formulates the concept of "refugeetude" that dialogues with Ahmed and Troeung in its deconstruction of the notion of refugeeness and offers a dynamic negotiation of unsettlement ("Refugeetude"). Refugeetude then becomes an experiential resource of developing significant and durable ways of being in and moving through the world. These subjects no longer "strive for resilience (often critiqued as being closely knitted to neoliberal, late-capitalist ideas of success) but opt for resistance (more closely connected to subaltern subjectivities) (Romero and Cuder). There are possible ways of challenging the borderscape in current biopolitics and settle in a new imaginary *homeSpace* that resists Eurocentric structures. Thúy's *Ru*, and her more recent novel *Em* (2021), contain some of these affective manifestations of territorial and emotional displacements. They uncover selves, here and there,

2. Troeung's foundational work, *Refugee Lifeworlds*, is concerned with making sense of the long-lasting legacies of disability and debility that mass bombing, war-making, genocide, and displacement leave in the lives of ordinary people, and provides us with a rich set of vocabularies and concepts to push beyond the standard lenses of trauma, memory, and loss so prevalent in the existing literature, forging unexplored paths in blending autotheory, critical disability studies, transpacific studies, and critical refugee studies relocating subjecthood in refugee knowledge production. The purpose is to move beyond trauma and models of wartime damage that see refugees as suffering victims.

who are trapped geographically and linguistically, and focus on collective relocations to reverse the effects of epistemic violence.

3. Relocating Refugeetude

> My name is Nguyễn An Tịnh, my mother's name is Nguyễn An Tĩnh. My name is simply a variation on hers because a single dot under the i differentiates, distinguishes, dissociates me from her. I was an extension of her, even in the meaning of my name. In Vietnamese, hers means "peaceful environment" and mine "peaceful interior." With those almost interchangeable names, my mother confirmed that I was the sequel to her, that I would continue her story.
>
> –Kim Thúy, *Ru*

Refugeetude moves the subject from static debility to "cognitive self-experience" (Eakin 100) and this unpacks the construction of the self as relational, as it offers new routes to narrate refugee life as an experiential and collective practice of adaptation and repair. It is in this context that Thúy's *Ru* investigates the various linguistic and cultural displacements Vietnamese people have suffered both in a camp in Malaysia and later in Quebec after fleeing communism in Vietnam. An Tịnh, the protagonist, displays a broken narrative to disentangle the double unsettlement she has suffered as a child in a refugee camp. This is done in a "paratactic narrative of resistance, solidarity and sociality" and in the face of the traumatic silencing of both North American and international audiences (James 46):

> The History of Vietnam, written with a capital H, thwarted my mother's plans. History flung the accents on our names into the water when it took us across the Gulf of Siam thirty years ago. It also stripped our names of their meaning, reducing them to sounds at once strange, and strange to the French language. In particular, when I was ten years old it ended my role as an extension of my mother. (Thúy, *Ru* 9)

The novel's parataxis reflects the contradictions, interruptions and open-endedness of moving between spaces, languages and histories where fear and muteness become, for herself and thousands of boat people, the only protective shield to articulate the unspeakable. This strategy of political muteness is the answer to the "inclusive exclusion" for the abject cosmopolitan

who, maimed collectively by violent dislocation and haunting loss, suffers a suspension of subjectivity (Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism"; *Rethinking Refugees*): "We were frozen in fear, by fear. We no longer closed our eyes when the scabious little boy's pee sprayed us. We no longer pinched our noses against our neighbours' vomit. We were numb, imprisoned by the shoulders of some, the legs of others, the fear of everyone. We were paralyzed" (Thúy, *Ru* 11). In this borderscape, the self is petrified in a physical, psychological and affective hold (Nguyen, "Refugee Gratitude") and An Tịnh resorts to hope as the necessary frame to project herself, discovering that her corporeal vulnerability can extend beyond the time-space of the camp and opt for collective resistance.

This speechless vulnerability of the caged refugee has historically been deployed to discursively establish an animal quality to the refugee narration in their effort to assimilate into the new location. A location that adds a physical maiming to the linguistic disability the subject suffers and this journey is traversed by the paradox and ambivalence of being an abject refugee long before arriving in Canada, cripped by the embodied scars and racial marks at the hands of the state:

> I forget that I'm one of the Asians who lack the dehydrogenase enzyme for metabolizing alcohol. I forget that I'm marked with a blue spot on my backside, like the Inuit, like my sons, like all those with Asian blood. I forget the mongoloid spot that reveals the genetic memory because it vanished during the early years of childhood, and my emotional memory has been lost, dissolving, snarling with time. (Thúy, *Ru* 128)

In their attempt at fleeing political abuse in the refugee camps of Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia or Cambodia, room is made for a naked life at your native land or in a detention camp in between (Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*). There, they

> rubbed [their] shoulders with flies in the refugee camps for months. They clung to the branches of a dead tree near the septic tanks, next to our cabin. They positioned themselves around the branches like the berries of a pepper plant or currants. They were so numerous, so enormous, that they didn't need to fly to be in front of our eyes, in our lives. We didn't need to be silent to hear them. (Thúy, *Ru* 29)

Then, upon arrival in Canada the guest is allowed to enter the host's maimed space. In this intersection of language and space translatability the child narrator in *Ru* tries to reconcile her parents' static resilience who, being "[u]nable to look ahead of themselves, they looked ahead of us, for us, their children" (16). Refugee parenthood, maimed and disabled, is narrated with the focus

on this physical and psychic debility, a differential vulnerability which leads to premature death in ways that have yet to be addressed, especially in women, the ones

> who carried Vietnam on their backs while their husbands and sons carried weapons on theirs… They were so weighed down by all their grief that they couldn't pull themselves up, couldn't straighten their hunched backs, bowed under the weight of their sorrow… the women continued to bear the weight of Vietnam's inaudible history on their backs. Very often they passed away under that weight, in silence. (41-42)

Moving towards a new hopeful but conscious spatiality despite her parents' debility, the young An Tịnh dreams of Canadian citizenship as a medium of healing and repair where

> the scent of a newly blown poppy is no longer a perfume but a blossoming: where the deep red of a maple leaf in autumn is no longer a colour but a grace; where a country is no longer a place but a lullaby. And also, where an outstretched hand is no longer a gesture but a moment of love, lasting until sleep, until waking, until everyday life. (Thúy, *Ru* 140-141)

Thúy's narrator, then, opts for a collective optimism that resists the maiming qualities of her parents' static resilience in its cruel demand of a "happy life" here and now in Canada. Instead, An Tịnh attests to the possibilities of reinvention through a collective resistance in the face of the struggle of peer survivors who have made a *homeSpace* of the Vietnamese refugee success story: "The young waiter reminded me that I couldn't have everything, that I no longer had the right to declare I was Vietnamese because I no longer had their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears. And he was right to remind me" (78). This collective success in *Ru* also manifests through the expression of the "grateful refugee" (Nguyen, "Refugee Gratitude"), a recurrent stance in Kim Thúy's work; a refugee who lives a conscious relocation, a transformative process of survival and subject formation to make sense of the traumatic past. An Tịnh, after months of suffering and deprivation in the refugee camp anticipates her moving forward: "I was unable to talk or to listen, even though I was neither deaf or mute. I now had no points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project myself into the future, to be able to experience the present, in the present'' (*Ru* 8). Upon arrival in Quebec An Tịnh is only grateful for a new life to start over, an affect—as theorized by Ahmed—produced in moments of contact between the refugee and the state, "it was thanks to that gift that I was allowed to dream my own dreams" (76). I agree with Nguyen's notion of gratitude in *Ru*, whose

main interest lies in its lack of the ideological burden of debt towards the host country but consists in a potential model of subjectivity based on relationality, connectivity and sociality, a gratitude to other peer survivors and their parents' sacrifice to create a post-subject, a future self in a less devastating way, "by distancing ourselves from our condition as stateless refugees, from the empty space of an identity crisis" (Thúy, *Ru* 137).

4. Parenting Optimism

> In time this would be his language too. English. A new language for a new home.
>
> –Sharon Bala, *The Boat People*

The first act of violence towards the asylum seeker is the language imposed by the master of the house, the host, who demands translation by a third party (Derrida 16). Apparently, the foreigner is given the right to hospitality but, inept at speaking the language, is maimed by the law of the country: "Sovereignty. That word again. Pitched high, like a dog whistle" (Bala, *The Boat People* 66). In *The Boat People* Bala delves into the muteness of the refugee arriving in Canada who, with the pretext of remaining nameless to ensure their safety and anonymity, is stripped of any identity and thus becomes a faceless mass labelled as "terrorists" (391). In this linguistic struggle for self-location, Bala tries to "question the notion of free will" (392) and connects Mahindan's debility to other maimed characters whose free will is also broken. This constitutes, as Jasbir Puar argues, a field of "southern disability," which has, as a result, "a constituent and capacitating absence" (16) which pervades the characters both collectively and in their differential and uneven precarity, a disabling process of *cripistemology*.

This identity relocation affects different communities, from the collective to the transnational and the planetary in their "refusal to conform to the scripts of normative personhood" (Troeung, "Refugee Race-Ability" 281). Here lies the characters' resistance to the nature of Canadian sovereignty, to what "these people, the Canadian authorities, *believe* is true and false. What *they* want to believe" (Bala, *The Boat People* 297). Bala's asylum seekers are sent to a prison in Prince George, British Columbia, where they depend on "the legal and social systems of Canada represented by individuals who think in terms only of right and wrong" (van Herk 5). There, they are deprived of agency and humanity, fed by moulded food whose "flavours were muted, like the colors outside" (Bala, *The Boat People* 52). This precarity in the premises mirrors a country with a

detrimental socio-political atmosphere at the time, where migrants "are criminalised and subject to the imaging which is part of surveillance regimes either at the border or within the state, or they are imaged in the media as anonymous, brown masses" (Schimanski and Nyman 244). This surveillance regime is embodied by the character of the minister of Public Safety, Fred Blair who, mirroring Prime Minister Stephen Harper, declares that "Canada is a sovereign nation… We will protect our borders from thugs and foreign criminals and those who seek to abuse our generosity" (Bala, *The Boat People* 46).

A Tamil refugee, Mahindan, intentionally named on the first page, believes Canada is a country of justice and fairness and expects immediate refuge when he flees the Sinhalese violent abuse of the refugee camps north of Sri Lanka. There is no "happy life" under the Sinhalese rule, only "[e]xhaustion whenever he thought of the future; terror when he remembered the past… The roll call of the dead lull[ing] him to sleep" (Bala, *The Boat People* 3). Mahindan manages to survive warfare and violence, hunger and the intimidation of Sinhalese hatred. Widowed and maimed, he and his son Sellian board on an illegal cargo ship, convinced that he has fled violence and precarity for good, and fantasizing about the possibility of a good life. Mahindan's motto "learn English, get a job, find a small place to live" (86) foreshadows Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism and is reflected in Mahindan's obsession that "there [is] nothing to be scared of" (15). This becomes, as Aritha van Herk argues, "a recitation of desire, a hope for some future, however precarious" (8) even if, as Berlant warns, "there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built" (192). Mahindan's static resilience, and his own debility, is this "cruel optimism," this "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 24). Mahindan, however, lacks the agency or transformation Berlant presupposes and feels he is nothing, "just a cockroach she would stamp under her heel" (Bala, *The Boat People* 174). Despite his lack of agency, he tries to hold onto this optimistic hope, this "moral code" of being resilient (Bracke 62) and, in this whitewashed environment of safety and promise, he "camouflag[es] his tears, his frustration at being trapped, the growing dread he'd made an irreparable mistake, his homesickness and grief for every person he'd ever known and loved, the pain of the water raining down like a thousand knives, all of it mixing together" (Bala, *The Boat People* 322-323).

Both critics Darias-Beautell and van Herk critically underscore the joy of arriving, leaving behind dead bodies, relying on Canada's "reputation of being a soft touch" (Bala, *The Boat People* 40) and underline how Mahindan meets suspicion, misunderstanding, and a deliberate slow immigration system. Infantilized, shackled and animalized, both in the refugee camp and in the detention camp, he is encouraged to adapt to the bureaucratic system in a detention

camp for almost a year (Bala, Interview). I agree with Sara Casco-Solís in that "Bala's literary rendering of socio-ecological resilience is a government strategy to deal with refugee arrivals and its current alignment with neoliberal discourses" (67). This is deployed in the narrative aesthetics that reflects the stress, chaos and debility that make Mahindan's frustration unbearable:

> language was exhausting, all the irregular verbs, the slow, tedious work of conjugation. He laboured over every consonant and vowel, stumbled over the silent *k's,* acutely conscious of how awkward and tongue-tied he must sound, how different his pronunciation was from that of Canadians. (Bala, *The Boat People* 251)

The measures Mahindan encounters are the imprisonment of the asylum seekers and a bureaucratic process of detention reviews and admissibility hearings to gain refugee status. Grace, the Japanese-Canadian adjudicator is a key character who, as Darias-Beautell underlines, is caught between two conflicting affects towards human rights, "her own family's traumatic experience of the internment and dispersal of Canadian citizens of Japanese origin during and after World War II, which she is reluctant to talk about, and her present role as adjudicator of justice to decide on the fate of a group of Tamil refugees whom she fears" (75). A granddaughter of Japanese immigrants, Grace is also mute, unable to communicate without the interpreters whose translations sometimes distort Mahindan's agency when "[t]o be faced with such cruel options it [is] as if there [is] no choice at all" (194). It is Grace's first post at the immigration office so "[i]t was up to her, as the adjudicator, to rise above the petty sparring, to keep her focus on the migrants, vigilant for any hint that betrayed their true motives" (128). Despite the character's detachment and lack of empathy at times, Grace gradually evolves when she learns about her own history, in a collective process of parenting both her disabled mother and her privileged teenage twins, and it is in this care work where she starts revealing their debility and moves forward affectively:

> These girls had been born into a country at war, in a place where children were given guns and taught to fight, where girls strapped on explosives and turned their bodies into weapons. A place where *suicide bomber* was the highest possible calling. They had lived unimaginable lives. While all the violence Meg and Brianne had ever known was confined to a video game. (166)

Her mixed-raced daughters learn the most important lesson in helping Grace move despite the bureaucratic obstacles of a state biopolitics where "the injustice reach[es] forward three generations to latch on" (Bala, *The Boat People* 235). Parenting her dehumanized mother she starts feeling maimed, "in a gloom she didn't understand, a churning, unspecified angst upending her

usual equanimity… sobbed for no reason, the flowered counterpane clutched tight in her fist" (232). In this affective relocation, Grace's mother, Kumi, shaken with Alzheimer stage 2, also needs to reconstruct her affective ownership when, in her lucid moments, she recalls her Japanese parents who "owned that land… *Now* is the time to take stock of what was done to us… They took everything from us. Our dignity" (51, 53). Kumi's disability becomes a collective trope when she discloses the photographic archive and tracks her childhood home stolen in World War II in an attempt to repair the injustice perpetrated to Japanese people in British Columbia. Kumi's traumatic absence of speech parallels Mahindan's linguistic impairment, and, as we have seen above, is embodied as a parenting strategy to safeguard the loved ones, as an act of resistance to her parents' aphasia: "how carefully they controlled their emotions. Everything was quietly done—packing the suitcases, gathering all the things we had to turn over to the officials. My brother tried to hide a radio and my mother slapped him. Do what you are told, she said… If there's one thing we Japanese do well, it's following the rules" (271). Meanwhile, Grace's narrative starts debilitating in her new post at the Refugee Board: "I don't think I'm cut out for this—being judge, jury, and executioner" (307) when her family album is displayed:

> The photo was dated: 1934. The same year Hiro and Aiko opened their laundromat. By 1937, they would have a daughter and a house four years later, twin sons. And then came the internment in 1942, when the family was separated and Hiro was forced to haul rocks at a labour camp. Would they have taken it back if they could, returned to Japan, if they'd known what they would lose? The business, their dignity, home, and the place where they had built it? They weren't released until war's end in 1945. And then given an impossible choice: move east of the Rockies or be repatriated to Japan. (108)

In Grace's evolution, the concepts of family and nation link the novel's circular narrative to the intergenerational conflict which is, once more, a metaphor of transnational belonging. For Grace, "[t]here was a quiet dignity in the path her grandparents had chosen. The years Aiko had toiled cleaning other people's toilets, the overnights her grandfather had spent making change at a dimly lit gas station in Ontario. Grace was proud of their stoicism. They got on with the business of living" (Bala, *The Boat People* 112). Meanwhile, Kumi's mental disability momentarily turns into resisting lucidity when she questions the notion of free will and offers Grace a lesson that is summarized in Sarkowsky's words:

> This negotiation of citizenship is closely linked to an investigation of the underlying assumptions about belonging and the prerequisites for what counts as a 'good life', and thus to the second key term, recognition… Thus, the crucial point

> is the exact form in which the different groups in the novel envision this act of recognition that publicly acknowledges them not only as citizens, but as a relevant group whose past is unconditionally part of the national past—and whose present significantly contributes to the national present as well as to its future. (52, 55)

A parallel situation appears with Priya, the law student who learns how "the detention reviews, the admissibility hearing, [and] the Refugee Board hearing [become] a long series of judgements, each an opportunity for failure and deportation" (Bala, *The Boat People* 49). In parenting her father Priya, "blindsided by skin colour" (83) in her youth, affectively evolves when her family secrets are unexpectedly unveiled, and her vulnerability exposed with Mahindan's and Kumi's: "Don't give up hope," Priya tells Mahindan, "[w]e are still fighting" (346). Both Priya's and Grace's decision to resume their work in the refugee office will let them knock on the door again and step "over the threshold" (388). They realize they can create a new space for critical thinking towards the refugeetude around them. In a circular narrative structure, which begins and ends with Mahindan's waiting for admissibility, there is an affective growth, and some hope, to move forward showing some resistance to Canadian governance. Priya looks ahead, "puzzled over this injustice, overwhelmed by the odds their clients had already overcome, the hurdles still in their future. It irked her, the gulf between the letter of the law and how it was executed. How could a process so influenced by public opinion and politicking have the audacity to call itself law?" (118). Other female voices like Savitri Kumuran's and Hema Sokolingham's, widowed refugees, are key to this relational subjecthood in their sustainable narratives of mental health and sexual abuse respectively, as they take the chance of fleeing the refugee camps at home, as women who think it is "[b]etter to die in the ocean than in that godforsaken camp" (130). Both in their thirties, "calm and well-spoken" (59) they defy a system in which children "are being led in chains like slaves" (60), claiming that "if they try to send us back, I will kill myself and my daughters. Better to die here in heaven than go back to hell" (159). Savitri and Hema finally pass the admissibility hearing, and are "proof there [is] hope to be grasped" (168). They will be key to disentangle the muteness in Priya's parenting relations to create processes of transnational solidarity (Mohanty) and "transcend basic survival" (Rifkind).

