

Building New Worlds: Gender and Embodied Non-Conformity and  
Imagining Otherwise in Contemporary Canadian Literatures

BUILDING NEW WORLDS: GENDER AND EMBODIED NON-CONFORMITY  
AND IMAGINING OTHERWISE IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN  
LITERATURES

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree Doctorate of Philosophy

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McMaster University DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY (2014) Hamilton, Ontario  
(English & Cultural Studies)

TITLE: Building New Worlds: Gender and Embodied Non-Conformity and Imagining  
Otherwise in Contemporary Canadian Literatures

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SUPERVISOR: Professor Lorraine York

NUMBER OF PAGES: vii, 247

## ABSTRACT

My dissertation project maps three characters, Lucy, Evie, and the Fur Queen in three contemporary Canadian novels *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), respectively, whose embodiments and genders do not conform to norms and who are also the only characters able to imagine a different kind of world. These novels, which I read as magical realist dystopias each maps out a process by which normatively gendered characters can begin to imagine a different social order than the one they have inherited. What is significant about these novels, though, is that this imagining would not be possible without the work of the gender non-conforming characters. My dissertation argues that when a major identity category, like gender, is unsettled, possibilities arise for other major social structures, such as the nation, to be questioned. These novels, each arising out of different racialized and cultural backgrounds, all settle on gender and embodied non-normativity as a site of possibility for imagining a different kind of world. Using education and collaboration, these characters are revolutionary figures who, instead of tearing down dominant geo-political structures in ways that risk replicating dominant geo-political structures or reforming existing ones, argue for a slow revolution in which spaces are built without reference to dominant structures. These spaces are decentralized insofar as the novels suggest that they will need to leave room for revision and change, rather than advocating for a static idea of what utopia is, and they will be built collaboratively, so that there is no one authority. These novels do not suggest that building a different world will be easy, but they show that fast solutions will not work and instead map out the difficult process of learning that is necessary in order for it to happen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to start by thanking my committee, Lorraine York, Daniel Coleman, and Melinda Gough. You have all given me so much support, thoughtful feedback, and are just such wonderful people. I feel so lucky for having had a chance to work with you and for having you as models for the kind of thinker that I want to be. I need to say a special thanks to Lorraine: I don't know where to begin, but suffice it to say that I'm sure I would've started my PhD without you, but I can't imagine I would've finished it. Without your hard work with and support of me, I'm not sure I would've survived academia. Really, all I can keep thinking are the lyrics of "To Sir with Love." Thank you.

Without the mentorship of Dr. Mavis Reimer (no relation) and Dr. Sidney Matrix in the years before I began my graduate work, none of this would have been possible. Thank you both very much.

Next, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, George and Donna Reimer, as well as my brother, Vincent Reimer, my sister-in-law, Aron Byman, and my niece, Marley Reimer. Thanks, too, to my Auntie Kelly and cousins, Tommy, Mandy, and Sam Livingstone. Present with me, as always, in this moment are my late Nan and Grampy, Marjorie and Jack Livingstone, my Uncle Randy, and Granny, Ellen Langthorne. I feel so lucky and proud to call you my family. You have given me the confidence to pursue this work and the humility to keep me grounded. You are the inspiration for this project, and I'll be eternally grateful for everything you have taught me.

Thanks to my chosen family for the love, support, imagining, and conversations: Phaniel Antwi, Lori Dufault, Jessie Forsyth, Darcy Gaudreault, Kim Hart, Ambyr Hawkins, Benjamin Lefebvre, Christine Lyons, Filimone Mabjaia, Jan Mendes, Malissa Phung, and Areej Siddiqui.

Last, I would like to thank my partner, Kerry Cranston-Reimer, who has read every word of this dissertation with a keen eye and from whom I have learned so much. You make me believe that a better world is possible and give me the strength to keep fighting for it.

I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1:</b> Introduction: Technologies of Gender and Nation: Rumoured Possibilities in Contemporary Canadian Literatures.....	1
<b>Chapter 2:</b> The Devil You Know: “Knowledge” and Imagining Possibilities in Findley’s <i>Not Wanted on the Voyage</i> .....	50
<b>Chapter 3:</b> “The logic is built right into the architecture”: Narrative Gaps and Logics of Domination in Larissa Lai’s <i>Salt Fish Girl</i> .....	92
<b>Chapter 4:</b> “[Y]ou’re trying to write a realistic play from a story that’s just not realistic”: Collaboration and (Un)learning in Tomson Highway’s <i>Kiss of the Fur Queen</i> .....	142
<b>Chapter 5:</b> Conclusion: Making Connections: The Dystopic Present and the Work of Building.....	213
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	232

FIGURES

1. “Child Canada Takes Her First Step” reprinted with permission.....14

Introduction: Technologies of Gender and Nation:

Rumoured Possibilities in Contemporary Canadian Literatures

“[T]he policing of gender within the bathroom is intensified in the space of the airport, where people are literally moving through space and time in ways that cause them to want to stabilize some boundaries (like gender) even as they traverse others (like the national)” (Halberstam 20)

“[T]he terms and categories used in the classification of data gathered by the state do not merely collect information about pre-existing types of things, but rather shape the world into those categories, often to the point where those categories are taken for granted by most people and appear ahistorical and apolitical. Indeed, many such categorizations are assumed as basic truths about distinctions existing in the world” (Spade 745)

My dissertation project considers a pattern of non-normatively gendered figures that appear in a variety of racialized and nationalized literatures that fall to varying degrees uncomfortably under the rubric of “Canadian Literature”: *Not Wanted on the Voyage* by white Anglophone novelist and playwright Timothy Findley, *Salt Fish Girl* by Chinese Canadian novelist and poet, Larissa Lai, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* by Cree playwright and novelist, Tomson Highway. Located in what I frame as texts that operate using magical realist epistemologies to respond to dystopian contexts, these figures seem to be able to imagine a different, more equitable world in ways that are strikingly divergent from those of more normatively gendered figures in their texts, who seem to only be able to recreate the worlds that they inherit.

I ask why these texts, which have been well received both popularly and critically, and which exist in a vexed relationship to nation in Canada, settle on gender non-normativity as a locus for imagining alternative geopolitical possibilities. My argument is



that it is imperative to look at the representation of non-normatively gendered characters in these novels to see what possibilities they raise for building communities when notions of normative gender are complicated. I suggest that because these characters do not conform to a major identity category that structures the nation, they are able to unsettle its foundations and facilitate an imagining of alternatives. Because this unsettling happens in a semi-surreal context, I read these texts as inviting a reimagining of communities and geo-political structures, thereby acting as interventions into the constellation of problems raised by the concept of nation in Canada. The presence of these characters and the positive reception of the novels they inhabit suggest to me a desire to reimagine geo-political communities outside of their current structures.

The thrust of my dissertation project—despite its positioning in the allegedly fixed nationalized context of Canada—is the development of a methodology for the analysis of the discourse of the nation in gendered terms and the possibilities for reimagining social and geopolitical relationships. As these texts trouble gender, they simultaneously negotiate the dilemmas posed by the nation and are also bound together by their use of magical realism and dystopia as a way to unsettle, reimagine, and rewrite what community-building can look like. While I am conscious that I am doing this investigation in a particular context, my hope is that this methodology can be adapted to consider social contexts outside of the Canadian one and to consider more borders than just nationalized ones. Thus, in this chapter I will lay out the key concepts and questions that structure my dissertation project. I will first look at the history of relationships between gender and nation as well as mapping out the intervention that my project makes

into discussions of gender and nation, and then will move on to a discussion of the terms magical realism and dystopia, and I will end with a brief reflection on teaching this kind of work.

This project arises out of earlier graduate work that I did on masculinities in a few of Timothy Findley's novels. I came to the end of that project and could not figure out how to read Lucy from *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Findley's critical retelling of the story of Noah's ark, in the terms that I had set up with regard to the connection between masculinity and nation. Lucy, formerly Lucifer, the fallen angel, comes to Earth in the lead up to the flood. She acquires passage onto the ark through her marriage to Noah's son, Ham. While on the ark, divisions quickly arise between those who are aligned with Noah and those he sends below deck, including Lucy. No one knows Lucy's ontological or gender histories, a contentious point that I will discuss further in my second chapter. When Noah's unbridled power and cruelty become too much, Lucy incites a rebellion against him on the ark. Lucy's status as an outsider both ontologically and in terms of normative gender seems to facilitate her ability to see and respond to the power structures that are embodied in Noah. After mulling over the excesses of Lucy that did not fit into that project, it occurred to me that there are other figures like her in Canadian literature. Thinking about her led me to consider similar figures who are trying to imagine a different world in Canadian literatures. One way into this project for me, then, has been a curiosity about building better worlds, particularly in Canada.

The structure of the nation as embodied in masculine terms seemed like an obvious place to begin my investigation, but this approach conflicted with the feminized

positionings of the nation. While the nation is often positioned as masculine and strong, it is also be positioned as feminine especially during moments of “danger,” often in order to encourage support for “protective action.”<sup>1</sup> What was I to do, then, with my feminist critique of the destructive masculinisation of the nation, if the nation was feminized as well? It was then that I noticed, alongside my confusion about what to do with Lucy, that the nation is always gendered in normative ways; there seems to be no room for the nation to be figured outside of the normative masculinity or femininity. When I considered the limitations of this gendering alongside the work of Julia Serano, who coined the term “cis-gendered privilege,”<sup>2</sup> I began to wonder about the mutual imbrication of the naturalization of nation as a geopolitical space and the naturalization of gender.

The relationship that I saw between gender and nation was further supported by Lucy’s actions. Late in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Lucy, whom I frame as gender non-conforming, and who, therefore, fits under the trans\* umbrella,<sup>3</sup> expresses her dissatisfaction with the current order by beginning a “rumour” of another place. The uncertain “rumour” that Lucy starts is juxtaposed with the world as imagined by Noah and Mrs. Noyes, Noah’s wife, whose gender identities are far more normative: Noah’s unwavering desire is to recreate the world in its former image, an inequitable patriarchy

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<sup>1</sup> The nature of “threats” to the nation, of course, are highly charged and contentious. I mention them only to signal how the discourse tends to operate, rather than to reify this idea.

<sup>2</sup> “Cis-gender” means not trans-gender, and so this conception of privilege, which builds on the work of thinkers such as Peggy McIntosh, describes the ease with which people whose bodies and gender practices fit comfortably within social norms, in contrast to the multiple barriers and dangers experienced by trans\* people. I must note too that this is a contested term in trans\* theory and in trans\* communities.

<sup>3</sup> See Viviane K. Namaste, who maintains that “[t]he word ‘transgender’ is an umbrella term used to refer to all individuals who live outside of normative sex/gender relations” (1). I also add the asterisk at the end of trans\* to signal this range of identifications.

in which he makes the rules. Mrs. Noyes's desire, on the other hand, is similarly resolute, though it is diametrically opposed to Noah's wishes: she does not want to exist in that kind of world and instead prays for rain as she sits on the ark, surrounded by water. That is, given a choice, Mrs. Noyes would choose—indeed, prays for—certain death and the end of the human race over a re-creation of the world as Noah imagines it. The most salient point for the purpose of my thesis is that neither of these characters is able to imagine a world that is different from the one they already know. One of them does not want to imagine otherwise, while the other is desperate to, but it does not occur to her that something else might be possible. Only Lucy can see an alternative, and she is the only character whose gender and embodiment are non-conformist. That Findley's work settles on gender and divine identity as a locus of imaginative possibility is remarkable and curious. Furthermore, as I discuss below, Lucy insists upon the repeated reimagining of the world because she operates under the assumption that her present world is one of many to come, thereby decentring its importance and implying that the movement towards a better world will not be instantaneous or easy; most important, it will not be prescriptive in the way that Noah's world would be. Moreover, by virtue of starting a "rumour" about a world that will be built, we see that she will not build it alone—it will not be subject to a single normalizing epistemology because a rumour only exists if it circulates among many people.

Though Lucy's strategies are different from those of Evie, the subject of my third chapter, from Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, their investments in building new worlds are similar. This novel moves among three time periods and follows two characters, Miranda

and Evie, who are also divine, though they do not retain their super-human abilities in the latter two time periods. The latest timeline, set in the near future in what was formerly British Columbia, is the one in which we see the majority of Lai's response to the current order. In this time period, Evie is an escaped clone who has fallen for Miranda, a marginalized, but comparatively privileged, human with an unexplained condition that leads her to smell strongly of durian. Though Evie's gender is relatively normative—or at least unremarked upon, which suggests normativity<sup>4</sup>—it is her non-human status that allows her to imagine otherwise. Throughout the text, Evie tries to show Miranda the consequences of her complicity with dominant systems. Miranda is resistant to this learning, but eventually begins to rethink her position, though it is not clear what the future will hold for the pair as they run away from their homes and have a child, and neither is it clear how much Miranda has learned. As the novel demonstrates, privilege is hard to let go of, and Evie does the difficult work of trying to educate a loved one as Miranda makes choices that support the destructive dominant systems.

Like Lucy and Evie, Tomson Highway's Fur Queen from *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, whom I examine in my fourth chapter, is a non-normatively gendered figure, but she is also a trickster figure who addresses the history of colonialism in Canada, particularly through the experiences of two Cree brothers, Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis. The Fur Queen operates in a different way than most titular characters do—instead of having a strong presence, she is often in the background, making occasional appearances and sometimes shaping events. Her presence is subtly cued by repeated imagery—sometimes

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the connection between unmarked identity categories and privilege, see Ross Chambers.

appearing as the deity that she is, but more often as human or as inanimate objects—thereby acting as a signal to the reader that seemingly disparate events are deeply intertwined. Her super-human presence infuses this narrative, and her movement between levels of reality raises questions about how dominant conceptions of history and reality work. This novel looks closely at the devastating effects of colonialism on the Okimasis family and on Indigenous populations more generally, but it also writes against victimization by giving its characters at least a degree of agency, and in many cases a good deal of agency, despite the difficult situations in which they are often placed. While it is a novel that comes out of the Cree tradition, it is also offering a wider critique of the treatment of Indigenous populations by European settler-invaders and interrogates the legacies and current practices of colonialism enacted by dominant society in Canada. Through the connections that it makes, this narrative shows itself to be very much interested in building a better world, but also cautions against naïve idealism, advocating instead a provisional strategy that can never be certain.

In order to understand the workings of *Lucy*, *Evie*, and *the Fur Queen*, my project builds on the Canadian literary and cultural scholarship that reads nation in relation to understandings of gender, but I take non-normative genders in the Canadian context as my focus. But it is first worth spending some time on normative conceptions of the nation: though the nation is not my object of study, its role is important to reading these novels insofar as they are responding to the dominant social order of the nation. Benedict Anderson argues that nations are “imagined communities”; for Anderson, the nation is a story of unity and sameness that its citizens and, in particular, its government must

constantly retell to perpetuate its existence. A similarly necessary reiteration of identity is found in Judith Butler's work on gender, especially in *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that all gender is a form of drag that never ends—that the “performer” of this drag must be absolutely vigilant about his or her performance for fear of the manifold consequences and punishments that are incurred when one's identity does not conform to a normative gender category. The mutually reinforcing concepts of nation and gender appear to be stable, but this compulsive repetition indicates an anxiety that gender and nation will be recognized as social constructions—albeit social constructions that have serious political implications; that is, the very structures of nation and gender open a space in which to reconsider them.

Building on Anderson's work, Andrew Parker et al. emphasize the connection between sexuality and nationalism. They point out, for example, Anderson's statement that everyone is born with a gender and a nation (5); these are considered to be “innate” and “natural” categories.<sup>5</sup> Relatedly, they point out Anderson's framing of the nation as a “fraternity” (36), which makes gender especially important to interrogate in relation to the nation. A fraternity is both a kinship structure that is expressly but invisibly male—he would never refer to the nation as a sorority, for example—but it is also important to note that there is no space to consider it either outside of a gendered context or in a way that leaves room for people who do not fit into normatively gendered framings. Conceptually, the importance of Anderson's work and Parker et al.'s reading of it is that it foregrounds my contention about the centrality of gender in structures like the nation and the

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, neither Parker et al. nor Anderson remark upon race in this context, though I would suggest the same of it.

operations of imagination as being constitutive of dominant social structures; as they show, imagining and knowing are deeply intertwined.

This connection between the “imagined” concept and material realities of this imagining are usefully mapped out by Dean Spade, a legal scholar who works on law particularly as it relates to trans\* people in the U.S. He shows how structures like gender and the nation-state are deeply related through his description of the history of state-run identity classifications. Starting from the institution of things like last names and standardized systems of measurement to facilitate taxation, Spade argues that these practices have become a naturalized part of imaging geopolitical space and institutions and are what he calls “state-building projects” (738), particularly given that “[t]he state creates irresistible incentives for calling oneself after its fashion” (742). Expressing his concern about the impact of this project on people whose gender presentations or bodies do not fit easily into the categories that, as he says, “represent the imposition of ideological norms that the classification system masks as neutral and purely administrative,” Spade argues that “the creation of norms through classification decisions, should also be understood as having moral implications” (744). In the quotation that I use as an epigraph, Spade shows how these classifications “shape the world into those categories” (745), demonstrating the impact of the state’s and other institutions’ insistence on reifying categories like gender. Furthermore, he explains that “rules related to government gender classification do not simply discover and describe maleness and femaleness, but instead *produce* two populations marked with maleness and femaleness as effects and objects of governance” (747, emphasis in original). Spade goes



on to link this kind of classification system to similar ones that take up race and dis/ability and describes the consequences and inconsistencies within the matrix of the gender classification system.<sup>6</sup> His work explains the process by which the state's administrative practices shape what can be known and thought in the dominant national imaginary and how people who do not fit become unknowable, or, to follow this line of thinking, non-entities.<sup>7</sup>

In line with Spade's thinking and adding a discussion of heteropatriarchy and diaspora to this discussion of gender and nation, Gayatri Gopinath shows the material effects of the state's investment in managing bodies. Though, she argues, this has yet to be addressed extensively, women's bodies—both in terms of its need to be normative, especially in terms of sexuality—are important sites at which gender and nation come together:

female sexuality under nationalism is a crucial site of surveillance, as it is through women's bodies that the borders and boundaries of communal identities are formed. But... this body of work has been less successful in fully addressing the

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<sup>6</sup> Himani Bannerji's discussion of Canadian multiculturalism resonates with Spade's discussion about institutional administration of embodiment: "multiculturalism serves as a collection of cultural categories for ruling or administering, claiming their representational status as direct emanations of social ontologies. This allows multiculturalism to serve as an ideology, both in the sense of a body of content, claiming that 'we' or 'they' are this or that kind of cultural identities, as well as an epistemological device for occluding the organization of the social. We are encouraged to forget that people do not have a fixed political agency, and as subjects of complex and contradictory social relations can be summoned as subjects and agents in diverse ways" (6).

<sup>7</sup> To be clear, I do not want to suggest that these systems are necessarily successful. The possibility that Spade can write on this issue makes that clear, but at the same time, the fact that he has to write on it, and to be so careful to lay out his evidence—the article looks at the legal-administrative practices of all 50 states and runs to 112 pages—demonstrates just how successful the system is. Furthermore, that this work must be done by someone with as much privilege as Spade has—as a white university professor, despite also experiencing a good deal of oppression as a trans\* man—even though people with less privilege have been making similar arguments for a long time demonstrates how hard this possibility is to imagine. And while I understand that the nature of academic work is such that one must provide evidence to make one's case, this system both discounts other knowledges, and, as I discuss below with regard to Gopinath's work, tends to need so much justification to approach absurdity.

ways in which dominant nationalism institutes heterosexuality as a key disciplinary regime. Feminist scholarship on South Asia has also, for the most part, remained curiously silent about how alternative sexualities may constitute a powerful challenge to patriarchal nationalism. Nor has there been much sustained attention paid to the ways in which nationalist framings of women's sexuality are translated into the diaspora, and how these renderings of diasporic women's sexuality are in turn central to the production of nationalism in the home nation. (9)

For Gopinath, a discussion of gender and sexuality is important in order to read the workings of the nation because women's bodies and sexualities are sites upon which the nation is articulated, even if it is under-discussed. As we can imagine from the dominant discourses of Canadian nationalism, the nation may alternately be positioned as masculine or feminine, but it is never queer or gender non-conforming. Building on the work of Spade and Gopinath, I will examine how naturalized gender difference and the nation are mutually constitutive and how gender non-conformity becomes a site of possibility in reimagining relationality.

Discussions that bring together gender and nation as written on women's bodies tend to focus on the global south, suggesting that sexism is not a problem in the west,<sup>8</sup> but these discussions tend to miss the impact of racialization on this conversation. There are exceptions to my suggestion, however, but they tend to again involve racialized women, who are typically not framed as part of the "west": Andrea Smith,<sup>9</sup> for example, discusses how "[t]he history of sexual violence and genocide among Native women illustrates how gender violence functions as a tool for racism and colonialism among women of colour in general" (15). For Andrea Smith, then, the nation is mapped onto

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<sup>8</sup> I do not capitalize "west" as a gesture towards refusing its dominance.

<sup>9</sup> I will use Andrea Smith's full name to refer to her, while I refer to Lindsey Claire Smith by her last name.

these women's bodies in terms of marking which subject positions are disposable, as opposed to those that ought to be defended. This topic is discussed primarily in relation to racialized women because of the continued valorization of white femininity (and note here that "femininity" connotes both normative gender and heterosexuality). While white femininity is also policed by the nation, it is always policed with the intention of ensuring "purity" and preservation, whereas racialized women are always already "impure" and disposable, so anxieties that affect the national imaginary get mapped onto them. These distinctions are uneven and messy because of the extent to which nation and gender are mutually imbricated, but it is worth distinguishing the role of gender in a nationalized cultural imaginary and within the mechanics of the nation itself, to see the impact of racialization, and then to consider the ways in which non-normative gendering enters the conversations.

The question of what a nation is and how it works, particularly in relation to gender in the Canadian context, is usefully elaborated in the works of Daniel Coleman and Jennifer Henderson. In *White Civility*, Coleman looks at the tendency in nationalist discourses for groups with a good deal of power and privilege to naturalize a nationalism that actively harms other groups. Like Sherill Grace et al., for whom the ideal of Canadianness is a fantasy that privileges being "white, masculinist, heterosexual, Christian, capitalist, and Northern" (9), Coleman is concerned with the implicit positioning of Canadian literature as a nation-building exercise that bolsters and normalizes white (and middleclass, heterosexual, male) values, a point that is confirmed

by Sunera Thobani's discussion of "exalted subjects" who represent the ideal Canadian nation.

Jennifer Henderson adds to this work but argues for the importance of sidestepping dominant ways of understanding the nation, taking white women's involvement in the colonial project in Canada as her focus. Henderson discusses, for example, how the nation is generally figured as the male "wholesome and vigorous Nordic youth, blazing a westward trail across the northern half of the continent" (3), but also draws her reader's attention to the figuring of Canada as a "woman, young and fair, with the flush of sunrise on her face" (Archibald MacMechan, qtd. in Henderson 3). She sees limitations in the focus on the male colonial figure and elects instead to focus on settler feminists to flesh out a reading of colonialism in Canada: she focuses on the women who came to Canada on "civilizing missions" whose mobility was made possible by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century first wave feminist movements. These movements were celebrated as being "progressive," but, as Henderson points out, this freedom was at the "cost of [their] participation in the government of poverty, race, and morality" (5). Henderson usefully shows the ways that gendered representations of the nation are mobilized, how they are represented in normative gender structures, and what might be added to our understanding of the nation when the actions and complicities of more marginalized populations, such as women, are considered.

If we turn to an early Canadian political cartoon, we can see the operations of gender in imagining the nation, which overlaps with a discourse of Canada as "improving upon" the actions of the U.S. and the U.K. (see Figure 1). In "Child Canada Takes Her



CHILD CANADA TAKES HER FIRST STEP  
MOTHER BRITANNIA: See! Why, the dear child can stand alone!  
UNCLE SAM: Of course he can! Let go of him, Granny; if he falls I'll catch him!

Figure 1

First Step” (1870), Canada is unexpectedly gendered as both male and female, but at different moments: after Mother Britannia says “See! Why the dear child can stand alone,” Uncle Sam replies, “Of course he can! Let go of him, Granny; if he falls I’ll catch him!” There are several interesting things to notice here—first the genealogical relationships between the represented characters: Canada as child; the US as uncle; and England as grandmother, which points to tensions over the origins of this new nation as well as suggests that there is a generational difference between the nations that implies a degree of “progress” based on the younger generation’s ability to learn from the mistakes

of the older generation. This engagement with Canada's potential, notably, becomes bound up with Canada's gendering.

The history of the study of English literature parallels the history of Canadian literature, but Canadian literature differs from other English language literatures in its anxiety about its legitimacy. Canonical Canadian literature, especially its earlier texts, retains the discourses of idealization and the improvement of the body politic that characterize many national literatures, but it has a particularly intense anxiety about its position in relation to British and American literatures and uses its "white civility" as a way to assert its place. Writing in 1875, for example, Charles Mair—who, we know, was involved in the suppression of Louis Riel's Red River uprising—like many of his contemporaries, claimed that Canada had a lot of potential for improving upon the ideals of other nations, especially those of the U.S. and the U.K., as Coleman and Donald Goellnicht point out (3). This idea of the conscious constructedness of the Canadian nation is critical for my study: Mair's argument suggests that in the Canadian context, idealized or utopian world-building is a foundational national objective in Canada; it is both self-consciously built and a fantasy. This "utopia," though, has only been utopic for some. For many, this improvement project has been destructive, and its legacy persists today. Though they do not use the language of utopia, Coleman and Goellnicht point out that "[t]he belatedness of Canada—coming after the establishment of the United Kingdom and of the United States of America—caused early nationalists to believe that they could learn from the errors of these earlier models to create a more just society" (3).

That is, both conceptually and in its own dominant imaginary historically and today, Canada is a utopian idea.

For the purposes of my dissertation, the sense of “improvement” in the cartoon matters, but so does gender slippage due to its demonstration of the extent to which the nation is framed only in normative terms. The slippage occurs between the title of the cartoon—“Child Canada Takes *Her* First Steps”—and Uncle Sam’s assertion that of course *he* can stand on his own. Though the clothing may signify feminine—it looks like that might be a plaid dress and dress shoes—the child’s gender nevertheless, is flexible enough to be represented as either a boy or a girl within the same image, but changes from one moment to the next. There is a moment of cognitive dissonance, though, because neither of the genderings leaves space for anything other than boy-ness or girl-ness, and, instead they coexist in a single image in which there is not room for them both. It seems critical to the representation of Canada—and perhaps all nations—historically and today, that, more than simply being anthropomorphized, the nation is thought in gendered terms, and, more specifically, in normatively gendered terms; the child can be *either* a boy or girl, but *must* be one or the other. This need for flexibility between two rigidly defined categories is perhaps especially prominent in the Canadian context as an indication of its anxiety to be able to find a place on the world stage. Because there seems to be no way to imagine the child-nation through one of these two genders, though, this impossibility is instructive in thinking through how the categories of nation and gender are implicated in each other.

This cartoon also captures well the relationship between race, gender, and nation in the dominant imaginary. We might expect, for example, Indigenous or Chinese parentage, if we think about who was here first or the importance of the railway. But, typically, racialized bodies are erased in order to perpetuate the myth of the white nation on *terra nullius*. The gender ambiguity, however, is indicative of the ways in which gendered ideas of nation are mobilized, depending on the context and the needs of the mobilizing body: sometimes the nation is the female-gendered ‘motherland’ that needs protecting. In other instances, the overwhelmingly masculinized military, for example, represents nation on the world stage. Diana Brydon, in her discussion about the operation of “nation” in Canadian literary criticism notes that “each of the [widely discussed national] myths unconsciously genders Canadian humanity as male and Canadian wilderness as female” (“It’s” 21), though she does not take this point further. There is also the historical and contemporary image of Canada in particular as a young man going into the wilderness to “make his way,” or the *bildungsroman* narrative of Canada as a young nation about to “come into its (read: his) own,” but what we see is that the flexibility in these genderings, as in the cartoon, have limits and must be recognizable. In the dominant imaginary, gender identities can shift between two poles, but nothing else is possible.