5. Conclusion

Ru and *The Boat People* offer examples of a shift that is taking place towards alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of disability and aphasia. Through Thúy's poetic muteness and Bala's maimed characters other ways of

bringing about collective healing are approached. The wonderful paradox of these narratives of refugeetude is to enable a new view of refugees as ontological and epistemological subjects shaped by and shaping history. Both Schimanski and Nyman and Troeung have developed the foundational background to disentangle trauma narratives in the last decades. The "border turn" and the notion of *cripistemology* help us understand the new refugee narratives that open a new era of hope and collective resistance in the recent field of affect theory and resilience studies.

Figures such as An Tinh and Mahindan have always been "the true motive force of social history" (Nail 7) but now an important shift allows the new narratives to move "toward alternative futures" (Espiritu and Nguyen 7). This new conception of the *homeSpace* constitutes a space of collective encounter, of plurality and polyphony (Brambilla). It is precisely when these narratives talk about the hostility found in the implementation of political notions of resilience when the political is truly approached. Exposing the surveillance apparatuses, these contemporary Canadian fictions interrogate the power while they mirror the "hostipitality" of the refugee system (Derrida) and the terrible effect Berlant's cruel optimism is exerted on subaltern subjects who remain in an "ongoing limbo" for years (van Herk 13). *Ru* and *The Boat People* are some of the first examples of the "ethical turn" which makes readers reconsider the politics of care and assume responsibility. These narrative voices assume responsibility and develop "possibilities of identifying commonalities that move beyond state violence and yet attend refuge and connections with others" (Mani 30). As Casco-Solís showcases, all these voices contribute to the interrogation of the use of resilience as a government strategy grounded in the securitization of national boundaries and, in doing so, to the deconstruction of what Darias-Beautell calls "the utopian dimensions of hospitality that characterize the Canadian imaginary" (70).

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Killing Joy in Ustopian Gilead: Girlhood and Subversion in *The Handmaid's Tale* "Media Franchise"

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the representations of girlhood introduced in the recent additions to *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise: Bruce Miller's 2017 Hulu series and Margaret Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments*. Drawing on affect theory and girlhood studies, I analyze how the girls do not conform to the cultural expectations of ustopian Gilead but manage to challenge and contest them. Heterotopian spaces, where the girls are expected to undergo a process of self-transformation into stable identities, are employed by the nation to direct them towards their prescribed happiness markers. Sara Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy is used as key mode of dissent that arises when the girls encounter the dissonance produced between the objects that are collectively imagined to cause happiness and how they are affected by them. I argue that, through Kathleen Stewart's notion of ordinary affects and their liminal position as girls, they find radically joyful alternatives that clash with Gilead's fixed prescriptions. This article analyzes three depictions of girlhood across media in *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise, focusing on girlhood as a liminal category that empowers girls to become feminist killjoys to fulfill their own desires.

Keywords
Ordinary Affects; Feminist Killjoy; Girlhood; Margaret Atwood; *The Testaments*; *The Handmaid's Tale*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the fictional world of Margaret Atwood's classic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been expanded with the series adaptation by Hulu in 2017, as well as the publication of the literary sequel *The Testaments* in 2019. The conflation of the release of the series in 2017 with the convulsive sociopolitical context as Donald Trump took office were key factors favoring a renewed recognition of the franchise. In fact, Atwood herself has supported the idea of the relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to Trump's America by taking part in promotional interviews and articles, thus capitalizing on the pro-Trump and anti-Trump movements (Somacarrera-Íñigo 88-89).

This newfound popularity allowed both author Margaret Atwood and showrunner Bruce Miller to expand the scope of readers' and audience's insights about Gilead, the theocratic patriarchal nation where the action is set. *The Handmaid's Tale* novel has worked as the "tentpole text" (van Dam and Polak 177) while the franchise has been expanded by introducing a variety of perspectives of different characters in both the 2017 series and *The Testaments*. This approach offers the chance of exploring a diversity of issues, going beyond the limited knowledge obtained through the first-person narration by the protagonist Offred in the 1985 tale.

Some of the new characters introduced are young girls, whose storylines deal with how they navigate the restrictive system that is put into place by the regime. Depictions of girlhood are initially introduced in season two of the series, with the character of Eden, and then expanded with other characters, such as Esther in seasons four and five. In addition, girlhood takes a prominent role in Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, especially through Agnes's narration which delves into the shaping of the girls' roles and their upbringing into proper womanhood.

Although Atwood firstly introduces girlhood in dystopian Gilead in *The Testaments*, it has been a prominent theme throughout her literary career. It is present in some of her most renowned works, such as *Alias Grace*, in which the youth and girlishness of protagonist Grace Marks features in her recollections from prison, and it is considered as a defining trait of her personhood (Ober Mannon 558). Again, girlhood features retrospectively in *Cat's Eye*, which "examines the ways young girls learn to despise their corporeal selves, becoming complicit in their own possible annihilation" (Appleton 70). The examination of the corporeal self and its constriction by the patriarchy takes prominence in *The Testaments*, as Agnes, reflects on her own girlhood in Gilead, surrounded by a harmful environment that is regulated by patriarchal norms. Other works by Atwood like *Moral Disorder & Other Stories* and *The Maddadam Trilogy* also include less prominent reflections on girlhood and the experiences of growing up female.

Girlhood studies, which emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, may be used as a methodological tool to analyze the representations of girlhood featured in Atwood's fiction. Girlhood studies aim to consider the girl at the centre of the research, focusing on the specifics that differentiate their experiences and depictions in diverse media from those of adult women. Moreover, several authors have pointed out the importance of focusing on the girl as a subject, as scholarship has previously dismissed adolescence as a transitory phase that ends when adulthood is reached and has not been considered worthy of academic study (Daley-Carey; Driscoll; Wills and Bright). Thus, the study of girlhood and its representations in literature and other media are key to understand the unique challenges young girls face that have been so far largely ignored by feminist scholarship.

Recent works in the field of girlhood studies pay attention to representations of girl adolescence as a liminal phase that may allow them to challenge the limits of conventional boundaries and hegemonic patriarchal prescriptions (Bellas; Harkin). Therefore, girlhood may be considered as a productive stage to question dominant codes and systems deemed as commonsense.[1]

This article will explore depictions of girlhood in *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise by combining girlhood studies, paying special attention to the possibilities of subversion of the girl-subject, and affect theory, mainly using Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy. In addition, the ordinary as understood by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart will also be studied as zones of convergence where the radical potential of becoming a killjoy may arise. In particular, I will be analyzing three recently added character storylines depicting young girls in *The Handmaid's Tale* series and *The Testaments*: Eden and Esther, who appear at different points in the series; and Agnes, who is one of the main narrators in the novel's sequel. The objective of this article is to explore how the girls navigate the promises of happiness constructed in the collective imaginary of the ustopian nation of Gilead. I argue that from their position as girls they become disruptors, embodying the feminist killjoy, and challenge the good life that they are made to perform when they discover the cruelness that is embedded within it.

2. Promises of the Good Life in Ustopian Gilead

Although generally considered dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* universe may be conceptualized more accurately as "ustopia." This term, coined

1. Recent television adaptations such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power* have also engaged with the topic of girlhood and its potential as a subversive force.

by Margaret Atwood, refers to the coexistence of visions of utopia and dystopia within the same text: "Ustopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 66). While the fictional world of Gilead has been described as dystopian by most, those in power are putting forward the necessary means to create their own utopian nation. The Sons of Jacob, the fundamentalist Christian group that takes over the United States, believe that happiness may be achieved by the setting of codes and rules that will be followed by the rest of society. This is illustrated by the words of Commander Judd as he explains to Aunt Lydia his plans to reshape the American social organization: "You do agree that human beings are at their most unhappy when in the midst of chaos? That rules and boundaries promote stability and thus happiness? You follow me so far?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 174). Therefore, the regime aims to regulate happiness by defining it as the fulfilling of each person's assigned role, leaving no room for pursuing any other lifestyle that does not align with the one they prescribe. Julia Kuznetski interprets this need for control of chaos in Gilead as an allusion to Foucault's panopticon, as the system of "Eyes" surveils every corner of the nation to maintain order through violence and "the radical elimination of individuality" (289).

This elimination of individuality is enforced through class roles defined by a performance of what Judith Butler has named the heterosexual matrix, that is, individuals must express a stable gender that aligns with their sex and practice compulsory heterosexuality (194). In the case of women, they are divided into categories that must assume different tasks and hold different amounts of power. Some of the categories are "handmaids," fertile women who are considered "sinners" and must sacrifice their bodies to the nation to bear children for elite families; "wives," who accompany their husbands, they are the second head of the house and retain some amount of power within the household; or "aunts," who function as the teachers of the regime, transmitting knowledge and making sure the restrictive codes are followed. While these roles are presented as rigid, they are purely performative and individuals may shift from one category to another, mostly as a form of punishment. Those who mis-perform the heterosexual matrix are either brutally punished or eliminated from society.

Gilead is produced as a project that seeks happiness by creating happy objects in the collective national imagination whose citizens must strive towards, that is, fulfilling their roles appropriately. As Ahmed theorizes, these happy objects "are attributed as the cause of happiness, which means they already circulate as social goods before we 'happen' upon them" (*The Promise* 28). These objects hold the promise of happiness, which lies ahead if we do the right thing (29). For handmaids, getting pregnant and providing upper-class families with children ensures happiness; for wives, receiving that child and

acting as their mother is a goal they must attain to be happy. The good life can only be achieved by living "in the right way, by doing the right things, over and over again" (36). By performing the restrictive roles and following their codes and duties, anyone in Gilead can achieve happiness. It is just a matter of reaching those objects that circulate as happiness promises. However, as Ahmed points out, these objects may be judged as happy before we even encounter them (28). Thus, entering in contact with them may result in a contradiction, a dissonance between the promises they hold and how you are affected by these objects (42). When these objects are encountered, they may cause different emotions other than the expected happiness that has been previously attached to them.

The disenchantment of not achieving happiness even though the instructions to do so have been followed is experienced by Eden, a character depicted in the second season of the series. She is a fifteen-year-old that is forcedly married to Nick, a collaborator of the regime with a prominent role in the series as he steadily climbs into power as the show evolves. Eden is willing to participate in Gilead's good life, as she tries to perform her role as a wife as she has been taught: she arranges the house, cooks for her husband and tries to have sex with him. Nonetheless, Nick does not want to have a romantic or sexual relationship with a young girl.[2] There is an inconsistency between the expectations of happiness Eden holds about marriage and how she is really affected by the role once she becomes a wife.

The contradictions between affects and objects that characters like Eden experience may be considered as part of what Berlant refers to as "cruel optimism." These optimistic expectations "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1). Subjects cannot achieve happiness simply by entering in contact with those objects situated as happiness bearers. As shown in the case of Eden, she does not simply reach happiness with marriage or by performing her wifely duties. Thus, Eden is left disoriented and must seek happiness someplace else that is not within the bounds of Gilead's matrix.

To teach their version of the good life, the nation makes use of heterotopian spaces. Theorized by Michel Foucault, these function as "counter spaces" that seem suspended in time and are opposed to areas of passage (e.g. streets or trains), areas of transitory halt (e.g. cafés or cinemas) and closed areas to rest like home (Vidler, Foucault, and Johnston 20). Foucault distinguishes several characteristics regarding heterotopian spaces, but I will focus here on heterotopias of

2. Although Nick's exact age is not explicitly revealed, he is visibly older than Eden, it may be estimated to be around late 20s or early 30s.

crisis and heterotopias of deviation. Heterotopias of crisis "are generally reserved for individuals undergoing a 'biological crisis'" (20), which usually refers to a shifting or fluctuation of the body such as puberty, menstruation or giving birth. Thus, these reserved spaces serve the function of allowing subjects to go through these changes in a designated space, elsewhere. Foucault manifests that heterotopias of crisis are disappearing and giving way to heterotopias of deviation, which host individuals whose behavior does not align with the norm (20).

There are three prominent heterotopias in Gilead, where a transformation of the self takes place: the Vidala School, a heterotopia of crisis; the Rachel and Leah Centre and Ardua Hall both featuring as heterotopias of deviation. In the Vidala School young girls belonging to elite families learn to become wives. They are undergoing puberty while they attend school until they are paired with a husband and thus leave girlhood behind and enter adulthood. The Rachel and Leah Centre, also known as the Red Centre, works as a re-education center where women considered sinners are taken to learn their new role as handmaids. Lastly, at Ardua Hall, devout women choose a nun-like path and avoid marriage to learn how to become aunts. In all these different centers, a transformation of the self takes place and individuals leave once they have become a different and stable subject: from girls into wives, from sinners into worthy handmaids and from unmarried women into aunts. In these heterotopian spaces, there is an imperative for transformation, so that women enter those spaces because they are seen as being in some form of crisis, either in the biological sense as the case for girls in the Vidala School, or in a crisis of deviation such as the soon-to-be handmaids and aunts.[3] The ritual of purification (Vidler, Foucault, and Johnston 21) that occurs in these isolated counterspaces is visually represented with a change of color in their garments, as clothing marks the roles they inhabit—from girls wearing pink and plum, turning into red when they become handmaids, blue for wives and brown for aunts.

The need for renewal Gilead instills through heterotopias may be linked with the need to create a stable subject that abandons the liminal phase that characterizes the coming-of age process. The seminal work of Arnold van Gennep regarding the rites of passage is essential to the process of becoming that occurs during girlhood and adolescence. Van Gennep identifies a three-phase pattern in indigenous ritual ceremonies: the preliminal rites (separation),

3. As I have stated, the handmaid category is reserved for women that the puritan regime considers as sinners (divorced women, single mothers, etc.) and they must go through a process of purification and penitence before they can re-enter society with their new identity. In the case of aunts, they must acquire the inside knowledge that is reserved for them as administrators and teachers of the "women's sphere" within the regime.

the liminal rites (transition) and the postliminal rites (reincorporation). Building on this theory, Victor Turner has focused on the threshold that the liminal phase creates, drawing attention to the "invisibility" of the liminal subject, as their state is ambiguous: at once no longer classified and not yet classified (96). The liminal phase is held as an unclear stage that is defined in opposition to the stability of childhood and adulthood. Regarding adolescence, Catherine Driscoll points out that it is retrospectively defined as a prior phase to adulthood and a disruption of childhood, both considered relatively stable periods (6).[4] Thus, Gilead aims to exploit the indeterminacy of identity during the liminal period to lead the girls into a stable category.

In *The Testaments*, Agnes provides insight into the workings of these heterotopian spaces as she firstly attends the Vidala school for young girls and later starts her preparation to become an aunt at Ardua Hall. In her testimony, she dives deep into the gendered categories Gilead creates and how they shape her understanding of the world. Moreover, she provides readers with information on how Gilead is presented to young girls and adolescents as an object of desire. Education is solely focused on transforming the girls into future happy wives by teaching them how to make flower arrangements, sewing petit-point and nurturing their future husbands and children. Nevertheless, their future as happy wives is also instilled with fear and self-blame as some of the aunts refer to the girls as "snares and enticements" who "could make men drunk with lust" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 10). The girls are made responsible for any harm the men may cause them, and they must protect themselves from "the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner" (10).

These contradictory images of men as both predators and potential husbands cause fear in Agnes, who refuses to become a wife.[5] While preparing for her wedding, those around her encourage her to accept the man she will marry. Her stepmother tells her to think of the position she would acquire by marrying Commander Judd, who is powerful within Gilead (Atwood, *The Testaments* 225). Agnes is given the illusion of choice, as three candidates arise as

4. The period of girlhood is not clearly delimited and recent scholarship points towards the lengthening of the period between childhood and adulthood, particularly in the West. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett refers to this new phase as "emerging adulthood."

5. The ambivalence of male protagonists as both predators and lovers is reproduced in other works by Atwood. It is a main theme in *The Edible Woman* in which the engagement of protagonist Marian to Peter "signifies her submission to the traditional role of passive femininity" (Appleton 64). Sarah A. Appleton points out that while Atwood's women may be looked at as victims to male power and fantasies, they resist to various degrees and with different strategies (61). This is also a predominant theme in other works such as *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Heart Goes Last*.

possible husbands, but she is aware her preference does not matter: she will have to marry the man with the most power, Commander Judd. She becomes desperate as she can find nobody that listens to her desires, so she starts considering suicide as her only way out. Her escape comes with the visit of Aunt Lydia, who goes to Agnes to bring her news about her friend Becka, who had attempted to kill herself with secateurs: "'Becka has received a call to higher service. If you yourself have such a calling,' she said, 'you still have time to tell us'" (231). After the encounter, Agnes manages to communicate to one of the aunts that she has received a "higher calling" and expresses her desire to become an aunt to escape a dreadful marriage.

3. Cruel Attachments and Rape Culture

As the girls soon discover in their journey into womanhood, Gilead's promises of the good life are conditional and to achieve them they must sacrifice their own desires. Using Berlant's term, Gilead's advertising of marriage may be described as cruelly optimistic "insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a word finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2). While the girls are behaving as it is expected of them in Gilead by becoming wives, they experience extreme disappointment and shock at the intrinsic violence that is bound to their marriages: Esther is constantly raped by several men so that her husband may obtain a child; Eden is ignored even though she tries to be a good wife; and Agnes is paralyzed by the idea of marrying an old man who has killed many of his child wives. Their marriages are cruelly optimistic since the harm they experience within them is a feature they must accept to be judged as happy. The attachment of happiness to marriage dissolves once they discover the abuse they will bear as they enter the new phase of their lives.

The feeling of detachment and distance between joyful expectations and violent affects is woven into the fabric of the ordinary. Kuznetski declares that "in Gilead violence and executions are the means of enforcing the values of the traditional family" (292). Aunt Lydia emphasizes how they will eventually normalize these circumstances: "This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 43). This quotation from *The Handmaid's Tale* novel is recalled by Offred as she stands with her shopping companion staring at the wall where corpses of sinners and dissidents hang for everyone to watch. Such an overt display of violence becomes ordinary, the shock value wears off as they pass through the wall every day to get their shopping done. Similarly, the girls must accept the

disappointment and damage that comes with their roles, which will soon become part of their ordinary lives.

One of the concessions girls must make as they navigate girlhood is the commitment to keep silent as they are raped and abused. Rape is institutionalized in Gilead due to declining birth rates through the "Ceremony," a ritual in which the handmaid of the house is raped by the commander, the head of the family, while his wife holds her down. However, rape and sexual abuse go beyond the limits of a ritualistic practice and are also executed in other situations, justified by the patriarchal culture that allows male abuse and demands silence from girls and women.

Agnes is sexually abused by her dentist, as she recounts in her personal testimony in *The Testaments*. In this traumatic event, the dentist touches her breasts while she is alone with him at his consultation and then proceeds to masturbate in front of her. He exploits her vulnerability at that moment, in which she cannot call for help and she simply freezes, in shock. After that, Agnes blames herself as she was taught by the aunts: "So it was true then, about men and their rampaging, fiery urges, and merely by sitting in the dentist chair I was the cause" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 96). She believes she has enticed Dr. Grove to sexually abuse her and that only she is to take the blame, as Gilead has ingrained into her. When she is about to leave the dentist's office, the assistant tells her: "'You look pale. Some people have a fear of dentists.' Was that a smirk? Did he know what had just happened?" (97). This suggests that there is common knowledge about men in power being abusers, getting away with it and protecting each other from possible consequences.

The girls that dare to report abuses will be punished, as Agnes explains: "Some girls had reported such things. One had claimed their Guardian had run his hands over her legs. Another had said that an Econo trash collector had unzipped his trousers in front of her. The first girl had had the backs of her legs whipped for lying, the second had been told that nice girls did not notice the minor antics of men, they simply looked the other way" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 97). Kuznetski points out the precariousness endured by the girls in these vulnerable situations, which render them powerless: on the one hand, they are encouraged to report sexual harassment, but on the other they are punished and whipped for lying (294-295).

Esther is also a victim of the repeated abuse that men in Gilead are allowed to commit. She becomes a wife at fourteen to Commander Keyes, who is also significantly older than her. He rapes her repeatedly, but she does not get pregnant, so he invites other men to rape her to fulfill his wishes of eventually becoming a father. Through her harrowing experience, the audience understands how rape is a common occurrence that is covered up and even shared by groups of men and not an isolated incident. Rape is part of the collective

imagination of Gilead, which involves accepting it as something ordinary that is simply part of the good life, a sacrifice vulnerable women and girls must endure. Rape is ingrained into Gilead's social and political configurations; it is an essential part of the culture that relies on the ritualized exploitation of women's bodies to regenerate a nation whose power is declining.

The notion of rape culture emerged during the second wave of feminism and was firstly used in Noreen Connell's and Cassandra Wilson's *Rape: A First Sourcebook for Women* published by the New York Radical Feminists in 1974. These theorizations on the cultural prevalence of rape were shortly after expanded with Susan Brownmiller's seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* published in 1975. Brownmiller states that "women are trained to be rape victims" (309) and thus during their upbringing they are indoctrinated into becoming victims of power relations sustained by rape culture.

Moreover, Cameron Greensmith and Jocelyn Sakal Froese suggest that "under the auspices of rape culture, women's and girls' worth is predicated on enduring gendered and sexual violence, which is to be accepted in order for them to gain access to what they think of as the good life" (88). Rape culture legitimizes violence against women and girls, reinforcing male dominance as a normal part of the good life that is monopolized by men and boys (88). Girls are then taught to accept that in order to achieve the projected good life, they must endure rape culture, as they are made to believe that they are luring men in through a discourse of individual responsibility and self-victimization.

At this point, it is important to note that girlhood is a particularly vulnerable period in terms of gender based-violence. "For example, adolescent wives between the ages of 15 and 19 are three times more likely to be murdered than older wives… It has been found that girls are likely to be sexually abused in their teen years between the ages of 11 and 14 and boys between the ages of 4 and 6" (Jiwani 176). These statistics are especially worrying regarding the idea of immaturity linked to adolescence, so that adolescents are less likely to be believed by adults, as well as the knowledge among abusers that young women and girls are not likely to be believed which can coerce them to remain silent (176-177).

In Gilead, the ability to simply accept rape culture as part of the ordinary is praised. They are good girls if they keep silent but become problematic by pointing out what is wrong with their surroundings. Moreover, the girls are expected to be resilient, to experience the damage and bounce back to perform their roles. Robin James points out that resilience makes individuals legitimate members of society and its benefits, and this means to perform specific behaviors that maintain and reproduce the Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy (142). To maintain the patriarchal hegemony of Gilead, which uses rape culture as the base of its conception, girls are expected to bounce back every time

they are harmed, to perform as happy wives, handmaids or aunts and simply continue to reproduce the vicious cycle of performance and damage.

Still, the mandates of the regime and their visions of ustopia do not constitute the totality of the everyday lives of Gilead's citizens. These are also composed of the ordinary, as Berlant understands it, which contains unexpected encounters, conversations or sights that may have the potential for setting in motion the subversion of those codes. Berlant suggests that the ordinary may be conceived "as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" (10). Similarly, Stewart theorizes ordinary affects as a contact zone that may have the potential to affect the subject in particular ways (3). "Ordinary affects highlight the question of the intimate impacts of forces in circulation. They're not exactly 'personal' but they sure can pull the subject into places it didn't exactly 'intend' to go" (Stewart 40). Through the circulation of ordinary affects and their potential, the girls are redirected towards other forms of happiness outside of Gilead's envisioned utopia.

4. Killing Joy as a Mode of Survival

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed reflects on the conditionality of happiness. It may be conceived as an orientation towards certain choices and not others (54), but it is also conditioned by "being given as a shared orientation toward what is good" (56). However, it is not shared in a reciprocal way, but it favors the happiness of those that come first, while for those that come after "happiness means following somebody else's goods" (56). In the case of patriarchal Gilead, the righteous men in power come first. They are supported by other women in positions of relative influence, such as aunts or certain wives, who help sustain the notion of the good life attached to male happiness. Consequently, the girls' upbringing is conditioned to fold into their beliefs of what the good life is.

Ahmed refers to education as a way to direct and orient towards the "right" versions of happiness (*The Promise* 54). Gilead employs the heterotopian spaces described above to attempt to enmesh the girls in just the right course towards the good life. Nevertheless, the mandates and fantasies of cruelly optimistic happiness do not completely account for their experiences of girlhood. Despite the attempts to direct the girls towards the conditional happiness created by the regime, their liminal positions as girls together with the potential concealed in the unpredictability of their surroundings allow the girls to go beyond prescriptions and effectively disrupt Gilead's notions of the good life.

As stated above, the liminality and instability produced by the process of becoming are prominent characteristics of girlhood and make up a fertile ground

for the girls to challenge the conditional happiness of the regime. It is within the volatility that comes with their developing identity, which is undergoing transformation, that the girls manage to challenge the unquestioned ustopianism of Gilead. The liminal, ambiguous stage of adolescence "is a site where conventional boundaries and hierarchies dissolve, giving way to an unsettling of the status quo" (Bellas 18) which makes female adolescence a generative site for resistance and opposition to patriarchal norms (1). While it is regulated by patriarchal culture, it is also subject to the girls' disruptions and challenges (11). Stephanie Harkin points out that the liminal phase reflects uncertainty but also freedom and may be conceived as a particularly productive space for resistance against patriarchal paradigms in relation to adolescent girls (17). Gilead's narrow categories cannot fully contain the extent to which the girls exist, and the representations of girlhood in both *The Handmaid's Tale* series and *The Testaments* depict it as a fruitful period to contest and redraw the borders of what it means to be a girl and even a woman.

Even so, their liminal state as adolescents is not the only cause of their rebellion. It must be said that the girls' actions against the gender politics of the regime do not simply arise from within themselves but through Kathleen Stewart's ordinary affects. Through the potential of unexpected encounters with objects, conversations or even violent aggressions, Eden, Agnes and Esther are able to shift their paths towards other versions of the good life. While their liminal state allows the girls to be open to the possibility of change, the affects encoded in their ordinary encounters harbour the potentiality to redirect their desires towards other objects. Eden, Agnes and Esther are surrounded by a harmful environment where they are the targets of rape culture and they must break away from Gilead's prescriptions in desperate attempts for survival. Their instances of disruption of the happiness sustained by violence turn the girls into dissonant voices that go against the regime's requirements. They must embody the figure of the feminist killjoy as a way to redirect their own desires for a good life.

The notion of the feminist killjoy first appeared in 2010 in *The Promise of Happiness* but has been more thoroughly examined in Ahmed's latest book *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. In her helpful guide to become a killjoy, Ahmed considers becoming a feminist killjoy as an assignment, that is being willing to cause unhappiness, not intending to cause it (*The Feminist Killjoy* 19). The aim is to kill the joy in situations where one becomes trapped, limited by a dominant discourse that forces the subject to experience uncomfortable and even violent situations that directly attack their personhood or that of others. But as Libe García Zarranz states, these moments of disorientation work "precisely as moments of joyful insurrection" (18). There is joy in resistance, disruption and leaving behind what caused one to suffer.

The three girls whose narratives I have selected to analyze take on the task of becoming feminist killjoys. In order to find joy, they must first become a problem for Gilead, since by speaking up against their abusers they will likely be punished so that no one else dares to speak up and break the preserved happiness. As feminist killjoys, they speak up when they consider something that has been said or done is problematic, but by making the problem visible they become a disturbance of the otherwise kept peace (Ahmed, *The Promise* 65). The good life of ustopian Gilead is too tight for Eden, Agnes and Esther who find alternative ways of being by killing Gilead's promises of happiness. The three girls follow the same pattern: they become disappointed when they do not find happiness in their assigned roles; then they enter in contact with someone or something that affects them with the potential for change; and lastly they rebel, challenge and resist to be confined to what Gilead expects of them and thus embody the feminist killjoy.

In the case of Eden, after getting married, she becomes disappointed when her expectations do not meet the reality she experiences. She seeks reassurance in June, a handmaid and main character of the series, to whom she expresses her frustration about how even though she behaves as a good wife, her husband ignores her. In their encounter, June tells her that "in this place, you grab love wherever you can find it" ("Postpartum" 19:01). This conversation, encoded in the zone of convergence of ordinary affects, changes Eden's perception of how she may find love and happiness. So, when she encounters love she does not doubt and acts, contrary to Gilead's teachings. She runs aways with another young boy but they are both caught and turned in by her father. She is given several chances to repent her sins, but Eden has found joy and love in her rebellious challenging of the rules. Her decision is firm and she will not go back to Gilead's version of happiness, which means becoming a killjoy and breaking apart with a system that has failed her. In her public execution, Eden reasserts her decision by quoting the Bible "love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking…" ("Postpartum" 43:55). It is ironic how she uses the Bible, which women are forbidden from reading and Gilead holds as the source of its creation, as a tool to resist by reappropriating its meaning. In addition, an annotated Bible is found among her possessions, in her hands it becomes an incendiary device, her search for love and god are the root cause of her resistance.

The Bible also plays a crucial role for the subversion of Agnes in *The Testaments*. As stated before, Agnes refuses to become a wife and is luckily saved from that destiny by Aunt Lydia and her friend Becka, so she goes on to prepare to become an aunt. In her new role, she is encouraged to read, which is forbidden for most women in Gilead. Through the ordinary act of reading the Bible, Agnes discovers the truth about Gilead: throughout her years in the

Vidala school, she was presented with interpretations of biblical texts that twisted the meanings of the passages, presenting information in a way that fitted Gilead's mandates.

Agnes recalls a particular episode in which they were taught the story of the concubine that was cut into twelve pieces (see *New International Bible*, Jud. 19-21). As the story is told, the girls are horrified about the murder of the concubine. However, they are consoled by Aunt Estée: "There's another way of looking at the story. The concubine… sacrificed herself to keep the kind traveler from being killed by those wicked men… That was brave and noble of the concubine, don't you think?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 79-80). Aunt Estée frames the concubine's actions as benevolent and gracious, an act of self-sacrifice that reflects the cultural implications of the patriarchal nation.

When Agnes gets access to reading the Bible, she goes back to this precise story and the potential of this ordinary re-encounter brings about her subversion against the ustopian project. She finds out that the woman was given no choice, she was simply murdered. Agnes soon realizes how Gilead twisted the meaning of the story, changing it to fit their needs. This is a breaking point for Agnes's confidence in Gilead's teachings about god and faith. "This was what the Aunts meant, then, when they said women's minds were too weak for reading. We would crumble, we would fall apart under the contradictions, we would not be able to hold firm" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 303). In fact, here Atwood "plays with the Bible's ambiguity and openness to infinite interpretation… hence the constant need for more testaments" (Sabo and Graybill 132). The author addresses the need for change and constant revision of those in power. Agnes must then get involved with Aunt Lydia and her plan to bring the nation down and eliminate rape culture and its perpetrators.

The last of the representations of girlhood that I have selected to analyze is Esther, whose storyline has not concluded yet and will possibly play a major role in the upcoming sixth season of the series. Just like Eden, both became wives as teenagers but they approach their marriages in distinctive ways. Contrary to Eden's compliance with her role, Esther is hyper-aware of the cruelness that is embedded in Gilead's ideas of the good life. As mentioned above, her experience as a wife has been marked with constant instances of sexual abuse. As a result, Esther refuses to conform to Gilead's impositions and simply performs her role to be safe while actively working against the regime: she poisons her husband and collaborates with dissident groups. At the end of season four she is caught working with rebels and she is turned into a handmaid as a form of punishment. This means a considerable decrease in her power at home, and also the fact that she will continue to be regularly raped, which she had struggled to avoid. In season five, she's at the Red Centre, the heterotopian space Gilead uses to train girls and women to become handmaids but Esther refuses to cooperate.

There is one specific conversation that gets Esther to change her mind, and it is the potentiality encoded in this conversation that will affect her subsequent actions. Janine, another handmaid and Esther's closest friend at the center, tells her: "be good and you'll be safe" ("Ballet" 10:11). Janine encourages Esther to act according to Gilead's rules so that by performing these actions repeatedly, she is promised that she will be protected. Regardless of her behaviour, her safety and protection are not guaranteed, as Esther and Agnes have already learned. In this case, Esther has no choice but to try and be a good handmaid, but when she finds herself alone in a room with a commander, she is raped again. Once more, Esther is left feeling betrayed and abandoned as the safety she was promised crumbles. In a desperate attempt, she tries to kill herself and poison Janine, who had assured her that a good life was ahead. Both survive, but Esther is completely deranged and refuses to comply, as she has been violently harmed in the process every time.

Esther embodies the feminist killjoy as she confronts Aunt Lydia afterwards: she is tied up to a hospital bed, wearing a white hospital gown that symbolizes that she has now freed herself from the gendered categories. Aunt Lydia approaches Esther to ask her whether she did anything to entice the man that raped her, following the victim blaming logic of rape culture. When Esther says that she did not do anything, Aunt Lydia genuinely apologizes to her, but that is not enough. Esther clearly states that "they all do it, you know they do, you're not sorry" and screams at her to get out of the room ("Together" 12:41).

Esther has nothing left to lose, her own identity in Gilead is now a blank slate and this grants her the audacity to go beyond the constraints she has been previously imposed. She directly confronts Aunt Lydia and tells her that she is an accomplice, by allowing men to exercise their power facing no accountability. As Esther states, "they all do it," this is an endemic issue part of rape culture and not an isolated event. Approaching her mentor in this unrestricted way means killing the joy that Aunt Lydia may have found in Gilead, as her privileged position had allowed her to be relatively safe while actively collaborating in the shaping and preservation of the ustopian fantasy. Even though up until this moment Aunt Lydia had collaborated with the regime without questioning their mandates, it seems that this encounter may contain the seeds for the possible rebellion that will transform her into the one who leads the plan to bring the nation down. Contrary to Eden's fate, who ends up dead before giving into the good life, Esther receives some kind of retribution, as the man that raped her this last instance is executed. By gathering the strength to speak up against the regime and killing the joy in Gilead, Esther creates the space to build an alternative future away from Gilead's happiness, but her destiny is left to see in the final season of the series.

5. Conclusion

The representations of girlhood included in both *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale* series revive the need for change and renewal of the restrictive politics of fictional Gilead, but also of Western patriarchal nations. Through points of contact with their own communities and their evolving identities, they manage to assert their refusal to become part of a system ruled by violence and abuse. Their subtle connections with ordinary but potentially radical moments in their coming-of-age process are the key elements that spark their transformation into feminist killjoys. Their dissonant voices, asking for joy and refusing to absorb the palpable abuse that is ever-present, will also impact others to act, resist and challenge the impositions. While the consequences of rebellion are not rewarding for all of those who decide to defy Gilead's codes, they will at least reach others who are impacted by the immanent force of their courage and act in their own ways to put an end to the genocidal nation.

This article has highlighted the need to study girlhood and its possibilities for resistance as a key mechanism for agency and proudly standing in the way of unethical and predatory practices. Girlhood and adolescence may be seen as a messy and transitory stage of life, which may underestimate its perception as a powerful force for change. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of possibilities within girlhood harbours an immense potential to generate alternative conceptions of the self that do not align with conventional notions of femininity, consistently striving forward with the radical desire of hanging on to joy.

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The Long Way to Emancipation in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

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ABSTRACT
Lauren Berlant's critical stance proves instrumental to carry out the analysis of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of* God, a story dealing with personal insecurities and crises, related to feelings of loss, trauma, suffering or failure. There is no doubt that Rachel, the protagonist and first-person narrator, encompasses all the trappings around the notion of "cruel optimism," and the novel can be considered as a drama of adjustment, where the fantasies of the "good life" are interweaved with the suffocation of ordinary life. Rachel will have to dismantle the view that by being both a good citizen and a loving daughter she may achieve happiness or, at least, peace of mind. This story of personal struggle and emancipation can be eventually related to the political circumstances in Canada's long process towards autonomy and independence.

Keywords
Canadian Dream; Cruel Optimism; Margaret Laurence; Prairies

1. Introduction

Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" has proved a fertile ground for assorted academic fields such as anthropology, psychology or political studies.