My methodology for reading gender non-conforming characters in contemporary Canadian literature draws on the work of thinkers like Henderson, as I discussed above, as well as Gopinath, Jack Halberstam, and Dionne Brand, who model ways to bring together a range of identity categories and who actively refute dominant discourses.



Gopinath looks at what she calls “impossible subjects”: queer diasporic women. Gopinath demonstrates the ways in which conversations about nationalism (both within nations and diasporas) and gender negate questions of queerness by assuming a heterosexual subject.<sup>10</sup> She argues, instead, that an interrogation of queer diasporic women is critical to the consideration of the workings of nations and genders. Gopinath positions her work on queer female diasporic subjectivity by showing the gaps in the knowledge about subjectivities that are generally made visible in “progressive” discussions of diaspora—those of queer men, and straight (if feminist) women—which, she suggests, tends to shore up patriarchy and heteronormativity; as she says, “[b]y making female subjectivity central to a queer diasporic project, [this book] begins... to conceptualize diaspora in ways that do not invariably replicate heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship and community” (6). Gopinath uses what she calls a “scavenger methodology” to find the impossible subjects—queer women—in the nationalized/diasporic texts in order to imagine alternative possibilities to the contemporary “regime” (28). Like Gopinath, my project will look at subjects whose existences are not typically represented in dominant cultural imaginaries to see what they can teach us about the workings of the dominant order.

Similarly, Jack Halberstam<sup>11</sup> reconfigures traditional approaches to gendered objects of study, suggesting that the best way to understand masculinity is to come at it sideways, by looking at what he calls “female masculinity,” or transgender and butch

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<sup>10</sup> Though she does not discuss non-normative genders, her conception of “queer” includes both queer genders and sexualities, though her study focuses more on queer sexuality than it does on gender (28).

<sup>11</sup> Halberstam’s book, *Female Masculinities*, was published under his previous name, Judith Halberstam.

culture. Halberstam also engages a “scavenger methodology,” supported by a politics of refusal in that he refuses to take up the common discourses in these discussions and instead elects to look exclusively at female masculinities (8), a subject-position that is ignored in much work on gender. As he says, linking gender explicitly to the nation-state, “[m]asculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth” (2). Halberstam also asks a question that animates my work: “How does gender variance disrupt the flow of powers presumed by patriarchy in relations between men and women?” and makes persuasive observations about the intensification of policing when ideas of gender are complicated, such as in the one I use as an epigraph with regard to gender and nation in airport bathrooms (*Female* 17). Though these are small moments in his work, they show the importance of considering gender variance, particularly as it affects other categories, such as that of nation. In a similar move, I argue that if nation is a gendered institution, then to look at nation in a non-normatively gendered context will shed some light on the complex relationship of gender and nation.

Poet, theorist, and novelist Dionne Brand, like the other thinkers I have mentioned, similarly refuses to engage with dominant epistemologies. In *Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, in which she attempts to articulate the effects and legacies of slavery and colonialism, she claims that “too much has been made of origins” (69). That is, she argues that political organizing based exclusively on narrow definitions of identity that do not attend to parallel related oppressions and intersectional analyses, will never attain the goals of that organizing. To be clear, she is not saying that

origins or identity categories are meaningless or that they can be done away with. Instead, she is arguing for an expansion of the work that different groups do so that solidarity can be built across difference. This text is critical for me because it brings together the need to look at multiply layered sites of analysis that account for the complexities of the subject at hand. The refusals of thinkers like Brand, Gopinath, Halberstam, and Henderson to engage in the dominant categories create space for non-normative subjects and model how I might do the same. Furthermore, Brand's work is crucial to my thinking about the political power of form and genre: by troubling genre expectations as Brand does in this text, she draws the reader's attention to the ways generic and literary conventions—what we might otherwise call known organizing structures—shape what we know and what is legible. In doing so, Brand's book acts as an intervention into the discourses of anti-racism/-colonialism/-oppression work because of some genres' contingency upon and collusion with colonialist and Enlightenment epistemologies.

This idea of refusal is usefully brought together with utopianism in an article about Toni Cade Bambara's work. In the article, Avery F. Gordon discusses Bambara's work in terms that are significant for my project as well, including utopianism, futurism, process, community, the nation-state, racism, and imagination, among others. Bambara has overtly rejected the term "utopianism" to describe her work particularly because of its "decidedly Eurocentric and racially exclusive construction" (257). Gordon does not disregard Bambara's objections to the term (260), but she argues that Bambara can be read as expanding it: "[t]he utopian as we primarily know it has missed the opportunity to chart a richer and more adequate history and theory of our real and imagined strivings for

a livable social existence” (258), an argument that resonates with my readings of Findley, Lai, and Highway and that is picked up by José Esteban Muñoz, as I discuss below.

Indeed, Bambara is even explicitly critical of inclusive nationalist politics when Gordon points out that for Bambara, freedom “[i]s not a better nation-state, however disguised as a cooperative” in ways that are similar to the novels that I discuss (272). Instead of using the language of imagination, as my project does, Gordon shows how Bambara uses the closely related concept of “dreaming,” but as with imagining, the dreaming process is not uncomplicated: “[t]his anticipatory consciousness involves dreaming, but it also involves risk” (264). In engaging in revolutionary thinking and action, we can see that there are no guarantees, as the novels also show us.

Another parallel between these projects is that Bambara also sees the revolutionary process as a slow but urgent one. As Gordon says of Bambara’s position on revolution, it “can’t wait until later, it can’t be done in a minute, and most importantly, it can’t be done alone” (267). Because of her emphasis on process in Bambara’s work, Gordon also shows the complexities of revolutionary action, particularly as it relates to people in positions of power, both on the left and the right who wind up replicating oppressive systems: “To understand as embodied knowledge... is to hold to a reality principle that runs counter to everything we are taught by all rulers, *most scholars, and many radicals*” (270, emphasis mine). Moreover, she says, this move towards a different world “is an uneven process, not very linear, always looping around catching folks at different moments” (272), a recognition which resonates especially in terms of how I read the difficult learning experiences of the characters Miranda and Jeremiah. Part of the

work, as Gordon describes it, too, is to “share [this knowledge] with others” (271), which is the function that Lucy, Evie, and the Fur Queen serve in their own ways and speaks especially to the scales of their actions. Finally, Gordon advocates “in-difference [*sic*],” or what we might call “refusal,” over cynicism: “The power of in-difference is more powerful than skepticism for the simple reason that it attaches you, not to what you hold in contempt (as cynicism does), but to that liberated zone where the daily practice of freedom constitutes the grounds for sovereignty and for a labor of love that’s anything but misguided” (272). My work builds on Gordon’s thinking about Bambara as I consider the operations of gender non-conformity in the Canadian context.

My project also has precursors in queer Canadian scholarship in texts such as Peter Dickinson’s *Here is Queer* (1998), Terry Goldie’s *Pink Snow* (2003), and to some extent in the edited collection, *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies* (2012). My project differs from Dickinson’s in a few key ways. Dickinson looks at sexuality in Canadian literature, while I am looking at gender. Dickinson does not look exclusively at queerness—“the range of texts discussed in this book ... suggest[s]... that ‘queer,’ as a literary-critical category of an almost inevitable definitional elasticity, one whose inventory of sexual meanings has yet to be exhausted, challenges and upsets certain received national orthodoxies of writing in Canada” (5)—instead, he considers homosociality, lesbian-feminism, and the connections between heterosexuality and patriotism, while my project emphasizes how the embodiments of certain characters seem to facilitate a re-imagining of community. That is, his work is surveying the field, while mine is doing a more in-depth look at three characters that challenge the nationalized

basis of the field. Dickinson and I are both interested in how gender, race, and class inflect Canadian literature, but his project refers to “Canadian, Québécois, and First Nations literatures” (3). Though he does have a complex understanding of what “Canadian” means—he includes Dionne Brand as a Canadian writer, for example, noting that she is often mislabelled as “‘West Indian’ rather than ‘Canadian,’” despite having lived in Canada throughout her adult life and notes that “these same critics [who mislabel her] frequently erase [her] lesbianism” while also erasing the range of artistic and political interventions she has made (9)—my project more explicitly considers the tension within different authors’ “Canadian-ness.” At present, I am only studying a white Anglophone, a Chinese Canadian, and a Cree voice: this project is not comprehensive and cannot be. But Dickinson and I differ in our analysis of the complexity of the authors’ relationships to the concept “Canadian”: writing in the late 1990s, Dickinson’s project values the idea of inclusion while my project works to refute it. While Dickinson is doing the important work of bringing sexuality and nation together, my work tries to show how non-normative gender presentation facilitates a critique of the nation and an imagining of a different geo-social relationality.

Goldie’s *Pink Snow* sets out to build what he calls a “Canadian *homotextual* tradition” within canonical Canadian literature (16, emphasis original). Goldie’s project focuses exclusively on gay men because of the differences between gay and lesbian cultures (2), but the tradition that he is building does not necessarily require gay male content or authorship. Rather, Goldie is working as a gay reader-critic, in a context in which “there is no question that homosexuality continues to operate as a dirty secret in

North American cultures, in spite of the many examples of progress” (6). Given the extent to which Canadian literature is a new field and the dearth of texts that are overtly queer, as compared to the American literary history of queerness, Goldie feels compelled to build one. Because there are very few overt statements of queerness, though, he develops a reading practice: “Perhaps these studies are not of writing by homosexuals or which depict homosexuals; they are books which the gay critic chooses to analyze in a certain way” (13), though he is not claiming here that a “gay critic” is one who self-identifies under the label “queer,” as he leaves room for the “non-homosexual gay critic” (13). Rather than claiming an essential identity, he suggests that “it is all the spaces that can be homosexualized, the existence of homosexuals in those spaces, and explicit or implicit presence of those spaces in the lens of the critic that create homotextuality, regardless of the experience of the critic” (15). Though I see value in Goldie’s project, my project differs in its focus on gender and embodiment. Our projects are similar, however, in that they both involve a kind of searching for and foregrounding of a minoritized population. While Dickinson is looking for the sexual underpinnings of the nation as represented in Canadian literature, Goldie is looking for queerness in the Canadian canon. Like Dickinson, I am looking at the underpinnings of the nation as represented in Canadian literature, but I am concerned with gender more than sexuality, and I am also concerned with how Findley, Lai, and Highway respond to nation and the alternatives that their novels suggest.

*Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies* connects the ideas of sexuality and nation and is also an important precursor for my project. It is the

first Sexuality Studies reader that is focused on the Canadian context. Its focus is on a range of important moments in the evolution of the thinking about sexuality in this place. It is also interested in the discursive function of socio-political events in terms of sexuality and the nation: “this collection of essays brings to the fore the way in which sexuality has played a fundamental role not only in the building of our nation, but in the creation of national narratives, myths, and indeed anxieties about Canadian identity” (xvi). This edited collection does not deal extensively with literature, so it is telling to see that Scott Rayter’s introduction opens with a discussion of the complexities of Canadian identity by drawing on the thought of well-known Canadian literature scholar, Linda Hutcheon. Though my project is not directly about specific events or cultural moments, this book lays important groundwork for my project in terms of its attention to questions of gender and sexuality with regard to nation in Canada; I also appreciate the way that it brings the humanities and social sciences together and considers how they inform each other. With that said, though, the book has a much greater emphasis on sexuality than it does on gender, though gender does figure in it.

Because there is more scholarship on questions of sexuality than there is on non-normative gender, it is worth mentioning at this point the tensions between queer and trans\* theory, the latter of which is the theoretical framework that will support my reading of gender non-conforming characters. These two areas of thought have a tense relationship, of which we can see evidence in Goldie’s discussion of gay and lesbian cultures differing so substantially from each other so as to not warrant being discussed together. Goldie’s claim is fraught, of course, but it is indicative of some significant



differences. One can imagine then—if gay men and lesbians have their queerness in common, but still differ substantially—that queer people may have very little in common with trans\* people based on these identifications. Some trans\* people are queer, of course, but there is no necessary connection between the two; the “T” in LGBTQ is often treated as being tacked on by LGBTQ populations, since gender and sexuality often have nothing to do with each other. As Susan Stryker explains,

[w]hile queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often queer remains a code word for “gay” or “lesbian,” and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity. Most disturbingly, “transgender” increasingly functions as the site in which to contain all gender trouble, thereby helping secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood. This has damaging, isolative political correlaries [*sic*]. It is the same developmental logic that transformed an antiassimilationist “queer” politics into a more palatable LGBT civil rights movement, with T reduced to merely another (easily detached) genre of sexual identity rather than perceived, like race or class, as something that cuts across existing sexualities, revealing in often unexpected ways the means through which all identities achieve their specificities.

The field of transgender studies has taken shape over the past decade in the shadow of queer theory. Sometimes it has claimed its place in the queer family and offered an in-house critique, and sometimes it has angrily spurned its lineage and set out to make a home of its own. Either way, transgender studies is following its own trajectory and has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed. (“Transgender” 214)

To vastly over-simplify the argument: on the one hand, queer theory made room for trans\* theory, but on the other hand, queer theory has a tendency to read trans\*ness reductively, leading to a rift between the schools of thought. Despite the tensions between queer and trans\* theory, and given that none of the authors I focus on self-identify as

trans\* while they all self-identify under terms relating to queer, I focus on gender here because the texts themselves seem to settle on gender identity—though certainly not gender alone—as a locus of imaginative possibility.

In exploring such operations, genre becomes an important consideration because, as Peter Dickinson shows, drawing on Butler, genres, though very complex, operate in ways similar to genders, based on their need for repetition (“Introduction” 9). The function of a genre is to produce a narrative that is legible to its intended audience. Though texts may or may not deviate to varying degrees from their generic norms, textual legibility is contingent upon familiar stories, and gender can be said to work in similar ways: there are a limited number of “legible”—or what we might call normative or generic—gender positions, and most people adhere to the most common signposts with some variation, and thereby legitimate, naturalize, and normalize the dominant gender positions, whether they intend to or not. Because of the naturalization of these categories, other ways of being in the world become more difficult—and in some cases, impossible—to be read or be understood as legitimate, and this delegitimization lends itself very quickly to both pathologization and dehumanization.

Concerns about social inequities as they affect pathologized and dehumanized peoples abound in discussions about magical realism, making it a fitting genre for the novels in my project to engage. It is a contested genre, however, with extensive critical debates about its nature. For the purposes of my project, it is not necessary for me to engage in these debates, as I am not trying to make a claim about the nature of magical realism, though the contextualizing function of these debates has been useful for me to

reflect on my own investments in the liberatory potential of magical realism. My interest, then, is in emphasizing the political work that magical realist literatures can do in relation to a coherent notion of reality, particularly as it relates to the texts I study here. I read the political world of the novels in the context of magical realism and dystopian literature, a stylistic strategy that can be employed to move beyond the limitations of realism in order to imagine alternate possibilities. Indeed, part of the reason that the texts I will write on are able to take up the questions of nation and gender so aptly is that they are located in realms in which realism does not fully account for the goings on; rather than reify notions of nationhood, they extend possibilities beyond them.

Reading the supernatural and its relationship to the political in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, *Salt Fish Girl*, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* through the lens of magical realism helps to elucidate some of the work that the novels do.<sup>12</sup> Arising out of Latin America in the 1950s,<sup>13</sup> it is widely characterized as having a representation of two world views that coexist in a non-hierarchical relationship to each other (Schroeder 14). Generally, the two world views are evidence of epistemological differences between what Stuart Hall would call “the west and the rest”; this genre is generally read as critical writing that is against colonialist and other dominating social structures, showing the flaws in their oppressive structures. Magical realism differs from other “fantastic” genres like “fantasy, fairy-tales, and science fiction” because magical realism is based in realism, while these other genres “de-privilege[] codes of the real by taking as settings realms removed from our

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<sup>12</sup> As with the characters’ genders, my aim here is to provide some landmarks, but I am not trying to apply labels: I am much more interested in what the novels do.

<sup>13</sup> See Faris for a discussion of the history of magical realism.

recongisable, empirical world” (Warnes 3). That is, its relationship to the “real world” is a crucial component of magical realism.<sup>14</sup> The discussions of its liberatory potential emphasize its questioning of dominant orders: “Magical realism has become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely” (Faris 4).<sup>15</sup> Magical realism is widely read as offering a site of possibility for questioning the foundations of social orders and, therefore, imagining a different kind of social order.

Scholars of magical realism show that it is not without its problems, however. Schroeder discusses the potential for appropriation, for example, when it is taken out of a Latin American context, and, especially, when it is used by western authors.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, there is concern about its ability to reify or shore up western epistemologies by “containing” the “difference” of non-western writers and through its potential for emphasizing non-western “mysticism” in relation to western “rationality” (Bowers 117, 118),<sup>17</sup> in addition to its romanticization of marginalized people, particularly when authors write about groups of which they are not a part (Bowers 120). Wendy B. Faris is critical of magical realism as well, but her concern is with representations of gender. As she notes, “magical realism continues the process of patriarchal culture’s disenchantment with itself and its dominant forms of realistic representation... [but] magical realism also perpetuates some of patriarchal culture’s stereotypes, using female bodies as a bridge to

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of magical realism’s relationship to realism, see Bowers (20).

<sup>15</sup> See also Bowers 31-32, Bhabha 7.

<sup>16</sup> For Bowers’s discussion of magical realism in Canadian literature, see 48-51.

<sup>17</sup> See also Warnes’s discussion of exoticization (7).

the beyond,” and her project in part “investigates the use of women as narrative enablers in texts of male magical realists” (4). I read these three novels in this genre, despite the potential problems both because they invite this reading with their joining of realism and the supernatural, but also because they privilege the marginalized worldview, though the potential problems of audience reception persist.

The genres of the texts I discuss is instructive especially because of the degree to which Canada is imagined and discussed as a utopia. While also attending to gender non-conformity and its complexities, my project is also reading these three novels as magical realist responses to dystopian settings, but this is a tricky claim to make. The concept of “dystopia,” like magical realism, is also not necessarily a straight forward one, and, interestingly, does not appear to overlap with magical realism, though I will argue that at least in the cases of the novels I am reading, they are integral to and co-constitutive of the strategies that the novels employ. The trickiness of this claim, however, is that the setting required for magical realism—a realistic one—is often not present in dystopian fiction.

Different theorists date the history of the dystopia differently, from ancient Greece to nineteenth-century Europe,<sup>18</sup> but all point out that it arises in the west in moments of large-scale social change, whether “political, philosophical, or technological” (Theiss 24). According to M. Keith Booker, a dystopia will

foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using that setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically that of the author or the audience. In other words, the bleak dystopian world should encourage the reader or viewer to think critically about it, then transfer the critical thinking to his or her own world. (5)

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<sup>18</sup> See Booker (*Dystopia 2*) and Theiss (24).

This genre, then, like magical realism, is commenting on its society, but dystopia has a more explicitly pedagogical function for readers. This genre is seen as a sub-genre of science fiction but differs from other sub-genres like post-apocalyptic fiction because they tend to focus on the apocalyptic event, rather than the society that led to it (Booker 5). Marlene Goldman's discussion of the history of apocalypse, however, defines apocalypse in Canadian literature in ways similar to the definition of dystopia offered here. She argues that contemporary Canadian writers "stress the links between apocalyptic violence and the creation of the Canadian nation-state" and show that "the originary apocalyptic violence that engendered the nation-state typically involved the subordination and commodification of women, Native peoples, ethnic minorities, and the landscape" (*Rewriting* 25). For Goldman apocalypse in the Canadian context is commensurate with the kinds of dystopian characteristics that scholars discuss in non-apocalyptic dystopian contexts. Patrick Parrinder's discussion of science fiction and metaphor also relates to how we read utopia and, therefore, dystopia: "[t]he redefinition of science fiction as metaphor coincided with the politicisation of sf" and suggests that the "[m]etaphorical theory views science fiction not as an alternative to utopia... but as one of the contemporary forms of utopian writing" (28). And Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas link this work to feminist politics.<sup>19</sup> While it is read in a range of contexts, the consistent characteristic of dystopia is its critique of social orders.

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<sup>19</sup> Booker and Thomas's work suggests that considering dystopia in an explicitly feminist context helps to elaborate more of the text's effects. While dystopia speaks to the contemporary political climate, part of its legacy also relates explicitly to feminist politics, particularly as feminist dystopia can provide an "imaginative space" in which to "examine alternatives to patriarchal structures" (87). Further to this discussion of gender, Booker and Thomas explain that feminist dystopias also take up questions of the nature of humanness, sexuality, and racialization. There is a long history, though, of feminist science fiction

In addition to dystopias that critique a society, there is a second strand of dystopia that critiques the notion of utopia because of the fascist potential of imagining a “perfect” world; dystopia is necessarily in conversation with ideas about utopia because of its criticism of the current order and, therefore, its implicit imagining of alternatives.<sup>20</sup>

Fredric Jameson in particular worries about our short memories with regard to Stalinism’s investment in utopianism and the ways in which an uncritical utopianism can lead quickly to fascism,<sup>21</sup> which is why the collaborative aspect of the texts I work with is crucial; these novels avoid this concern because they do not suggest there will be no one person or population with all of the imaginative power. It is worth noting, however, that Jameson’s understanding of utopianism sees it as static and that it is necessarily drawn from the socio-historical structures that we have inherited. He does not advocate nihilism, however; rather he proposes that being “anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy” (xvi). Being *against* anti-utopianism, rather than *for* a utopianism that could lead to fascism is what he sees as the best option. The questions he raises in this statement are important, given the hopefulness of the genre, but my project asks if we can imagine beyond a static utopia and what possibilities education and collaboration might offer. The crucial point of the novels, as I read them, is that they do not prescribe what a utopia is; they want to collaboratively build it. That is, these novels provide a way to

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retaining essentialist ideas about what constitutes a “woman” in ways that are both oppressive to women and trans\*women.

<sup>20</sup> See Booker (6-7).

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the fascist potential of utopianism, Jameson is concerned with the impossibility of imagining otherwise when our frames of reference are necessarily of the society that is being critiqued. As he says, “even our wildest imaginings are all collages of experience, constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now.... On the social level, this means that our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of past ones it has preserved)” (xiii), and this is why the novels I study argue for a process-based utopia that anticipates revision as more is learned from mistakes.

consider utopian ideals that do not replicate the top-down structures that have led some utopian ideals to turn into an oppressive fascism.

José Esteban Muñoz does not see utopias as necessarily imposed. Rather he sees utopia through the lens of queerness as aspirational. Though Muñoz does not explicitly discuss magical realism or dystopia, his work is significant for my thinking in that it engages in a mode of critique that demonstrates the value that I see in these kinds of generic locations for their utopian imaginings. Drawing on Ernest Bloch, Muñoz argues that queer theorists must resist the logic that leads to the negative turn in queer theory.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Muñoz suggests a re-evaluation of the present moment: rather than engaging in presentism, he argues for a look to the past in order to imagine a future. Indeed, for him, queerness is a potentiality: drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, he says, “potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense” (9). Muñoz’s work on utopianism differs dramatically from Jameson’s in that it is not interested in imposing; he deals only with potentiality. It is this emphasis on futurity and possibility that I investigate throughout the body of my dissertation, as the texts themselves do not discuss utopia. They are looking to build a better world, but the language of utopia suggests a faster change in system than the novels discuss; they are invested in a slow process of building, rather than a wholesale tearing down the current system. That is, they suggest that a tearing down will

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<sup>22</sup> The “negative turn” in queer theory is against the social; it picks up on the sense that since queer people are not reproductive (a contentious claim in and of itself), we must embrace our non-heteronormativity and the sense that we have “no future.” See, in particular, Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.



only lead to a replication of the current order, while a slower change might be a better strategy.

As with magical realism, concerns about the audience reception of dystopia and its political efficacy for imagining alternatives. Brett Josef Grubisic, Gisèle M. Baxter, and Tara Lee see political potential in the genre, particularly in the ways in which it is not escapist. Indeed, they call dystopia “one of [science fiction’s] least escapist genres” and refer to it as “foreseeing threatened near futures and writing cautionary, activist tales in reply” that are “conceived of as vehicles for pre-emptive political activism... in order to forewarn, illustrate, and dissuade” (7-8). Grubisic, Baxter, and Lee draw on Booker to suggest that dystopia is “less a fantastical escape from contemporary reality than a political engagement with it,” and that it addresses real world issues and critiques sociopolitical practices that “might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (10). Overall, for them, dystopian literature has “diverse political engagements with faulty present-day systems with the growing potentials for widespread harm” (11). Like the other critics, Grubisic, Baxter, and Lee are generally hopeful about the political work that dystopia can do. Their discussion does delve to some degree into questions about markets for readers, but it does not question the ways in which widespread reading of dystopian literature does not seem to have had a large-scale social effect. Booker also mentions concerns about saturation because of the popularity of the genre, but continues to see its political potential (11). In the case of both dystopia and magical realism, their political potential depends on the reader’s willingness and ability to learn, and if the text is being taught in a formal classroom, on the skill set and reading

capacity of the instructor(s). What is important, however, as Bowers shows, is the space that magical realism opens up for a discussion about “the relationship of fiction and representation to reality” (123), which we also see in dystopia. How and whether or not that discussion gets taken up is another question, but it is crucial that a degree of space exists in order to have it. These texts are usefully read in terms of the history of utopian thought in Canada, particularly given the widespread framing of Canada as a utopia. This sense of constructedness and the questioning that accompanies it are echoed in the texts that I will consider.

The works of Findley, Lai, and Highway try to imagine and facilitate the building of a better world. Like Muñoz, they are hopeful but not prescriptive, which, for Muñoz, is crucial for imagining: the potentiality of utopic imagining must remain indeterminate because hope is the mode that facilitates the kind of imagining necessary for change. For Muñoz, “[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1);<sup>23</sup> his project “perform[s] and utilize[s] the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity” (12). He further draws on a logic of astonishment in the mundane as a site of possibility (5); for him, drawing on the philosophical work of Andy Warhol, “utopia exists in the quotidian” (9). This relationship between utopia and the quotidian

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<sup>23</sup> Though the texts with which I work are all written by queer authors and my reading strategy might fit under the rubric of queer theory, it is important to emphasize that it is the emphasis on futurity more than the identities of the authors that leads me to Muñoz’s work.

relates to the ways in which my project considers the importance of small-scale building. Interestingly, Muñoz is open to the possibility of disappointment—“utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed. They are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging transformation.... But such disappointment needs to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted” (9). In short, Muñoz demonstrates the connection between utopian thinking and material changes in social conditions for marginalized groups, and it is this kind of utopian thinking that appears in the texts I will investigate.

As I suggested above, my analysis gets tricky, however, because I read *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, *Salt Fish Girl*, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as both magical realist and dystopian. Despite not being discussed together in the scholarship, they share significant similarities in their potential for building new worlds. My main reason for reading them together, however, follows Warnes’s suggestion about reading texts on their own terms. The novels are magical realist because their supernatural elements are treated as legitimate in their worldviews, which are otherwise mainly based in realist contexts. The one potential exception here is *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, whose setting is mainly realistic, but it is not historically literal and is not set in a verifiable place. The novel still fits into this category, however, insofar as it is invested in questioning western Enlightenment logics.

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* has the opposite problem in terms of being positioned as a dystopian novel, in that it is set in a very realistic 1980s Canada. If a key feature of dystopia is setting a text in one context in order to comment on another, how are we to read Highway’s novel as a dystopia? My argument is that by focusing on Indigenous

people's experiences of colonialism and its legacies in the context of the colonial nation, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* shows how the current moment is dystopic; rather than using an outside setting, Highway uses a small segment of the population to make a larger critique, and so retains the distancing position of a community that is isolated from the dominant society, which is made more visible through the Fur Queen's juxtaposition of the dystopian effects of colonization and utopian possibilities.

Though *Salt Fish Girl* fits most overtly in a dystopian genre both because of its futuristic setting and its overt pedagogy, its relationship to magical realism is a bit tenuous. I nevertheless read it in this context because of its surreal elements, which go mostly without explanation, as well as because of the presence of the divine characters. These characters act as sites of hope, show the limits of the imaginable, and push beyond them.

While there is abundant evidence of the utopian legacy of Canada persists today, it has changed over time. In response to the historical debates about the position of the nation, particularly as it relates to Canadian literary studies (see, for example, Frye, Davey, Lecker, Kertzer, Brydon "It's," and Szeman), Kit Dobson, among others, explains that while there was a consolidation of the Canadian literary canon in the 1960s and 1970s, the conversation changed in the 1980s and 1990s to make room for minoritized authors, and things are continuing to change with the increasingly globalized world, in which market logic seems to override sites of difference. Here we might consider Dobson's assertion that "[w]hile it was formerly popular to celebrate the nation as a bastion against globalization on the left, today it seems that the national and the global

are, instead, interlocking scales of capital” (x). What Dobson means here is that Canadianists cannot pretend as though the nation can be separated from the global. His work looks at how different Canadian authors position relationships to the nation and other identity categories.

As he goes on to say, there is a tension in the concept of the nation at the current cultural moment:

Considering the question of a national literary community is fraught in an age in which corporations champion the erosion of state borders as a means of facilitating production and resource extraction. At the same time, the so-called war on terror is erecting new, racialized barriers that keep people from crossing these same state barriers. (xi)

That is, alongside the openness of capitalism, there are other sites where policing of “outsiders” has been amplified. Indeed, he goes on to say that it is “important to look beyond the nation (without forgetting that it’s still there) in order to rethink, rework, and resist what global capitalism has meant for those excluded from the dominant within nation-states, since the nation-state and neo-liberal models of globalization are ever more similar” (xvii-xviii). That is, if the nation has become increasingly porous, it has only become so for some people; many of its exclusionary structures remain intact or have been increased. Dobson’s statements about these structural parallels raise questions for my project’s look at the nation.

Rather than seeing the nation and globalization, however, my project is interested in responses to top-down socio-cultural institutions, whether they are labelled national or global. I agree with Dobson that

[t]elling alternative stories...is complex because this process can be easily subsumed to the marketplace that surrounds and penetrates everyone's lives.... Writings that get classified as multicultural, composed by previously subaltern voices, are also appropriated to dominant structures in Canada and used in order to demonstrate the benevolence of the nation-state in tolerating a diversity of voices.... This very useful display of tolerance is also a display of the inclusivity of the marketplace, of capital's construction of subjects to participate in the circulation of goods and commodities. (204-205)

Dobson is usefully pointing out the limits of nationalist and globalization discourses; commodities like books can be used to serve both of their purposes. Dobson is anxious in part about the idealized position of the arts in this conversation:

Books are cultural commodities that participate in the logic of capital... There is no need to lament [this] fact, but there is still a tendency to privilege cultural productions as being 'outside' the market. Instead, books participate in it, and, at a textual level, the freedoms that individual characters search out, by being subsumed to national discourses, can be used to sustain the state as well as capitalism. (205)

In short, he is cautioning against a celebration of literature as either nationalist or globalist because these two modes may be more closely aligned at times than we realize. With that said, though, he does not believe that literature can only serve the interests of capital, whether national or global: "The answers that have been offered show how, to a large extent, engaging in literary work that challenges the values of global capital also implicates such work in its structures" (207-208). Dobson's point is that whatever resistance is possible is always already compromised, much as Jameson suggests in his

discussions of the potential of utopia, but that does not mean that there is no political potential in the arts.<sup>24</sup>

We might read the books with which I engage as asking questions of the nation, and in many ways they are, but their questions are more about the dominant social order, which happens to be the nation. They refuse the nation as it stands and are not interested in inclusion, but they are also not advocating a kind of fluidity that discourses of globalization often espouse. These novels' criticism of top-down structures would see the nation and globalization as closely aligned, while they are trying to imagine something else. While Lai's novel takes on post-national globalization quite explicitly, her concerns are more about the impact of the social structures and how to imagine otherwise than they are about the ins and outs of those structures.

Following the work of some of the critics I discuss above, I suggest that we need to think carefully about attempts to recover the nation, to make it more inclusive, or to believe that we are all now post-national "global citizens." I do not want to suggest, however, that conceptions of nations are always already negative. As Daniel Coleman and Donald Goellnicht explain, the institutionalization of programs such as Asian Canadian Studies, which often exist as a result of a nationalist sentiment, is desirable because these programs come out of antiracist activism and are an indication of "the recognition of and serious critical engagement with the cultural and literary achievements of previously marginalized groups" (14). These kinds of projects involve the very

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<sup>24</sup> For more on globalization in Canadian literature, see Jeff Derksen's *Annihilated Time: Poetry and Other Politics* and Herb Wyile's *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*.

important work of exhuming previously dismissed work and inventing fields that create “a unity or at least a community to which the original writers or artists often had no access” (17). Coleman and Goellnicht are cautious, though, in their celebration because of the risks of essentialism that these sorts of programs run. But while they recognize these potential problems, they also see these spaces as opening possibilities. As they say, it is imperative that the process of institutionalizing these programs be seen “precisely as a *complex process*—so that it not become reified in such a way that these institutions of racialized cultural production in Canada become prisons or reservations rather than pathways and avenues toward the further building of more complex patterns of identification” (23, emphasis original). As I see it, this institutionalization can be seen as similar to the operation of a strategic nationalism—while cautious celebration is important for nationalized groups who have been marginalized by more dominant groups, as is the case for First Nations populations, Black nationalism, Québec nationalism, and queer nation, a habitual and self-conscious reconsideration is imperative to ensure that the boundaries do not become ossified and introduce or support oppressions.

I am not arguing that we need to eschew the concept of the nation wholesale, but I am not advocating for it either. What is important here is that even if I did say that we need to get rid of the nation, it is not going anywhere—there is far too much currently invested in the idea of the nation and the epistemological structures that inform and enforce it are ubiquitous. Just like any other form of structural power or privilege, it cannot be wished away. The novels I work with, however, are suggesting alternatives. While Dobson rightly warns that the arts are not produced outside of market forces, and



these ones are no exception, these novels are exceptional for the way that they question dominant structures and, most importantly, advocate for collaborative solutions. These novels bring together the ways in which gender and nation are naturalized, structured in similar ways, and mutually reinforcing, and then through this analysis, work to suggest that other possibilities exist.

My interest in these texts, and specifically my investment in imagining a future that departs from the one that I have inherited, arises largely from the subject positions that I occupy and my experience with women's studies epistemologies and pedagogies. As with most people, I occupy a position at an intersection of marginalization and privilege. Because of the inequities that marginalize me and the sites of privilege from which I benefit, I want to—and have a responsibility to—better understand how these systems work. Alongside this investment is my interest in trying to imagine possibilities, and this is why I am drawn to the texts upon which I will focus: How do we build better geo-political spaces and relations? What might they look like? And how do we work to unlearn the insidiously naturalized ways of knowing that we have inherited? How do we teach otherwise? How do we ethically navigate the compromises that may have to be made? And how do we learn from our mistakes? It is absolutely essential to criticize current common practices that create destructive hierarchies for some while others thrive as a result of them, but that criticism often does not go as far as it needs to, so I find myself wanting to think about a building process that honours the horrors of historical and contemporary genocides and other atrocities, but that works to think about future possibilities.

Ajay Heble's writing provides a useful way into thinking through ethical reading strategies as I work through these questions. He asks, "[d]oes postmodernism, perhaps even in spite of itself, lead us in some way to think that it is only by reading and writing about *texts* within the context of the academy that effective social change can take place?" (78). And indeed, Heble begins to ask questions about issues like pedagogy and social justice in Canada only to find that they are not inherently Canadian questions, and then advises that "Canadian criticism, without losing sight of its cultural specificities, needs... to see itself as a part of a broader discourse of social, cultural, pedagogical, and institutional transformation" (80). This sentiment is echoed in the work of Christl Verduyn, who argues that people like Dionne Brand among other writers of colour are "altering the way in which Canada is constructed, with the result that readers increasingly understand it as a country with complex gender, race, and ethnic dimensions that must be debated" and advocates a turn in the study of Canadian literature towards comparative analyses (109, 103). Heble differs from many, though, in asking,

is it utopian of me to suggest that Canadian critics and teachers have a responsibility, however modest, to initiate and nurture forms of solidarity which will help bring about progress, help facilitate change both in the current distributions of social relations and in the popular understanding? (92)

Indeed, as Heble discusses—at least in the context of the university—any kind of art needs a teacher who is politically engaged. These critics recognize colonialist tendencies such as feminist imperialism—in which (generally) well-intentioned people's privilege clouds their ability to see the potentially oppressive implications of their work—while insisting that these are pressing questions for those entering the university as instructors.

Following the work of Heble and Verduyn, another reason that I have come to this project is that I am trying to come to terms with Canadian literary studies as a teacher. The responsibilities of teaching in this field are enormous, particularly because Canada so consistently and so frequently positions itself as benign and neutral. This myth of neutrality is so pervasive that the majority of Canadians do not seem to be able to critically analyze troubling state practices.<sup>25</sup> These are just some of the conditions that must be taken into account when we consider what it means to teach Canadian literature.

As such, leaving out discussions of race, colonialism, nationalism, gender and other similar categories undermines the potential for a complex analysis. I have nevertheless put gender at the centre of my project because the novels demand an analysis of gendered non-conformity alongside these other sites of oppression, particularly given that we are living in a cultural moment that is often characterized as post-feminist (and post-racial) in the dominant cultural imaginary. Certainly, there are many discussions of gender as it operates in specific texts and in readings of catalyzing cultural moments, but there is less room available to discuss gender non-conformity. This gap is an indication of the tension between reading gender-based oppression as it affects cis-gender people and the related but distinct oppression experienced by trans\* and gender non-conforming people. Both of these sites of oppression are, of course, important to investigate, but my project focusses on the latter.

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<sup>25</sup> Some recent developments are the cutting of funding to the Sisters in Spirit database project, Prime Minister Steven Harper's statement that Canada has no colonial history, and his subsequent re-election into a majority government while incarceration rates among racialized peoples are significantly higher than the majority of the population, as are suicide rates, particularly among queer and Indigenous peoples.

Rather than centralize the nation, though, the texts with which I am working articulate the problems of the nation, and then insist that an alternative socio-political organization is possible. There is a long history of debates about the role of the nation in Canadian literary studies. This project operates laterally from these debates. Rather than thinking about the nation, this project aims to ask questions about socio-political spaces that do not rely exclusively on the history of national formations, though I would not want to suggest that a different social organization would operate in a vacuum; there is no denying, of course, the centrality of the role of the nation in the Canadian context. Rather than critiquing the nation or demanding inclusion, the novels that I work with demonstrate the limitations of this formation and try to imagine a different relationality that develops slowly and that anticipates revision. They do not advocate for a reductive eschewing of the nation in favour of a more transnational formation or globalized social structure. Rather the novels tend to make large-scale critiques of the power structures implicit in national formations while imagining smaller scale solutions.

The conception of the nation is imbricated in enlightenment epistemologies and logic—a mode of thinking that has been and continues to be deeply destructive to many, especially to marginalized peoples. That is to say that nation can be mobilized in both destructive and liberatory ways with regard to marginalized groups. On the one hand, it enforces borders around space and identity categories. On the other hand, in the face of something like cultural genocide, embracing the conception of nation is an effective strategy for uniting a group of people against an oppressive force, though in many cases this unification dangerously erases other vectors of difference. As we consider the hard

lines that this kind of epistemology espouses, it is important to think too about the ways in which Canada has been gendered and how the borders around genders are related to the nationalized borders, both literally and metaphorically.

In order to address these kinds of problems, the novels suggest that we must survey the ground we are standing on and engage in a strategic use of the tools we have available in order to accept that the violences of history have happened and are ongoing in order to consider how we can best address these legacies. This is the difference between reifying the nation and considering its material effects. This difference is crucial for my work because I will certainly be talking about the construction of nation, but I will be doing so in an attempt to raise questions about that construct. And so, the work in which I will engage will contribute to a reading strategy that troubles these boundaries and thinks through how texts operate on a socio-political level. That is, I want to engage in criticism that will focus on connections, rather than boundaries.

Each of the texts I consider takes up non-normative figures because of the imaginative possibilities they facilitate. Though they all function differently—Lucy imagines a place, Evie raises questions, and the Fur Queen facilitates empowerment—each of these texts pushes the reader to consider what might be possible. They resist easy answers in favour of a struggle. And while I am very keen to proceed with this project, I do have some apprehensions, one of which involves the possibilities of making these connections. On the one hand, I think that the pattern that I have laid out is significant and worth exploring, but there is also a danger in making generalizations about figures that are rooted in particular cultural mythologies. The “colonial habits of mind,” as

Brydon calls them that inform and shape my privilege (“Reading” 172)—particularly my white privilege, but my other privileges also—mean that despite my good intentions, I may still make mistakes. I intend to honour and respect these cultures, but I also want and need to tread the (potentially) dangerous ground of trying to look beyond cultural differences—I want to look beyond the origins in order to make connections. I do not want to engage in misrepresentation, especially given the degree to which this kind of violence is done so often and so liberally, especially to Indigenous communities. Lee Maracle explains that it is imperative to include the voices and experiences of Indigenous people in narratives about Canadian literatures and cultures, but one can expect, of course, heavy criticism if it is not done well. I am both terrified of misstepping, but I also welcome the criticism if I do. It seems to me that it would be a greater violence to ignore what I hope will be a rich discussion.

Another of these privileges is my cis-gender privilege, which is compounded by the frequency with which trans\* people are used as metaphors. What I mean here is that my gender presentation does not cause me much turmoil. Choosing which bathroom to use is not difficult for me, and I do not fear derision or worse based on the choice that I make. I do not have to worry that my gender will get me killed—or at least not nearly to the same degree as a trans\* person does. And if I should get hurt, I am confident that I will not be turned away from a hospital. This is not to victimize gender non-conforming people, but merely to demonstrate the very real day-to-day dangers that many trans\* people face. This violence, Viviane K. Namaste explains, is elided by the ways in which trans\* people are used as metaphors for gender crossing. Indeed, for example, Namaste

criticizes Marjorie Garber's argument that transvestitic characters in literature are an indication of a "category crisis"; in Garber's formulation, according to Namaste, these characters are reduced to a symptom with no materiality and no interiority. My project risks moving into the same direction that Namaste describes. The goal of my project, however, is not to consider these characters as metaphors that point elsewhere, but rather to think through how these characters' gender variance, to use Halberstam's term, facilitates the possibility of imagining of different social orders.

Though they speak from widely divergent and infinitely complicated cultural backgrounds, these texts offer characters whose gender identities do not fit into normative categories and whose traditions have fraught relationships to the concept of nation. I position each of these three texts as (provisionally) representative of a racialized/nationalized literature. The decision to do so is fraught—no one text can represent a whole literature, and drawing lines around 'kinds' of literatures is always already an impossible task. I will proceed despite the problems with doing so because the pattern that I have noticed is so striking and because of the pressing nature of the problem I am investigating. These texts invite the question, what happens to the concept of nation when the normative understanding of gender is unsettled? Or, to put it otherwise, what becomes possible to imagine when major identity categories are destabilized? To attempt to answer this question, I will devote one chapter each to the texts that I will investigate. If we do not ask questions about the constitution of the nation and how that shapes what we can know and imagine about it, then we risk obscuring the foundations of what we can ask, think about, and try to know. My dissertation is an attempt to address one of the

gaps that impedes a deeper understanding of these structures. Let me begin with how  
Lucy does it.



The Devil You Know:

“Knowledge” and Imagining Possibilities in Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage*

I intend to leave this place—because it is intolerant of light. Somewhere—there must be somewhere where darkness and light are reconciled. So I am starting a rumour, here and now, of yet another world. I do not know when it will present itself—I do not know where it will be. But—as with all those other worlds now past—when it is ready, I intend to go there.

-Lucy in Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (284)

The character of Lucy in Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage* inspired my dissertation project, and she is a paradigmatic example of the connection I see between gender non-conformity and the imagination of alternative social organizing, or, what we might call a “different world.” This novel is the most canonical of the texts I investigate, and I would imagine that Findley is the most widely recognized author of the ones with whose works I engage. *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is a critical retelling of the story of Noah’s ark, and in this retelling, as many critics point out, Findley moves between making a mockery of and mounting a scathing critique of a text from the most canonical of all texts in the west: the Bible.<sup>26</sup> In Findley’s version, Noah is a violent, megalomaniacal monster, not the hero that many of us are taught to think of him as; God, known here as Yaweh, is ambivalent, human, and effectively commits suicide, not the

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<sup>26</sup> Findley’s characterizations of biblical figures, it should be noted, are more concerned with what we might call “pop religious” images that circulate dominantly, rather than with being faithful to the Bible itself.

benevolent divine being with a white beard who is concerned about humans' well-being; and Lucifer, instead of being cast out of Heaven decides to leave because he wants to be able to ask "Why?" rather than accepting what he is told. Lucifer appears on Earth as Lucy, the woman who makes the imagining of another world possible. In this version, Findley dystopically fills in the gaps left in the biblical version of the story and engages in a magical realist re-telling to open possibilities of imagining alternative futures.

The novel opens with a critical passage about the false biblical representation of the ark's easy departure when the rains start, and moves quickly to look at the lives of the Noyes family. Noah Noyes is a devout but miserable scientist who assumes total mastery over everything, and so feels entitled to conduct experiments and give orders as he sees fit. There is little overt resistance to his tyranny, and what little there is not successful in changing his behaviour or worldview. Lucy arrives, and some of the animals can tell that there is something different about her, but no one else seems to notice, and she ensures that the animals will keep her secret. It soon becomes clear that Yaweh is going to visit, and preparations start for his arrival. When Yaweh arrives, he tells the Noyeses of his trip, in which humans violently express their disregard and resentment of him. During the visit, Yaweh decides that the world is devolving, and he wants to start over, and so begins the flood, with the Noyeses as the only survivors. Because Noah burns all of the farm's animals to death and will not allow Mrs. Noyes's cat, Mottyl, on board, Mrs. Noyes refuses to board and hides, which is catastrophic for Noah because it contravenes Yaweh's edict. Mrs. Noyes spends time wandering through their enormous property and decides that the cost of her boarding is the ability to save Emma's sister, Lotte, an "ape-

child,” who has been abandoned and who reminds her of the ape-child son, Adam, whom she felt pressured to kill.<sup>27</sup> Noah agrees to Mrs. Noyes’s demand, but then has the child murdered, which leads Mrs. Noyes to depart again to look for Mottyl, whom she eventually smuggles on board.

On the water, the hierarchy that existed on land becomes amplified: Noah, Hannah, Shem and Japeth are the privileged group, while Mrs. Noyes, Lucy, Emma, and Ham are marginalized. This division becomes more stark when Noah calls for the massacre of friendly sea creatures, calling them “pirates.” The marginalized group can see that these animals are friendly and try to stop the massacre, which leads Noah to lock them permanently below deck, at which point they come to be known as the “Lower Orders.” Their second show of resistance happens after Japeth behaves particularly cruelly, but the Lower Orders are overtaken quickly. The next revolt requires the help of Emma, who has been forced onto the upper deck to be a “compliant” wife to Japeth, which occurs after her sexual assault at the hands of Noah. This next revolt is planned so that they can take over the ark and happens as Hannah gives birth, only to discover that her child is also an “ape-child,” though it is stillborn. The Lower Orders take control briefly, but the revolt is more of a draw, as everyone is once again free on deck, and this is where the story ends: with Noah, whose paranoia has led to a diminished ability to function, inventing the claim that land had been found, and with Mrs. Noyes praying for rain.

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<sup>27</sup> With “ape-children,” Findley is referring to part of the history of eugenics: these children are positioned as developmentally delayed children about whom one is never supposed to speak, and who were often killed or sent away after their births because of the implication that the family is “deficient.”

The role of women is remarkable in the story, as opposed to the biblical narrative that erases women almost completely in favour of descriptions of men who “beget” men. The women are complicated: Mrs. Noyes, for example, whose name alone indicates the degree to which she is operating under what bell hooks would call a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,”<sup>28</sup> has very little power, and the places she does have it tend to be rather inconsequential. She disagrees with and is shocked by many of Noah’s decisions, but she has no power to change anything. Noah and Mrs. Noyes have three adult sons, Japeth, Shem, and Ham. Mrs. Noyes takes out much of her frustration on Emma, the eleven year-old wife of Japeth. The second woman I consider is Hannah, Shem’s wife who is pregnant with Noah’s child, and who is disengaged and distant from Mrs. Noyes despite the parallels between the oppressions they experience. Hannah operates at a distance from other women because she recognizes that aligning herself with the heteropatriarchy as embodied by Noah will yield her an existence that is less painful in some ways, even though doing so requires compromises that she comes to regret, as I will discuss below. And, finally, Lucy, who is in what appears to be a happy and equitable marriage with Ham, is one of the marginalized in the novel, but she is the one character who can imagine an alternative kind of social order.

Of all the characters I look at in the coming chapters, Lucy is the clearest example of a non-normatively gendered figure who can imagine a different kind of world. This ability to imagine sets her apart from other characters in the text, and this chapter focuses on the ways in which Findley tracks that process. While my other chapters move between

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<sup>28</sup> I would add heteronormative to this list, because Mrs. Noyes’s name demonstrates that the entirety of her being is only ever acknowledged and legitimated by her marriage to Noah.

large- and small-scale revolutionary ideas, this one focuses on the large. The extent of Lucy's critique of the dominant order as well as the degree to which her suggestions are revolutionary become more visible when we read her in relation to these other two women, particularly in terms of their instructive relationships to knowledge, fear, and imagination in the Canadian context.

While Mrs. Noyes and Hannah have differing relationships to it, they remain subject to patriarchy, while Lucy advocates a resistance to its foundations in favour of imagining an alternative: Lucy represents imaginative possibilities in the face of phallogocentric Knowledge that works to preclude these possibilities. Critics such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue that much of the novel is about knowledge and authority; that is, the novel is concerned with asking who has the power to determine what is "true." The knowledge holders in the text operate in a variety of ways: Noah understands himself to hold all of the valuable knowledge, and he is willing, able, and has the power to manufacture unquestionable "knowledge" for his own gain when necessary or convenient. Mrs. Noyes's knowledge, on the other hand, operates in a very different way: she knows the rules that Noah enforces and knows that there are things that she believes that she cannot know, both because she is a woman and because she is not Noah:

Mrs. Noyes was afraid of her anger and she did her best to subdue it in the twilight. She was afraid of all the things she wanted to say—and might: the things she wanted to do and could not. She was afraid of her ignorance: *her fear of all the things she did not know, but felt....* Indeed, she was afraid for everyone... even for Noah. *If she was ignorant, he knew too much. Or appeared to. There was not anything he did not claim to know and this, it seemed to Mrs. Noyes, was dangerous.* (21, emphasis mine)

We see here that Mrs. Noyes has knowledge, but it does not operate in the same authoritarian way that Noah's does, and because she has been interpellated into Noah's system, she does not recognize it; her knowledge is positioned as illegitimate feelings, though she does identify the dangers of Noah's "knowledge." In this passage she also articulates a difference between phallogocentric knowledge and the things she "did not know, but felt." To put it otherwise, she identifies what Noah would consider to be illegitimate as knowledge, and while we can see that she does not trust that knowledge—if she did, she would not identify it as "not know[ing]"—she nevertheless registers it as knowledge on some level.

Hannah, conversely, uses Noah's Knowledge strategically in order to survive. Hannah aligns herself with Noah and Yaweh, but, in the end, makes more compromises than she wishes she had in order to access the degree of privilege that she does. Her strategies mainly involve affirming Noah's "knowledge." Though we rarely get an interior view of Hannah, one significant passage that demonstrates that a parallel strategy for her, like Mrs. Noyes, is to keep silent, though in Hannah's case, there is no room for things that she "might" say, as there is with Mrs. Noyes:

She was shaking with contained anger.... she bit back every word that might have told how she felt these days and merely mumbled yes and no. When the urge was on him, she took down the old man's [Noah's] dictation and patiently read it back to him. Never arguing—never saying "this is right" and "this is wrong" or "I agree with this" and "disagree with that." Nothing. Never a word, but she was full of words. Sentences and paragraphs. Whispers and shouts. Hundreds of them. *Thousands*. But she was a woman and she could not speak. Aloud. But only think in silence and go mad. And now, when she might have legitimately spoken in her own behalf—she maintained her dreadful silence... (243)

Despite the privilege that Hannah accesses, her position as a woman under patriarchy is inescapable.<sup>29</sup> Despite this displeasure with the system, however, it is only Lucy who has the capacity to imagine that an alternative is possible. Mrs. Noyes and Hannah, both normatively gendered human women, are caught up in the patriarchal norms and cannot imagine outside of them, while Lucy, whose embodiment—particularly her gendered embodiment—does not conform to norms, can imagine beyond them.

It is surprising to me, then, that Mrs. Noyes is so often positioned by critics as being the main character in the novel, and for that reason it is important to look at her in relation to Lucy. Mrs. Noyes is the character from whose point of view the novel is mainly focalized, but she differs from Lucy most significantly in that she cannot imagine a different social order than the current one. She, like many of the other characters, seems to be able to identify problems, but not solutions. That is, she has been so effectively enmeshed in the hetero-patriarchal ideology that shapes her world that she cannot imagine possibilities outside of it, though she does not fully affirm patriarchal ideals. We regularly see her lament the unfairness and dangers of living under Noah's rule. She is also, at times, in shock when confronted with the realities of her existence, such as when Noah discusses his new title of "Reverend" as he lays out the workings and living quarters of the ark: "Mrs. Noyes look[s] at her husband, unbelieving and astonished. She could not even bring herself to stammer or to stutter her objection, but only made a

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<sup>29</sup> Notably, there are a few moments in which Noah ironically laments that there is no one with whom he can have discussions (243), presumably because, as we see, Noah does not "discuss"—he only instructs. As Ham explains to Lucy, "You don't *have* "discussions" with my father, Lucy. What you have is arguments and edicts. His problem is—even when you've provided him with the scientific evidence—he finds some way of refuting it" (180, emphasis original). Most of what Noah laments, though, is that Yaweh is not speaking to him, as he does not know that Yaweh is dead; ironically, only Mottyl knows.

guttural noise...” (210). At other moments, she cannot say the word “No” and feels humiliated as she is forced to apologize to Noah (14). That is, Mrs. Noyes is doing her best to survive under patriarchy. She cannot see possibilities and takes pleasure and power where she can find it; she can see that things are not good or fair, but she sees no options and so resists in the ways she can under the system to which she is subject.

Mrs. Noyes gets misread by critics, however, particularly in terms of the (allegedly) ambiguous ending of the novel, when she prays for rain. Several critics suggest that she is embracing a “drifting” (Goldman)—a kind of voyage that will never end or that this is a way for the battle between the upper and lower orders to continue (Guihan), which will lead to a world that is unfixed, as opposed to the ways that Noah would like to see it fixed on land (Jefferess; Brydon *Timothy*). But if we return to the realism that imbues magical realism, we know that these readings are not possible because there would be food shortages; indeed, there already are before the end of the novel, so there must be more to her prayer. Anne Geddes Bailey, on the other hand, asks if Mrs. Noyes’s prayer is a plea for death: “Are her final, frustratingly *silent*, prayers a plea for death? After all, rain, within this story, means the end of the world” (152). While Dickinson suggests that her prayer is both “an act of resistance and a gesture of despair” (68). These suggestions all read an ambiguity into the end of the novel, but others suggest that this act is more resistant.