Literature scholars are no exception; Berkely and Karlova (Prague) universities have recently offered comparative literature courses on classic and modern literature from the perspective of Berlant's *good life* formulation. Furthermore, Berlant's focus on the failed *American Dream* has inspired publications on Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, Salinger or Zora Neale Hurston. In fact, Berlant has framed her critical discourse within the context of the social crisis in Western countries, and particularly in the United States, after the 1990s, when an increasingly conservative establishment, supported by an equally right-wing electoral body (Barber and Holbein), radically confronted those advocating racial rights, gender equality and social justice. She has traced the disappointment at the dissolution of the *Dream* into the neoliberal dogma, or what she calls "the retraction during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3).

In this paper we will argue that Berlant's analysis can show light on works from any other historical period or background, particularly if we want to consider characters or circumstances whose emotional attachments have proved unrealistic or failed. Berlant has paid especial attention to those who live precariously and feel vulnerable because their emotional affections have been conditioned by the wrong choice of fantasies or desires, and Canadian literature has produced a number of works that are ideally suited to be analysed under these assumptions. Among them, we could consider the dystopian production by Atwood, or authors that question the utopic vision of Canada, like Ann Marie MacDonald or Mordecai Richler. The focal point of our analysis will be Margaret Laurence, a writer who should not be missing from any survey of Canadian literature. Although critics like Aritha van Herk have suggested that her influence has been waning in recent times (Rocard 88), Laurence has often been referred to as a major figure, as a matriarch, by Atwood (1988), Dvorak (68), Wainwright (xi), Hutcheon (182), and Stouck (241), among others.

Laurence's *A Jest of God* is one of her novels set in the Canadian Prairies, in fictional Manawaka; the time coincides with the post-war period, when the notion of a *Canadian Dream* is associated to the consolidation of an advanced economy and a generous welfare state; some even believe that Canadians ended up regarding this concept of an egalitarian society as a defining national characteristic, particularly when compared with the United States (Johnston et al. 349-377). However, with the passing of time, the Canadian social miracle has been the object of scrutiny and criticism (Saul; Bissoondath), and Berlant's critical work helps to explore the circumstances that surround Rachel, a first-person narrator, whose fantasies of the *good life* are unfulfilled. It is interesting to notice that Berlant has portrayed in her own work a similar character, Rosetta, who equally despairs in the pursuit of happiness, fighting for self-knowledge and survival, mired in the stifling shadow of her mother's

clutches (*Cruel Optimism* 169). Rachel's mother has been called "a real ghost of the past" (Hughes 40), a label that would be equally fitting for the constitutional role of the monarchy in present day Canada. Therefore, we may end up finding parallels between the ordeal of the protagonist and the historical and political developments in the country.

2. The Canadian Dream

Rachel, the protagonist of *A Jest of God,* suffers from a constant emotional shift between attachment and disappointment; she is apparently enjoying the comforts of a cosy home, where her mother caters to her needs and she even acts as an amiable flat mate. Rachel has been awarded a diploma in teaching and is now the main earner of her home, enjoying a comfortable position at the local school, living in "a good part of town" (11). In fact, she reveals that when she was a schoolgirl she had daydreamed about being a teacher one day; now she has fulfilled her ambition and Manawaka seems to have offered her a haven. However, very soon in the narrative, we realise that this is only a delusion, a fantasy of the good life; telling good from bad in Rachel's story will prove not an easy task. In fact, her childhood dreams prove trivial enough as her ambition is limited to being "the one with the power of picking any coloured chalk out of the box and writing anything at all on the blackboard" (1).

In Laurence's novel some authors have seen indications of a society that opens up to feminism and women's rights (Brandt 257). Her position as a schoolteacher has secured financial independence; Rachel, like millions of post-war women, has given up traditional social roles in favour of personal autonomy. Moreover, at a time when smoking was an indicator of social visibility, Rachel is often portrayed buying or smoking cigarettes or bonding with fellow smokers as her closest friend, Calla. Her mother's disapproval of the habit only emphasizes a generational gap.

In the 1960's there was a feeling of "optimism about structural transformation" in most Western countries (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3), shared by many Canadians who started to benefit from upward social mobility, job security, affordable housing, political and social equality. This would also attract thousands of immigrants, represented in the novel by Rachel's Ukrainian boyfriend. Therefore, Rachel might be considered an offspring of the *Canadian Dream*. However, she will soon reveal her frustrations. Notably among them, her failed attempt to finish her university degree. Rachel might represent one more among those under the "conceit that still saturates the sentimental educational rhetoric about the identity-forming, citizen-building, or ethical function of education… the subaltern female student… was trained to think that her education

would simultaneously help her to bone an authentic self-identity" (Berlant, "Feminism" 150, 154). Rachel will openly admit her belief in the capacity of university to provide social upward mobility when she ponders (supported by ingrained prejudice) about Nick's humble origins: "It's as though I've thought in Mother's voice. Nick graduated from university. I didn't" (Laurence, *A Jest* 64). The fact that she is not exactly certain about the reasons that frustrated her graduation (perhaps family's mismanagement or squandering) points to an open wound and her lack of satisfaction in her present role as a schoolteacher. In one of the most revealing passages in the story, Rachel suffers a nervous breakdown when her mother's friends show praise for her job performance: "This pain inside my skull. What is it? It isn't like an ordinary headache" (18).

Ambivalence, so often discussed by Berlant, can be found in assorted images and symbols in this story. For example, the Cameron's house represents a middle-class entitlement, a comfortable place where Rachel finds a space of her own; however, we realise that this shelter has a sinister symbolism. Of all associations, the town's funeral parlour is located on the ground floor; no wonder that Rachel relates her parents' bond to the house to paralysis: "[Father] has really attached to the place… Mother wouldn't feel at home anywhere else" (56). Berlant has often emphasized that the *American Dream* is only a trap for the average citizen (*Compassion* 3); the post-war fantasy, based on some of the material achievements that Rachel has effectively secured, can in itself involve entrapment rather than welfare. In the Canadian context, this plight should be related to one of the most visible of national stereotypes, the "garrison mentality," as codified by Northrop Frye. He has stated that Canadian literature abounds in characters overwhelmed by a hostile nature and isolation: "In the earliest maps of the country the only inhabited centres are forts… these beleaguered inhabited centres offer the individual a safe haven and the comforts of social intercourse, but they also demand compliance with unquestionable moral and social values" (227-28).

In fact, critics like Coral Ann Howells have accounted for the influence of geographical factors in Canadian fiction (*Contemporary* 11-12). Writers such as Stephen Leacock, Louise Penny, Eden Robinson, Jack Hodgins, Wayne Curtis, Elaine McCluskey and Alice Munro have provided abundant examples of characters whose life is cast in the narrow margins of small towns like Manawaka. Therefore, Rachel's entrapment, unravelled throughout the narrative, can be seen as the result of a toxic bound to her family, home and town. As Daniel Cockayne and Derek Ruez point out, staying stuck and being attached to circumstances might "provide satisfaction through their repetition as habit" but it ends up exhausting the individual (qtd. in Anderson et al. 147). Rachel may have fallen prey to a fantasy of expectations, but she will end up being a victim of such "cruel optimism" that will put to test her mental balance; thus, Robert

Lecker states that "Rachel Cameron's story is a study of anxiety bordering on madness, and of the society that nurtures these fears" (88).

Some critics have suggested that the reader will feel frustrated by the narrative, somehow sharing Rachel's frustration. Berlant would probably classify this attitude as "compassion," which is always based on a relation between the spectator and the sufferer: "You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering" (*Compassion* 4), as can be the case with critics such as Robert Harlow, who frowns upon the use of the first person narration, considered as a technical failure; he states this has the effect of hiding from the reader the real reasons why Rachel does not change course, sparking the above-mentioned feelings of compassion: "The reader, instead of identifying, finds himself (herself, too, I should think) silently shouting at her to get some eye-liner, save for a mink, strong-arm a man, kill her mother and stop bitching" (190). Stuart McClelland, Laurence's lifetime editor, trying to assuage these voices full of scorn spoke out: "A lot of critics didn't think that *A Jest of God* was an advancement on *The Stone Angel*, but this was not an opinion I shared, as you know. One was a critics' book; the other [*A Jest of God*] was a readers' book" (qtd. in Solecki 123). In fact, Laurence has admitted to having pondered the pros and cons of choosing one or another point of view: "I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel herself is a very inturned person" ("Ten Years' Sentences" 21); Laurence also states that she failed when she tried third person narrative because "Rachel would not reveal herself" ("Gadgetry" 93); Clara Thomas sides with Laurence: "Rachel's voice, in the present tense, almost hysterical and yet propelling the reader compulsively onward, is the remarkable achievement of *A Jest of God*" (92).

Whatever our opinion about technical issues, the fact is that the reader is forced to pay attention to all that Rachel does not openly express but eventually reveals in one way or another. The story deals mainly with her feelings of confinement and entrapment and how she cannot find alternative ways of life; as Atwood has put it: "the story of a woman trapped in a prison partly of her own making" ("Afterword" 231). Berlant has explained that cutting off the ties and escaping may also bring about unhappiness and pain; therefore, afraid to venture out of the narrow boundaries of her apartment and, for that matter, of Manawaka's small social circle, Rachel will stay on, and the narrative of her life will be focused on describing her paralysis and feelings of entrapment. Thus, she perceives the house she is sharing with her mother as "not large"; other spaces are described as claustrophobic, symbols of Manawaka's suffocating atmosphere: the church she attends (the tabernacle) is "dense and murky, the way the sea must be, fathoms under… It's like some crypt, dead air

and staleness, deadness, silence" (Laurence, *A Jest* 36-37). Her friend Calla, who has drawn her to attend the religious services, is aptly whistling "She's only a Bird in a Gilded Cage" (53).

In one of the most significant passages in *A Jest of God,* Rachel pays a midnight visit to the funeral parlour located, of all places, on the ground floor of her own house. For all her life she had been avoiding coming down; this time she decides to confront her past, including the problematic relationship with her parents. Climbing down the staircase, she is making a Conradian journey into darkness where the parlour manager, a Kurtz-like figure, becomes her confidant and reveals existential truth. At some point, Hector will cease to treat Rachel as a mere visitor and invites her into a *sancta sanctorum*, a dark labyrinth: "He grasps my hand, and I'm tugged zigzag along a corridor, into the depths" (131).[1]

It is significant that Rachel, unable to overcome the limitations imposed on her life, embodies Frye's notion that "The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him" (228). Rachel is the product of an oppressive environment that could be interpreted in broad generic terms as that of any other small community in the world, although hers is a typical prairie location; as Lecker has pointed out, "[t]he town is all pervasive but is seen at one remove, through Rachel's eyes and through its effects upon her" (88). We can definitely identify the place as Canadian: the calendar at the headmaster's office runs: "*Bank of Montreal*" (Laurence, *A Jest* 50); Manitoba, Alberta, Winnipeg or Banff are explicitly mentioned. The landscape is equally Canadian; the end of winter is evinced through the visual aspect of the maple trees (17), a description only to be expected since landscape and weather are on the foundations of prairie fiction (Lecker 147). Laurence has often expressed her mixed feelings about this environment; she has always felt attachment but has equally admitted to the difficulties it involves. She has even blamed the territory for the pathological inwardness of many inhabitants, a very important clue to understanding Rachel's characterization: "we are a very stiff-necked people… there's a sort of suppression, the kind of repression of emotion" ("Margaret Laurence").

The setting, as happens in so many literary works, ends up being part of the character of the individual and Manawaka is a microcosmos that Greta Coger has

1. This setting also bears a striking resemblance to Poe's burial chamber in "The Fall of the House of Usher," which is also located in a deep dark vault (150). This, combined with a "glossolalia" episode, accounts for alternative readings of *A Jest of God* as a gothic narrative (Stein 79; Heiland 157). Furthermore, Rachel's journey, a kind of katabasis, reminds us of contemporary works such as Doris Lessing's *Descent into Hell* (1971) and *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) or Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1992).

called "a Canadian Yoknapatawpha" (228). The experience of the pioneers in the Prairies and those who came later has never been easy. In fact, there has always been a demographic crisis because people end up leaving this territory: "Towns throughout Canada's prairies are dying slow deaths. All along the highways of Saskatchewan, abandoned buildings lean against the prairie wind, which blows through the cracked windows of houses" (Brown). Statistics show that only some urban areas, and rural settlements around them, have been able to retain population (Carlyle) and we often find in scholarly work references to "the long-standing sense of hinterland marginality" (Sangster 387). Neepawa, the inspiration for fictional Manawaka, is one of those prairie towns struggling to survive, although Donez Xiques points to this particular settlement as a lively place with a number of social and cultural facilities, such as an opera house (23). However, it is interesting to notice that Laurence, by making this fictional counterpart much gloomier, attempts to emphasize the harsh realities of scattered small towns and villages across the province of Manitoba. This is the background for the discourse on Rachel's cruel optimism, and can be linked, as mentioned above, to one of the major Canadian tropes, Frye's "garrison mentality" (233).

Rachel has identified Manawaka and her home as a fortress and is reluctant to venture beyond the narrow boundaries of the small town; even on her occasional walks on the banks of the local river she feels out of place. Critics and writers have once and again emphasized that the wilderness is a masculine territory. As Robert Kroetsch puts it, there is a dichotomy house vs horse, where the horse means movement and distance while house is related to stasis (76). In fact, the wilderness is present in the novel mainly on a symbolic level, as in the world of dreams. It is in her sleep that Rachel trespasses upon the moral strictures of Manawaka, dreaming of wild spaces that allow some emotional liberation. Margaret Atwood has discussed the importance for Canadians of the "Grey Owl Syndrome," which makes Western people feel the attraction of primitive life (*Strange Things* 43). It is interesting to note that, as mentioned above, Rachel feels the attraction of the unexplored land by describing her dream lover in a heavily racialised way, as an athletic sun-tanned man with Indian features. She daydreams by fashioning herself as living in a dwelling place amid nature, as the wife of a somewhat exotic man, replicating some settlers' attitude to indigenize on the land (Oliver and Dobson 16). The real-life lover is described in a similar way: "Prominent cheekbones, slightly slanted eyes, his black straight hair… one of the hawkish and long-ago riders of the Steppes" (Laurence, *A Jest* 92).[2]

2. Rachel's real life love affair with Nick resembles that of other women in English fiction who trespass the restrictions of sexually repressive societies by loving a stranger, an

As Howells states, wilderness, Canada's most popular myth, is fashioned in colonial discourse as a place "outside civilised social order and Christian moral laws… the space of freedom from social constraints" (*Margaret Atwood* 21). Henry Kreisel refers to a neo-Calvinist framework that straightjackets settlers of the vast plain: "The prairie, like the sea, thus often produces an extraordinary sensation of confinement within a vast and seemingly unlimited space… It is natural that novelists should exploit the tensions which invariably arise when a rigid moral code attempts to set strict limits on the instinctual life" (623-625). Laurence, in one of her stories, had described loons as a bird species that best represents the uninhabited frontier territory: "No one can ever describe that ululating sound, the crying of loons, and no one who has heard it, can ever forget it. Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by aeons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home" ("The Loons" 102). Similarly, Rachel is captivated by and scared of these birds: "They were mad, those bird voices, perfectly alone, damning and laughing out there in the black reaches of the night water" (Laurence, *A Jest* 168).

3. Paralysis and Descent into Hell

When Rachel looks out of the window the chilly air enlivens her imagination and she is transported to the prairie plains where freight trains send a prosopopoeic whistle: *"don't stay don't stay just don't ever stay—go and keep on going, never mind where"* (Laurence, *A Jest* 173-174). The sound carries a message that she understands very well, as confinement is the most obvious leitmotif in *A Jest of God*. Window scenes make us aware of Rachel's physical seclusion, reminding us of Evelyn, one of Joyce's characters in *Dubliners*, who is also eternally looking out of the window, pondering about escape to distant Argentina with her boyfriend. Aptly enough, at the opening of the novel Rachel is also looking out of the window of an empty schoolroom; this tells us about her stance as a first-person narrator who will contemplate the world in the presence of a reader that is given privileged access to the innermost layers of her soul. Next comes her introspective stare; by being above the playground she enjoys an excellent vantage point to observe and describe, also affording the occasion for the first accounts of her failures in life. It is significant that by the

outsider or an exotic "Other," as can be seen in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and, at the same time, one more example of the Canadian settlers' notion that indigenous people are close to the natural world (Mackey 45).

end of the story we find Rachel in an analogous situation: "I walk to the window and look out at the playground, the gravel, the swings, everything the same as last year. Nothing has changed. Not anything or anyone" (165). As a passive onlooker, by the window, she mimics her ailing mother, routinely contemplating corteges: "She watches Japonica Street like a captain on the bridge of a ship, watching the ocean and hoping for some diversion. She almost yearns for funerals" (80).

Therefore, Rachel realizes that her role as spectator is not only sterile but also constitutes a barrier to acting, like a modern Hamlet: "I'm sitting here thinking of all this, when I should be doing something. I must get up now" (Laurence, *A Jest* 122); later on, when she discusses the prospect of departure with her mother she expresses once more her fear of remaining mired in words. At this point, she switches to second-person narration, summoning courage in an attempt to set herself in motion: "Do it Rachel. Or else quit" (201). Earlier in the narrative, we had already noticed she was aware of living with paralysis, as if she were one of Joyce's characters: "Where I went wrong was in coming back here, once I'd got away" (18); "how much I would like to leave this school" (32). Her dreams have turned into a nightmare, her expectations have proved to be in vain; if she had ever been confident about her future, the fact is she remains lonely and unmarried, she resents her ungainly physical appearance, she is fearful of ageing and is also crippled by a pathological shyness and self-distrust. She has fallen into all the trappings of life in Manawaka and yet she has remained fatally attached to this place.

Berlant has singled out the concept of the "good life" to describe a type post-war infatuation based on the assumption that the state will provide for the individual, who must sacrifice to reach the goal of social welfare and, ultimately, wellbeing. Rachel's failure serves to confirm Berlant's suspicion that the model is flawed and individuals often get waylaid; she points out that people actually become protagonists of "the bad life," described as "life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water" (*Cruel Optimism* 169). When Rachel thinks of where she has gone wrong, she does so in terms of comparison, checking her record against that of other female figures. Nick's sister is married and living in Montreal. Stacey, her own sister, is portrayed as Rachel's opposite; according to Flora Foster Stovel "[Stacey] could not appear more different in personality or situation… broad-beamed, hard-drinking, middle-aging extrovert who has escaped the clutches of the Cameron clan in Manawaka to live in the big bad city of Vancouver with her salesman husband" ("Sisters" 63). Therefore, Rachel mainly identifies her limitations and loneliness with the spatial constrictions of Manawaka. For fourteen years, she has been teaching at the school of her

childhood. Likewise, she has been a customer of the same beauty salon since she was sixteen because, in this small town, shops and enterprises embody the immutability of space and society; occasionally they are rebranded, as happens to *Cameron's Funeral Parlour,* later *Cameron Funeral Home*, then *Japonica Funeral Chapel* and, finally, *Japonica Chapel*; however, no major changes or renovations are involved in the process.