The other tendency in the readings of Mrs. Noyes’s prayer imbue her with more agency than she has, seeing it as a refusal to exist under Noah’s rule. As Goldman suggests, “Noah’s wife prays for rain because she does not want Noah to find land and



create a new nation that will [...] inevitably include certain people and viciously exclude others” (*Rewriting* 166). Similarly, George Woodcock states that

[i]f that new world is to be like the last or the present (for here Findley is clearly equating the ante-diluvian and the post-diluvian worlds and directing our attention to the condition of living beings now), if it is to perpetuate the cruelties and injustices that exist between men and men, and men and animals, then we must reject it and pray for rain. (237)

Mervyn Nicholson, similarly, suggests that Findley’s novel moves from chaos to action, though action that he calls “female-centred” (102). None of these readings, though, account for Mrs. Noyes’s position in the novel, and a more contextualized reading of this scene is crucial in order to understand what Findley is doing with both her and Lucy. This scene shows us both the extent to which Mrs. Noyes is caught in the logic of patriarchy, and, most importantly, demonstrates her inability to imagine otherwise.

I read Mrs. Noyes’s prayer effectively as suicide. Mrs. Noyes, if given a choice, in this moment, prays for her own death, the deaths of her children, and the end of the human race. While Mrs. Noyes is not directly taking her own life, she is praying for the conditions that will lead to her death so that no one need exist under the kinds of conditions that she understands to be the only ones possible. This option seems to her more humane than the possibility of living in a world as Noah would order it. The life she leads is not livable, much less one in which she and others can thrive.<sup>30</sup> Mrs. Noyes’s prayer is an extremely powerful statement to make, but it is critical to recognize that she

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<sup>30</sup> There is an argument to be made here that living under white supremacist heterosexist capitalist patriarchy is destructive to male-identified people as well. I would not dispute that claim, I do resist it, however, in order to centre the experiences of those who are most marginalized under patriarchy. I acknowledge that it is destructive for everyone, but the stakes are infinitely higher for the more marginalized.

makes it because she does not see options. This is an act of desperation, and because of that we know that if she could see another option, she would take it.

With that said, I do not want to suggest that Mrs. Noyes is only ever a victim. She is complicit in the system in that she does not act out to the extent that she might, but she also does enact small rebellions. While Mrs. Noyes might not take the actions that the reader might like her to, we risk victimizing people and blaming them for doing what appears to be necessary to exist under terrible circumstances. I do not intend here to try to recuperate Mrs. Noyes, and neither do I intend to blame her. Rather, I want to leave room to recognize the complex matrix of forces over which she has limited control and the ways that these forces affect her actions.

Moreover, it is crucial to point out that Mrs. Noyes is not totally without the ability to imagine, but this is also where we see how her imagining differs from Lucy's. In particular, when she reflecting on the experience of having woken up from sleepwalking to find herself comforting a bear in a thunderstorm she thinks to herself,

Cruelty was fear in disguise and nothing more. And had not one of Japeth's holy strangers said that fear itself was nothing more than a failure of the imagination?

That was why Mrs. Noyes had been afraid of bears.  
She had not been able to imagine consoling them. (252)

When she wakes up, holding the bear, she has no choice but to continue as she was, for fear of the consequences of screaming and running; rather than consciously going into a situation trying to imagine an alternative, Mrs. Noyes unconsciously enters one and then must adapt when she finds herself in unexpected circumstances in order to survive it. In part, she explains the power of having a common enemy: "when you are caught together

in the same trap, you share the same fear of darkness and of walls and you also have the same enemy. You fear the same jailer. You share the same dream of freedom... You also learn to survive together in ways the uncaged would never think of” (251). Mrs. Noyes is, in this moment, identifying how coalitions can be built when populations recognize the oppressive system, but she remains invested in surviving the circumstances, rather than reimagining a different system. Though her reasoning is built upon the need for experiences of identical oppressions, we can begin to see here an articulation of the power of imagination in relation to community building. Still, her imagining is only ever adaptive.

I would, therefore, push the critics’ reading of the prayer further: Mrs. Noyes cannot figure out what to do with the present she finds herself in and so she prays for rain. That is the most active role she can take. She has her moments of small-scale rebellion, and she can ask questions, but she cannot answer them. She begins to understand the power of imagining alternatives to the order that has been naturalized, but only has skills to react and adapt; she does not show the ability to proactively imagine. In juxtaposing these two characters, the novel shows us that Lucy can answer these questions because she is able to be proactive in her imagining.

The other woman with whom Mrs. Noyes and Lucy are juxtaposed is Hannah, Mrs. Noyes’s daughter-in-law. Like Mrs. Noyes, Hannah is also not able to imagine alternatives, but she makes different decisions than does Mrs. Noyes in order to ensure her survival. She is an example of a woman who acts in complicity with patriarchal structures as a means of coping, or what Lois Tyson calls the “patriarchal woman,” who

“has internalized the norms and values of *patriarchy*” (83, emphasis original).<sup>31</sup> We only rarely get any kind of interior view of Hannah, so it is easy to demonize her, but she is also acting under patriarchy. Hannah, therefore, is active in and complicit with terrible things: she stands idly by as the “Lower Orders” are badly mistreated; she is involved in Emma’s rape by Noah; and she becomes Noah’s main source of support. Like so many women who manage to break the glass ceiling and ascend to positions of power, she knows that she must accept her social position as subordinate and comply with the patriarchal rules in order to access a degree of power. Though we do not witness all of her rationalizations, there are moments where we can see that she is being strategic about her positionality, which is true of other women in similar positions; she has not really internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, as Tyson puts it, but she knows what she must do to access a degree of privilege.<sup>32</sup> For the most part, Hannah remains as opaque to the reader as she does to Mrs. Noyes and the other members of the Lower Order, who cannot understand why she behaves as she does.

One of the few interior glimpses we get of Hannah shows her regret at making the decisions that she has to access the power that she does by aligning herself with Noah. In her most telling passage, we discover that not only has Noah fathered her child, but also

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<sup>31</sup> There is a parallel to draw between the “patriarchal woman” and the “mimic man” position of colonized peoples who gain access to some degree of power in the colonial regime, as discussed by Homi K. Bhabha.

<sup>32</sup> Donna Pennee describes the women in the novel in terms of feminist modes: Mrs. Noyes is a “strongly maternal feminist,” while Hannah is a “liberal feminist,” and Emma’s feminism has the “beginnings of a lesbian politics” (93), though she does not note that Emma’s potential lesbianism is connected to Hannah’s molestation of her (261-62, 269). Pennee does not read Lucy in the context of feminism, but we might read her as a radical feminist.

that she is sleeping with Japeth, her brother-in-law, in addition to Shem, her husband,<sup>33</sup> and she describes these sexual relationships as a result of some compromises that she regrets making: Hannah has

an uneasy awareness that she had traded too much of her self [*sic*] in return for what she had thought would be security and esteem.... And yet there was nothing of what she had gained that [her] ambitions would allow her to abandon, though she had begun to wish—and fervently—that what she had gained had been got in different company. (287-88)

Though she regrets the choices that she has made, she cannot bring herself to let go of the potential that she might attain that to which she aspires, though we are never told what that is. She therefore further isolates herself from those below deck because it is hard to remain resolute when, for example, Mrs. Noyes reaches out to her (267-68) and remains silent when she is mistreated by Noah despite wanting to respond, as I discussed above. We see yet another side of Hannah briefly that also undermines the sense that she is only cruel and self-interested: we see tenderness in her with regard to her child, who dies, in whom “she had invested all her ambition and all her secret love” (341). Hannah is a more complex character than many of her actions show, but she has learned the rules of patriarchy well, and she abides by them to serve her own purposes.

As we see, despite all of her sacrifices, Hannah remains subordinate. Even though she is chosen by Yaweh to be his special companion, this is not enough to make her equal and worthy of humane treatment in the eyes of Noah: the men on deck have unlimited

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<sup>33</sup> Though there is never any explicit discussion of her participation in these relationships, based on the power structures and her lamentation about having “traded too much of herself,” we can infer that these sexual relationships are coercive at best; Hannah does not seem to have been an eager participant in them relationships—rather, they seemed to be one of the compromises that were required of her if she was to remain above deck.

sexual access to her; she does all of the domestic labour; and she is refused access to the healthcare she needs in the form of Mrs. Noyes as a midwife during childbirth because Noah does not want to risk the chance that someone will find out if the baby is an ape-child. We finally see that, despite getting a seat at the table, misogyny persists. Because we do get a clear statement that Hannah believes that she must act individually—instead of collectively—because she operates under the assumption that if she complies, she will be able to access all the things she wants for her life, we can see that she too has been interpellated into Noah’s epistemological framework at least to that extent and cannot see possibilities beyond that. She sees only two options: either Noah’s order, which she believes she may be able to manipulate in order to secure the kind of life she wants, or to at least to survive in more comfort than she might, or total subordination if she rejects it. In order to accomplish her goals, Hannah must operate at the whims of the people to whom she is subject, while also stroking their egos and reifying their social order, in addition to accepting and enforcing the dehumanization of the Lower Orders.

Hannah demonstrates well what it means to be “included” in a community that retains the dominant value system that once excluded her. We hear arguments that equality means including marginalized groups in spaces where they have not been historically welcome, and there is value in that practice, but we must also be conscious that the people who get appointed to these positions do not necessarily become the equals of the other people at the table or in the space; they are often chosen because they comply with the dominant norms, they continue to be marginalized in these spaces, and they are often under constant pressure to conform to and to maintain the norms. Generally, to be

put into that kind of position—which, of course, usually involves being appointed by the majority who are in power—one must conform to the norms that will not threaten the majority. That is, one acquires the illusion of power, but, as we see with Hannah, that power is always contingent upon the wants and needs of those in power. Hannah is not unaware of this dynamic, however; she decides to go along with the systems of power in order to access as much power as she can. In the cases of both Mrs. Noyes and Hannah, then, we see not only an inability to imagine alternatives—neither can imagine another system, and Hannah cannot imagine that working collectively for everyone’s benefit might improve her circumstances—but also a fearful if somewhat contested acceptance of the status quo. They go along with the devil they know because of their uncertainty about change and what might happen if things get worse. They have survived this long under these conditions, and at least they know what to expect, though Hannah does come to regret her decisions but does not change them, while Mrs. Noyes is surprised at what she learns as a result of her subordinated position.

Mrs. Noyes and Hannah use different strategies that comply to varying degrees with the violences of Noah’s heteropatriarchal knowledge system, but through Lucy, we see that these are not the only options. To begin this discussion, I will first look at some objections that may arise, the first relating to Lucy’s gender identification. Like others who have reread key “queer” texts as trans\* texts, as Halberstam has done with *The Well of Loneliness*, I want to make an argument for a trans\* reading of Lucy. Like Stephen, Lucy clearly identifies as a gender other than the one to which she has been assigned; though she does call it “dressing up,” it is more than a novel or fleeting performance.

Following Butler, we can see that all gender has a performative element, and certainly Lucy's does too, particularly given that she is described as looking like a Kabuki actor, which is significant in that this description takes up both gender and racial stereotypes. As Goldman points out,

[a]lthough some readers might be tempted to interpret Satan's drag act as reinscribing an orientalist perspective, the text prevents anyone from naturalising the stereotypical image of the exotic, submissive, hyper-feminine oriental woman.... Thus, rather than simply reinscribe the cliché, the novel traces the orientalist production to its source to reveal how gender stereotypes are woven together with racist, colonial fantasies ("Transvestism" 204)

Goldman is right to suggest that Findley brings together the ways that race and gender constitute each other, but it is also important to note that though Kabuki is a form of acting, Lucy's appearance is only a performance in the Butlerian sense; Lucy is clear about her gender identity. There is an extent to which Lucy is in disguise,<sup>34</sup> and she is definitely being strategic about avoiding recognition, but she could have "disguised" herself in an infinite number of ways.<sup>35</sup> That she feels genuinely comfortable in her skin as Lucy is significant, as we see in an exchange between her and her brother, Michael Archangelis:

'What do you hope to accomplish by all this?' Michael asked.

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<sup>34</sup> This is a contentious claim in the context of Lucy, however, insofar as being "in disguise" is an accusation made against many trans\* people—especially trans\* women—for "misleading" people, and this reasoning is often used to justify a violent response if the "truth" of their existence is revealed.

<sup>35</sup> Jefferess discusses Lucy's gender presentation as merely a strategy to get the figure that he reads as the always already male Lucifer on the ark, and as one that will "deceive Ham" (145). It is convenient, of course, that Findley's retelling is faithful, at least structurally, to biblical passages, including Genesis 7:7, which describes Noah, his wife, his sons, and his sons' wives being the only people on the ark, meaning that Lucy must appear as the wife of one of Noah's sons. But given how unfaithful Findley is to the remainder of Genesis, there is no reason why he could not have had one of Noah's sons be the one who imagines otherwise. Another possibility would have been for Lucy to have appeared as an animal that Mrs. Noyes rescues, or she could have snuck onto the ship. Instead of the innumerable possibilities, it is Lucy who gets onto the ark as she is and from there is able to imagine otherwise.



‘All what?’ Lucy shook out her frail skirts and lifted her hand to her hair.  
 ‘Well—dressing as a woman to begin with. *And* a foreigner.’  
 ‘Nothing wrong with dressing as a woman. Might as well be a woman as anything else. And what, may one ask, do you mean by ‘a foreigner’?’  
 ‘Someone not of these parts,’ said Michael, as if he was quoting from a book of rules for border guards. (107, emphasis original)

While this passage only minimally addresses xenophobic histories and border guards who determine who is “of” a place and who is not, it nevertheless attends to how racialization operates, and, moreover, this interaction demonstrates that Lucy feels no shame about her embodiment. In fact, we might consider Lucy as someone who has the power—unlike many people who, at best, must subject themselves to invasive and pathologizing social institutions and at worst turn to alternate means that are often less physically safe (though possibly socially safer) or try to live with the pain of not feeling at home in their bodies—to change her body into one that feels most comfortable.<sup>36</sup>

Despite Lucy’s comfort with herself, a surprising amount of time is spent in the secondary criticism trying to articulate Lucy’s gender presentation. Lucy’s position in the novel has been obscured, I would suggest, because critics are not sure how to read her gender presentation and become mired in an attempt to locate her gender. Because we do not get an explicit statement of Lucy’s identification, it is crucial to work through how we can read her. While I do not want to be prescriptive—I have no interest in giving Lucy a label to make her legible—this confusion is why reading her under Namaste’s understanding of the umbrella term “trans\*” is useful. And while I worry that that

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, of late, there has been a discursive shift away from the language of “Sexual Reassignment Surgery,” for example, to “Gender Affirming Procedures.” This shift is important because the idea of “reassignment” necessitates that someone is not what they feel themselves to be, regardless of surgical status, as opposed to a procedure that affirms who they know themselves to be. This shift also reduces the assumptions about authenticity in terms of who has access to surgeries and how that access comes to signify “legitimate” masculinity or femininity.

definition might be dangerously broad—and it is certainly one that is contested—it is also loose enough that it allows for possibilities and identifications that may not be totally clear, as all gender and sexuality cannot be adequately articulated in language. That is, Namaste's work suggests that it is unreasonable to make assumptions about hard distinctions without a self-identification. Because non-normative bodies are so regularly subjected to invasive demands for labels, though, it is not surprising to see these questions crop up in the criticism.

To add to the complexity of reading Lucy's gender, it is also important to note that here can be a tension between "authentic" notions of drag performance and trans\*ness. As Halberstam discusses, for example, "[t]he queer butch... represents fluidity to the transsexual man's stability, even as she represents stability (by staying in a female body) to the transsexual man's fluidity (gender crossing)" (305 "Transgender"). In both cases, people are dressing in a way that does not conform to gender expectations as dictated by the sexes they were assigned at birth. But the stakes in these performances can be dramatically different: while both groups may be subject to trans\*phobic, homophobic, or misogynistic violence, drag's element of campy performance must be contrasted with the sense of a core gender identity. As I have mentioned, we never get an explicit articulation of Lucy's understanding of herself, but it is crucial to note that while Lucy does not deny her maleness, as we see in a conversation between her and Michael, she also does not deny or minimize her identification as Lucy.

The criticism up to this point describes her in a range of ways. While this list is not comprehensive, some examples include as a hybrid (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin;

Pennee *Moral, Praying*; Brydon *Timothy*; Tiffin); as a transvestite, a drag queen, or a crossdresser (Goldman “Transvestism”; Findley *Inside*; Dickinson *Here*); as an “ontological boundary crosser” (Guihan); as being in “disguise” (Pennee *Praying*; Jefferess); as being “politically-‘female’” (York); as a “shape shifter and a seducer of men,” thereby pathologizing her gendered embodiment as hyper-sexual (Bailey 138); as being androgynous (Lamont-Stewart; Pearson “Vanishing”); as being “ambiguous” (Tiffin); and we also get an extensive discussion of the ways that Lucy’s appearance allegedly becomes more “masculine,” particularly as she takes off her make-up (Goldman “Transvestism”). Bailey even turns to speculations about “angel biology” in an attempt to make Lucy’s body legible:

Lucy’s biological essence is always in doubt. The reader is never sure what exactly is hidden underneath her kimono or feathered amour [*sic*]. Although Michael Archangelis reassures both himself *and the reader* that Lucy is really “male” (107), the narrator always refers to Lucy with the feminine pronoun. The resulting effect is that within the narrative, Lucy’s sexual identity shifts and becomes constructed through language and costume, rather than angel biology. (141, emphasis mine)

Here Bailey makes it sound as if everyone’s sexual identity is not influenced by language and costume, and she falls into the trap of biological determinism. While Lucy is an angel whose ontological framework exceeds that of the human, potentially making human gender categories—whether normative or not—irrelevant, she remains committed to this identification for at least the time being.

Moreover, Bailey’s argument relies on binarized gender norms in ways that make Lucy unreadable. As she says,

[a]ll the characters must either fall into the masculine or the feminine camp, and Lucy acts accordingly by being *either* masculine *or* feminine, rather than both at once. Thus, even as the narrator tries to free his characters from hierarchical roles, they become confined and defined by the roles assigned them within the parodic structure. (149-50)

Here, Bailey is working from a two-sex model that necessitates an identification as one of two sexes, or a mixture of them both, thereby precluding the possibility that other options exist.<sup>37</sup> She does go on to discuss Lucy's desire for a place where she can be herself, but her reading continues to discuss Lucy in terms of dualities: that "[u]nlike any of the other characters, Lucy is located at several borderlines, encompassing several dualities in one body.... she longs for a place where language and meaning remain flexible, rather than tyrannical, so that she can be who [she, *sic*] says she is, rather than what 'nature' or God dictates" (140-41, emphasis original). While I admire that Bailey can see that Lucy wants—and deserves—to live in a world where everyone can articulate their identities, her reading is limited because of the binarization of gender that undergirds it; this binary inhibits her ability to read Lucy as a whole person, rather than someone comprised of "dualities."

In relation to this idea of dualism, we see critics use slashed pronouns to refer to Lucy over and over—formulations like "s/he" abound in the criticism while people speculate about her identity. Brydon, in fact, is the only critic to explain her choice:

As an angel who has chosen to align herself with the human world, rejecting God and his heaven to marry Ham, Noah's gentle and thoughtful son, Lucy crosses borders that are usually closed to crossing. For that reason I refer to this creature as s/he to indicate the instability s/he refuses to resolve. (80)

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<sup>37</sup> All of these positionalities are legitimate, of course—my point here is that this reading limits what is possible.

It is not clear, of course, that Lucy is unresolvable: she clearly identifies with a name and a pronoun preference, just like all the other characters do. But this interpretation of her gender identity further demonstrates the confusion that arises with regard to Lucy and demonstrates the way that this uncertainty becomes the focal point of questions that are asked of her.

This problem is not helped by the fact that Findley himself describes Lucy as a drag queen (*Inside Memory* 227).<sup>38</sup> There is, however, a major flaw in his reading that is worth pointing out: Findley does not account for Lucy's interpretation of herself. While I do not want to draw a hard line between kinds of gender performances, and neither am I interested in drawing hard lines around each of these terms, I do think that trans\* theory can offer an enormous amount of help in understanding Lucy's positionality in the text. Regardless of her identification, Lucy is Lucy. Findley might call her a drag queen, but that is not how she identifies, and if we are to do a strong reading of the text, we can only draw our claims from what the text presents. Lucy does not seem uncertain about her identity and seems instead to thrive as much as possible under the circumstances, regardless of how her appearance changes, what her brother says, or what is under her clothing.

Because Lucy is an angel whose gender presentation does not appear to operate in the same ways that the other characters' do, some try to suggest that her gender does not operate or signify in the same ways that humans' do. I would suggest, however, that we

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<sup>38</sup> I generally avoid engaging with authors' descriptions of their own works because I find Roland Barthes's discussion of the "Death of the Author" compelling. I am engaging Findley's discussion here, however, because many of the critics make reference to his reading of Lucy.

must again return to the text: not only are the angels described as humanoid, but also Michael and Lucy discuss sex and gender in the same terms that are used to describe humans. Furthermore, in a fictional text about beings whose physiology we know nothing about, it is difficult to imagine a logical speculation about Lucy's embodiment.

Moreover, if the text questions ontological categories with the revelation that Yaweh is human, as Mottyl indicates from his smell and the flies indicate when he dies (112), then we really cannot be sure about the divine status of the angels. What we do know is what she and the narrator tell us: Lucy is a woman, regardless of her history.

While I do not want to engage in a presentist reading of trans\*phobic historical discourses, it is significant that so much attention and time are devoted to trying to resolve the question of Lucy's embodiment while critics are often taking for granted that the novel is arguing against fascistic ways of ordering the world, which are connected to the orderings that shape the sex/gender system. The fact that Lucy's embodiment commands so much of the critics' time demonstrates just how deeply engrained these normalizing systems are. We might return here to Dean Spade's description of how regulatory structures shape what is recognizable and "legitimate." The extent to which these normalizing structures are in effect is visible in the struggles of critics to be able to talk about Lucy: because of the focus on normative genders in these analyses, Lucy's interventions get missed, misread, or downplayed.

The problem with these gendered analyses is that they rely too heavily on masculine and feminine gendered norms. Critics consistently read Findley as promoting feminine norms as inherently good and masculine ones as inherently bad, thereby linking

gendered bodies to oppressive structures, as if certain bodies are incapable of engaging in oppressive practices while others are pre-determined to enact them.<sup>39</sup> Linda Lamont-Stewart articulates this problem and then looks at the implications of this binarization for people who do not fit the binary:

the reading strategy of inverting the violent hierarchy of the traditional masculine/feminine binary, associating all positive qualities with the feminine and all negative qualities with the masculine, does not address the fundamental problem: rigidly exclusive categorization invariably oppresses one term of the binary in order to privilege the other and to exclude, as Butler puts it, “those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (*Gender* 17 qtd. in Lamont-Stewart n.p.)

Because these critics tend to read the novel in terms of a binarized gender system, they replicate this system, and thereby erase other options. The division between the Lower Orders (gendered feminine in the criticism) and those on deck (gendered masculine in the criticism)<sup>40</sup> do not actually adhere to gendered lines in the text—Lucy, Ham, and Hannah all complicate them. These characters show us that asking questions within a two-sex framework misses what Findley is doing with gender.

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<sup>39</sup> I say this not to deny the power of socialization or the veracity of domestic violence rates, for example, but rather to respond to what at times is an essentialist reading of gender.

<sup>40</sup> These questions become more complicated when gender identity is added to the mix and then is conflated with sexuality: Jefferess points out that the “association of violence with masculinity is reinforced further if we [...] recognize Lucy as a man in drag and therefore reach the conclusion that Ham is homosexual” (148). He goes on to say that the “implication, as I see it, is that, while the androgynous Lucy is capable of violence, aversion to violence or the practice on non-violence or ‘love’ is confined to ‘feminine’ characters such as Mrs. Noyes, Emma, Mottyl, the Faeries, and the homosexual Ham. If Lucy and Ham are positive characters or the ‘good side,’ as critics have argued, then does this text challenge or reinforce an essentialist binary of masculine and feminine, exhibited in the notion that violence is a masculine trait?” (148). Jefferess too, then, reads the text as reinforcing gender binarization. The crucial errors that he makes, though, are first in assuming that Ham is queer when he has married a woman and gives no indication that he is queer—though, certainly, a queer man *can* marry a woman without it affecting his queerness—and second in assuming that male queerness is somehow associated with femininity. The other error in this analysis is the assumption that Lucy is a man in drag when we have no indication that that is the case.

In order to see what Lucy does in the text, we must consider these complexities. This is not to downplay the importance of Mrs. Noyes, of course; she is operating under near impossible circumstances. It is only to say that she is subject to the ideological positions and norms of her world. Most critics read her as either giving up or taking an active stance, but they do not recognize the limitations of that action. She cannot see alternatives because the world in which she lives has been constructed to preclude the possibility that a different kind of world might exist.

As with my argument, Lamont-Stewart sees a connection between Lucy's gender and other socio-political structures, but her reading is obscured by her investments in normative gender categories, as demonstrated by her use of the term 'androgyny': a

[r]edefinition of 'androgyny' as a trope which figures refusal to conform to hierarchical binary oppositions of all sorts extends the insights of contemporary work in gender studies to construct a figure that performs resistance to authoritarianism in its multiple social, religious, political and economic manifestations. (n.p.)

Lamont-Stewart usefully links Lucy's gender non-conformity to her anti-authoritarian politics, but she maintains the binary system: the idea of androgyny brings together the terms "andro," meaning male, and "gyn," meaning female, but retains their distinction. She then moves to a discussion of post-modernism, while I find a reading of the novel in terms of nationalism and colonialism more fruitful, particularly following the work of the above-mentioned theorists. One unfortunate consequence of this funnelling of attention is that it obscures the really interesting work that Lucy does. Instead of spending much time on Lucy, critics have tended to gravitate towards Mrs. Noyes as the site of transformational politics in part because of how they read Lucy and what gets missed in



those readings. Mrs. Noyes is idealized in some cases as a kind of “Earth Mother” (Nielsen, Bailey) or a pacifist (Jefferess). Bringing these two sentiments together, Carrine Demouselle suggests that “[w]hereas Noah is the epitome of the death-oriented mentality, Mrs. Noyes is the epitome of the life-oriented one” (49). W.J. Keith suggests that Mrs. Noyes and Mottyl “provide the distinctive warmth and compassion instinct that foster whatever hope may exist within the work” (132). Bailey suggests that “[u]nlike [other main characters in Findley's work], who represent the forces of peace and resistance but are also full of violent contradictions, Mrs. Noyes and the animal community aboard the ark are consistently good” (149). Mrs. Noyes is consistently positioned at the centre of the ethos of the Lower Orders, but I want to suggest that her position is over-emphasized because critics have gotten stuck on figuring out Lucy’s gender identity and so have not been able to fully see and engage Lucy as a character.

Lucy’s difference from the other characters is visible when we see how she understands the relationship of fear and imagination. Lucy is in the unique position of understanding the order to which Noah subjects all of the other characters because she has been cast out from Heaven for questioning the orders of God. She has seen this kind of destruction before, and she has seen other worlds; one of the main uses of the magical realist form in this context is its naturalization of having a being with considerably more experience than anyone else. In this context, she is both insider and outsider, and magical realism is the mechanism through which these two things can co-exist.<sup>41</sup> It is not made clear in the text from where her ability and willingness to question the word of God

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<sup>41</sup> With that said, all of the other characters live for hundreds of years—Noah is “now over six hundred years old” (47), but the sense of the novel is that Lucy has considerably more experience than him.

originate, though we do know that her embodiment is a part of it when she describes a the fantasy that she had while still in Heaven of another world: “if I were to say; *I am not I—but whoever I wish to be,*’ would I be believed—in this other world?” (282, emphasis original). We also know that a motivating factor for her is fear: speaking to Ham, as Noah awaits an edict from Yaweh, she says,

“I wish I could teach you to be more afraid.”  
 “*You* are not afraid,” said Ham.  
 “Yes, I am,” said Lucy.  
 “Are you really?”  
 “Yes. With all my heart.” (349, emphasis original)

This passage, which comes right at the end of the text, demonstrates the connection between fear and action. Though it is not clear exactly what scares her, we can surmise that it is the edict from Yaweh and what the future will therefore hold. Lucy has experience that none of the other characters have—she has seen at least two worlds. But it is also significant that this experience and these abilities are present only in someone whose gender presentation does not fit the expected norms. Given her powers, though they have diminished significantly at this point (279), it is also surprising that she is afraid, but we have seen that she has had to leave other places, such as Heaven, as well. In her case, though, fear motivates her to seek out change; this is why she imagines a different world.

If we consider this passage alongside Mrs. Noyes’s consoling of the bears, their difference becomes clearer. Mrs. Noyes remains confined by the only framework she has, but Lucy’s experiences allow her to see options; Mrs. Noyes sees only a replication of the patriarchal order or death. Both are motivated by fear, but Lucy is able to consciously

face her fear, whereas Mrs. Noyes is only able to react and adapt to fearful situations—she is always responding to the most fearful thing she is experiencing. That is, Lucy’s discussion of fear differs from that of Mrs. Noyes insofar as Mrs. Noyes fears the immediate small-scale consequences of wandering into the bear cage while sleepwalking. Lucy, on the other hand, can read the large-scale implications of the situation and so goes into her imagining looking for a solution.

What is interesting about Lucy’s imaginings, though, is that they are indefinite. The quotation with which I opened this chapter bears repeating. When faced with Noah’s plans for the future, Lucy opts to start a rumour:

I intend to leave this place—because it is intolerant of light. Somewhere—there must be somewhere where darkness and light are reconciled. So I am starting a rumour, here and now, of yet another world. I do not know when it will present itself—I do not know where it will be. But—as with all those other worlds now past—when it is ready, I intend to go there. (284)

This rumour of another world has been misunderstood by critics. Dickinson’s reading of the passage in terms of camp, for example, is too reductive: “The irony is that [...] Lucy’s ‘rumour’ remains just that—a rumour, gossip, speculation, a further example of camp vernacular” (68). He cannot see its power as a kind of alternate discursive structure.

Similarly, Jefferess disparages the rumour, suggesting that “[w]hen Lucy finds that Earth is not the ideal realm, she dreams of a place somewhere else where difference is tolerated. Yet this idealized other world, as it must be, is always somewhere else, elusive, ‘a rumour’” (149), but his disparagement becomes more concrete when he argues that Lucy

distances herself from any responsibility for creating that promised land by spreading ‘a rumour’ of a promised land someplace else and sometime else for which she is content to wait. While she is able to conceive of a world that is more

harmonious, diverse, and just, she lacks the imagination to overcome her fear of *performing or living* this promised land. (150, emphasis original)

What Jefferess and the other critics miss with their readings is the power of this alternate discourse: Lucy does not want to replicate the structures in which she finds herself, and so she alone cannot possibly imagine a different world, but in starting the rumour alone, she has shown an active role. Because of the collaborative nature of rumours—they work only when spread among many people—this world will necessarily be collaboratively built, a point to which I will return below. Moreover, Lucy discusses a rumour that began her journey out of Heaven:

“A long time ago,” she said; “in a place I have almost forgotten—I heard a rumour of another world. With all my heart—because I could not abide the place I was in—I wanted to see that world. I wanted to go there and to be there and to live there. Where I was born—the trees were always in the sun. I do remember that. The merciless light. It never rained—though we never lacked for water. *Always fair weather!* Dull. I wanted storms. I wanted difference. And I had heard this rumour . . . about another world. And I wondered—does it rain there? Are there clouds, perhaps, and is there shade in that other world? I wanted somewhere to stand, you see, that would give me a view of deserts and of snow. I wanted *that* desperately. I wanted, too, someone I could argue with. Someone—just once—with whom I could disagree. And I had heard this rumour: about another world. And I wondered . . . might there be people there, in this other world, who would tell me the sky was green? Who would say that dry is wet—and black is white? And if I were to say; ‘*I am not I—but whoever I wish to be,*’ would I be believed—in this other world? . . .” (282, emphasis original)

Though some of Lucy’s complaints may seem frivolous, the core of her statement shows that her own journey came out of rumoured possibilities. She could not thrive in that world, and the rumour gave her hope of another world that is structured differently.<sup>42</sup> She

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Gilroy’s work on Black cultural production in the Black Atlantic is useful here: as he explains, there are typically two modes of political engagement, a politics of fulfillment in which “the notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished”

now finds herself in another world in which she cannot thrive, and this time it is she who starts the rumour.

Part of the reason for the misreadings of the rumour is that critics also misread Lucy's character and motivations. The biggest critique of her reads her as espousing the same values as Noah. Donna Pennee, for example, suggests that Lucy has parallels with Noah in terms of desiring opposition, having a violent streak, and relying on "fictions," because she reads Lucy's rumour as the same kind of "fiction" as Noah's many edicts, though she does privilege Lucy's approaches (*Praying* 91-92). Lucy is not a perfect individual, and this is part of her collaborative framework—that no one gets to decide for everyone—which is why she wants to build a world collaboratively. Lucy and Noah's desires for opposition and discussion also differ significantly: Noah does not respond well to non-compliance, so everyone would be too fearful or just not interested in having a discussion with him, as he has made clear that he is the unequivocal authority and most things are not up for discussion. Lucy, on the other hand, felt hemmed in by the "perfection" of Heaven, in which there was no place for discussion; it was not perfect for her, so she left.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, while Noah's "fictions" are actual narratives that he has constructed to suit his own interests, Lucy's "fiction" is an aspirational rumour that looks to the future as a site of hope, as José Esteban Muñoz might suggest. Pennee in many ways does a good reading of Lucy; in a different publication, she argues that Lucy "isn't

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and a politics of transformation which espouses "the emergence of new desires, social formations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors" (37). This is the difference between Mrs. Noyes and Lucy: while Mrs. Noyes wants immediate conditions improved, Lucy wants to see a change in the conditions themselves, both as they affect relationships amongst the marginalized and between the marginalized and those in power.

<sup>43</sup> This discussion is reminiscent of Jameson's discussion of utopia and fascism.

looking for anything to do with the rational mind; she is looking for difference in skin colour and erotic preference, in mythical properties and life forms, in anything and anyone that defies the unillogical, misogynist, heterosexist, anthropocentric world view of the patriarchy” (*Moral* 92), but the point of this chapter is to look specifically at Lucy’s strategies for imagining a different world.

Like Pennee, Jefferess explicitly argues that “Lucy in many respects is part of the system of domination that she deplors” (141). He suggests, moreover, that

Lucy is unable to conceive of a ‘culture of peace’ as a lived space, a performative alternative to the hierarchical, violent, and enemy-dependent culture of war.... Lucy accepts the us/them dichotomy imposed by the dominant order and seeks *victory* over an adversary, conceiving of victory as the destruction of the enemy/other. (146)

My reading differs significantly from Jefferess’s here. Lucy can see that consensus will not be reached on the ark; she and the other members of the Lower Order are under the rule of people in power who see them as inherently less valuable—indeed, less human—and so there is no way to reason with them. Though she does seek revenge at one point, after Japeth kills her demons, she does not tend to be vengeful, though, as I said, she is not perfect. For the most part, the Lower Orders have no choice but to use force in order to try to attain some semblance of equity, but Lucy’s goal is not to invert the power structure.

Finally, a number of critics suggest that Lucy is being a kind of decadent dandy who is merely “bored” with Heaven (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin; Jefferess; Tiffin). Lucy does indicate that she is bored with the sameness of Heaven, but it is clear from her discussion that it is the tyranny and her inability to be herself there are what leads her to

go. This accusation is significant, though, for the ways in which it minimizes the difficulties of her living conditions and, furthermore, undermines a recognition of the work she is trying to do on the ark.

We can glean crucial details about Lucy's outlook from her passages about rumours. First, we can see that there is no finite 'world' to which she aspires—worlds have come to be and will pass, so she has an investment in building, but she is not prescriptive because she recognizes that it will be a process. We also learn that these worlds enact a process of improvement. This is not the same kind of fascistic improvement that Noah espouses and that dystopia critics like Jameson worry about, however. Because Lucy's version of improvement is collaborative and aims to address the needs of the many, not the needs of the few—as we hear at one point, Lucy's "greatest fascination seemed to be with the outcasts and pariahs, the strangely formed and the excessively delicate... the immensely ugly... [and] the immensely unpopular" (275)—it is a building towards a more equitable world starting with the needs of "outcasts."

Lucy also uses the language of 'rumour' as this world's catalyzing event. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on gossip is helpful here for elucidating the political work and investments that inform Lucy's actions. We might count rumour as being among what Sedgwick calls the "devalued arts of gossip" that "have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses" (23). That is, Lucy understands the building of a more equitable world as a provisional endeavour that cannot

be shaped by the top-down logic that Noah espouses. She needs to start a rumour—a form of illegitimate knowledge—in order to begin a collaborative building process. We know that the building process will be collaborative because of the way that rumoured knowledges circulate through a community. We also know that Lucy has not made a definitive statement about her role in building this world, which is a statement that is a direct juxtaposition of Lucy and Noah’s epistemologies; he is the sole authority in his world, while the world that she advocates will have to be built by her and others.

Lucy seems to understand that while the content of this rumour matters, so does its structure, and here we can draw a parallel between her use of “illegitimate knowledges” and genre, a point that is also true of the novel as a whole and its political intervention. While I am sympathetic, for example, to Dickinson’s and Martell’s readings of the text as camp, I think these readings risk missing some crucial political work that the novel is doing. Linda Hutcheon gets at the politics of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* in her suggestion that it “parod[ies] those structures and narratives in a typically postmodern way, both exploiting and subverting their undeniable cultural authority” (7). But she also describes it as “fantasy”: “[t]he apocalyptic vision of Findley’s earlier novels here took on comic yet moving and serious form in the retelling of the story of Noah’s flood. This was a political and moral retelling, though, a story about evil and destruction, both biblical and future” (216). While post-modernism questions dominant metanarratives, I am more convinced by W.J. Keith’s reading of the novel as a dystopia that is concerned with broadly 20<sup>th</sup>-century issues evidenced in its “preoccupation with totalitarian politics, with violence, and also with a feminist viewpoint” as well as its suspicion of



“unquestioned ‘progress’ in socio-political developments” (130, 131). *Not Wanted on the Voyage* testifies, he says, “in both [its] form and [its] content, to a faith in human resilience against the dangerous rigidities of an excessively rationalistic system” (133). Similarly, Mervyn Nicholson raises questions about the power of artistic engagement, which has been linked to dystopia, when he says, “it is not a matter of believing or disbelieving in the Bible as literal or historical truth, but rather of subjecting established social assumptions of what good and evil are to imaginative scrutiny” (88). While these critics, certainly, are addressing the work that the novel is invested in, these readings nevertheless wind up overlooking the ways in which reading the novel also as magical realism contributes to its political engagement.

Thus, I would like to add to this discussion a reading of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* in terms of magical realism. The novel, I would suggest is a magical realist response to a dystopian setting, as are the other novels in my study. *Not Wanted on the Voyage* has unexpected elements, such as the animals’ ability to speak, in addition to having a relatively realistic setting, aside from the ages of the characters and the presence of the divine characters and their special abilities. Lamont-Stewart draws on Butler and Sedgwick to make a similar point: “Among the kinds of hierarchical binary oppositions upon which authoritarian ideologies depend, one is the conventional distinction between natural/supernatural, which in the form of the real/fantastic is in many ways the basis of narrative technique itself” (n.p.). As critics with whom I work in my introduction suggest, both dystopia and magical realism foster readers’ abilities to draw parallels between the world they inhabit and the ability to imagine an alternative. Reading the novel also as

magical realism helps to foreground its juxtaposition of the dominant narratives through its realism with its subversive narrative through its emphasis on aspirational imagination, or what we might call its magical elements. Taking them together helps to demonstrate the novel's strategy of writing a story that is set at a historically significant moment in the past, that is about the present, and that looks towards the future.

I also want to think about *Not Wanted* as magical realism, though, because of the anti-imperialist histories of the genre, particularly as they relate to the nation. Findley adopts this genre in part because of its needs to step out of a realist mode in order to raise possibilities. Findley steps well out of his contemporary moment to demonstrate how things are, to imagine what might have been lost, and to suggest that we ought to imagine what might be. The potential that I see in magical realism is that, while it remains faithful to some extent to the orders of realism, it leaves room for possibilities that cannot quite be accounted for logically. Like the rumour, part of what comprises magical realism is a fertile element of illegitimacy from the perspective of the dominant order.

My aim here is to demonstrate Findley's investment in delegitimized ways of operating in the world that allow for alterity. Indeed, these forms of delegitimized ontologies and epistemologies are positioned in this way precisely because they draw attention to flaws in the system that the novel critiques. As I say that, let me be clear about the risk, signalled by Namaste, that gender non-conforming people become metaphors.<sup>44</sup> There is the potential for this kind of reading of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* especially because of the extent to which Lucy is an outsider. But, at the same time, I

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<sup>44</sup> While Lucy is positioned as an angel, and therefore exists outside of human norms, her embodiment remains identifiable in a humanistic structure for which I nevertheless need to account.

would argue that Findley suggests that gender is one category—potentially one of many—whose disruption could lead to profound changes in the social order. This is not to say the onus of changing that order is on people whose gender or other identity categories disrupt norms, but is rather to suggest that Findley sees the potential in this possibility. Because of the extent to which gender categories are seen as discrete and universal, “natural,” and because of this rigidity in the dominant understandings of gender, in breaking those assumptions down, he can ask questions of others.

It is significant, then, in anticipation of what has been controversially referred to as our “post-gender” moment, that Findley uses a magical realist dystopia to carve out room for someone whose gender also does not conform to naturalized social categories to imagine a different kind of social order that departs from patriarchy’s punitive logic. There is an argument to be made that the 30 years between the novel’s publication and my dissertation is significant, and that may be true to some extent, but there is also much that is the same: the gender wage gap remains significant; marginalized peoples’ bodily autonomy is under attack; sexualized and other kinds of violence against women remain all too common; and feminism remains a four letter word, to name just a few parallels. For these reasons, I am reticent to say that things have improved for women and trans\* and queer people.<sup>45</sup> The context may have changed, but I think we are still too close to the time of Findley’s writing to be able to make a concrete statement about what has changed and in which ways. Moreover, I would say that it was true then, in the wake of the second wave of feminism, as it is true now in the wake of the third, that the dominant

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<sup>45</sup> See the statistics of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, particularly the 2009 publication “Women and Poverty.”

sense is that gender no longer matters, at least in the Canadian context. We regularly hear claims from a range of sources—despite ample evidence to the contrary—that women “have arrived,” and, in some cases, that they are treated better than men and are now the beneficiaries of “unfair advantages.”<sup>46</sup> We are not so far off from Findley’s moment, I would say, and the continued relevance of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* draws our attention to the ways in which gender and wider social categories are intertwined in this kind of cultural moment.

As we see in the work of the theorists from my first chapter, the policing of gender has parallels in other, particularly nationalized, boundaries. And so it is significant that the only the figure whose gender does not conform to norms is also the only character who can imagine a different kind of world. Findley grants a kind of primacy or potential to gender categories that he does not grant to other ones. Lucy operates in a way that contravenes the present order, both in that she undermines Noah’s and Yaweh’s authority, but she is especially remarkable because she does not try to enforce her own. Instead, Lucy trades in strategic knowledges and rumour. And it is Lucy’s gender non-conformity, in addition to her experience of different worlds due to her life as an angel

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<sup>46</sup> At present, for example, the “Men’s Rights” moment is gaining a lot of traction, but this movement’s investments are not new. A concrete example in Canada in the 1980s would be the Montreal Massacre of December 6, 1989, in which a man entered the École Polytechnique in Montreal, separated out women, and killed fourteen of them. The man believed the women had been let into the program because of feminism and that he was unfairly disadvantaged because of their presence. A similar incident happened very recently in the U.S. On May 23, 2014, a man killed six people because he was frustrated by women’s lack of romantic, and especially sexual, interest in him. Though these incidents are very different and happened in different countries, they share the common thread of misogyny and a sense of male victimization at the hands of women. While there are certainly differences between American and Canadian cultural landscapes, there is also a lot that is shared, and I think that it is therefore worth reading these two incidents—and many others—in relation to each other.

that facilitates her ability to use non-normative knowledges as well as her ability to imagine socio-political alternatives. While the novel's emphasis on gender as a site of possibility alone is significant, this work is also important to think about for the ways in which it draws our attention to the nationalized socio-political context of Canada, a country that is built on the same hierarchical and imperialist logics that inform Noah's worldview.

The novel is addressing histories of western imperialism and logics, as several critics argue, particularly in its political investments and anti-colonial stance. There are extensive discussions of *Not Wanted* as an anti-colonial text, and I will emphasize them here because an analysis of these kinds of power dynamics is central to my argument about how the world is shaped, to which ends, and in whose interests. On one hand, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is discussed as a generally anti-colonial text. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, for example, argue that it “deploys a number of counter-discursive strategies, re-entering the western episteme at one of its most fundamental points of origination to deconstruct those notions and processes which rationalized the imposition of the imperial word on the rest of the world” (102). Donna Pennee agrees, saying that “this novel is a response to the founding text of the whole Judaeo-Christian culture, and as such, is a response to Western ‘civilization’ as we know it” (*Moral* 80-81). Helen Tiffin suggests that “the ‘rise’ of any culture is not just coincident with the demise of other forms and futures; it involves the active suppression and/or annihilation of ‘otherness.’ It closes off alternative tropes or modes” (48). Diana Brydon looks at the range of implications of Findley's work:

Although it is tempting for readers to accept Noah's divisions of the novel's more complex message, which rejects the kind of thinking that separates an 'us' from a 'them.' At a philosophical level these divisions enabled colonialism and fascism. To the extent that they are fundamental to Western civilization, they need to be rethought. (*Timothy* 81)

In short, this novel has been read by some as arguing against the western imperialist logic that shapes both the world as we know it, as well as the relationships between individuals and groups of people in terms of who is categorized as "legitimate" and who is categorized as "illegitimate."

But *Not Wanted* is also discussed as a text that takes up the history of colonialism in Canada specifically. As I discussed in the introduction, Marlene Goldman reads many Canadian literary texts as being concerned with the nation's relationship to the apocalyptic violence of colonialism, and we can read Findley's among them. Moreover, Brydon argues that "[f]or Findley, endings and beginnings are intimately related. As a Canadian, he knows that the beginnings of Canada as a nation demanded the ending of the rule of the First Nations in that disputed geographical space" (*Timothy* 77). Indeed, while these discussions of colonialism are crucial to an understanding of the power dynamics in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, it is Dickinson's suggestion that the text is "writing (or re-writing) a New World/nation" that most clearly states the connection between the narrative and its geo-political implications (58). It is critical, then, to read the world that Noah intends to build as a national project that has connections to a larger world-building project, but one that is based in the logics that form institutions like nation-states.

I would suggest, though, that the world-building in this text operates as an allegory for nation building insofar as our understanding of the world is founded in significant ways on how nations are formulated, maintained, and enforced. *Not Wanted on the Voyage* uses a magical realist epistemology to invite a critical reading that both exposes the world as it is by putting it into an unfamiliar context but that also requires a degree of literalism to think through its full implications. So, for example, we might think about the complications of using the world writ large as a metaphor for a nation. But once the water recedes, we know that Noah is going to continue what will become the western epistemological framework that he has demonstrated before the flood and especially while they are on the water, which includes a particular way of organizing geo-political space that is built on the construction of ontological hierarchies.

It is this connection between the text and the material effects of colonial logics that is at the heart of my analysis. As Brydon explains, “Findley’s extended examination of the abuses of power involves investigating the psychology of complicity and understanding the misguided human drive for perfection, which in his view reached its ultimate form of expression in fascism” (*Timothy* viii). Indeed, Bailey aptly asks, “[w]hat reader will choose to side with Noah when the result is to be cut off from imagination, love, and compassion?” (148). Brydon answers that question by stating that “Findley’s novel demands that readers recognize their own complicities in similar [imperial] ventures today” (*Timothy* 79). I will concede that Noah is positioned as monstrous—perhaps even a straw man—but the point of the novel is not a didactic argument for how not to be. The point of *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, in dystopian fashion, is to invite

readers to think about alternate ways that the world might be organized, and Findley settles on Lucy as the source of the ability to imagine alternatives; by disrupting a naturalized category like gender, he can also disrupt a naturalized category like nation.

One of Lucy's pedagogical functions is that she shows readers that boundaries around gender categories are not universal and do not work in her case, and, moreover, that these boundaries are imposed by and serve the interests of a particular logic and way of organizing the world. Because she is able to imagine a different world, we are invited to read a parallel into this construction: as it stands, the system that determines gender is the same one that determines the shape of communities in geopolitical spaces, or what we might otherwise call nations. In looking closely at her gender presentation, we can see that these two systems operate similarly. Donna Pennee puts it well when she discusses the novel's warnings about labels: "labels and categories will not always apply because the times will change, as will the beings categorized and labelled. In its efforts to make things fit, this compulsion to create monoliths denies difference" (92-93). That is, genders, like nations, have artificial boundaries that are imposed under the logics of white supremacist heteropatriarchal logics and are invested in maintaining themselves.

And so, if, as Halberstam suggests, there is a compulsion to close down categories (such as gender) when some become less stable (such as the national), it becomes significant that Findley insists on opening both alongside each other. Granted, Findley does not take up Canada or Canadianness explicitly, but the fact of his Canadianness is nevertheless significant. His text was published in the early stages of the sex wars; it was published in the wake of the second wave of feminism; it was published during the cold war and



during the Reagan-Thatcher years; it was published during the AIDS crisis; and it was published at a time when LGBTQ rights were beginning to be discussed at a federal level in Canada.<sup>47</sup> Dickinson, for example, explicitly links Noah and Yaweh's edicts and other practices to imperial impulses that animated "Nazi propagandists in the name of racial and sexual (i.e., national) purity" (59)—issues that would be at the forefront of Findley's mind in this cultural moment. Though I would not want to make an argument about an *essential* Canadian ethos, the context in which Findley is writing has had a significant influence on his work.

Given that Findley is living in a colonial nation that is beginning to recognize some of his rights as a gay man, but neglects the well-being of many, and this nation exists in the shadow of a superpower during politically tumultuous times, it is not surprising that he may want to imagine another world. As Pennee writes,

the novel...show[s] us that enforcing the ways of one group on all the others in the name of a single Truth or a single God, constructed to fulfill the needs of that one group, is ethically suspect. Who says it's the Truth? Who is speaking, and to whom? In what place and time? There are only constructions, only fictions, but they are based on real needs and have real effects. This novel, I think, encourages us to choose our fictions more carefully. (*Praying* 94)

Pennee is right in her reading of the novel as asking these questions, but I suggest that it also begins to answer them. For Findley, the revolution will not be fast: the ideal community that *Not Wanted on the Voyage* advocates is not the static dystopia that he describes that reluctantly includes minoritized populations. Instead, it is the provisional utopia, imbued with the potential of magic, to which he aspires through Lucy. It is a

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<sup>47</sup> The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, for example, was passed in 1982, though access to rights under the nation remain an issue in many contexts.

world that is built collectively and that values the process of change and imagining otherwise. It is a world in which Lucy can just be herself. Though Findley is concerned with the large scale, as we will see with Larissa Lai's *Evie*, even when mounting a large-scale critique, this work must start small.

“The logic is built right into the architecture”:

Narrative Gaps and Logics of Domination in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* <sup>48</sup>

“And so all the Workers in the factories...”

“Brown eyes and black hair, every single one.”

“Stuff like that is not supposed to happen any more [*sic*].”

“Stuff like that never stopped.”

-A conversation between Miranda and Evie, *Salt Fish Girl* (160)

“Cyborg writing is about the power to survive,  
not on the basis of original innocence,  
but on the basis of seizing the tools  
to mark the world that marked them as other”

-Donna Haraway (33)

*Salt Fish Girl* is a non-linear novel that can be read through a number of contextualizing literary frames—as an Asian Canadian novel, a magical realist and dystopian novel, a queer novel, and a feminist novel, among others. It is also a complicated love story about two women trying to stay together over several lifetimes; it is a politicized novel concerned with the catastrophic effects of what I call “logics of domination”; and it is a novel of unanswered questions. Written by Larissa Lai, a queer Chinese Canadian novelist and poet, *Salt Fish Girl* is a thrillingly unruly sci-fi dystopia about two Chinese deities, Nu Wa/Miranda and her relationship with Salt Fish Girl/Evie, who live multiple lives in vastly different times and spaces.

As with my reading of Lucy in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, this chapter will focus on *Salt Fish Girl*’s strategies to imagine a different kind of world than that in which the characters find themselves and investigates the ways that Evie, a character whose

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<sup>48</sup> Much of this chapter draws on the two previous articles I have published on *Salt Fish Girl* under my former last name, Reimer.

embodiment is non-normative, leads Miranda through this work. While Lucy is able to imagine a different kind of world, and the Fur Queen makes tools available for people to imagine their own worlds, Evie's strategy is to make unflinchingly visible the power structures that operate in the present in her world so as to encourage an imagining of alternatives and to encourage readers to reflect on their own. While none of the characters upon whom I focus are human, this fact is at the centre of my analysis of Evie's non-conformity because of the extent to which her clone status is emphasized, while Lucy's gender nonconformity is paramount for Lucy and figures in for the Fur Queen. Evie's site of non-conformity is at the intersection of her clone and divine status, and though her queerness may raise questions about her gender presentation, it is not taken up in the novel. For this reason, I use Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs in my reading of Evie because it has investments that parallel those of the other critics I discuss, but it is not as relevant for a reading of either Lucy or the Fur Queen. Despite these differences, it is important to read these characters alongside each other because the implications of their non-conformity remain parallel, even if the sites of their non-conformity differ.

*Salt Fish Girl* uses two main strategies to offer critiques of the dominant social order that speak to contemporary issues in Canada. First, it unsettles readers' assumptions by leaving large narrative gaps and unanswered questions, thereby inviting the reader to ask questions about the logics that shape our world. Second, it uses the character of Evie to model what asking these questions might look like and to demonstrate the possible effects that the answers to these questions might have. While there are numerous ways to discuss the political investments of *Salt Fish Girl*, my work will focus on these narrative

gaps and the circulation of knowledge, particularly those regarding origin stories, and the pedagogical work that Evie undertakes with both Nu Wa/Miranda and the reader, who are positioned much like Hannah and Mrs. Noyes in *Not Wanted in the Voyage* as people who remain mired in the dominant logics that harm them.

My work on Evie, *Salt Fish Girl*'s transgressively embodied character, picks up on chapter two, where I juxtaposed Lucy, the gender non-conforming character, with Mrs. Noyes and Hannah to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of Lucy's aspirational future while Mrs. Noyes and Hannah remain mired in the patriarchal logics that shape their world. In the case of *Salt Fish Girl*, the circulation of knowledge operates differently than it does in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*: here there is no centralized antagonist who embodies the dominant socio-political system to the extent that Noah does, though Dr. Flowers, as I will discuss below, comes close. The effect of this lack of centralization in *Salt Fish Girl*, though, is that the dominant system appears to be much more dispersed and is more easily naturalized by populations that are invested in or benefit from the system. In *Salt Fish Girl*, there is much speculation about a range of issues, but many questions go unanswered—the knowledge is never confirmed. *Salt Fish Girl* suggests that the dominant knowledge system is inherently flawed because it relies on coherent concepts like origins that can never be substantiated, and for Lai, this incoherence is a key political strategy to refute this system.

The novel takes on two major sites of knowledge, first, spending a good deal of time demonstrating that the concept of discrete origins, such as racialized or nationalized ones, are perpetually uncertain and that any suggestion otherwise cannot—and should

not—be confirmed, because this confirmation would only serve the dominant power structure. Second, it looks at the knowledge that is withheld from marginalized populations so as to minimize potential for resistance to the status quo. Instead, the novel suggests that we might do well to pay attention to *effects* of the dominant system, rather than look to origins, to begin to imagine a different socio-political world. So while the novel makes a large scale critique of the dominant system, it picks up on Mrs. Noyes's discussion of how coalitions can be built out of having a common enemy and, therefore, have similar experiences of oppression. But because of the decentralization of the common enemy, *Salt Fish Girl* maps out the small-scale, messy work of trying to educate people about these systems in order to build towards a revolution. That is, while Lucy teaches insofar as she demonstrates that an alternative to the dominant order is possible by sharing what she imagines through her rumour, Evie, as one of millions, must first show people, in this case, Miranda, what the problem is.