The limited availability of services may affect citizens in more serious ways. When Rachel needs medical or sexual consultation, she is forced to visit Dr Raven, long acquainted with her family, a fact that endangers the confidentiality of the medical check-up. Rachel had previously shown difficulty when dealing with male characters in positions of power such as her headmaster; she is permanently on the alert when she meets him, and some moments are presented as epiphanic: "Although he is short, he looms against the light from the window. His back is hunched, like a picture of a vulture in a geography book" (Laurence, *A Jest* 29), "he is smiling as thinly as a skull" (31). Rachel's description of the director seems to have been modelled on Joyce's priest in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "The director stood in the embrasure of the window, his back to the light,… the waning daylight from behind him touched the deeply grooved temples and the curves of the skull" (139-140).

This connects Rachel not only to Joyce's concept of paralysis but also of *Bildungsroman*. In her process of maturing, she becomes fully aware of the patriarchal arrangements of society, and characters like Willard mostly serve this purpose of denunciation. For example, in the parting scene, when Rachel has already tended her resignation, the headmaster presses her to open her heart and explain her reasons to leave; however, Rachel never bothers since "He doesn't want my answer. He wants me to say 'Of course I have always been as happy as a veritable meadow-lark in this eminently well-run establishment'" (Laurence, *A Jest* 197).

Patriarchal oppression is also associated to the figure of Dr Raven, whose surname carries an obvious symbolism in the Canadian tradition. Penny Petrone describes an anti-social character, rooted in folklore, and known as *Raven*: "[who] relies on cunning deceptions and mean tricks to reach his goals, which are usually food, or the possession of women" (16).[3] No doubt, the doctor embodies in Rachel's narrative a position that exacerbates the roles of the oppressor/oppressed, associated to rape, violence or extinction. As a

3. This symbolism is especially abundant in the Canadian context. The oral stories of the First Nations refer to figures such as Old Man, Ojibway, Glooscap or Coyote, as portrayed by Sheila Watson in *The Double Hook* (1959). Atwood mentions the "Wendigo," a bloodshot-eyed giant creature that is eager to eat human flesh (*Strange Things* 81).

patient, Rachel feels so downtrodden that she compares her situation to being at "Death's immigration office" (Laurence, *A Jest* 183). While in the clinic, she feels she no longer enjoys her rights as a respectable citizen of Manawaka, living on the good side of town, as seen in the imagery chosen to describe the waiting room: "all of us waiting with stupefied humbleness to have our fates announced to us, knowing there will never any possibility of argument or appeal" (183). This doctor, impersonated as a "raven" or "trickster" may be the agent for her physical annihilation. In mock Biblical imagery, he is perceived as an angel of death: "allotted to the job of the initial sorting out of sheep and goats, the happy sheep permitted to colonize Heaven, the wayward goats sent to trample their cloven hoofprints all over Hell's acres" (183).

At this critical point, Rachel is burdened with her psychological complexes and the related feelings of physical awkwardness, pathological shyness and ambiguous maturity, and she is suffering from what Berlant would call "slow death": "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (*Cruel Optimism* 96). In this sense, the transition from first into second person narrative remarks her divided, paranoid self (Stovel, *Divining* 207) or simply utter loneliness: "I've drawn together my tallness and loped through the waiting room, sidestepping chairs and outstretched feet, an ostrich walking with extreme care through some formal garden. Rachel, hush. Hush, child. Steady. It's all right. It's going to be all right" (Laurence, *A Jest* 183).

Dr Raven eventually diagnoses a tumour, and it is ironic that this forces Rachel to leave home, as she must go to a big hospital "in the city." Sarah Ahmed has repeatedly refused to give a definition of happiness, but she has certainly related it to the concept of "movement" (137); consequently, one would say that, by setting herself in motion, Rachel is giving herself another chance,

> happiness becomes a forward motion: almost like a propeller, 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… To become an individual is to assume an image: becoming free to be happy turns the body in a certain direction. (Ahmed 137)

We have repeatedly watched Rachel mired in paralysis; it is by going out of town that she takes a decisive step. Surgery involves physical healing, but the journey itself proves therapeutic. In fact, Laurence considers that when Rachel comes back she "does succeed in freeing herself from her mother's tyranny and from her own self-doubt and self-hatred" ("Ivory" 24).

4. Conclusion

The topic of offspring asking for freedom, and most notably the conflict mother/daughter, can be found in postcolonial works as diverse as *Lucy,* by Jamaica Kincaid; *A Matter of Time,* by Shashi Deshpande; *An Angel at my Table,* by Janet Frame or *Surfacing,* by Atwood. All of them admit an alternative interpretation as an echo of the struggle for independence that the former colonies underwent. As Cecily Devereux affirms, "Imperial visions of Anglo-Saxon racial hegemony underlie both the transformation of the New Woman into the imperial mother, and the reconstruction in the same period of the most potent image of the Second British Empire" (183-184).

The Manawaka novels, and particularly *A Jest of God*, can similarly be read from a political stance, and be related to issues of national identity (Pinder 403); Laurence herself stated: "Canadian writers, like African writers, have had to find our own voices and write out of what is truly ours, in the face of an overwhelming cultural imperialism" ("Ivory" 17); she confesses that "I was from a land that had been a colony, a land which in some ways was still colonial" (22). Laurence regrets the lack of self-esteem in her fellow citizens, blaming it on "colonial mentalities" (23). However, she sees the need to take a course of action by, as she states: "coming to terms with your own past, with your childhood, with your parents, and getting to the point where you can see yourself as a human individual no longer blaming the past, no longer having even to throw out all the past, but finding a way to live with your own past" (Cameron 98).

Along these lines, Laurence believed in Canada's potential, and advocated political redemption ("Ivory" 23); this points to the larger issue of the severing of historical ties of the Commonwealth realms with British institutions. In Canada, as happened in Australia and New Zealand, this process has run so smoothly that it might seem that, at some point, there has been a certain unwillingness on the part of these countries to cut off their umbilical cord. Berlant might have found this to be another form of "cruel optimism," insofar as these states, rather than enjoying the comfort of their constitutional arrangements, pivoting on British values, have suffered from a lingering sense of uncertainty about their identity. This, in turn, substantiates the fact that gaining independence has not been an easy task. The New Zealand referendum on a new design for the national flag in 2016 resulted in a majority of votes in favour of keeping the traditional ensign, where the Union Jack still features prominently. In Australia, both the the 1999 and the 2023 referenda on constitutional reforms resulted in a vote reinforcing the Anglo-Saxon European identity and prolonging the political status quo. It is no wonder that some authors have described these attitudes as "conservative, fearful and obstinate" (Aarons and Pietsch 3).

We can say that Rachel's story of survival has to be interpreted in view of her past ordeal, which is why Berlant is so pertinent in this discussion, as her nomenclature proves instrumental for the analysis of the protagonist, as already seen above. The neoliberal critique delves into the political dimension of this novel. In particular, this paper has addressed *A Jest of God* in terms of how it questions the *Canadian Dream*, a fantasy that is not within reach of certain social groups, be it the rural population of isolated rural environments, or women, whose gender casts a net of paralysis over them. Rachel, through her narrative, betrays her afflictions and the attempt to reconcile the elements in her life that have fulfilled and frustrated her at the same time. Hers is a story of redemption, at least partially. By the end of the story, she will no longer be mired in the past, finding a way to envision a future: "Where I am going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen… I will be different. I will remain the same" (Laurence, *A Jest* 201). While Rachel seems only to be starting a new cycle of cruel optimism, this is always a better option than the pessimism that precludes even thinking about the future.

In this soul-searching narrative, she ends up being empowered, as revealed by the words she utters on waking up from anaesthesia: "I am the mother now" (Laurence, *A Jest* 184). The protagonist of the novel has taken a long time to make up her mind, and so has Canada in its redemption process, from political autonomy into complete sovereignty. Full independence was eventually recognized in 1982 by the British Parliament and proclaimed by the Queen. Given that Berlant has pointed out that accommodating attitudes are self-delusive, we must conclude that it was high time, for a daughter of empire like Canada or, in a parallel reading, for Rachel, to see the demise of the mother figure. After such a long journey, this attests there is a future ahead.

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Mundane Joy as Emergent Strategy: Community Storytellers on "Happiness," "Resilience," and the "Good Life"

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ABSTRACT
This essay traces how community-based activist storytellers make room for emergent strategies in perilous times. It was sparked by the authors' experience of working between two distinct communities that are both deeply invested in understanding the function of story-and-art-making in troubled and troubling times. For brevity's sake, we will refer to the first community as the collective of "arts-based community-making" groups with whom we work under the auspices of the Centre for Community-Engaged Narrative Arts in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Our second community is the Spain-based RESHAP international group of literary and cultural studies scholars who are studying the theme of "Narrativas de la felicidad y la resiliencia / Narratives of Happiness and Resilience." In the context of "risk society"—the widespread perception of life on earth as dangerous, vulnerable, and fraught with complex hazards—popular media, governments, and corporations, in addition to school systems, public think tanks, and the self-help industry often urge people to generate what Sara Ahmed has called "happiness scripts," to keep positive and be resilient. These "scripts" become directive, insofar as stories of happiness, the good life, or resilience become mechanisms of discipline or coercive governance that can elicit what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism." Our essay teases out the emergent possibilities, the creative potential, that we see arising from community-based story-makers' navigation of the tension between these

(required) stories of the "good life" and the everyday, emergent strategies they invent in the midst of challenging times.

Keywords
Community-based Storytelling; Resilience; Emergent Strategies; Mundane Joy

1. Introduction

This essay examines the narrative expectations that often go unstated in widespread exhortations to achieve the "good life"—that is, to understand your experience as a story of finding *happiness* or *resilience,* especially in precarious times such as the period of the COVID pandemic. Our premise is that *the good life, resilience,* or *happiness,* among many other affective states, are essentially stories—scripts or narrative sequences that order events and experiences into stories of "bouncing-back" from trauma, conflict, or adversity (in stories of resilience) or navigating the "hap" of happenstance (in stories of happiness) in such a way as to feel one is living a good life. Another premise is that these kinds of stories or narrative sequences when collectively shared, have remarkable binding power to shape communities. Indeed, communities and subcommunities come into being by means of the stories they collectively share.[1] What we have learned by interviewing community-based storytellers in our city is that their communities tend to avoid predetermined story forms that would add up to *happiness* or *resilience* and espouse instead less-determinable narratives along the lines of what adrienne maree brown has called "emergent strategies"—strategies that she says involve "adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, fractal awareness, resilience and transformative justice, nonlinear and iterative change, creating more possibilities" (16-17).

These distinctions were recently highlighted for us through our experience of participating in two communities that share common interests in storytelling

1. We are influenced here by Benedict Anderson's argument forty years ago in *Imagined Communities* that dispersed people imagine themselves as part of a community when they can share the same stories. His argument was specific to the way in which the popular spread of print media (from newspapers and novels to maps) after the invention of the printing press made possible the emergence of the modern nation. The shaping power of stories to generate communities and belonging are not strategies deployed exclusively by official nation-states. As Korean-American writer Mathew Salesses points out, stories shape how people of various social and cultural positions find "meaning in our everyday lives" (15); speaking of the importance of storytelling to the formation and survivance of Indigenous communities, Cherokee writer Daniel Heath Justice writes that stories "connect us to the world, one another, and even ourselves" (4).

but are quite different from each other: in the first, we have worked in partnership with community-based artists and writers in the City of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where we three authors work, and in the second, we are participants in a team of international scholars studying "Cultural Narratives of Happiness and Resilience." You could call the first a community that practices storytelling in the everyday world, while you could call the second a community that theorizes the methods and effects of storytelling in the worlds of literary and cultural studies. We will say more about each of these groups momentarily, but for now we will note that both are interested in how shared stories create communities and how communities create shared stories (one way of understanding what "cultural narratives" do). As scholars trained in the disciplines of literary and cultural studies who draw on the insights of affect theory, disability studies and theories of care, we see our straddling these two communities as necessary to our investigation of a widespread public's relation to our disciplines and of our disciplines' relevance to a larger public.

The gaps between these two communities have been instructive to us because, when we asked our community-based artist and writer partners in a series of interviews conducted in the early half of 2022 how they would describe the benefits of their story-making and story-gathering activities, especially during the pandemic, we were struck by their avoidance of summative concepts like *resilience* or *happiness* that are key reference points for our scholarly community of theory, and how they instead preferred open-ended, improvisional concepts that emphasize unfolding processes, such as *surprise*, *creativity*, *community, care, spontaneity,* or *mundane joy*. Reflecting on our interviewees' statements, we have come to believe that their discomfort with terms like *resilience* and *happiness* stems from their resistance to the normative narrative sequences conveyed in these terms, sequences that present hard-pressed individuals or communities "bouncing back" from adversity or "overcoming" trauma to achieve a kind of solid state, affective denouement, such as *happiness* or the *good life*. Not only do these narrative sequences occlude the social, contextual determinants that generate trauma or precarity in the first place, they also fail to appreciate the creative energy or vitality that our interviewees valued most about the *process* of generating narrative artworks, producing collaborative stories, or participating in creative communities. In this sense, then, our essay discerns in our interviewees' responses a strategic, improvisational ontology that seeks to elude the preset narrative forms assumed by cultural scripts for *happiness* and *resilience,* for what constitutes the good life, by espousing mobile, processual ways of conveying their experiences that give them room to manoeuvre.

2. Context: Our Two Communities

All of the people we interviewed for this article are partners of CCENA, the Centre for Community-Engaged Narrative Arts, based at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (see https://ccena.humanities.mcmaster.ca/) founded and co-directed by Daniel and Lorraine, white, settler-Canadian faculty members in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton. Since 2016, CCENA has partnered with over forty storytelling projects generated by equity-seeking communities in the Hamilton area. CCENA's mantra is that we partner with groups who are engaged in "telling their stories their way." This means that we work with a very broad understanding of "narrative" or "story," and we have partnered on projects that use music, visual arts, poetry, stories of various people's food traditions, theatre, interactive mapping, and other methods of narration to tell community stories. Whatever genres or methods partners prefer to use, CCENA tries to provide moral, infrastructural, and financial support as well as consultation to help our partners facilitate focus groups or storytelling groups; edit their own forms of publication from websites to podcasts to zines; produce digital stories or music recordings; generate newsletters, interactive maps, community archives; or produce community plays, concerts, or exhibitions. Each year, we welcome a graduate student to work with us as a research assistant and manager, working with our Advisory Committee to decide on how to partner with the community proposals that come our way. Our RA manager facilitates CCENA's partnerships by communicating with our partners and arranging with them to feature their storytelling projects at our yearly series of Long Table gatherings, where community partners describe their projects, mainly to other community-based narrative-making groups in our city, but also to academics, and interested people from the general public. Kathryn, a white, chronically ill, settler PhD student came to McMaster in 2021, and we were fortunate to recruit her as CCENA's RA and manager.

All of CCENA's partner projects have been developed by already-existing community groups whose priorities range from racial or sex-gender equity, poverty and housing, to environmental concerns or disability justice. For the purposes of this article, we interviewed eleven community partners, asking them questions such as how they understood the role of creativity and narrative-making in facing adversity, what emotions or affects they associated with their project's activities, how individual or collective they understood their creative work to be, and what they thought of terms like "resilience" or

"arts-based community-making" for the work they did.[2] Here, we will offer a little background about these partners to provide a sense of the range and focus of CCENA's activities, to give readers an idea of what kind of narrative projects our partners have produced, and to set a context for what they had to say in response to our questions.[3]

- **Aaron** worked with the Hamilton Black History Council to research and assemble a "one-stop online shop" for locating multi-generational stories of Black history in Hamilton. A key site in the Underground Railroad, Hamilton has an over 250-year history of Black presence. Many historical sources are scattered around the city, so this project created a portal that would enable community people, who may not have inside access to various archives at McMaster University, Hamilton Public Library, Stewart Memorial Church, or private collections to find relevant materials on Black life in Hamilton.
- **Paul** and **Fiona**, who edit *Hamilton Arts & Letters (HAL)*, a social justice-centred literary journal, have published several special issues of this remarkable online magazine in partnership with CCENA, featuring art, photography, and writing on topics such as climate action, disability poetics, activist photography in the city, living through the COVID pandemic, and Indigenous writing in our region. You could say that *HAL* is a serial producer and distributor of Hamilton storytelling.
- **Leo** is a disabled poet, songwriter, and spoken-word artist who worked with *HAL* to produce "poem films," recording the vocal track for another poet's lyrics intercut with a commissioned blues music soundtrack accompanied by visual art. This collaboration was produced during the COVID lockdown, so although the artists—painter, poets, musicians, and film editor—involved in this project were local, they were forced to assemble the poem film virtually and never met in person.
- **Melissa** led another CCENA project in partnership with *HAL* in which she solicited and edited six essays for a special dossier in the journal on the topic of narrative-making and community engagement. You could say that Melissa's project constituted meta-storytelling: a collection of pieces telling stories about the importance of community-led storytelling.
- **Kelsey** contributed poetry that was featured in the "Ode to my Postal Code" CCENA-sponsored poetry-writing series of online workshops (again, during the lockdown), facilitated by the extraordinary

2. For the list of questions we asked our partners, please see our Appendix.
3. More information and links for the projects below can be found under our "Projects" tab at https://ccena.humanities.mcmaster.ca/

Hamilton-based spoken word artist and dubpoet, Klyde Broox. Each participant in the workshop series wrote and performed a set of poems in, about, and for their "postal code"—their neighbourhood of the city where they live.