I argue that *Salt Fish Girl's* narrative gaps invite readers to ask questions about the logical gaps that shape the worlds that the narrator(s) inhabit. We never know from whom the Sonias, a series of clones of which Evie is a part, originate or why some of them are able to imagine what it might mean to escape from their servitude. We also never know why Evie is the only one to rename herself, though we do know that she is the only one of her generation to have been adopted by the human, Dr. Flowers. We do not know who—if anyone—leads the escaped Sonias, if everyone escapes at once, or if it is one by one, so it is not clear what Evie's role in the escape(s) is. It is also left unclear how the consumption of durians is related to conception. Rumours circulate about some

of these things, but no concrete evidence is made available. As in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, rumours figure significantly in *Salt Fish Girl*, but they signify differently in that the rumour in *Salt Fish Girl* is not a product of collaborative building; rather, the rumour in this context operates as unconfirmed knowledge that is withheld by those in power in order to impede the capacity of the marginalized to organize resistance to oppressive forces. We receive provisional answers, but there is a good deal that remains unexplained.

Some questions that animate this chapter are: how do we read the narrative gaps that are scattered throughout the text? Why does Lai stage these gaps in a dystopian genre? Robin Morris suggests that

Lai's examination of the textual production of power-based inequalities is a critique of the way in which fixed binaries such as that of creator/created, human/not human, real/not real, works to assure whiteness of its dominance while subjugating and denying the 'other's' movement towards an autonomous identity. (85)

While I agree with Morris's reading of the novel's political investments, I want to think more about the discursive function of the narrative gaps in *Salt Fish Girl*. My aim in this chapter, then, will be to highlight some of these narrative gaps and think through their effects in relation to the ways in which Evie facilitates the possibility of imagining an alternate kind of world. In Evie's case, her embodied non-conformity is a result of her status as both divine and a clone, and the novel suggests that this non-conformity facilitates her ability to imagine otherwise.

To adapt a phrase of bell hooks, I suggest that the logical gaps in the novel are akin to those that shape and inform the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy—

what I am calling “logics of domination”—that determine the dominant geo-political worlds that the characters and readers of the novel inhabit. The novel takes up questions of race, gender, nation, and labour quite explicitly, asking how these sites of identification converge in a socio-political moment when total dehumanization is not only possible, but a common practice. The novel invites readers to ask why it is logical to organize space into corporate cities and the “Unregulated Zone.” We might ask why a being with DNA made up of 99.97% human and 0.03% carp has no legal or social rights. It is never explained why clones are exploited for cheap labour. Attention to these gaps is particularly pressing in the increasingly globalized North American context, but the reasons for these facts are so mundane—so normalized—that both the reader and many of the characters accept them unquestioningly. Lai’s project is to draw our attention to these kinds of questions about logical gaps in the novel and, by extension, in our world.

Critics of the novel productively link these gaps to questions of genre in *Salt Fish Girl*. In an argument that harkens back to the definitions of dystopia that I discuss in my introduction, Paul Lai<sup>49</sup> argues that “[t]he lacuna in the novel around our contemporary moment suggests that a fictional critique of our own time period might best be created in histories about the future” (168). Along similar lines, Pilar Cuder-Domínguez argues that “Lai... forcefully points towards the racialization of poverty and the power differential of the First and Third Worlds that make people of some races expendable, a political purpose for which speculative fiction is a peculiarly suitable vehicle” (127). She goes on to say that Lai has

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<sup>49</sup> To minimize confusion, I will refer to Paul Lai always by both names, while Larissa Lai will be referred to by her last name.



managed to use the speculative form creatively in [her] fictions, bringing together such diverse features as myth, history, SF proper, dystopia, and pioneer writing. The ensuing hybrid form allows [her] to interrogate the representation of Asian women's subjectivity, challenging standards of both gender and genre. (127)

Paul Lai, too, considers the text to fit a range of genres: “*Salt Fish Girl*'s juxtaposition of a prehistorical past, historical moments, and a speculative future creates a hybrid narrative that is at once myth, history, fairy tale, and science fiction” (169). He further elaborates on Lai's project when he suggests that “[b]y deliberately placing freedom and oppression at the center of speculative fiction, Lai forwards science fiction as a project of imagining worlds outside the norms and systems of our contemporary world” (175).

Robert Zacharias agrees, but he links genre to nation, picking up on the work of thinkers like Homi K. Bhabha in *Nation and Narration*, suggesting that “historical realism is a mode invested in maintenance of the homogenous, empty time of the nation” while “the first revolutionary gesture of Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* is its rejection of that normative spatio-temporal paradigm” (15). Furthermore, he suggests that Lai's challenge to this paradigm “complements her use of radically fluid subject identities, myth that intertwines with history, cyborg clones and Chinese goddesses, and a narrative that is deeply fractured—all of which violate the strict order and clear *telos* desired by the nation-state” (16). These critics, then, see the generic location of Lai's work as fostering its political potential, particularly for critiquing the current social order and trying to imagine a different one.<sup>50</sup>

Alongside the reading of the novel as dystopian, though, we must also see its magical realist elements, though they are less pronounced in this novel than they are in

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<sup>50</sup> While I remain invested in reading this novel as a magical realist dystopia, I am not particularly concerned with the specific labels; the political potential of the work is more my focus.

the other two I consider. Cuder-Domínguez, for example, reads the novel in terms of autoethnography, but uses the work of Patrick Parrinder to think about its genre, paying particular attention to his suggestion that science fiction is a “metaphor for the present” (27), meaning that the genre imagines the consequences of following current practices to their logical ends in order to make the implications of contemporary actions visible, but it is the magical elements that act as a conduit for this process. It is important, then, to consider Evie’s presence as both a divine figure and an extra-human figure, as well as the novel’s creation story, as signalling magical realism. We see it too in the unexplained durian pregnancies that raise questions about the complicated relationship between magic and technology; though technology is invoked here with regard to the possibility that the fruit has been genetically modified, a definitive answer is never given. We can also see magical realism in the extent to which the novel criticizes the logics of the current order and ways to imagine beyond it insofar as Evie is responding to her dystopian present, but her status as a non-human clone helps her to imagine that alternatives exist. Indeed, *Salt Fish Girl* imagines the outcome of the late-capitalist neoliberal technocratic logic as it affects marginalized people and works to alert the reader to the consequences of these logics. Given the looseness of the genre, we might also make connections to some other ones, particularly in the Canadian context.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, Marlene Goldman’s attention to apocalypse in the Canadian context is particularly useful for reading Canadian dystopian fictions, such as *Salt Fish Girl*, because of the politicized connections she makes between the genre and nation-building. She argues that “[i]n contrast to the traditional biblical

apocalypse, contemporary Canadian fiction refuses to celebrate the destruction of evil and the creation of a new, heavenly world. Instead, these works highlight the devastation wrought by apocalyptic thinking on those accorded the role of the non-elect” (5). To substantiate Goldman’s claims in relation to *Salt Fish Girl*, we must ask, though, what is the apocalyptic event that leads to the dystopian present in the novel? The novel resolutely suggests that the catastrophe is not a singular apocalyptic event, but is rather the progressive rise of the logics of domination and their effects on space, labour, and the overall value ascribed to some lives, especially at the expense of other lives. Lai uses the novel, particularly Evie, to map out the consequences of these logics both as they might happen and, most importantly, as they *are* happening.

Although Evie does not appear in the novel until half-way through, Lai’s disruption of the normative knowledge systems and logics begins in the first pages of the text, where she emphasizes the impossibility of “pure” origins that underpin many of the logics against which she is writing. I will take the question of origins as my starting point both because it is one major site of the narrative gaps that I am describing, but origins are also crucial to consider because the logics of domination that I am investigating rely so heavily upon discernible boundaries; these logics require the clear quantifiability and identifiability that the novel calls into question. Without clear lines around the “self” and the “other,” the “human” and the “non-human,” and the ability to claim a definitive origin, these logics fall apart.

This strategy has two effects: first, it is an example of the logical gaps in the novel, but it is also a strategy to think through solidarity building across difference. Lai’s

interrogation of origins is a strategic move to address the issue of coalition politics, but in order to make that move, she needs to render the notion of origins—and, especially, the privilege that accrues to ‘authentic’ origins—incoherent. That is, if most political movements are built upon a sense of shared identity categories—many of which are linked to “biological” categories (or shared origins)—then a disruption of the centrality of shared origins to political movements affords the possibility of considering shared *experience* of oppression as a basis for political action, which is a strategy that Lucy and the Fur Queen, whom I will discuss in my fourth chapter, share. Lai therefore creates a world in which the notion of authentic origins no longer makes sense. She problematizes the dominant conceptualization of origins by using characters that have multiple origins that are not hierarchically organized. That is, origins in *Salt Fish Girl* are indeterminate, multiple, turn in on themselves, or seem to regress infinitely—and they do so without explanation or apology. The uncertainty that accompanies this lack of explanation is critical to the work of her critique: if the logics she is writing against are built around prescribed boundaries and coherent and contained narratives, then Lai’s open-endedness substantially disrupts these norms. In short, she troubles the notion of stable origins by offering a critique of the dominant discourses that emphasize disembodied rationality, progress, and certainty to the detriment of alternative epistemologies that allow for a different social order.

This concern with origins is not surprising if we consider *Salt Fish Girl* in the context of Asian Canadian literature. As Donald Goellnicht explains, when considering the development of Asian Canadian literature as a field of study in relation to other fields

of minoritized literatures, Asian Canadian literature has no “‘originary’ event” that acted as a catalyst (or “‘founding’ moment”) for the emergence of the field in the same way that many other racialized, nationalized, and ethnicized fields do (23). He goes further to advocate a move towards coalition politics that is less concerned with specific nationalized and/or racialized boundaries. Instead, he looks at the possibilities for critiques of power structures that affect people of colour, while remaining conscious and respectful of the differences between the experiences of groups of people, in addition to attending to the significance of the intersections of other identity categories that may make it difficult to “unite under a single sign such as ‘Asian Canadian literature’” (19). One of the fields that Lai is writing in, then, itself is without a clear origin and is one that challenges the Canadian literary canon by questioning which narratives and histories are valued, shared, and naturalized, and which ones are not.<sup>51</sup>

Doing the work of what Donna Haraway calls a “cyborg author”—who “subvert[s] the central myths of origin of Western culture” in order to resist the myths’ colonizing tendencies (33)—Lai renders incoherent the origin stories that support logics of domination in *Salt Fish Girl*. The novel opens with the creation of humans by the female Chinese god, Nu Wa. Like Findley, Lai is taking on the Bible, but rather than fill in gaps like Findley does, she supplants the primacy of the Christian mythology by starting from Chinese mythology, though there is evidence of Lai rewriting the Christian

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<sup>51</sup> Indeed “Canadian literature” is a category that does not hold both because of the complexities of Canada’s histories, its demographic makeup, and its relationship to the American cultural imperialism and to British colonization, in addition to the ways that nations now operate in an age of globalization; Canada seems to be a place and idea with a particular anxiety about coherence, making it a particularly apt site out of which novels like the ones I study here might arise.

narrative as well. Nu Wa, we are told, exists before the world, but we have no sense of where she comes from: aside from her unexplained presence, “[t]here was no order, nothing had a clear relationship to anything else” (1). Soon in this undifferentiated place, though, water arrives—also without explanation—an event that begins the creation of the world. This process is not further narrated, though, and that leaves open the possibility of another agent of whom Nu Wa is not aware who controls the water.

The lack of clear origins continues throughout this story of the making of humans and the world. Nu Wa uses mud on the river banks to create humans in her own image because she is lonely; they have the torso of a woman and the tail of a snake, but she gives them “stubby little tail[s]” so that they “wouldn’t get too arrogant and think [themselves] better than [her]” (2). When they fail to give her the respect she thinks she deserves, she decides to split their tails. Much to her surprise, the people take pleasure in the splitting and mock her tail, leading her to throw them to the ground, intending to kill her “monstrous creations” (2-3). Finding that they have survived, though, Nu Wa teaches them how to build shelters and, when they begin to age and fall ill, she gives their “instinctive activity” of “stroking each other between the legs” a “secondary function”: she makes the “strong ones into women and the weak ones into men” so that they can procreate, which restores their health (4-5). Notably, she frames the procreative ability that she has given her creations in technological terms—not as “natural,” but as her “latest invention” (5). This section of the narrative is striking both because it rewrites the Christian creation myth by centring Chinese mythologies, and because it denaturalizes dominant understandings of reproduction by framing it in a technological discourse.

The magical realist elements of the disruption of her origins become more striking when Nu Wa decides to become human. Once the people begin to procreate, they get wrapped up in their lives and forget about Nu Wa, resulting in the return of her loneliness. She decides that she wants to become human, a desire that is exacerbated by her glimpse of a young man in a boat, apparently not one of the people she created and whose origins are therefore unclear (6-7). Although she describes herself as being alone before the world came together, Nu Wa visits a fish who has “eyes older than the world” to accomplish her transformation, a being who may then predate the world that Nu Wa knows (8), and who lives in a lake that is “so deep it might have been bottomless” (7). If this lake is bottomless, then we must consider the possibility that there may be an infinite number of “originary” beings, each predating the last, who may co-exist without knowledge of each other. Furthermore, when the bifurcation of Nu Wa’s legs happens, she desperately swims to the surface of the lake and sits on a rock, watching her legs form, and as she does so, she looks over and sees “another woman, also stroking her legs and marvelling at their newness” (9). This woman, we may speculate, is the woman who becomes Salt Fish Girl/Evie, who then is also a divine being and who may have co-existed with Nu Wa all along, though this is never made clear.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Nu Wa’s body—that is, the divine body, which is generally thought to be supremely Whole—is denaturalized, and her status as originary being is questioned with the bifurcation of her tail and with her births in later lives.

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<sup>52</sup> The novel mentions Fu Xi, Nu Wa’s brother, but Lai has rewritten him as a woman (187).

The novel further disrupts the dominant Christian mythology of a singular male God worshiped by people in that it is the ‘creator’ who is envious of the ‘created.’ Upon leaving the lake, she crawls into a cistern of water in a village, at which point she resumes her previous shape and shrinks so much that a woman fails to see or feel Nu Wa as she swallows her. Nu Wa lodges herself in the woman’s uterus and is born nine months later into a life in nineteenth-century China where she falls in love with Salt Fish Girl, the daughter of her village’s fish vendor. Nu Wa is later reborn as Miranda in 2044 in the walled city of Serendipity, this time after becoming part of a durian that gets eaten by her next mother.

In this 2044 rebirth, a radical revisioning of the biblical Adam and Eve story, Nu Wa’s conception involves trans-speciation and is excessively pungent and sensual. Here she makes herself into a worm and crawls into a durian bud, wrapping herself around the core of the bud, and eventually she “became the seed and the seed became [her]” (208, 209). Nu Wa/Miranda is conceived when her mother eats this durian, an illegal fruit from the Unregulated Zone outside their city, Serendipity. To reframe the imagery that Lai invokes, Miranda is born from forbidden fruit, and she wonders to herself whether or not her conception can be read as immaculate because her mother was “a good eight years past menopause” (15). Lai magnifies the double signification of the word ‘immaculate’ to emphasize the juxtaposition of the biblical phrase with notions of cleanliness and to highlight the corporeality and sensuousness of Miranda’s conception: Miranda’s parents conceive her with a passion that they had not felt since the illegitimate conception of their son decades before while the smells of the durian’s “pepper-pissy juices mixing with their



somewhat more subtly scented [bodily] ones and the blood of the injuries [the durian] inflicted with its [spiky skin's] green teeth" waft around them (15). Instead of an immaculately conceived Jesus figure, this messy sex results in a baby whose "unpleasant cat pee odour oozed from [her] pores" (15). In this section of the narrative, Lai explicitly invokes and bends this Christian origin story while also juxtaposing it with hyper-embodiment and the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human.

It is useful to consider Lai's denaturalization of origins in the context of posthumanist feminism because this theoretical framework raises questions about the nature of humanness in order to challenge the discourses of universal human values and linear histories of progress that pervade the western imaginary. Lai troubles notions of "pure" origins through the characters of Nu Wa/Miranda, Salt Fish Girl/Evie, and Miranda and Evie's daughter. Though she overtly discusses the ways in which origins can be a site of political action in the text, Lai does not celebrate this approach; rather, she suggests that there is a danger in locating community exclusively in shared origins and therefore destabilizes the possibility of "legitimate" origins. Doing so allows her to advocate for the possibility of creating communities that address interlocking oppressions, thereby resisting the atomization that is privileged under logics of domination. With this approach, the novel maintains the importance of history and origins in community building, but, as we will see with Highway's discussion of history, their presence does not mean that this history is static and definitive.

Lai takes up the language that posthumanist feminists have used to deconstruct dominant discourses of universality and legitimacy in favour of an intersectional analysis.

Donna Haraway discusses the ways in which the dominant notions of what constitutes humanness are bound up in epistemologies that value unity, coherence, and disembodiment and that privilege and naturalize white, middle class, heterosexual cis-gender maleness. To think against this exclusive set of binarized self/other, natural/unnatural parameters, Haraway politicizes the figure of the cyborg: “Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism” (34). *Salt Fish Girl* engages cyborg politics in its rejection of what Haraway describes as a western patriarchal logic that is predicated upon the domination of those constituted as “others” to be mastered: women, people of colour, workers, nature, and animals (35). Lai’s novel takes up the feminist politic advanced by Haraway that resists the “totalizing and imperialist” “dream of a common language” in order to embrace a “powerful infidel heteroglossia” that does not close meaning in the way that corporatized western thinking attempts, though necessarily fails, to accomplish (31, 39). Indeed, with this rejection, Haraway’s feminist project can leave the fraught understanding of biological categories in order to embrace a politics based on affinity, which she defines as “related not by blood but by choice” (14). And the rewriting of origin stories is one strategy that Haraway advocates to challenge dominant narratives.

Haraway’s analysis also helps to interpret Lai’s use of clones and non-normatively embodied people. Lai not only problematizes Miranda’s conception story, but she also raises questions about her relationship to humanness. Putting aside her divinity for the moment, throughout Miranda’s childhood there are indications that she

does not fit into the norms that define one as human: most obvious is her strong smell. This smell, which is a symptom of the Dreaming Disease—an affliction that randomly affects people and is characterized by its sufferers' strong odours, memories of traumatic events they have not experienced, and suicidal impulses, though it is never fully explained—suggests that Miranda's body is not like those of other people. In addition to her smell, Miranda has two fistulas beside her ears (163), a characteristic which Evie, though a clone, shares, and Miranda sheds scales when she gets out of the bath (44-45). Her non-normativity is also present in terms of her divinity, particularly as it is articulated in terms of her relationship to motherhood: Nu Wa/Miranda is both child and creator of her mother, but also identifies as a "motherless child" (207, 227). Moreover, as Evie drives them out of the city, Miranda—who, at this point, remembers her previous life in nineteenth-century China—thinks to herself, "I am your grandmother, I wanted to tell her. I am the maker of your maker. Both of us, such putrid origins, climbing out of the mud and muck into darkness. But I did not want to unmake what I had made, imperfect and wicked as it was" (253). Ultimately Miranda's origins remain uncertain. We do, however, know a few things: that she is a creator, Nu Wa; that despite being a deity, she is reborn twice in the novel without being aware of the rebirths until well into the next lives and that her body does not adhere to normative conventions of humanness. Furthermore, by giving both Miranda and her mother the same unexplained fistulas that the clones have, Lai raises the possibility that "authentic" humanness may no longer exist, if it ever did, though in terms of the state's legal discourses, Miranda retains the rights and privileges of humanness.

Evie's "sordid" origins, as Miranda phrases it (158), are similarly fractured and uncertain, and Haraway's work also helps to interpret Evie. As with Miranda, Evie's representation is mired in biblical imagery because of both her name and her "angel wing" scars, which resulted from her removal of the tracking device implanted in the backs of all the clones (156, 159). Simultaneously, though, this notion of "unnatural" origins is echoed in Evie's telling identification with Frankenstein which emphasizes the relationship of human to non-human-ness. This allusion is particularly striking since Evie is a clone who lacks a conventional origin story and because she confuses the creator with the created, as dominant culture tends to do, explaining that she, like Frankenstein, "crossed a glacier to throw [her pursuant] off the scent" (159), an act performed by the *creature*, not Frankenstein himself.

Rather than trying to claim "authentic" humanness, Evie embraces her clone status and demonstrates the slippage between the two orders of being. This slippage is further evident in Evie's biological make up. Despite being a clone, Evie is revealed to be the reincarnation of Salt Fish Girl when Miranda recognizes her salt fish smell (150). Born Sonia 113—one of a generation of numbered clones all called Sonia—Evie is not considered to be human because her DNA is 0.03% carp (158).<sup>53</sup> As she phrases it, "I'm not human.... I'm a patented new fucking life form" who was created to enter the neo-slave trade of the Pallas shoes factories in order to keep their labour costs down (158). Because the novel is focalized through Miranda, we never get an interior view of a clone's experience, though we do get a sense of their absolute disposability through

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<sup>53</sup> This ratio inexplicably changes later in the text to "Zero Point Three Per Cent" (252).

Evie's discussions of social issues, particularly in relation to corporatization. Miranda does wonder about these experiences, though: with regard to Evie's relationship with her older "sister," Miranda asks, "[t]o have access to oneself as an old woman. Was it like that for them? Did Sonia 14, having lived them, share Evie's foibles? Had she come to an understanding of them? Did she see Evie's life as an extension of her own, as a second shot at those things that had failed her the first time?" (228). When describing her "source material," Evie shares the story of the Chinese woman and the Japanese man who were interned during WWII whose bodies were sold to science, but, Evie says, "[f]or all I know one of my co-workers made it up" (160). It is clear, however, that both Evie and the people who run Pallas recognize the political power of this origin story because, as she says, Pallas "tries to keep it quiet. A nice myth of origins after all would be a perfect focus for revolt" (160). This moment is one of Lai's clearest interventions into the discussion of coalition building: though "origins" are a strong site from which to build a resistance movement, if one's biological origins are unclear, misrepresented, or concealed, there must still be a site from which the building of a different kind of world is possible, and these other sites of connection may well prove to be more fruitful, as more people can be involved.

Further complicating Evie's origin story are the discussions of Evie's metaphorical origins: she is born of multiple sources, not all of which are "human." In addition to having "source material," we also hear that her mother is a carp (261) and that her father is Dr. Flowers (252), a 'mad scientist' figure whose attempts to master environment, genetics, and bodies, are unchecked, unremorseful, and unabashed. Flowers

adopts Evie with his wife, Dr. Seto, another clone, but of the Miyako generation. But when things do not go well, he sends Evie back to Pallas (252). Like Miranda, then, we can also read Evie in the context of immaculate conception—born of her “father” who stands in for the phallogocentric scientific impulse towards mastery at any cost, much like the approach of Noah Noyes, who is also a ‘mad scientist’ figure. Indeed, this birth and its progeny—out of “sterile paternal origins,” as Joanna Mansbridge puts it (125)—are bound up in the logics of domination; the progeny of this immaculate birth is destined for what Haraway would call a stable life with one code, but Evie is illegitimate because of her non-human status and her lack of complacency, and as Haraway predicts, “illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins” (10).<sup>54</sup> Indeed, with Dr. Flowers’s role as the embodiment of these logics, Evie has no loyalty whatsoever, and her disloyalty to the system that Dr. Flowers represents—the one that delimits her existence and renders her non-conforming—is what allows her to see other possibilities.

Evie’s “origins,” then, consist of fish, humans, the history of the racist treatment of Asian Canadians, and the logics of domination that commodify her. Wendy Brown’s work on neoliberalism, a key component of the logics of domination, helps to elucidate these logics. She describes neoliberalism as “*extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*” (para 6, emphasis original); under neoliberalism, that is, “all dimensions of human life [become] cast in terms of a market rationality” (para 8).

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<sup>54</sup> The connection between Noah and Hannah’s ape-child resonates here. When these children do not prove to be the ideal children that are socially expected, particularly as their fathers see it, they are disposed of. Reading Evie and Miranda’s illegitimacy alongside Lotte and Adam from *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, moreover, suggests that perhaps part of Findley’s work was also to create ruptures in ideas of knowable, coherent origins.

If we consider this insight in relation to the technocratic reduction of humanness that Lai criticizes and the dominant need for fixed boundaries and singular codes that Haraway warns against, we can see the degree to which this market rationality encourages both individualism and the quantification of all elements of a life. But, importantly, Evie's messy origins mean that she can never fit comfortably into discrete categories, and it is Evie who renames herself, thereby rejecting the discourse that has been imposed upon her—literally, the name of the father—and rewrites herself: “I changed my name when I escaped. It's weird though, never quite comfortable,” though she does not elaborate on this discomfort (223). By juxtaposing Miranda's “authentic” humanness with Evie's non-human status, Lai demonstrates that the lines are not as firm as the logics of domination require.

Worthwhile to consider in relation to Lai's cyborg politics is Susan Stryker's elegant and powerful trans\*feminist observation that the impulse towards policing the borders of “humanness” belies an anxiety about people's actual power, which picks up on the investments of both Lucy and the Fur Queen. Though she is discussing trans\*embodiment, Stryker's critique of “authentic” origins and humanness resonates strongly with the feminist politics of Lai and Haraway: likening the “monstrous” transsexual body to that of Frankenstein's monster, Stryker argues that “[t]he affront you humans take at being called a ‘creature’ results from the threat the term poses to your status as ‘lords of creation,’ beings elevated above mere material existence” (240). Indeed, *Frankenstein* acts as a significant metaphor in discourses of embodiment, particularly in feminist criticism because it evokes the image of not-quite-humanness. This discourse has haunted

and delegitimized both trans\* and other marginalized peoples, and continues to haunt the characters in Lai's novel, many of whose 'aberrant' bodies have been and continue to be explicitly and implicitly imagined as dangerous and unnatural in their non-normativity because they cannot be contained, as is the case with Miranda's smell, and especially with Evie's clone status. Stryker exposes the anxieties that underpin the dominant need to locate bodies in relation to a concrete notion of an authentic origin that purports to confirm authentic humanness. And, of course, the discourse of "purity" resonates widely, as we can see with the discussions of nation from Zacharias and Cuder-Domínguez. The 'unnatural,' monstrous, racialized bodies in Lai's novel complicate the alleged authenticity and purity of human bodies advanced by these dominant discourses.

The final denaturalized origin I will address is the birth of Miranda and Evie's daughter. Like Evie's and Miranda's multi-sourced conceptions, their daughter's origins are unclear. After the first time they have sex, a scene in which both Miranda and Evie are described in terms of fish, Miranda wonders to herself whether or not that moment was the point at which the baby took root, thereby raising the possibility—one that is common in feminist dystopian literature (Booker and Thomas 88)—of her and Evie having the capacity to conceive a child together (161). We get a description too, though, of Miranda eating durian and of Nu Wa/Miranda implanting another one of her selves in Miranda (225, 227). That is, the baby's conception seems to be related both to queer sex and the durian. Furthermore, Evie discusses the speculation of the Sonias that the fertility associated with the durian trees results from the government having "implant[ed] human genes into fruit as fertility therapy for women who could not conceive" and, to further



emphasize this uncontainability, the narrator goes on to say that “of course the pollen blew every which way and could not be contained” (258). In this instance, the boundary between human and non-human is breached and cannot be controlled through institutional mechanisms, a point that Flowers emphasizes: “The fertility those durians provided was neither natural nor controllable. It was too dangerous [to let the Sonias live],” to which Evie responds that his reproduction of clones was the same (256). As we already know, Flowers does not like it when someone else is in control. Through these complex origin stories, the novel suggests that an alternative world is possible. This different world to which Evie aspires is one in which the strictures of capitalist epistemologies and values would not dominate, but, as I will discuss below, it is not quite that simple.

Through the range of disarticulated origins that *Salt Fish Girl* features, the novel acts as a metatextual interrogation of origin stories, questioning their power and the authenticity that stable origin stories are assumed to provide. Lai complicates the notion of “natural” origins by suggesting both that no one can be read as “naturally human” and that there is a danger in embracing this exclusive authenticity, arguing instead for an intersectional politics that is not based on (allegedly) discrete categories. Although, according to Miranda, “[t]his is a story about stink” (268), the book is really about community-building and resistance.<sup>55</sup> While listening to Evie’s story about her escape from the factory, Miranda describes Evie’s situation in terms of freedom, but Evie counters by framing it in terms of community: she was now “[a]lone. It wasn’t easy to

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<sup>55</sup> There may be fruitful connections to draw between the circulation of “stink” and rumour.

leave, you know, when you are used to being surrounded all the time by your sisters” (159-60). Lai further raises Haraway’s politics of affinity when Nu Wa thinks to herself, upon her return to Salt Fish Girl after deserting her, “[h]ow easily we abandon those who have suffered the same persecutions as we have. How quickly we grow impatient with their inability to transcend the conditions of our lives” (172). Indeed, Lai is advocating for a recognition of oppression through common experience, as opposed to through allegedly coherent categories and shared origins, such as racialized or nationalized identities.

Critics of the novel consistently mention the importance of origin stories, reading it as questioning fixed notions of origins, but they tend to suggest that Lai is revising origins. I suggest instead that in paying close attention to the origin stories, we can see that in Butlerian fashion, Lai’s novel disrupts notions of origins upon which identity categories are contingent. Paul Lai reads *Salt Fish Girl* as a critique of neoliberal structures, stating that the origin stories that *Salt Fish Girl* takes up “offer[] a great deal of material for further discussion” (171), and numerous people take up Lai’s engagement with origin stories in the contexts of globalization, racialization, monstrosity, embodiment, intertextuality, among other issues (see Wong; Lai, Paul; Mansbridge; Morris; Birns; Lee; and Harmer). While there is some overlap among these articles, for my purposes, the most important element that underpins all of these arguments is their reading of *Salt Fish Girl* as maintaining the importance of origins to some degree. I suggest instead that a critical argument that *Salt Fish Girl* makes is that “pure” origins do not exist. Indeed we might think of dominant investments in these stories as part of the

logic of domination because in ossifying the fluidity of categories like gender, race, nation, and body, they become knowable and more readily subject to the power and control of the dominant system. Moreover, if the logics that continue to shape our geopolitical spaces are predicated upon knowable and discrete origins, then, as Haraway suggests, we must rewrite these narratives.

Even if resisting these hard lines and rewriting these narratives means that things become uncertain—that familiar logics are no longer the main social organizing principle—Haraway and Lai are willing to embrace this uncertainty if only because it necessitates constant reconsideration due to its instability. *Salt Fish Girl* embraces these epistemological uncertainties and points to the variability and precariousness of building coalitions due to the characters' lack of shared origins and lack of uniform shared experiences. This is a project full of possibilities for building political relationships, though it is never clear what the end result might be, and Lai and Haraway, not to mention Findley and Highway, do not celebrate cyborg politics uncritically. Rather they provisionally embrace the possibilities that these epistemologies afford for coalition building.

Even though she sees the power of origin stories, Lai rejects them as an exclusive basis for community-building and building new worlds. Through Evie, she illustrates the many ways in which the concepts that inform and enforce logics of domination can and must be troubled. Evie's embodiment is non-normative in that she is a clone without rights, and it is she who teaches Miranda, the main character, to ask questions of the world around her. Like Lucy, Evie knows that there will be a slow process of learning

and building towards a better world from the current order. Indeed, Lai, Findley, and Highway respond to and rewrite creation stories that have come to inform dominant structures like the nation, among others, in order to “seiz[e] the tools to mark the world that marked [her and others] as other,” as Haraway encourages (33).<sup>56</sup> The crux of Lai’s, Findley’s, and Highway’s arguments echoes Audre Lorde’s assertion that “the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house”: in order to challenge these logics, one cannot replicate or repurpose them—something else must be built.

The narrative gaps that Lai uses to accomplish her goals appear in a range of other significant contexts that speak to her critique of the logics of domination and link them to a critique of geo-political organization. Lai demonstrates, for example, the ways in which the idea of nation becomes meaningless, one of the key results of globalization in the North American context. There are multiple mentions of geo-political spaces in the text, but they are all denationalized. Indeed, national borders seem to have dissolved completely in the latest setting: Serendipity is a “walled city on the west coast of North America, 2044” (11). We also hear about the “former municipality of Greenwood, British Columbia” (71) and the “eastern rim of the PEU [“Pacific Economic Union”] in what used to be China” (218, 156). There are also brief references to the cities, such as Serendipity, a secular city run by the Saturna corporation in which citizens are “taught to place [their] faith in reason” (61), and Painted Horse, a Nextcorp town that practices

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<sup>56</sup> To be clear, I do not want to suggest that origin stories I discuss in this and other chapters are inherently or necessarily oppressive, but I would suggest that the dominant ones have been manipulated by those in power to justify oppression.

“fundamentalist Christianity” (62-3), but these cities are at war. Ian, Miranda’s childhood friend, describes, for example, how he has come to live in Serendipity:

Ian said his parents were intelligence agents for Saturna. They had recently been discovered by the councillors at Painted Horse. They would have received the death sentence if Saturna had not traded them for two of its own, who had recently been charged with espionage in Serendipity. Ian said he thought his parents were double agents, that they were really working for Nextcorp, and were on a mission right this very minute. (63-64)

Now, of course, there is no verification of Ian’s story, but that is the point: in this world, we do not know if these are a child’s fantasies or if there is something to what he says. Instead we find that rather than disappearing, the structures of the nation are rearticulated in a range of ways, such as through both the differentiation between the Unregulated Zone and the walled corporate cities and the policing of embodiment. We see numerous examples of the latter with the response to Miranda’s smell, the fact that she is “the only Asian child in her class” (23), and, of course, through the regulation of Evie’s body.<sup>57</sup>

The rearticulation of these boundaries is not terribly surprising if we again consider Halberstam’s argument about some borders becoming ossified as others become porous. While the context in *Salt Fish Girl* and the other novels I study here is quite different, I remain compelled by the suggestion that a destabilization of some significant social boundaries is likely to result in a hyper-policing of others. And so, when the nation-state breaks down into the city-state and the “Unregulated Zone,” or, perhaps returns to a more ancient form of social organization, and the surveillance of normative

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<sup>57</sup> For more on smell, see Paul Lai, Oliver, and Phung. For more on multiculturalism as a biopolitical project, see Morton.

bodies becomes a major site of concern in the novel, we can read this policing as a rearticulation of borders.

Complicating a reading of the process by which the nation is replaced by the corporation, however, is Zacharias's convincing demonstration that there is little difference between the operations of the nation and the operations of the corporation. Both are top-down regulatory structures, both impose a range of kinds of violences on their 'citizenship,' and both claim to represent the best interests of all, but, in practice, only represent the best interests of the privileged few, while dehumanizing the many. Regardless of the power structure, though, as Joanna Mansbridge shows, the regulation of space is never complete:

The alleyways in which the Salt Fish Girl, Nu Wa, Miranda, and Evie move through the cities provide alternative pathways that subvert the flow of global capital. It is these pathways that allow a sense of agency and mobility within a capitalist hegemony. (126)

The controlling of space and bodies—particularly the deep anxieties of the citted populations about the Unregulated Zone and of non-normative embodiments, as well as the need to manage these unruly sites—speak to related anxieties about ideal (corporate) citizenship.

Lai suggests that in an age of corporate domination, dehumanization becomes the norm. Mansbridge explains that “[t]he anti-Eden of Serendipity is a walled city in which simulation is reality and everything, including humans, becomes a commodity” (123). Lai draws a connection between the histories of labour practices between nineteenth-century China and twenty-first-century North America in terms of factory work. In nineteenth-

century China, Salt Fish Girl has little choice but to do work that will seriously affect her health in order to support herself and Nu Wa. Like the factory workers in China,<sup>58</sup> the Sonias of 2062 are the workers who do invisible labour from the dominant perspective, as we see with the Janitors (76), who are also subject to unregulated experimentation because they are not “human.” As Mansbridge goes on to say, “Evie rebels and escapes from factory exploitation that kept the Salt Fish Girl imprisoned years before in China” (126). In this context, Zacharias asks, recalling the work of Kit Dobson,

[i]f it is true that the autonomy of the Canadian nation-state is giving way to the authority of globalized capital, a wholesale reconsideration of the concepts of sovereignty and citizenship is required. What type of communities will we imagine ourselves belonging to under the banner of transnational corporations? What type of sovereign is the corporation? And what type of citizen is the consumer? (4)

The dominant reading, of course, is that corporations and market-based economies with their “survival of the fittest” mentality are neutral, meritocratically based, and good for all, but, as Evie is trying to show Miranda and the reader, they actually only serve the interests of the privileged few.

Critics of *Salt Fish Girl* have tended to focus on this critique of neoliberal capitalism. We witness the devastation wrought on populations who are not what Sunera Thobani would call “exalted subjects”: “[s]uch spaces of abject poverty [as the Unregulated Zone] are causally connected to the unregulated market forces of neoliberal global capitalism” (Morton 94). While not everything can be regulated—as many point out—there is an informal economic barter system, for example, in which Miranda’s

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<sup>58</sup> At the time of writing, a clothing factory in Bangladesh that serves North American markets has just crumbled, leading to the deaths of hundreds of people, despite employees’ long standing concerns about safety issues, leading to, as just one example that demonstrates the topicality of these concerns.

brother works, but the presence of these systems pales in comparison to the needs of the populations who engage in them. As Rita Wong explains,

[t]he people dying in the streets are the logical outcome of the ongoing privatization of public spaces, the corrosion of the social contract, the attrition of diverse communal affiliations. Uncomfortably similar to today's Free Trade Zones, this futuristic Unregulated Zone is the rational extension of policies that exploit and discard labour for the sake of monetary profit. (119)

What we see, finally, is the extent to which, as Morton says, "the novel depicts the way in which the social and political rights of migrant workers are determined exclusively by their employment in multinational corporations" (94). While I agree with other critics that the critique of capitalism especially as it connects to other sites of oppression, particularly race, is central to understanding this novel, we must also note that there is no room in the definition of fully human for anyone who does not adhere to the social norms as determined by the forces that support the logics of domination, which are implicitly white, upper middle class, and heteropatriarchal; racist capitalism alone does not account for all the work that this novel does.

Consistently, it is women of colour who are poor, without any rights, and whose lives are disposable: "The Sonias were ambushed.... [they] were in detention or had disappeared. Without a legal existence to begin with, they could not be reported missing" (249-50).<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the labour relations in the novel raise larger questions about whose lives are valued, as is demonstrated by the work that marginalized bodies have almost no option but to do both in the present and the past. Indeed, it is not even clear where the

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<sup>59</sup> While the context is different, this circumstance speaks to the ways in which missing and murdered Indigenous women—despite (allegedly) having legal rights—have a long history of being ignored by police when they are reported missing. While the Sonias cannot be reported missing, these women can be, but the reports are ignored.



clones come from or how it came to be that their DNA could be exploited to increase productivity and the whims of science in these ways. Though I quoted briefly from the following scene above when I discussed origins, I include a more extensive passage here to further elaborate on the question of power differentials as they relate to the ways in which bodies are used: Evie explains to Miranda that

“Some of the others talk about a woman called Ai, a Chinese woman who married a Japanese man and was interned in the Rockies during the Second World War.... The bodies were sold to science.... But it’s all rumour. For all I know one of my co-workers made it up.... Pallas tries to keep it quiet. A nice myth of origins after all, would be a perfect focus for a revolt, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do know that Nextcorp bought out the Diverse Genome Project around the same time as I was born.”

“Diverse Genome Project?”

“It focuses on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction.” (160)

Regardless of the origins of Evie and the other Sonias, we can see that certain bodies are considered to be exploitable in these ways, not just in terms of labour, but on a more basic level in terms of their bodily integrity. This eagerness to exploit “foreign” bodies dates back to early exploration narratives in which the “exotic” other was always already available for consumption by the pseudo-scientific logic of colonialism: the Other could be categorized, consumed, demarcated, and preserved by and for the ever-present “neutral” western gaze (see, for example, McClintock). Prior to her conversations with Evie, it had never occurred to Miranda to wonder about who does various kinds of labour or to consider that clones might exist, much less to have ever thought about the conditions that would have to be in place to make their creation possible. Miranda’s

ignorance shows how badly she needs to be able to read social structures so that she can begin to ask questions about them.

The narrative gaps that Lai uses draw our attention to logical gaps that implicate the reader alongside Miranda in her ignorance. The logics of domination do not form a perfectly contained and coherent system without fissures, of course, but it is undeniable that there are benefits associated with maintaining the status quo and there are punishments associated with raising questions, and Miranda has been successfully indoctrinated in the dominant ideologies that encourage her to remain unquestioning. As Tara Lee explains, “[c]haracters like Miranda are reduced to submitting to the local manifestations of [the] multinational power network, unable to imagine how they can resist the power grid” (95), but Miranda also makes conscious choices that serve these interests, as I discuss below. We see the interaction of Miranda’s ignorance and her simultaneous articulations of privilege over and over, and we are meant to sympathize with Evie’s anger and frustration. But the text suggests that, like Miranda, there are questions that the reader may not be asking of her own socio-political moment, particularly given that Miranda’s justifications are not always inconceivable. Evie, however, refutes the assumption that people’s compliance and complicity are inevitable.

Indeed, Evie puts a good deal of time and energy into educating Miranda about the world that they inhabit with results that vary from Miranda’s acknowledgement of poor judgment or lack of knowledge to outright denial of any wrongdoing. Because the novel is centred on Miranda’s experiences of learning, and Evie is a comparatively minor character, most of the teaching that Evie does is through conversation; we hear Evie’s

statements with no interior dialogue, but we do get to see Miranda's thought processes.

As she is stealing Flowers's car while Miranda hesitates, for example, Evie makes clear that Miranda must take a position: "'You have to decide which side you're on, baby girl'" (154). Because Flowers is her employer, and her family is relying on her income,

Miranda is hesitant, but goes along with Evie:

I worried about the devastating blow I had delivered to my career. . . . I tried to tell myself I didn't care, that these were merely the vicissitudes of life and that there were much larger situations and more important goals than what an individual might or might not make of oneself in a lifetime. I tried to tell myself that Flowers was corrupt and self-serving, but it didn't help. I didn't know how I would face [my family]. (155)

In this moment, we see Miranda genuinely struggling with the consequences of the learning that she is doing, both for herself and for her family. Though she knows that Flowers is unethical, her privileges rely on her complicity with the systems of domination that he represents and breaking ties with those systems will have effects not only on her, but on her loved ones too, both in terms of basic physical needs and the emotional investments she has amassed over a lifetime of socialization.

We can see the extent of Miranda's inculcation in the dominant ideologies of her society when she resists Evie's explanation about how clones came to be. Miranda tries to argue, saying, "'[b]ut the newspapers say . . .'" to which Evie responds, "' . . . [i]t's all there right in front of you. All you need to do is look. There are thousands of compounds all over the PEU. Don't you ever wonder about them?'" Miranda resists further, taking up what she imagines to be a moral high ground, but one that is built on the privatizing logics of domination: "'I was raised to respect private property.'" Evie then shakes her

head and asks, “[i]s everyone in this town as out of it as you? I don’t get it. It’s not like you have this comfortable life to protect.” Miranda snaps back, “I’m not out of it,” but her beliefs have been shaken: “[her] stomach wavered. [Her] world had suddenly become something quite different from what it had been mere moments ago” (161). While expressing defensiveness and in denial at this point—though this knowledge has unsettled her—Miranda later outright refuses to recognize her class and human status privilege, despite being marginalized in other ways.

This moment is telling in the context of Miranda’s earlier description of a compound: carefully framed as a mundane description of setting, we find that Miranda has noticed the compounds but they are such a naturalized part of the environment that she does not register them. As she rides her bike to work, she describes the landscape:

Just short of the halfway point sat a grey concrete compound in the middle of a field, surrounded by a chain-link fence. There was a small plastic sign clipped to the fence that said ‘Zodiac Industries’ in neat lettering. I passed the compound every day on my way to work, but it was the kind of thing that is just grey and there. *You don’t think about it.* (148, emphasis mine)

But, of course, the “you” in Miranda’s thinking presumes a normalcy to her experience and implicates the reader; relatively financially comfortable people with human status privilege, despite potentially occupying other sites of oppression, might have the luxury not to think about it, but people who occupy the marginalized categories that Evie does do not.

Evie also does not have the luxury of believing what the dominant media tell her. She insists that Miranda think carefully about the sources of her information and ask

questions about these sources and whose interests they might serve, something that

Miranda had never considered: as they discuss Evie's angel wing scar, Evie asks,

“Do you never take the bus, or what?”....

“I don't, except today....”

She shook her head. “You have to ride the bus or you never find out what's going on. I suppose you read the papers and believe what they say.” I nodded. “The papers are still independent.”

“They aren't. They belong to Aries Williams, who is a major shareholder in the Central Bank.”

“But there are laws about freedom of expression.”

“Yeah, they don't gas bus riders for talking on the bus, yet. Though it wouldn't surprise me.”

“I don't understand what this has to do with your... wings.”

“You ever hear of a firm called Johnny Angel?”

“Sure. They're seed designers.”

[Evie] sighed and leaned back on her elbows. “Designers. Okay. You ever hear of a shoe company called Pallas?”

“Of course, everyone that can afford them owns a pair of Pallas shoes.”

“And they both belong to Aries William of Nextcorp fame. They've been making people for years.”

“Making people?”

“Why do you think their labour costs are so low?”

“But the shoes are expensive.”

“Well, why do you think some people are so stinking rich?....”

“I don't know.”

“That's what they bank on. Excuse the pun.”

“You're telling me that you're a clone.”

“You don't need to be so crass.”

“But that's illegal.”

“Being one, yes, just about. But not making them.”

“I've never heard of it being legalized. There was an article in the papers last week about the ethics of it. I remember because a lot of produce we sell is affected. Animals and plants are allowed, but not humans.”

“I'm not human.”

....

I stared, speechless. Finally, I said, “That's an enormous loophole. There must be some laws governing human biomaterial.”

“There was until about 25 years ago. That's when they figured out how to grow certain organs in the lab. Livers and kidneys, I think. I ought to know. It's

my own personal history. But the education of Workers is not something either Pallas or Nextcorp concern themselves with overly.”

....

“Are there a lot of you out there?”

“Lots of me, yeah, at least a hundred thousand with identical material.”

“Oh, God, that’s not what I meant.”

.... “I know.”

I still felt stupid, but now I felt kind of freaked out as well.

“You wanted to know if they let very many of us go.”

I nodded.

“They don’t. I got out the same way I got [Flowers’s] car. Because I wanted to. We’re not designed for wits or willpower, but I was an early model. They couldn’t control for everything.” (156-58)

This exchange is interesting for a number of reasons. The first is the fact that the knowledge that Evie trusts is communal and grassroots, shared in informal public spaces, such as buses, as opposed to the more traditional, privately owned, institutional knowledges for which Miranda has previously expressed classist disdain as well as genuine concern about:

I hated the bus. In the urban part of its route it was rank and crowded, all those bodies that could not afford anything better pressed up against one another, too intimately close. If there was anything to be picked out of one’s pockets, it was invariably picked. If you weren’t careful, other more personal pockets might also be violated... (152)

The conversation also draws the reader’s attention to the ways in which corporations are diversified, having investments in media as well as scientific pursuits and product industries. Miranda’s horror at hearing the facts Evie shares is palpable. She had no idea about any of these investments. Evie is also educating Miranda about ruptures in discourse and how language can be deceptive; Evie is showing her that she must learn to be an oppositional reader of the information she is offered.

Even as Miranda is learning about her socio-political environment, the lure of maintaining the power structures that afford her relative privilege persists, and both she and Evie know that Miranda is susceptible to the seduction of the logics of domination because of the relative power and validation they afford her. Throughout the text, she supports these logics in both major and minor ways: she sells her mother's songs, she abandons Salt Fish Girl and takes the last of their money when Salt Fish Girl is sick, she does work that supports Pallas and contributes to the exploitation of some of the most marginalized members of society in addition to working for Flowers, she is generally known not to be trustworthy, she avoids taking responsibility for her actions, and she is adept at ignoring or avoiding thinking about topics that might otherwise challenge her ideological investments. But what is fascinating about her errors in judgement, most of which are decisions she has made consciously, are her justifications. After breaking the promise she made to her father to never sell her mother's songs, for example, Miranda elaborately justifies her actions to an extent that is worth quoting at length:

How could I have sold my mother's greatest hit to that shark? And in the service of shoe sales? It wasn't as though I didn't understand where the shoes came from. Evie had described to me in lurid detail the mad, dark factories, the greed that drove pay ever lower as contractors moved their factories to more and more desperate places. Evie, I thought, would be furious. The fat wad of cash burned against my chest. *What the hell, I thought. I didn't personally do anything to those factory women, did I?* What harm could it do for my mother's song to have a second life? It would bring the memory of her to millions, introduce her genius to a new generation who hadn't heard it the first time around. It would put a bit of real glamour into the lives of the women who bought the shoes—bored suburban housewives for whom an evening aerobics class or a morning run through the park was the only time of day they did something for themselves. It would bring a moment of beauty to women who were scared of growing old, women who had worked hard all their lives, women who deserved the beauty they worked for even

as time took its toll, loosened their once tight clutches on immortality.... *My imprisonment, I thought, was a kind of martyrdom.* (202-203, emphasis mine)

While Lee discusses this scene as one in which “[s]elf-interest, one of the basic tenets of capitalist logic, leads individuals to contribute to the commodification of bodies even when they are not conscious of what they are doing” and goes on to say that “Miranda willingly resubmits to corporate control because capitalist logic is so entrenched in her that she unwittingly replicates it” (103), the lines that I emphasize above counter this reading: while Miranda is largely subject to the logics that have shaped the world she knows, she is actively convincing herself of the legitimacy of her actions. She is not only denying the experiences of the exploited workers by valuing the plight of suburban housewives, but she is also trying to suggest that bringing the music to people is a benevolent act. We might consider reading Miranda alongside Hannah here: though Hannah does not feel the same degree of embarrassment or defensiveness about her actions, she recognizes to some degree the effects of her complicity.

These betrayals also happen in Miranda’s personal relationships. After abandoning the sick Salt Fish Girl with the last of their money to follow an enchanting woman, she thinks, “[s]urely, I could have wrenched myself free of her grasp and turned around if I had truly wanted to. Surely. But I could not have wanted to very much, because I followed her along a winding path...” and later thinks, “I can’t say what made me follow this strange woman, except that it took more weakness than strength” (123-24, 125). Here, Miranda accepts responsibility for her actions, but feels guilt without changing her practices. Though she later regrets doing so, Miranda does something similar in the 2062 setting, becoming seduced by the similarly enchanting Darling Tom



and her offer of a job working at Logo Moguls, the ad agency for Pallas shoes. She knows that Logo Moguls is a highly suspect corporation, but she responds to their call anyway:

They weren't based inside any walled city, but kept their offices in Bright Sea, in a newly fashionable part of the Unregulated Zone. You had to be careful on the streets, my brother said, but he thought the company would probably be operating in a high-security building with uniformed doormen to keep outsiders out and insiders in. It would be cheaper to run, less beholden to the strict regulations of the walled cities and therefore freer to be more creative both with their products and their labour practices. They were inviting me for an interview. (233)

When she goes for the interview with Darling Tom, she compromises herself further: "I knew I shouldn't but I let her buy me dinner. She ordered blue martinis and encouraged me to eat as much as I wanted. I let myself go soft inside with pleasure." And when she is asked to sign a contract for her work, Miranda asks,

"Everyone signs this?" . . .

[Darling Tom] topped up my glass and ladled some wild mushroom fricassee onto my plate. "Everyone," she said.

I took a very big gulp of the berry-scented wine. "I don't know. Can I take it home and look at it?"

She shrugged. "If you want to. I'll try to keep the boss from giving it to this art school grad he's got waiting in the wings"

....

*"I'm not trying to run out on you,"* I found myself telling her. "It's just... my head is swimming. I can't think right now. The wine..."

"It's a nice one, isn't it? This restaurant has one of the best wine lists in the city. A bit more expensive than the rest, but worth it, don't you agree?"

I nodded. "It's okay," I said. "I'll sign it now. *I trust you.*" (239, emphasis mine)

Particularly interesting in this passage is the way that abandonment and trust manifest: here, Miranda does not want Darling Tom to feel abandoned. But Miranda knows that it is Evie's trust that she is breaking: Miranda accepts the job, and when Aaron, her brother,

suggests to her that she get more of the cereal that Evie and Sonia 14 gave them, she thinks to herself, “I wasn’t feeling particularly interested in hunting Evie down for more.... I didn’t want her leaning over me as I set to work blackening my own soul” (236). Miranda knows she is causing harm by supporting these destructive institutions. And this time, she does not have her fall-back excuse of her family’s economic needs—her father wants her to be an opera singer, like her mother, and Aaron says that she is making a “wreck” of her life, though this is in reference to a range of decisions that she has made, this one among them (235). Instead, she is acting out of self-interest and, perhaps, a desire for acceptance and recognition by the people in power.

As she begins to work for Logo Moguls, she continues to recognize it as a bad choice, but one that she continues to make: she says,

my great crime was not my participation in the banalities of the advertising world. It was not the slow undermining of women’s self-worth through the glamour of passivity. My great crime was yet to come. It was committed in the seemingly innocuous staff lounge, where I sat with Darling at the end of the day to discuss the future.

....

“I was thinking, suppose Pallas were to advertise shoes as protection against the dreaming disease. Memory-proof soles. I think they would sell really well. And there’s this great wall that we could include as part of the ad campaign. They would just have to design a product to fit the concept..”

Darling smiled so that all her small white teeth showed. (243-44)

The wall to which Miranda refers is one with graffitied instructions about how to avoid contracting the Dreaming Disease. Here Miranda is willing to exploit some of the most marginalized members of society, who are trying to protect themselves from a disease that has likely been caused by environmental contamination by corporations like Pallas. Darling Tom is preying on her anxieties about her financial need as well as her desire for

approval and a feeling of accomplishment in a world where everything seems quite grim, but Miranda makes this suggestion knowing the consequences.

And, finally, we see that Miranda cannot be trusted because of the likelihood that she will betray Evie's confidence. When Miranda asks why Pallas security does not track down the escaped Sonias, Evie replies,

“You already know more than you ought to” ...

....

“You can trust me,” I said. And then I paused because I knew it wasn't true.

She sensed my hesitation. “That so?”

“No,” I said. “You're right. It isn't.” (224-25)

A moment later, when Miranda tells Evie about selling her mother's song, a similar interaction occurs:

“How could you?” she sputtered.

“I don't know,” I said defiantly. “It just happened.” (225)

These two moments differ in that in the first Miranda is able to see herself as someone who is likely to betray both herself and Evie, while in the other, she is defensive about it and will not take responsibility for her actions.