- **Simon**, **Matt**, and **Nancy** constructed an interactive map and website based on oral history interviews and focus groups conducted with senior citizens who grew up in Brightside, a Hamilton neighbourhood that had been bulldozed to make room for Hamilton's once-powerful, now-waning steel industry. This work generated an exhibition at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre; a broadside paper including maps, photos, and narrative. Their telling of the former neighbourhood's stories has had such prominence that City Council has named a new park in Hamilton "Brightside Park."
- **Ashley** conducted psycho-geographical auto-ethnographic exploratory walks in downtown Hamilton where she had lived as a young Black woman. She employed the Situationist dérive theory of urban "drifting" to record her experiences of "walking-while-Black-and-female" on camera and in poetic form. She published the resulting work in *Pitch: Black Magazine* (Feb. 2020).
- **Rick** is Tuscarora of the Six Nations, an artist, art historian, and curator who had partnered with CCENA to produce *Creation Story in Haudenosaunee Narrative Arts*, a book derived from interviews with a wide range of contemporary Haudenosaunee artists about their renderings of the Haudenosaunee "Sky Woman" creation narrative, with particular emphasis on how the artists, who were often not raised in traditional families, discovered or reconnected with narrative tradition.

We hope that this brief overview of the partners we interviewed for this article and the projects in which they were involved demonstrates that, although telling stories that aim at equity and justice are common concerns across these groups, their approaches and spheres of activity are distinct from one another.

During the years when CCENA was involved in the above partnerships, Daniel had also been involved, alongside a McMaster colleague, Dr. Susie O'Brien, with the international RESHAP project investigating "cultural narratives of happiness and resilience." Composed of leading scholars of Spanish, Canadian, and other national literatures and cultural studies, the RESHAP group had received funding from the Spanish government to investigate "critical and theoretical scholarship on the notions of happiness and resilience and… to address the relative scarcity of research on both notions in the specific field of literary and cultural criticism" (Darias-Beautell and Fraile-Marcos). When RESHAP invited its members to contribute papers to one of their series of workshops on

the topic, Daniel asked Lorraine and Kathryn if they would like to pursue this line of inquiry by asking CCENA partners how they understood concepts like happiness, the good life, and particularly resilience in the community-based storytelling work they were conducting. This essay is the result of our reflections upon those interviews.

Led by Dr. Eva Darias-Beautell (University of La Laguna, Spain) and Dr. Ana María Fraile-Marcos (University of Salamanca, Spain), who had each conducted collaborative research projects previously on happiness (Darias-Beautell) and resilience (Fraile-Marcos), the RESHAP group seemed like kindred spirits to us three at CCENA because they approach the concepts of happiness, the good life, and resilience critically, aware of how what the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed calls "happiness scripts" and what RESHAP member Michael Basseler has called "resilience narratives" have risen to prominence in the context of what Ulrich Beck has called "risk society"—the widespread and increasing perception of life on earth as dangerous, vulnerable, and fraught with complex hazards. In such a context, when popular media, governments, and corporations—let alone school systems, public think tanks, religious institutions, or the self-help industry—urge people to "keep positive" or "bounce back," these "scripts" become directive, insofar as the objectives or goals of happiness, the good life, or resilience become mechanisms of discipline or coercive governance that can elicit what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism."[4] "The production of happy subjects," Fraile-Marcos and Darias-Beautell write in their RESHAP Project Description, is

> inversely proportional to the awareness of vulnerability and the body's material conditions of physical and psychological health, economic and ecological precarity, social isolation and so forth. Moreover, the success of the happiness industry, Ahmed argues, depends on the erasure of those conditions and the protection of hegemonic modes of heteronormative citizenship. (3)

This is the harm "happiness scripts" can cause; they readily become coercive tools in the neoliberal effort to convince everyday people that their capacity for the good life depends on their individual ability to make positive stories

4. "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 1). "[O]ptimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2).

from their experiences, leaving the structural and material conditions of their suffering and precarity (strategically) unaddressed.

Likewise, in their contributions to a volume of essays edited by Fraile-Marcos during the buildup to the RESHAP group's formation, *Glocal Narratives of Resilience,* Darias-Beautell and O'Brien, along with other scholars in that volume, linked the rise of interest in resilience to the upsurge in neoliberal thinking during a period of increasing globalization. For them and many other critics of resilience, the creative potential of resilience story-making can be recuperated under neoliberalism's dogma of constrained individualism in such a way that the oppressed are expected and even required consistently and repeatedly to adapt to their subjection. In a vein parallel to Ahmed's critique of "happiness scripts" and the "happiness industry," Basseler has written that "resilience is essentially a narrative concept. After all, the very notion of resilience, as the capacity to 'bounce back' from stress and pain, rests intrinsically upon the narrative sequencing of events, responses, and adaptive processes" (26). Consequently, Basseler suggests, stories of resilience constitute a kind of genre built upon what Marxist critic Frederic Jameson would call an "ideology of form" (29-30). Basseler goes on to sketch out some common properties of resilience narratives: 1) they often revolve around a disruptive or even traumatic event or situation of perceived risk, 2) they often feature narrators who work hard to restore coherence and continuity, meaning and normalcy, 3) they often emphasize social and cultural resources or elements (such as music, artforms, or traditional ceremonies) which serve to increase the resilience of individuals, groups, communities, and even societies (27-29). Considered as a narrative form or genre, then, resilience pre-shapes the story it tells. It brings with it certain expectations of sequence and plot, metaphor and resolution, to the experience for which it ostensibly accounts.

3. Terminology and Narrative Expectations

Our experience of interviewing community-activist story-makers about their experiences during the COVID pandemic drew the problem of these narrative expectations into sharp relief: it is not that the stories they were telling and collecting in their neighbourhoods were dismissive of the *affect* of happiness or the quality of resilience. Our interviewees seemed more concerned about how these affects and qualities get mobilized. That is, as soon as we turned to our RESHAP community's vocabulary about how our partners' work as community-based storytellers related to happiness or resilience, we could see how these terms' narrative expectations and timelines did not adequately reflect their experiences. "Why are creative activities so important in these times?" we

asked Paul and Fiona. "Let's turn that question on its head!" they replied. "Are there *any* times when creative activities are not important?" Simon put it this way: "Creative stories are important *all* the time." These story-makers disputed our time signature; they didn't want to credit the pandemic as a necessary, painful stimulus to the story of creativity. When we asked, "Is *resilience* a word you would use to describe your experience with your project?", Melissa admitted, "I wasn't… sure how I felt about that word because it's become the sort of badge of honor that I think can mask… a kind of tolerance for harm," while Aaron remarked, "I'm upset that [we in the Black community] have had to be resilient… What should we be doing so we *don't* have to be resilient?" It didn't take long for us to realize that people who create stories in and for our city's communities found the terms we brought to our inquiry overly restrictive.

If, as Basseler has suggested, "the very notion of resilience… rests intrinsically upon the narrative sequencing of events" (26), then we think our community partners were drawing attention to our terminology's tendency to sequence—and, in the hindsight of evaluation, to make meaning of—their events, responses, and adaptive processes. We understand their responses as showing us that *happiness* and *resilience* imposed narrative expectations on them, similar to literary genres such as romance, tragedy, epic, or autobiography, with their narrative teleologies, and these limited our community narrative-makers' freedom to find sequences that did not marshal their experiences to fit a preset structure. In listening to our community partners' querying of these terms, then, we wondered who exactly the terms *resilience* or *happiness* are for. In our conversations, our partners rarely, if ever, brought these words up on their own when describing their storytelling activities. Rather, it was only when we introduced them as a possible descriptor that participants tried to fit their experiences into these narratives, or else suggested alternate terms altogether. Melissa suggested that resilience is "a very traditional idea, this idea that persevering through difficult times is how you show your worth, or your good character." We understand the insufficiency of our key terms, then, as arising from community partners' effort, maybe even their need, to maintain a non-predetermined freedom when it came to assessing the value and effects of their efforts to generate community stories and creative forms of self-expression.

Our community partners did, however, curate their own language for describing their experiences. Ashley summed up her reaction to *resilience* as a way of describing her experience when she said, "I want to emphasize that we [Black Canadians] need radical love, and I would replace resilience with that for us, and let the [political] right keep resilience." "Our [story-gathering] research did not make [community participants] *happy*," added Nancy. Rather, "our research provided them many moments of *joy*." Joy was a term that recurred in many of our partners' responses: "Joy exalts," Nancy went on to say.

"It's big… Joy elevates completely in a way that happiness does not." Along the same lines, Kelsey said artistic creation is joyful, precisely because it's "not expected… You could have an idea, but a lot of times you have this energy to do something and then you're surprised by the end result, as much as anybody else. And then it's like these layers of, oh *this* [poem]–*this* came from me, this came from my experience! That's the magical part of creating; that is the unexpected reflections." Our partners' chosen terminology highlighted for us a questioning of the structures imposed by resilience: by redirecting the conversation away from the conflict and trauma inherent to resilience and instead towards the spontaneity of unexpected joy, our interviewees communicated a desire for remaking expectations of arts-based community work. As Ashley went on to say, "A lot of people that do this kind of … social justice work think that [it's] also joy… I don't want our passion to be struggle, constantly. I want our passions to also be… Prosecco!"

4. Centring Trauma: Do Stories, Like Resilience, Always Have to Be Structured Around Conflict?

Listening to our partners' preferences for joy, spontaneity, and love over resilience, we noticed that many of them expressed frustration over public perceptions of resilience as a *product* needing to be achieved rather than a *process* which can be messy, ongoing, and incomplete. Kelsey pointed us in this direction when she told us, "Moving towards resiliency is not necessarily a capacity or something that you *have,* or that you definitely *possess,* but it is a kind of horizon you're moving towards," while Melissa addressed the issue even more directly: "If we actually want change, we'll focus on *process*. If we just want the semblance of change, we'll focus on *product*." Their statements accord with Simon's warning that the temptation to instrumentalize art-making and creativity "reduces its free play; loses what's resilient about it–its 'playful indeterminacy.'" Our community-based partners consistently avoided summative, conclusive terms and preferred open-ended ones that emphasized ongoing process.

If we understand resilience to be a narrative structure, then we wondered: what does a public fixation on *product* over *process* mean for storytelling? These conversations with our partners reminded us of the disabled activist Harriet McBryde Johnson, who wrote in her 2006 memoir *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life* that "Storytelling itself is an activity, not an object" (4). From this, we understand the *process* of storytelling and what it represents for the storyteller–an opportunity to be heard or witnessed–to mean more for the community it involves than the *product* itself. Thus, by expressing their preference for process over product, our community partners redirected

expectations for community arts-making away from what an audience may *take* from a story and towards instead what the storyteller (and their audience) *gains*—joy, surprise—from the telling.

While our community partners aim for joy in their everyday practice, discussions of narrative in Canada as both a craft and a field of analysis often conform to a Western perception of storytelling. Whereas Western storytelling positions crisis or trauma as a crucial point around which a narrative unfolds—with the character persevering through conflict until a resolution is achieved—storytellers in many African and Asian cultures do not consider conflict as the driving force in a story. In *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, for example, Korean-American novelist Matthew Salesses writes that "In East Asian fiction the twist… is not confrontation but surprise, something that reconfigures what its audience thinks the story is 'about'" (54). If we take resilience to be a narrative structure that privileges a conflict-centred Western understanding of storytelling, then we can understand Salesses's account of East Asian fiction as bypassing resilience and instead prioritizing the unexpected, which many of our partners spoke about valuing within community narrative-making projects.

One of CCENA's partner projects during the COVID pandemic highlights this assumption about the purpose and structure of narrative. Leo Nupolu Johnson, the Liberia-born Hamilton community activist, proposed and organized the Ubuntu Gospel Music partner project with CCENA in 2020-2021. In his project description, Leo noted that throughout his leadership in the Black Lives Matter protests on Hamilton's streets in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, he was troubled by the way public narratives of Black life in Hamilton centred on trauma, grief, conflict, and anger. These portrayals were absolutely justified, he noted, but he felt they limited public understandings of why Black lives in our city matter to Hamiltonians. By contrast, Johnson noted that "the history, beliefs and folklore of African communities have been kept alive through the tradition of music and oral storytelling. Stories have been passed through the ages by musicians, poets and artists… African [stories] are often created to be verbally and communally performed as an integral part of dance and music" (1). Given this story-in-music-and-dance tradition, Johnson observed that Hamilton's Black communities had narratives of joy, creativity, and embodied pleasure to share with the city, especially in times of struggle and adversity, and he arranged for CCENA to provide support for a group of twenty-some young African musicians to present a concert on the forecourt of City Hall in a public expression of *Ubuntu,* "I am because you are" (Johnson 1). The concert and subsequent recordings and YouTube video, he said, were meant to convey African values of celebration, resurgence, gratitude, and regeneration.

The assumption of crisis and conflict as central to Western understandings of story, by contrast, places resilience as central to the way Western narratives seek to resolve conflict. Basseler cites Luckhurst to suggest that resilience might, then, be understood as the "narrative possibility, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative" (17). Thinking of this linkage between trauma and resilience, then, we wondered what effect focusing our inquiries on resilience may have had on the partners we interviewed. Aaron, for example, said that "I feel like sometimes we focus a little too much on celebrating the people who have the resilience to actually do these things and sometimes we forget about the people [for] whom [resilience] is not as easy—whether it's just based on who you are as a person, the amount of obstacles you have, or even based on disability—the fact that sometimes you might not be able to be as resilient as everybody else." Which raises the question: who are we excluding when we focus on resilience? And how might asking *already* marginalized individuals to conform to such narratives, regardless of their desires or capacity to do so, harm their communities?

In "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck addresses the larger harms of "damage-centered research," proclaiming "the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (413). We take Tuck to mean that researchers who focus exclusively on trauma risk portraying communities solely through the lens of oppression. While resilience narratives ask a community to continually return to the trauma of the past, the terminology our partners suggested—like joy and desire—look instead to a collective future, reminding us of Raymond Williams' proclamation that "To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing" (118). As researchers and community members ourselves, then, it is our responsibility to reflect the community's chosen terminology and the complexity of their pasts while also maintaining an eye towards the future. Tuck wrote, "It is our work as educational researchers and practitioners, and especially as community members, to envision alternative theories of change, especially those that rely on desire and complexity rather than damage" (422). Alternative narratives about how change works were on Rick's mind when he suggested, "Let's not script what the community narrative *should be*, but let's listen to what the community narratives *are*—that's what the arts can provide." Throughout these conversations, our partners advocated against using resilience as the standard way to assess community narratives, and instead upended common perceptions of arts-driven community work as displaying perseverance in the face of oppression—thereby resisting the kind of damage-centred research Tuck describes. Indeed, Ashley summed up several of our partners' reactions to resilience when she pointed to how many "… see resilience as this thing we need to achieve and be good

at and I reject that." Rather, Ashley went on to say, "I refuse the term resilience and instead call it *community*."

5. Care Work as Alternate Narrative Structure: Finding Joy in Community

In her introduction to *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century,* disabled activist Alice Wong proclaims, "Community is political. Community is magic. Community is power. Community is resistance" (xviii-xix). We would add that people can feel part of community as they envision themselves sharing the stories of politics, magic, power, or resistance together with others around them. Throughout our conversations with our partners, we often found ourselves returning to the expansive possibilities of community. To circle back to Ashley's observation, "I want to emphasize that we [Black Canadians] need radical love, and I would replace resilience with that for us, and let the [political] right keep resilience." Or, as Kelsey echoed: "That is community, you know: love." From our discussions, we understand that our partners view community—like joy, desire, and some of the other terms our partners offered in place of resilience—as an inclusive space: anyone who subscribes to the stories that define that space can belong to a community. In contrast, not everyone has the desire or ability to be resilient. Aaron, like several of our partners, questioned the need for resilience during our conversations, asking "Why do we *have* to be resilient?" while Melissa touched upon a similar idea when she told us that resilience, "especially in the conversation that we're having today around mental health, in the kind of people who can't persevere, [is] actually a demeaning idea, in some way." If we understand resilience as a narrative often imposed on marginalized communities, we wondered: can there be community-making agency in refusing resilience as an organizing principle for telling community stories? And, if so, what organizing principle might we use to replace resilience? This line of thinking brings up, for us, the question: what value is there in *resisting* resilience as a narrative structure?

In their interviews, Melissa and Ashley both pointed to rest as a radical response to the exertion demanded by resilience. On the topic of resilience excluding people with disabilities and mental illness, Melissa said, "that's actually very counter-challenging to our modes of work and… capitalistic imperatives to say in fact that if we hit the pause button and say 'I can't right now'—what value does that have instead of resilience?" Pursuing a similar line of thinking, Ashley pointed to how "capitalist time tells you to hurry up and that being busy and overworked and under—rested is a positive thing" and how, in contrast, "I embrace the mundane and I want us to find ways, even after this pandemic, to be more mundane—to have more time at home." This focus on mundanity as

a radical act—on everyday care over a narrative structured around trauma and resilience—reminded us of the many cultural forms of storytelling that focus on building joy rather than conflict.

In listening to our partners find alternatives to resilience as a narrative structure, we wondered if "care work" might better describe the complex arts-driven community work in which our partners are engaged. Disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, in her 2018 book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice,* proclaimed, "we have the opportunity to dream and keep dreaming ways to build emergent, resilient care webs" (23), which reminded us of brown's description of emergent strategies as, "Not one perfect path forward, but an abundance of futures, of ways to manage resources together, to be brilliant together" (14-16). Piepzna-Samarasinha goes on to ask, "What does it mean to shift our ideas of access and care (whether it's disability, childcare, economic access, or many more)… to a collective responsibility that's maybe even deeply joyful?" (21). Posing care work as an opportunity to forge "a collective joy and offering we can give to each other" (12), Piepzna-Samarasinha suggests a connection between the kinds of radical love and joy our partners described and community-driven care work. We wondered, then, what might happen if we stopped imposing summative narratives such as resilience or happiness upon the communities we work with and instead prioritized care? Would we avoid structuring narratives around damage, like Tuck suggests, and instead redirect ourselves towards a more collective future? As the disabled activist Sami Schalk writes, "Our knowledge," built by community stories, "is part of how we [Black disabled people] as a collective not only make it to the other side but also build a new world that is more capable of responding with care for all of us, not just some of us" (160). Or, to quote the disability justice performance group Sins Invalid, "To exist is to resist."

6. Radical, Mundane Joy

Radical mundanity, and the embrace of everyday pleasures that it entails, offers another alternative to trauma-based narrative frameworks and terminology. It opens the way for joy as a correspondingly radical affect that suffuses the kinds of arts-based community-making that CCENA supports. And there is reason to believe that the joy that emerges from the radically mundane is closely tied to the idea of *process* that our community partners value so highly. When Brian Massumi theorizes joy, he connects it to his more general notion of affect as an embodied becoming. "Affect," he declares, "is thinking, bodily… a movement of thought or a thinking movement… accompanied by a sense of vitality or

vivacity, a sense of being more alive" (10). When Massumi points out that this conception of affect is "more compelling than coming to 'correct' conclusions or assessing outcomes" (4), his thinking correlates powerfully with our partners' preference for a processual language of doing and becoming rather than one of tabulating final results. In fact, one reason for the insufficiency of the terminology we proposed to our partners is its lack of what Massumi perceives as valuable about affect: its mobility. Affect as embodied becoming allows for "a margin of manoeuvrability" that people can focus on "rather than on projecting success or failure" (4): a liberatory incrementalism considered as affective-political "wriggle-room" (6). In essence, this mobile manoeuvrability is what we understand Simon to mean when he highlights creativity's anti-instrumentalist "playful indeterminacy."

Mundane occupations and situations give rise to this joy; intensity need not only attend culminating moments. Ashley connects the reclaiming of pleasure in Black communities with anti-capitalist, leisurely temporality, even though such pleasures are often thought to be counter-revolutionary: "I can live here [in a nice apartment] and… do my nails and it doesn't make me a bad revolutionary."[5] This embrace of mundane, radical joy is not a bourgeois seeking of refuge from ideological critique in an apolitical aesthetics, for pleasure becomes radical when it thrives in the face of an ongoing history that has sought to eradicate it wherever possible. As Ashley pointedly remarked of Black pleasure, "I understand what this leisure time means and… what it was borne from… what it came out of."

This joy—"what it was borne from" and "what it came out of"—is powerful but it is also fragile, precious, fleeting, and frequently under attack. We might distinguish it from its liberal humanist cousin as everyday, "*resistant* joy." And its temporality, in turn, distinguishes it from what we might call, borrowing from physicists and chemists, "steady state" conditions of happiness, the good life, or resilience. (A "steady state" is one in which stability and predictable equilibrium can withstand countervailing challenges or changes. The most common illustration of this state is the water contained in a bathtub while the faucet is on and the drain is unplugged). Joy, on the other hand, is more commonly associated with surprise, eruption, a bursting forth, a volatile substance that is anything but steady. Water circling noisily down the drain! Water overflowing the bathtub!

5. See Rebecca Solnit's *Orwell's Roses*, in which she argues that Orwell's attention to natural beauty (as captured in his act of planting roses at this cottage in Hertfordshire) is not opposed to his political writings and advocacy but is, instead, intimately intertwined with them.

This sense of joy as burgeoning movement is linked to the empirical or experimental method that many of our partners have espoused; as Massumi explains, joy is:

> an empirical kind of belief. Ethical, empirical—and creative, because your participation in this world is part of a global becoming. So it's about taking joy in that process, wherever it leads… having a kind of faith in the world which is simply the hope that it continue… not a hope that has a particular content or end point—it's a desire for more life, or for more to life. (48)

Our community partner, the poet Leo, takes joy in collaborative film-making in precisely this empirical, experimental way: "there's a lot to be said for just getting it [one's creative contribution] out there, you know, and just trusting that it's going to be what it is… and really going with the flow." Out of that flow, for Leo comes "generosity": "when you give something and you don't care about what happens or who notices or who says what, when you just say okay I have this to give. Here it is." We discerned a similar preference for empirical experiment over deliverables in Kelsey's answer to our question about why she associates creative work and joy. Noting that she had recently finished writing a poem whose final word was "joy," she replied, "I think because it's not expected… [A] lot of times you have this energy to do something and then you're surprised by the end result." Several of our interlocutors emphasized the serendipity of the creative joy that they had experienced—its isolated temporal bursts. This is the improvisatory faith that Massumi calls "joy," bubbling up and overflowing the conventional "tubs" of artistic and social practice.

The staccato temporality of joyful creation appears to have been all the more striking to our partners during the pandemic. Just because everyday, resistant joy manifests itself in vibrant bursts does not mean that it is untethered to difficult experiences like the pandemic (Ashley's "what it was borne from" and "what it came out of") whose temporalities remain expansive, systemic, and persistent. Melissa connects the momentary "wow, something happened" of creative collaborations with relationality in all its difficult, protracted phases: "when we're exposed to the story of another person" "… that moment where you should have to confront the fact of another person's existence in reality through a narrative art project… [T]he most transformative moments in my work have come in those moments of critical reflection, as opposed to [seeing] other people's reaction to an end product."

For Rick, the quality of the creative moment that he would identify as resilient is a *replicability* that stitches together discrete joyous moments in a temporal extension that constitutes hope: "The resilience comes in when you want to do

it again. Let's go back and do it again. Let's sing that song one more time. Let's have that ceremony one more time. Let's show that we care about this so much that we hope it continues." Leo's definition of resilience as "continuation… the ability to continue," which he sees personified in the Ukrainian people who are robustly resisting the 2022 Russian invasion, channels this same recognition of the value of replicability. Creative joy contains within its short burst of temporality the promise of a replicability and continuity that, in their expansion of joy's temporality, become, in essence, care.

Radical joy extends care in many ways, not least because it has the capacity to materially affect and rebuild social relations in a way that promotes social generosity. carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, who, like Massumi, take Spinoza's theory of affect as a starting-point for their thinking, agree with Massumi that joy is distinct from happiness, for "Whereas happiness is used as a numbing aesthetic that induces dependence, joy is the growth of people's capacity to do and feel new things, in ways that can break this dependence" on capitalism's recipes for commodified happiness (n.p.). And when that dependence on externally validated versions of the good life is lifted, networks of care sprout and thrive in its place: "When people find themselves genuinely supported and cared for, they are able to extend this [care] to others in ways that seemed impossible or terrifying before" (bergman and Montgomery). Ahmed, also building on Massumi's theories, similarly cautions that "We need to take care not to collapse joy with happiness… Joy is a less weighty word; it is often used to signify an intensity of feeling that is transitory" (214). And yet if the "intensity" that both Ahmed and Massumi identify is let loose in the kinds of creative practices that our partners have devised, we can witness a realignment of ways of being social that is "weighty" enough! While joy, according to bergman and Montgomery, "rarely feels comfortable or easy," provoking the sort of unease that attends the revolutionary rebuilding of social relations, it is still capable of nourishing "the growth of people's capacity to do and feel new things… because it transforms and reorients people and relationships… it is resonant with emergent and collective capacities to do things, make things, undo painful habits, and nurture enabling ways of being together" (n.p.). The language of movement and development that is fundamental to Massumi's affect theory resurfaces here ("do and feel new things"; "transforms and reorients"). And if social creativity is approached in the spirit of patient, inductive experiment that many of our partners have articulated to us, it can be more effective than broadly utopian thinking. As Massumi argues, "focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture isn't really settling for less. It's not exactly going for more either. It's more like being right where you are—more intensely" (3).

7. Conclusion: "Emergent Strategies"

In closing, we emphasize that mundane joy is not "settling for less" either; it is not a politely quietist alternative to radical social change. As we noted earlier, brown's concept of emergent strategy captures the vision of serendipitous experiment that CCENA's partners have devised precisely because those strategies are "ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions" (brown 14). Taking inspiration from Octavia Butler's fiction, brown deeply believes that "radical ideas speak through conversation, questions, one to one interactions" (14), CCENA will continue, in this spirit, to facilitate the kinds of "conversations, questions, and one to one interactions" that communities already practice, in the belief that those strategies can scale up to be shared more broadly as means of sweeping social change. As brown explains,

> emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (16)

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Appendix

CCENA Happiness and Resilience Project Interview Questions

- Why are creative activities so important in these times?
- George Lipsitz speaks of "arts-based community making"—a phrase that reverses the more expected "community-based art-making." Would that describe the method and aim of your project? Is community important as a goal for your project? What is it about arts (story- or narrative-making) that builds community?
- How individual or collective is your project? Does your project encourage individual or collaborative creativity? How would you describe your participants' experience of community over the course of your project?
- Resilience is a much-used term these days to describe how people adapt to adversities and even find new energies. Is this a word you would use to describe your hopes for the participants in your project? If so, what does it help identify? If not, what term or terms would you prefer?
- What do you feel are the limits of your project and what it can achieve? Why?
- What does your project bring to participants? What do participants bring to your project? How do you feel about the relationship between these two acts of contribution?

- What feelings do you associate with the carrying out of your project?
- What qualities or habits of mind does your project introduce and/or reinforce in community participants?
- What difference does your project potentially make in the world?

Interview

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"Hope, but also Danger": A Conversation with Larissa Lai on not Going Back and the 'Re' of Recuperation

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Larissa Lai is a poet, fiction writer and academic who holds a Canada Research Chair at the University of Calgary, where she directs The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing. She has authored nine books. Her most recent works are *The Tiger Flu*, *Iron Goddess of Mercy* and *The Lost Century*. She is a recipient of the Jim Duggins Novelist's Prize, the Lambda Literary Award and the Otherwise Honor Book. She was recently awarded a Maria Zambrano Fellowship at the University of Huelva in Spain and has been actively engaged in cultural organizing, experimental poetry and speculative fiction communities since the 1980s. Her work often explores themes of identity intertwined with elements of science fiction and the fantastical imagination. This interview took place in Parque García Sanabria on 24th March 2023 during a visit of Larissa Lai to the University of La Laguna and it focuses on the convergence of history, myth and affects, providing a reflection on the circularity of time and the promise of happiness.

Sheila Hernández González: In preparation for this interview we have been reading your articles, and some of them, like the well-known "The Sixth Sensory Organ," are pieces that you wrote in the 90s, which means they are almost thirty years old. In a previous interview with Anja Krüger, you stated

that you do not define yourself as a propaganda writer and that you are more interested in notions like history, technology and memory according to your own particular experiential and embodied location (97). Keeping this in mind, how do you feel about growing as a writer? Since your writing is both personal and political, have you noticed any change or growing concern that has shifted away from your early works?

Larissa Lai: First of all, thank you both for your time and for giving my work such careful thought and consideration. I am really honored and I appreciate it so much. Thank you as well for this beautiful first question. I would stand by what you just said about recognizing the importance of writing from my own embodied location. If something has changed over the years, it is a sense of what exactly constitutes that location because, of course, as the discussions move on, our understandings of Chineseness and Asianness changes. The way we think about gender and sexuality has changed too, and my own life has moved on, meaning that I inhabit relationships differently. If something has shifted in 30 years, it is probably a deeper recognition of my own embodied relationship to other racialized positions. I am particularly thinking about Blackness and Indigeneity and the ways in which Asianness is continuously coming into being in relation to those racialized positions and through the vast and violent movements of capitalism and colonialism that place us differently, specifically in relation to questions of land and the body, and particularly the production of property. If you think about how Blackness is produced, for instance, in part through the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, and what that might mean in relation to the way Asian labor comes in later to supplement it: Black bodies are commodified and Asian bodies are nominally not. Experiences of labor overlap and diverge from one racial location to the next in complicated ways also. In relation to Indigeneity, the major disjuncture occurs around Indigenous commitments to sacred land counterposed against Asian participation in the conversion of sacred land into real estate, if one thinks, for instance of the Chinese sojourners who worked on the railways to open up the West for colonization, or if one thinks of Asian participation in contemporary real estate practices now. Discussions around these issues were available in the 1990s, but they were perhaps not so much at the forefront. And so, if something happened at that time for me, it was an important recognition of how deeply those differences produce my own embodied experience, but also the embodied experience of others. I need to be accountable and responsible towards both my own repressed history and those of other racialized people, but without reading those histories in overdetermined ways that close the door on those parts of our being that are subtle or not yet visible or yet to come. If I have learned anything in all these years it is that I must move slowly, be extremely

humble and really do the work of listening, which is as important as the work of speaking, writing, etc. I was aware of these things when I was younger, but as I get older that sense of how deeply embedded we all are in fraught and complex histories, how little language and relationship we have to address the problems, and how much building needs to be done to be more conscious. In the early days, I was fortunate to have been given an unusual education by virtue of coming up through the cultural communities in Vancouver: a big part of my early education was not in the academy, but on the streets and in the artist-run centres and small art projects involving a very heterogeneous community of differently racialized people who were all trying to figure things out. I had the good fortune of being mentored by a number of artists engaged in a range of different practices and working from a range of different backgrounds too. Among them were writers, video artists, photographers, installation artists, curators, filmmakers, painters and more. One of the key things I learned from them was that the work is grounded in practice, and that practice matters more than the "results." I have committed myself to the work of practice. When you write on a daily basis, you figure things out about the way writing works, the way your own head works, what you are good at, what you are not, where you are able to see things very clearly, and also where you have tendencies make assumptions or fail to see, hear or feel. And so I think I am more aware of my own capacities and incapacities than when I was younger, which gives me a certain confidence around being able to speak of those things where I know I can see more deeply than others. But it also makes me more humble in those areas where I can see that I cannot see.

Jennifer Estévez Yanes: You write about possible futures and utopian dreaming, yet you always go back to the past. In your recent lecture "Why I Write Historical Fiction," you also emphasized the idea of working with that genre as a way of looking back to the past to understand the present. Would you say you revisit the past in a nostalgic manner (in an attempt to recuperate something lost), or are you critical in that journey back? Is it necessary to look backwards in order to look forwards?

LL: I would say that when revisiting the past a certain measure of nostalgia is probably unavoidable, nostalgia in that sense of an unattainable desire for a thing that is gone. For me, that desire is a huge part of what drives the work. The desire comes from an awareness that there are things about the past that we do not know, and also that there are things that are known but not very well known. There are also things about the past that have been recorded by people in positions of power in the past whose relationship towards the things known is not the relationship that I have. And so I think a certain nostalgia is

unavoidable in the sense of wanting to find the things that are not known, wanting to bring to the surface the things that are known but not well known, and maybe also a desire to retell, from my own location, the stories that have been told about me or my people and my forebears without much care or interest in us. So nostalgia as desire is unavoidable, although not necessarily bad. However, nostalgia and criticality are not mutually exclusive.

I think we need both research and the imagination. I fully believe in the power of the imagination to allow us to know things about the past differently from the truth of journalism or a scientific experiment, for example. One just needs to be aware of the possibility of romanticizing the past or reproducing power relations that you do not want to reproduce. Nostalgia is an attempt to recuperate something lost but with an awareness that you can never have the past again. So the 're' of recuperation is always the important thing to pull to the foreground. We have to recognize that any "return" is a turn again in which you get a repetition with difference. You do get something of the past but rebalanced with all of the present's troubles. I think that you can only make the future from the present that you have and the present that you have necessarily comes from the past as you understand it. And if you understand the past in a certain way you will tend to reproduce it. You do some kind of memory or genealogical work (which is the work of the imagination) in order to seek a different kind of relationship to the past because it places you in the present differently and in inhabiting the present differently, one hopes one can build a future, again, differently. It is about recognizing what is in the past to the best of your ability and developing some visions or ideals about what might emerge from that past. You do that work of imagining the future as well, and you dream it, but you are also working with others who may not dream the same dreams and may not imagine the same futures. So that is how I think about the relationship between the past and the future, but we are talking about linear time here. If we are thinking the way in which some Indigenous elders will teach (and also my recent work about the Tao), we see that there are other ways of being in time as circular or time immemorial where the past, the present and the future are coterminous with one another. And I think that is what story gives us. If you are not thinking in a linear mode, then story is just story, present and unfolding as it unfolds. But I think it is very hard for us as Western subjects to inhabit that and feel it. When we do this work you can maybe touch it for a moment, but that is it. One day, maybe. Or always, maybe.

SHG: Precisely regarding this recuperation of the past you are talking about and more specifically reading "Familiarizing Grist Village: Why I Write Speculative Fiction," which was published in 2020 and focuses on *The Tiger Flu*, we can see many connections to *The Lost Century*, even though these two novels

initially seem to be very different. What stood out to me is that in this article you explore Hong Kong history and the recuperation of your own narrative because the older generations did not want to talk about it, and that is exactly what you will later portray in *The Lost Century*. Could you comment on that?

LL: Yes, there is a way of loving children that is perhaps a bit culturally specific to Chinese people. Do not get me wrong, this is not a cultural rule, rather, it is a tendency. If parents and grandparents suffered something, they keep it to themselves to prevent their children from experiencing it in hopes that the child will then have a happy life, unmarred by any memory of parental suffering. But Marianne Hirsch, through the concept of postmemory, shows us that children can know much about the suffering of their forebears even if they are never told about it: it can be passed on in unspoken ways, osmotically. Some recent research suggests that it might even be passed on genetically. Your generation and mine have the privilege of knowing in this kind of way because we are not living through what they had to live through. We can see how in our own bodies we can carry these knowledges—differently from previous generations—but it is in us, we still know, only differently. Our work seems to be to try to find out the content of that silence that was given to us out of love and yet, without having some sense of what the content is, we are actually kind of stuck in the past, and because we are stuck in the past we cannot move until we know. In order to have a future, we have to find out.

JEY: Also in "Familiarizing Grist Village," you wrote: "*The Tiger Flu* puts into play a utopian ideal: that of a society dominated by women instead of men. It is a response to our long, patriarchal moment, as all Utopias are responses to the historical moment in which they are written" (34). And we wonder, is there a particular trait of our current society that *The Lost Century* aims at responding to? Could we say *The Lost Century* comes from a recurring necessity to convey a particular message?

LL: In *The Tiger Flu*, I was trying to get at power relations among women and female-identified people. That is the question that is driving that novel. Historical novels and speculative fiction novels can only ever come out of the present because that is where you live, and even though *The Tiger Flu* purports to be about the future, of course it is about the present. In this case, it is about the difficulties in progressive communities to find ways of being in conversation with one another and getting along, which I think is something that is a concern in my life: just because we have been oppressed it does not necessarily mean we are going to understand one another in our different positions, even if there are overlaps in our experiences of oppression. *The Lost Century* asks that question too, but

in a different time and place: the British Crown colony of Hong Kong is invaded by another Asian nation and the characters have to grapple with what this can mean. What kinds of choices can and should one make about one's life, and how can one have friendships, alliances, and marriages in a place where your choice of loyalties lies towards the colonizer or the fascist? There is another layer too, which is about the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong and relationships among Black, Indigenous and Asian characters in the story. The question of what the relationship can be among those people opens up in a horribly traumatic moment–the wartime Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, which is already a British colony. What happens when one formation of Asianness is attempting to "rescue another"? What if the so-called "rescue" is actually a mode of imperialism? So, if there is a question that the two novels have in common, it is: how can you fight oppression beside friends, allies or comrades? Is it possible to emerge from the suffering of the past working beside others from disparate locations, carrying problems of their own, which one may or may not understand?

On top of that, *The Lost Century* was written in the thick of a pandemic, and also in the wake of a novel about a pandemic, that is *The Tiger Flu*. COVID threw me into a strange, alternate temporality; it must have done so for many of us because your day and your relationships are not unfolding in the same way they had been in the months prior. I found it so surprising and strange and yet familiar because I had been writing about it just prior. Yet, while actually living through it, it was impossible to write about it. And I think that is part of what sent me spiraling back to the past, which is why the novel pays a certain attention to survival knowledge that I just seemed to have much earlier than most people. And of course, I had that knowledge because my family has been through similar times before, not quite in the same way, but I realize that it was the Japanese occupation coming out of me, two generations later. So, it is different from *The Tiger Flu* because it was a different kind of present. But you are right that the two novels ask related questions.

SHG: In your academic work, you also keep going back to history. In "Labour Asian Can: Grammar, Movement and the Institution," for example, you present history as fragmented and sometimes circular, which other scholars have also agreed on regarding *Salt Fish Girl* (Huang). This is also palpable in *The Lost Century,* but given that it is a historical novel with a clear timeline and does not rely on fantastical elements we wonder how does historical fragmentation and circularity present itself?

LL: It is not so much that history itself is fragmented, it is that the narrative fragment is a form that is accessible to me from my own embodied location. I cannot claim to know or tell a story about a whole and complete past. But if I can

offer my readers enough fragments pertaining to the past, they might understand the past differently and more deeply than if I did not offer these fragments. We need multiple voices and multiple narratives in order for any narrative to make sense. In *The Lost Century*, the story that Great Aunt Violet tells Ophelia is more or less linear, but it is incomplete. She tells what she remembers and what she confabulates. She is not an entirely reliable narrator, but other voices erupt through the novel—Emily's, Tak-Wing's, Tak-Tam's, and Courchene's. There is also a third-person omniscient voice that for the most part tracks the story of Mah, and letters exchanged between Isadore Davis Wong and Morgan Horace, through which their stories unfold. It is a novel about interlocking relationships and the voices may be fragmented, but they are fragmented in order to show how the characters are connected to one another as they unfold their individual stories together. So it is both fragmented and stitched together. In some ways, it is quite different from *Salt Fish Girl*, in the sense that it addresses a much shorter time frame, four years rather than several centuries. Also, *The Lost Century* does not foreground fantastical elements in the same kind of way that *When Fox is a Thousand* or *Salt Fish Girl* do, though there are still fantastical elements at work in the novel. While the earlier novels engaged speculative elements as a mode of memory, I use them differently in *The Lost Century*, as marks of humility, the way a potter might press her thumb into an otherwise nicely rounded bowl. I do it to show that there is much that I do not know and that there are likely mistakes that I have made. Without the fantastical elements, the story might appear transparent and seamless. I put the fantasy elements in to remind the reader that the story is made up and that there is imagination at work to fill all kinds of gaps. It reminds the reader that some forgotten things remain forgotten; that there is so much I do not know. We can never truly have the past back. Great-aunt Violet says it in the novel and she is right. I am like a little dog in the dirt, digging to find the bones. Something does come back, but it is not actually the past. So, if I see something weird, like the laws of physics being defied in the throwing of a ball, for instance, I will put it in the story both in order to give myself and the reader something, like a token of the past, but also make it strange so that it is very clear that it is not factual truth of the past, that I do not have any more access to that than anybody else, and yet, I can still have something. It is not fact, it is not data, or the exact thing you were looking for, but it is something. So, for me, that is the work of the fantastic in *The Lost Century* and maybe if there is something in this recent novel that the work of engaging in the archive offers is that I am getting a little bit of fact. There are real traces there: photographs and written records, memoirs, autobiographies, newspaper articles, legal tribunals, etc. The source material is a bit different, the archive is a slightly more proper archive. It is still fiction, but there is more "fact" at work in it than in the previous novels. Different grounding materials do

lead to different kinds of narratives. Or to put it differently, the previous novels were more interested in narrative precursors and the truth of the fantastical imagination, while *The Lost Century* is interested in an existing historical record and the truth of the archive. But I would still have to contend with the problem of the archive that we know through Derrida, which is that the archive cannot really give you the past either. And yet there are powerful traces of the past in the archive. Working imaginatively with it offers something different than working imaginatively with myth and folk tale. In *When Fox Is a Thousand* and *Salt Fish Girl* my archive was folk tale and myth. I leaned on Pu Songling's *Strange Tales of Liaozhai* and other books like it, as well as bits of anthropology and bits of personal travel. In *The Tiger Flu*, I engaged not so much archive as intertext—earlier feminist speculative fiction about non-heterosexual reproduction, women's communes and lesbian collectives.

JEY: On a similar note, and as for the inclusion and revision of "origin myths" (Harmer 1) and fluid temporalities in your work, can the use of mythology be considered an antidote to forgetting, that is, as a way of filling in the gaps?

LL: This gets at what we were talking about before. The work of myth, the work of story, does something that belongs to a different temporality than the temporality of the novel which wants progress and wants some kind of linearity. I think a certain level of forgetting is unavoidable for the reasons that we were just discussing: you cannot go back. But what myth or tale or story do is different from what the novel does in circular time and time immemorial. Myth does not recuperate, it does not do anything for that linear mode of time or forgetting, because forgetting belongs to linear time. Myth does not care about the calendar. The Lebanese Canadian artist Jamelie Hassan taught me a little bit about an Arabic way of being in story. They do not open their stories with "once upon a time," they say "there was and there was not." This is so beautiful because that sense of presence and absence layered into the same moment that we inhabit the minute we enter the story does not belong to history or memory. So, I would say no to the antidote, but yes to a sense of presence that we would not have any other way.

SHG: Considering that sense of presence you were just talking about, we might think of affects, which are deeply connected to the corporeal and bodily experiences. Some scholars (Oliver; P. Lai; Phung) have indeed written about how, in your work, the senses (and particularly the sense of smell) play a very important role. How would you relate the sense of smell and the past in your stories? Do you see a connection between embodied affective responses to the past and transgenerational memory in your texts?

LL: In *Salt Fish Girl*, the sense of smell allows me to make an engagement with the work of memory. There is something about the sense of smell that is very evocative, it offers a different way of knowing, and therefore a different way of tapping into the imagination than the work of sight or the work of hearing. For whatever reason, because of the tradition we inherit, sight primarily is the sense that novels traditionally tend to hold up, more so than smell or touch. To think about smell allows me to engage with these questions of forgetting and memory. It can work in a kind of double time in the sense that if you smell the same smell that you smelled a decade ago, especially if you have not smelled it since, it can bring that moment back to you in a very immediate and visceral way. But it does not bring it back to you in a linear way: it is evocative, it does not give you the data on a decade ago or a news report from a decade ago, it gives you a sensation from a decade ago that can trigger things that you might otherwise have forgotten. Perhaps smell can allow us to consider postmemory, as in that connection you are carrying ancestrally in some kind of way. And I feel I have had these experiences traveling, for instance, in South China for the first time and smelling the air, the rice growing, the fish in the ponds, etc. And thinking "I know this smell even though I have never smelled it before." The sense of smell for me somehow verifies a sense of bodily connection to a place through family; as an ancestral connection or a kind of fleeting waft that does not belong to the field of reason and yet can be sensed. They do not provide an evidence-based kind of truth; they offer a different kind of truth and a different relationship to the past. I think it is possible to cultivate one's sense of smell through practice. And maybe that is something that fiction writers, and probably artists more broadly, might have to offer to the present moment: a way of getting that thing that slipped away from us, so it is not forgotten. It is a way of bringing things back that does not belong to any other mode of truth.

JEY: Continuing with the implications of affect, Sara Ahmed writes about the promise of the good life very much in terms of Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism. As Ahmed puts it, "the very obstacle to happiness is what allows happiness to be sustained as the promise of the good life: as if happiness is what we would have, if that thing did not get in the way" (32). This is almost explicitly present in your speculative fiction novels. Particularly in *Salt Fish Girl,* we see how characters are promised happiness and prosperity if they follow certain social rules and participate in a devastatingly capitalist system. Would you say your work is critical of the "good life" as cruel optimism? If that is so, is this idea also part of *The Lost Century* and how does it manifest differently in speculative fiction than historical fiction?

LL: As I imagined it, the town of Serendipity in *Salt Fish Girl* reflects the acceleration of capitalism and the kinds of spaces and places that in the early 2000s were being constructed to make places for the wealthy and privileged, or at least, the middle class, to live lives advertised as, if not happy, at least comfortable and "safe." Serendipity is a gated community, a kind of cocoon sheltered from the horrors of the Unregulated Zone. The dream for the people who live there is, I think, more one of safety and security than happiness as such, though I suppose one could argue that the hope for safety and security constitutes a kind of optimism in Berlant's sense. The dream of safety and security is a fraught dream given the horrors unfolding right outside the gates of Serendipity. Miranda's parents, for instance, do not quite dare to dream of happiness. So, for sure, *Salt Fish Girl* is a critique of that mode of desire and those kinds of compromises that people make and hold up as a kind of ideal that capitalism makes possible, but at the expense of anybody outside the gates of such places. But it also has a measure of compassion for that position. There is a cost for those inside too, perhaps precisely of happiness. They foreclose happiness in order to stay safe. I would probably write it differently now, given all the changes that have been unfolding across the planet since its publication in 2002. However, Berlant and Ahmed are imagining a more or less contemporary moment. *Cruel Optimism* came out in 2011. *The Promise of Happiness* was published in 2010. I imagine they are both attempting to capture the affect of a late neoliberal moment. But *The Lost Century* is set in the thirties and forties. The promise of happiness is something that is held up as a way of keeping people in the thrall of an increasingly messed up economic system that we do not have a lot of tools to make otherwise. *The Lost Century* belongs to a different moment and the characters in the novel are the subjects of the early-mid 20th century. The promise of happiness in Hong Kong is a promise of happiness for the British. However, the characters whose lives are being considered in that novel are the people whose lives are incidental to the British colonial project. They are there to be instrumentalized as the British see fit. Society and its promises are not being constructed for them. They work to survive and build their lives out of available materials and narratives in a field that the British are producing for themselves. The Chinese are the majority population, but it is a colonial situation. So, if there is something that I am doing as a writer in the novel is trying to recuperate lives that have not been much written about. Maybe I am trying to recover fleeting moments of happiness for them, but their condition is not one that expects happiness. Obviously, they are not without agency. They are not so under the thumb of the British colonial administration that it is not possible to live. People make the happiness that they can with what they have. Emily is a strong dreamer. She is also fortunate in that there is an available cultural narrative for her to pin her hopes to. She pursues heterosexual romance as a way

of trying to make a happy life for herself. Was it promised in any way? I think it is too early for this to exist as a promise. It is a possibility and a dream. It is available for her as a narrative that she can chase. She tries to make it happen. It does not end well, and the reasons could be understood as structural, but I think the structures of capitalism and race in early 20th century Hong Kong were quite different from how they are in contemporary Britain or the US. One of the main points of the novel is to illustrate the difference. The absence of an available narrative, an available dream, is more clearly read in the figure of Violet. In contemporary terms, we might understand Violet as lesbian or queer, but in her moment, she does not have the language for it. Though she has feelings for Ting-Yan, and though they eventually end up together, she thinks of her life as a life of service. Her actions are all actions to improve the lives of others. Most of my characters are not the willful girls of Ahmed's theory. Violet in *The Lost Century* and Kora in *Salt Fish Girl* have more of Roy Miki's "asiancy" about them. Their ability to act consciously with determined intent is an ability that flickers. Society does not provide them with any easy narratives to pursue, so not only is it difficult for them to summon the will, but it is also difficult for them to know what to direct the will towards. They need to invent the narrative for themselves.

I might say something, though, about the promise of immigration, which is not what unfolds in *The Lost Century* but of course, is on the horizon as a kind of utopian possibility available to some of the characters and not others. I am definitely thinking about the lives of contemporary Chinese Vancouverites in particular and trying to imagine the pasts that they come from. I no longer live in Vancouver and the novel is not set there, yet *The Lost Century* has that city very much in mind. There is a happiness promise for the immigrant: that they could become somebody else in this other place through a national ideal that they have not yet figured out is fraught. And of course, when one arrives in the new country you encounter all kinds of troubles, racism not the least among them; the pragmatics of a life unfolding in another place where you are not at home. And so maybe that is what is present as a promise of happiness in the novel.

SHG: We might argue happiness through your idea of "insurgent utopias" through which you attempt to reflect "eruptions of the unexpected" through the interaction of worlds. You state: "[f]or me this is where both hope and danger lie" (Lai, "Familiarizing" 34). However, the title of your last novel announces a lost world, or else century, but is it indeed lost, or is there any hope in loss itself? Are both hope and danger part of *The Lost Century*?

LL: The century is both lost and not lost. The novel is more an exploration of the problem of loss than it is a statement declaring loss. In the first instance, I am

thinking about the 99-year lease that Britain had on Hong Kong as a colony—a century minus a year during which the city was both not itself and becoming itself. The fact of British colonization is a large part of what makes the city what it is, though it is not a British colony anymore. Now it is both British and not British, lost and not lost. The so-called return to China has been very fraught, more now than at the 1997 handover. And of course, the China that Hong Kong "left" is a very different China from the one it has been "returned" to. Before the Opium Wars, Hong Kong was a very small and not particularly consequential outpost at the foot of the Pearl River delta. Through the colonial century it grew into a key port for import and export between China and the rest of the world. In those years, it also grew into a teeming metropolis. Many South Chinese crossed the border into the colony at various points—seeking work, fleeing famine, escaping persecution, or leaving dangerous political situations. And in the middle of the "loss" it was occupied by the Japanese for four years because the British lost the Battle of Hong Kong. In those years, it was lost to both Britain and China, in a twisted moment of occupation that was both fascist and decolonial. So I am really interested in the contradictions of loss, and the question "lost to whom?" or "lost to what?" In these large geopolitical losses (which are, of course, also gains, but contradictory ones), it is difficult for people to know themselves and even to know what stories to tell about themselves. Ordinary people suffered a lot, without narratives to make their suffering make sense. Some, like Emily and Tak-Wing, clinged onto narratives of romance or racial belonging. Others, like Violet, groped around in the haze of newness, trying to make sense of a cascade of unfamiliar and difficult experiences and trying to do the right thing in the thick of them. In order to hang on to pride and mitigate shame, and in order to remain hopeful for the upcoming generations, they kept a lot of secrets. So many stories were lost, and in the loss of story, I think it became hard for us to know who we were and are. And yet, through the work of imagination or an imagined time and the archive some things can be recuperated. I think the novel offers hope because the imagination and the archive have made it possible to bring something "back" from which, perhaps, a future can be imagined. Nevertheless, by putting the imagination in conversation with the archive, a writer might be able to put conditions in place for a moment of eruption, a knock at the door that could be the (temporary) arrival of a happy future. So there is a utopian home but also the prospect of terrible danger in this work. Yet, especially for those of us who have the capacity to imagine, I think it is our duty to take risks. And after that, you have to be open, nothing is ever guaranteed. So hope sure, but also danger.

JEY: As many works of speculative fiction, your novels deal with the idea of hope and have a hopeful ending where, after suffering loss and destruction, we are still presented with a world of possibilities through transformation, which is

usually embodied through difference (like the Grist Sisters creating a new civilization at the end of *The Tiger Flu*). We also wanted to end this interview with that sense of hopefulness. What does hope look like for you and how does it connect to having empathy for others and their experiences?

LL: You are right. I tend to end novels on a hopeful note. I feel I have to. There are many stories told about our death and destruction in which we are disposable and incidental to the main narrative. We so often get blown up in the first frame of the movie or the second chapter of the book. There are plenty of stories out there as well in which we come to tragic ends so that white people can be happy, think of Madame Butterfly, for example. So I feel that, politically, it is important to show our survival, to show that we have continued, to show that we are the protagonists of our own stories. Although with the Grist sisters the way that the continuation happens is quite strange. And it is in the aftermath of a lot of things that are less hopeful. I do not want to be a pollyanna about it, there are many forces at work and not all of them are positive and productive. Some of them, even in spite of their best intentions, are doing things that one might not necessarily desire. Who knows what the outcome will be? Or outcomes, since the future is continuously arriving. So I remain hopeful as a matter of politics and responsibility. I think I have to show that there are possibilities for the ongoingness of life because otherwise how do we keep going? For me, that is the work: to show us continuing to live. When it comes to empathy, you cannot step into the shoes of the other, but you can still attend to the conditions of the other to the best of your ability. You have to listen, do your homework, read, and show up when you are asked to show up. And then hope that what is unfolding in the relationship is something that is moving in a productive direction. You act when your best judgement says to act. But you are also still and quiet when your best judgement says it is best to do that. For me, this is the work of hope. You hope for your own survival and you hope for the survival of Indigenous people, their stories, their world, their lands, and for Black people, and for Black lives. But I have to emphasize that you cannot know. There is a profound ambivalence that I know is very difficult to inhabit and yet, if we do not hang on to that ambivalence there is the danger of erasing what both you and others have suffered. That is the reason why it is dangerous to be too joyful. So, hope, sure, but tentatively.

JEY: I would say you can connect hope to agency. You mentioned something there about other generations in the past and the fact that you make what you can with what you are given and there is some agency in that.

LL: Sure, you have to do what you can do with what you have, that is your responsibility. And you have to attach hope to that because otherwise, why are

you doing what you are doing? But by the same token, one can be too arrogant about one's capacity to make the world. We have to recognize that we are always making the world in uneven collectivity with others. You cannot know with any certainty what the other desires, what they dream, what they are trying to do. Also, some others are doing horrible things. One cannot be naive about that either; there are fascist others. I cannot desire what others desire or dream their dreams, because I am not in their shoes. Yet I have to judge which others I will ally myself with and which I will not. So, when you act, you have to hope and you have to feel committed to the judgment you have made which cannot and should not be easy. But because none of us has total knowledge there is no knowing for sure that my action or my inaction, my speech or my listening, will bring about the thing that I want. Hope is there, not in the judgment or in the action, but in the interactions of beings and forces.

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