While Miranda's actions are framed as inexcusable, she remains a sympathetic character to a large degree. Though some of her actions are not totally conscious or are taken under a kind of social coercion, they are still, in some cases, ones with which the reader can sympathize.<sup>60</sup> Miranda makes selfish decisions, but perhaps ones that the reader might also make under the same circumstance, and, further, that the reader *is*

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<sup>60</sup> Notable here is that Miranda struggles with her choices to some extent. Hannah is more difficult to sympathize with because she does not have similar struggles. She regrets some of the choices that she has made, but only because of the negative effects they have had on her, not because of their effects on others.

making under similar ones, given that we know that similar practices are happening about which we perhaps do not or do not want to know. With regard to her behaviour in nineteenth-century China, Nu Wa says of her abandonment of Salt Fish Girl, “[w]hen you own nothing, it’s hard to believe you have anything to lose” (125). From this statement we can see the desire to escape an already difficult situation at (almost) any cost. Similarly, in 2062, Miranda describes the oppressions upon which her family’s privilege was built, but shows how familial relationships shape some of her actions: “I was a sheltered child, living out my parents’ utopian dream as though it were reality. They did not show me the cracks. And out of loyalty and love for them, when I sensed the cracks, I refused to see them. But of course this unspoken pact could not last” (71). Miranda is not unwitting in the actions that she takes, but does experience pressures, some external, such as the desire to support her family, others self-interested. Miranda is working to justify her decisions; to do so, she uses what Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana call “epistemologies of ignorance,” an active refusal of knowledge in order to maintain the privileges to which she has access. The text invites us to ask, though, who carries the weight of these decisions.

Alongside these epistemologies of ignorance, however, is evidence that Evie is able to show Miranda alternate ways of operating in the world; we can see the pedagogical impact that Evie is having. Miranda makes a direct connection with Evie’s influence while being taught about the dreaming disease and wondering whether or not she was afflicted with it: Miranda says, “I didn’t want to think about it. But then, I had

not yet met Evie” (104). It is only after meeting Evie that Miranda begins to see the world differently and ask questions that she would have otherwise avoided.

Increasingly, too, we see Miranda’s ability to formulate her own analyses. In one case, for example, Miranda explains that she “had recently heard a rumour that Pallas intentionally made its shoes out of shoddy materials so that they would wear out faster” (227). While prior to this moment, almost all of Miranda’s critiques of the logics of domination were directly related to conversations she had had with Evie, this information is not attributed to Evie; Miranda seems to be using some of the skills that she has learned. Furthermore, when witnessing two men harassing a woman on the bus, which Evie and Miranda suspect will lead to an attack, Evie tries to intervene and we see more of Miranda’s transformation: “I wondered if [the woman] could detect the deadpan mockery in their voices. I wondered if, yesterday, I could have. I grew suddenly aware that I was watching and listening in a way I had not known how to before” (165). Here, too, Evie has shown Miranda an alternate way of noticing the operations of the world. With that said, though, this scene also demonstrates Evie’s capacity for action, while showing that Miranda is still learning how to read the power dynamics at play and probably would not have taken any action if she had been alone. And, finally, Miranda is able to see the extent of Evie’s hardships: right after we learn that all the Sonias but Sonia 14 are dead, Evie reveals that Flowers is her adoptive father, and that Seto, her adoptive mother, is dead, Miranda asks, “How do you bear it?” (252). Evie does not respond, but Miranda seems to be getting a sense of the weight of the knowledge that Evie holds and the work that she does.

While Evie sees the issues in stark terms, her capacity to empathize with Miranda, despite many of the choices she makes, shows Evie's dynamism. Evie, then, is not a static hero; she, too, began somewhere and only came to her political consciousness in a communal context, learning from others, even if we never get a sense of this process. Miranda's learning and growth may parallel Evie's own, and this parallel may partially explain why Evie has a degree of empathy for Miranda's struggle to break out of the logics of domination in which she is mired:

“What are you going to do now?” [Evie] asked.

“About what?”

“About your fall from grace.”

“You mean about my job.”

[Evie] nodded.

So [Evie] did think about my world the way I thought about it. “I don't know,” I said. (164)

Evie, here, seems to at least understand the struggle that Miranda is experiencing, even though Miranda's struggle is whether or not to maintain her and her family's position of relative power. While their lives-long relationship is surely a significant contributor to her empathy, this is not the only factor.

Not only does Evie empathize, but we also see that she does more than just teach. Miranda witnesses a lengthy conversation between Evie and Sonia 14, but she is not within earshot of the exchange: “Out on the back porch sat old Sonia 14, smoking her pipe and rocking in her rocking chair. At her feet sat Evie, puffing on a cigarette, eyes turned intently up towards Sonia 14, listening and nodding” (228). This scene is particularly important for demonstrating that Evie, seated at Sonia 14's feet, listening intently, is more than a traditional hero and a renegade; she is also learning and operating

in an inter-generational context. Moreover, we find that the Sonias' resistance movement is communally driven; it is not led by Evie, as we might have assumed. While there is no explicit discussion of leadership, the text suggests that it is a communal effort insofar as Evie's absence does not impede their work; when Evie is imprisoned, the Sonias decide to go ahead with their infiltration of Pallas (249). Here, we see Evie and the Sonias' deep commitment to community-based work. And their community work operates on two fronts, both taking down the logics of domination as well as fostering a more equitable community: as Miranda explains, "in that moment I understood the secret of the trees, the clever Sonias, the depth of their subversion. That they were building a free society of their own kind from the ground up" (256). Not only are the Sonias trying to destroy Pallas shoes, but they are also trying to build a new world, and they see building community as a core part of this project; the social structures that dominate their world are destructive, and they are trying to build something new.

None of this is to say, though, that Evie never betrays Miranda's trust. After the conversation with Sonia 14, Evie tells Miranda that Sonia 14 sends her home with a gift of boxes of cereal that can be sold in her family's store, allegedly because Sonia 14 feels responsible for Evie causing Miranda to lose her job with Flowers. But Evie misrepresents the contents of the boxes of cereal: they are full of shoe soles that people come to the store to buy as part of the Sonias' resistance movement. The difference between Evie's and Miranda's actions, though, is that Evie misleads Miranda to effect large-scale social change that will affect the living conditions of thousands of people;

Miranda's betrayals, on the other hand, are always in complicity with the logics of domination that serve either her physical or emotional interests.

Indeed, Evie demonstrates a surprising amount of patience with and love for Miranda. It would be tempting for Evie to abandon her after so many betrayals, but Evie persists. It is Evie who continues to make contact with Miranda. Even after Evie expresses her anger about Miranda's sale of her mother's song, "her hand reached out and touched my face" (225). This moment is particularly telling in that Evie's anger is generally followed up by physical intimacy, in which Miranda is an active partner.<sup>61</sup> That is, Evie seems able to accept, forgive, and continue loving Miranda despite the harm that she is supporting. Evie's capacity to maintain this relationship is particularly surprising, given that it directly affects Evie's family. When Miranda finds out about the cereal boxes, she is upset:

"You should have told me," I chided.

"You would've said no."

"You put my family at risk without their consent."

"At risk for what? My family pays for your family's ease and comfort." (246)

Here Evie directly connects Miranda's actions to harming the Sonias and supporting the logics of domination. To put it another way, Evie holds Miranda accountable for her privilege, but remains committed to their relationship and working through an understanding of privilege with Miranda. It seems that Evie does not see the value in abandoning Miranda as she learns, but, as I have mentioned, we never get an interior view and so we do not see how difficult this must be for Evie to watch her partner act in complicity with the logics of domination.

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<sup>61</sup> I say this so that it is clear that there is no evidence of coercion in this exchange.



As many theorists note, under these logics of domination, it is easy for people to become dehumanized and engage in dehumanization, as Miranda does: the worker increasingly becomes a machine and the citizen increasingly becomes a consumer. Because of corporatization, people become less familiar with each other's daily lives, thereby facilitating an obfuscation of 'unsavoury' forms of labour. And, perhaps most distressingly, this dehumanizing tendency becomes hegemonic; it is naturalized to the extent that it is replicated even by people who suffer because of it. The sense of community—as it is traditionally recognized—breaks down. This is not to say that resistance is futile or impossible, but, rather, to say that the configurations of communities change with social structures. As Tara Lee suggests, "Lai repeatedly writes of the body's potential to destabilize capitalism's normalcy until the futility lies not in the body's inability to escape total control, *but in capitalism's inability to suppress disruptive presences*" (104, emphasis mine). Lee is right: capitalism cannot suppress everything, but its lulling and seductive logics reward passivity, while punishing those who notice gaps and ask about or respond to them.

This is the project that Lai has set herself: imagining the problems that these logics pose for queer racialized women and otherwise marginalized groups and trying to imagine alternative possibilities, connections, and epistemologies. The narrative she constructs is not simple—for as much as *Salt Fish Girl* is a novel, it rejects many novelistic conventions that are mired in the structures of which she is critical, such as having a self-contained and coherent narrative, having a climactic story arc, and having characters whose behaviour is both consistent and logical—at least from their own

perspective. None of these luxuries are afforded the reader of *Salt Fish Girl*, but therein lies the pleasure and brilliance of the text: by rejecting these conventions, Lai draws the reader's attention to their expectations of the medium, and thereby alerts the reader to the implications of the structures that she critiques.

In order to draw the reader's attention to the narrative gaps, the novel uses a futuristic setting and the strength of Evie's convictions to implicate readers. The amount of information that is left to rumour and speculation is nevertheless unexpected when there is room in the narrative for these elucidations. So we must consider that Lai leaves these gaps in order to draw attention to other gaps in the narrative, many of which are highlighted by critics. Cuder-Domínguez, for example, suggests that Lai is "making deep connections between the personal and political, between Miranda's individual body and the way capitalist economies market and exploit human bodies" (122). And, more specifically, as we know is also currently the case, "[i]n Lai's imagined world, Caucasians exploit non-Caucasians" (Cuder-Domínguez 123). Zacharias agrees: Lai shows "the corporation's sovereignty claim to literally dehumanize its subjects [with the Sonias]" (17). As Evie insists, these realities are not a coincidence; they are systemic.

Some critics, however, are optimistic. Mansbridge, for example, argues that "[t]he birth in *Salt Fish Girl* signals a coming into being that is not defined by a racist, heterosexist, paternal order" (131). Along similar lines, Lee reads the final words of the novel—"everything will be all right, until next time" (269)—as "an understanding that continued vigilance is always necessary if the body is to ward off the ever present threat of appropriation" (108). I would suggest that the ending is more open and ambiguous

than that: the statement indicates that there *will* be a next time, and that no amount of vigilance will stave it off. This stance is not defeatist in the way that Mrs. Noyes's prayer for rain is, however; *Salt Fish Girl* argues, instead, that there will be a continual process of making and remaking in order to move out of these logics of domination, in a way that is not dissimilar from the rumours of different worlds that Lucy advocates. While I agree with Lee that the novel suggests that self-determination is valuable, the novel does not fully allow for it. By leaving the narrative open, with Evie and Miranda leaving, but with no sense of where they might go, and with a warning about "next time," Lai enacts a final resistance to the fixity and closure upon which the logics of domination are built.

Miranda and Evie will always be subject to their geo-political circumstances to some extent, as is the case in the other novels I discuss. And, as we have seen, Miranda is particularly susceptible to the lull of these logics, as are many of us. Instead, the text insists on a kind of literacy and a visibility in the form of asking questions of the narratives that we are fed. Evie demonstrates that we must continue to ask how things have come to be the way that they are. We must recognize, as she says, that not only have dehumanizing practices long been the norm, but "[s]tuff like that never stopped" (160).

Evie is both exceptional and not exceptional in this novel. She is non-conforming insofar as she is an "early model" clone, though one of many, but she is also a multi-lived deity, and she is the only clone to have been adopted by humans. She is also the only of the Sonias who seems to reach out to a human, even if those categories are questioned within the text. It is Evie's position outside of the system and her history of relationships with Miranda that propel her investment in teaching her about building a different kind of

world. She sees the problems in the system and feels their effects, and she cannot bear to watch someone so dear to her continue to be complicit in those harms and opens up a kind of modelling for how this kind of reaching out across difference might work in service of building a different world. Evie tries to extend the Sonias' work of building a different world out into a population whose lives are not directly affected by the harm, but as with *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, we know that there will be a next time; the new world will still have flaws that will need to be addressed, but it remains an aspiration—a look to a future time of hope, but here, too, the revolutionary process requires a slow building. Rather than aiming for a politics of inclusion, the Sonias are collaborating to build a new place, and Evie wants to bring Miranda into it. As with Lucy, though, Evie worries about the legacies of dominant systems, and these legacies are a major concern for the Fur Queen as well.

“[Y]ou’re trying to write a realistic play from a story that’s just not realistic”:

Collaboration and (Un)learning in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

“And what, pray tell, is this story all about?”

“Magic.”

-Jeremiah and Amanda in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (279)

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* is a profoundly hopeful novel about survival that traces the devastating impact of colonialism and its legacies on two Cree brothers, Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, and narrates how they survive in an urban context with the support of the Fur Queen, who embodies several significant characters in the novel, and three Cree stories. As with my previous chapters, this chapter focuses on a character with a non-normative embodiment, the Fur Queen—in her case, gender non-conformity among other non-normative sites—who acts as a facilitator and connector of various elements needed for the brothers to imagine a different kind of world, such as the building of supportive community, models for ways of being in the world that do not perpetuate colonial narratives, and knowledge of suppressed histories. Though a lack of access to Indigenous knowledges results from colonialism, it is important—and seems to be a central argument that the novel makes—that Indigenous (and all marginalized) peoples are able to find weapons for building a new world in a range of places, some of which might be unexpected, without those weapons being read as illegitimate in some way. In the case of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, this flexibility in recognizing and adapting tools is a crucial part of responding to colonial oppressions, and the Fur Queen facilitates the requisite recognitions and adaptations.

I read the Fur Queen alongside three stories that are told within the novel because the stories, like her, provide active knowledge bases for the brothers. As Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) explains of the role of stories and education in Indigenous traditions, “[e]very story is a guide fleshed out by the listeners in their consideration of future. Story impacts on the shape of the future the listener hears, and she or he completes the story from his or her own direction” (“Oratory” 67). I begin with the story of the weasel and the Weetigo, which focuses on the way that the weasel defeats the Weetigo, but still bears evidence of the battle; second will be the story of the Son of Ayash, which gives a framework for how one might begin the process of using “magic weapons [to] make a new world” different from the one that has been inherited (227); and third will be that of Chachagathoo, an embodiment of the Fur Queen and the last shaman in the main characters’ community, who died by suicide<sup>62</sup> when Jeremiah and Gabriel’s parents, Mariesis and Abraham, were children. The stories differ within the narrative in that the weasel and Ayash stories are traditional Cree stories, while the story of Chachagathoo is a factual account in the diegesis of the novel, though we know that similar events happen in reality, but by the end of the novel Jeremiah and Gabriel have turned it into a play that may become a traditional story too. Despite the differences in their degree of fictionality at the outset of the novel, I read these stories alongside each other because of the frameworks they provide for the brothers’ creative work and thinking.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> I use the phrase “died by suicide” rather than “commits suicide” to emphasize the socio-historical context that shapes her death, rather than seeing her as an individual acting independently of this context, as tends to be the case when suicide is discussed.

<sup>63</sup> In presenting the stories as active in the same way that the characters I discuss are, I am drawing from the novel’s position on the role of characters and stories that thereby implicitly disrupts western conventions of what constitutes action.

As we know of many Indigenous teachings, they tend to be place-based and specific, rather than universalizing, and this is true of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In this way, we can see that the novel both is and is not taking on the question of the nation in the Canadian context. Like some of the theorists I discuss in my introduction, the novel engages in a politics of refusal. It does not discuss the nation explicitly—though its discussion of the colonial project certainly implicates the nation-state—and instead focuses on strategies to build community within an urban Indigenous context without direct reference to the colonial nation, starting with the brothers. The novel counters discourses built on an either/or logic that emphasize “getting over” historical trauma and that read urban Indigenous populations as “hybrid,” instead privileging a both/and approach in which the brothers can live with their histories without those histories defining them and can be fully Cree while also being western-educated and practicing traditionally western art forms. That is, like *Not Wanted on the Voyage* and *Salt Fish Girl*, this novel is not interested in a politics of inclusion. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, rather, wants to support the building of communities that can thrive in their current context but independent of the nation’s structures. Though the scale is small and the pace is slow, moving from self-understanding to intimate relationships to communities that exist in a larger social context, this revisioning of how one might live in the world and foster alternatives is the Fur Queen’s revolutionary contribution. In this chapter, I argue that the Fur Queen and the stories function together to foster the brothers’ abilities to access and use their weapons to build a new world, and it is the Fur Queen who facilitates this

process by fostering their ability to make connections between their experiences and the history of colonialism in Canada through artistic practice.

The novel draws from Indigenous understandings of revolution that are described by Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk). Alfred explains that given the current social moment, it is important to take a pan-Indigenous approach: “There are many differences among the peoples that are indigenous to this land, yet the challenge facing all Onkwehonwe is the same: regaining freedom and becoming self-sufficient by confronting the disconnection and fear at the core of our existences under colonial dominion” (20). He is careful to note the importance of the long-term effects that colonialism has had on Indigenous populations and how colonial approaches have changed from a more explicitly violent engagement to a “kind of post-modern imperialism that is more difficult to target than the previous and more obvious impositions of force and control over the structures of government within their communities” (25-26). He describes the revolutionary idea as being socially based and needing to start from the self because “[l]arge-scale statist solutions like self-government and land claims are not so much lies as they are irrelevant to the root problem” (31), though he does see them as eventually becoming important. For the time being, however, he argues that “the end goal of our Wasáse—our warrior’s dance—must be formulated as a spiritual revolution, a culturally rooted *social* movement that transforms the whole of society and a *political* action that seeks to remake the entire landscape of power and relationship to reflect truly a liberated post-imperial vision” (27, emphasis original). My reading of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* picks up on many of the ideas that Alfred discusses and sees the most important contribution that the novel makes to



Alfred's work as its mapping of how the brothers move from being subject to colonial narratives to their revolutionary work.

This revolutionary change happens in a dystopic setting: effectively, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* demonstrates how the experiences of urban Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg in the 1980s in fact was—and remains—dystopic. My reading of the setting as dystopic is not obvious, however, and relies on considering the setting's relationship to the wider Canadian context. If we return to Booker's definition of dystopia, we can see how my argument works. As he says,

[t]o be dystopian, a work needs to foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using that setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically that of the author or the audience. In other words, the bleak dystopian world should encourage the reader or viewer to think critically about it, then transfer the critical thinking to his or her own world. (5)

Here we can see that the dystopian world of Jeremiah and Gabriel in residential school and beyond exists *inside* what otherwise appears to be a society without major social problems; by positioning the experiences of urban Indigenous peoples in relation to this larger context, the novel implicitly comments on the social conditions that make this world possible, namely the colonial nation-state, Canada. In doing this work, Highway is making room to educate settler populations about the effects of settlement by giving them an inside view, but the novel's priority is speaking to urban Indigenous peoples, especially Cree people, by focusing on the brothers' experiences of this world; the novel makes an argument for a pan-Indigenous solidarity against colonial forces and a communal unlearning of the colonialism that the brothers have internalized. To do so, Highway uses magical realism, particularly through the figure of the Fur Queen.

The Fur Queen, as many critics note, is introduced from the beginning of the novel and appears throughout it, but the magical realism of the novel allows her to function differently than most characters tend to. As Andrew John Buzny explains, the Fur Queen is a pan-tribal figure who does not discriminate among nations, as doing so would undermine her function as a figure who can facilitate people's—particularly urban Indigenous peoples'—abilities to respond to colonial violences (1). Her pan-tribal status is most overtly evident in one of the more humorous moments in the text, when the Fur Queen appears as a showgirl who identifies as a range of nations' "trickster" figures to a resistant Jeremiah: "Honeypot, if I were you, I'd watch my tongue. Cuz you're talkin' to Miss Maggie Sees. Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they call-me-honeypot-Sees, weaver of dreams, sparker of magic, showgirl from hell" (233-34). Kristina Fagan (Métis) discusses Highway's positioning of trickster figure as central to Indigenous belief systems (iv), in relation to critics' tendency to misread trickster figures. Drawing on the work of Robert Warrior, she argues that "[i]nstead of viewing such claims as 'the truth' about Indigenous people... we need to approach them as statements made by a particular person at a particular time for particular reasons" ("What's" 10). That is, Highway uses the Fur Queen for particular ends; his is not a definitive statement about the role of trickster figures in Indigenous contexts, even though his prefatory statement about trickster figures might suggest otherwise. Though this kind of generalization is not without its problems, the Fur Queen's self-identification as a divine cultural figure from numerous nations' cultural

traditions allows Highway to demonstrate that different nations' knowledges can and must be shared in order to build solidarity.

As with Lucy and Evie, the Fur Queen's embodied non-conformity, of which gender non-conformity is a part, facilitates the brothers' ability to imagine a different world. Lucy and the Fur Queen are the only characters in their novels whose embodiments do not conform to gender norms and, notably, both are divine figures, while Evie is the only character who is both non-normatively embodied, as a clone, and is also divine. While Lucy appears consistently in a humanoid form with whom people interact in a relatively realistic way, despite superficial changes in her physical appearance, and Evie is humanoid, but with the ever-present knowledge of her clone status, the Fur Queen's embodiment changes regularly. The novel picks up on much stereotypical gay male iconography, though, and the Fur Queen is never clear about whether she is in drag, as the showgirl imagery suggests; whether she is a trans\*woman, as the statement that she changed her name from "Fred" to "Maggie" suggests (231); or whether she is two-spirit, given that she does not self-identify in any of these ways.<sup>64</sup>

Many critics are concerned with pinning down the Fur Queen's identity in the novel, reading her as a hybrid character, a guide, a shape-shifter, a failed protector, a sign of good fortune, among several other symbolic or mystical functions that adhere closely to stereotypical reading practices of Indigenous literatures. These overdetermined designations, though, miss much of what the Fur Queen does in her work as a connector

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<sup>64</sup> While all of these potential identifications fit under the umbrella term "trans\*," I am conscious of the ways in which the first two are western formulations and therefore may not be relevant to a reading of the Fur Queen.

and a facilitator as the brothers work toward making a new world. These readings are troubling because they invoke many of the tropes that dominate discussions of Indigenous literature without seeming to account for what actually goes on in the novel; in many cases, they are generalizations that are not supported by the text. My intention in pointing out these invocations is to demonstrate how susceptible critics, particularly settler critics—myself included—are to falling into these discourses and reading practices.<sup>65</sup> What these readings tend to miss is the Fur Queen's non-interventionist politics; she does not fix anything, and neither does she seem to be meant to do so, from what the text suggests; rather, she presents the brothers with options that might help them to fix things for themselves. Rather than trying to pinpoint her identification, my approach will be the same as with Lucy and Evie, which is to focus on what she *does*, rather than who she *is*.

The Fur Queen also operates differently than Lucy and Evie, particularly because she moves in and out of the world of the novel, taking up different embodiments to show the brothers, especially Jeremiah, possibilities that they may or may not take up. She appears in a variety of forms: as inanimate objects, sometimes during traumatic events; as people who both give the brothers options or help them to make connections between history and their current cultural moment; as Amanda Clear Sky (Ojibway), Ann-Adele Ghost rider (Ojibway), and Chachagathoo (Cree), who model for the brothers other ways of being in the world and filling in historical gaps that contextualize the current moment;

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<sup>65</sup> One of these discourses of which I am conscious is the way in which “mysticism” is often attributed to both Indigenous peoples and gender non-conforming people. Similar stereotyping abounds in the criticism that draws a causal chain between surviving childhood sexual abuse, queerness, “promiscuity,” and death from HIV/AIDS.

and as herself, though she is not usually visible to the brothers in this embodiment. The Fur Queen has an additional capacity not shared by Lucy and Evie: some of her embodiments allow her the fluidity to be unobtrusively present in a range of spaces and moments in order to signal to the reader that connections between events and sites of oppression exist, thereby refuting dominant culture's active denial of these connections. Indeed, the Fur Queen works outside of dominant systems of knowledge, showing the non-human to be significant sites of knowledge. In each novel, the non-normatively embodied characters foster a questioning of categories that previously seemed natural and static—ones for which there is otherwise no space to question—but the Fur Queen's main function is to support the brothers' abilities to map connections between the effects of these categories.

Thus, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as in *Salt Fish Girl*, we cannot attend to gender on its own. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, we must acknowledge the importance of gender non-conformity alongside body non-conformity, knowledge sharing, and artistic practice as a strategy for building. The flexibility of the Fur Queen's embodiment serves two functions that support the brothers' ability to imagine a different world: on the one hand, the Fur Queen is able to change her embodiment so that she can draw seemingly disparate connections, as we see, for example, when her presence as an inanimate object at the residential schools and her embodiment as Indigenous women who get murdered forge an inextricable link between these two sites of violence. On the other hand, the Fur Queen, as a central figure in Highway's Cree worldview, must also be able to respond creatively to the changes in the world around her, as we see with her direct role in facilitating the

brothers' use of western art forms to enact their anti-colonial resistance. Because of their particular abilities and the needs of their respective novels, Lucy, Evie, and the Fur Queen's non-normativities function differently, but all of them require this non-normativity in order to work towards their novels' ideals of imagining different worlds.

The role of education is important in this novel as it is in the others, but the Fur Queen's relationship to it differs from that of Lucy and Evie in that she operates alongside two traditional Cree stories. Each of the figures and stories I discuss serves a different function in supporting the brothers' ability to combat internalized racism and colonialism as well as to deal with the trauma that they experience in the residential school and its legacies in order to remake the world. But the Fur Queen is also an ambivalent character, unlike Lucy and Evie: because she is non-interventionist, she often witnesses difficult events without intervening and thereby makes painful histories present. Instead of taking the direct role that Lucy and Evie do, the Fur Queen and the stories provide some information that provides pathways for understanding and reflection. The Fur Queen and the stories model how the brothers might live their lives and share with others the capacity to live with, but not be defined by, these histories. But the brothers do not necessarily always recognize what the models, histories, and stories mean until long after they hear them. As they learn and unlearn, however, they begin to see their wholeness, build community, and share what they are learning through their artistic practice. The different pedagogical mode also means that the results of their learning and unlearning are different than in the other two novels: at least at this point,

the brothers are imagining a revolution as it affects their most immediate community—they need to address the dystopic site itself—before considering a larger-scale change.

Because of some significant structural differences between the novels, my reading of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* differs from my readings of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* and *Salt Fish Girl* in some ways that are worth elaborating upon. Instead of leading the way towards collaboratively imagining possibilities as Lucy does, or being part of a revolutionary movement and trying to educate a loved one about the structures that shape their lives as Evie does, the Fur Queen is non-interventionist and will not live in the new world that gets made; Lucy and Evie want a better world for themselves and others, while the Fur Queen remains outside, though she does want a world in which people can make their own decisions and everyone can thrive. The Fur Queen is the force that allows possibilities to coalesce into a strategy for the brothers; she merely offers the brothers possibilities that *they* choose whether or not to act on or engage. While Lucy provides a model and a vision—“where darkness and light are reconciled” (284)—and Evie, building on the work of the Sonias, makes structures visible and teaches, the Fur Queen facilitates the brothers’ discovery of *their own* vision. That is not to say that modeling other possibilities is not a part of Highway’s strategy—Amanda Clear Sky and others provide this function—but Highway differs from Findley in that Highway’s approach is much more organic and grassroots, using mentorship and some education from a range of sources that are not centralized the way that Lucy and Evie are centralized.

While all of the characters facilitate imagining and are invested in collaboratively building a new world, Lucy and Evie are more assertive in this presence, while the Fur

Queen is more passive, and this difference in approach has everything to do with the contexts of the novels as well as Indigenous storytelling traditions. In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the characters have internalized social structures, but they are still able to see problems with them, so Lucy's function is to suggest that something else is possible; in *Salt Fish Girl*, Miranda has internalized the structures, but she benefits from them for the most part, so Evie's function is to show her the harm that comes to her and others because of them; but in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah has internalized the harmful structures without being able to identify the problems with them. He can see that Indigenous people are having a hard time, but he blames them for their troubles, just as he blames himself for his troubles because he has internalized the colonialist narrative that Indigenous peoples are inherently inferior to settler populations. Jeremiah cannot see the structure in which he is enmeshed, so the Fur Queen's function is to facilitate his ability to see the structure and respond to it. In short, Lucy and Evie tend towards leading, while the Fur Queen makes possibilities more visible: Lucy and Evie educate the reader about how a revolution might come about, while the Fur Queen demonstrates for the reader how individuals learn revolutionary thinking and, importantly, *unlearn* in order for revolutionary thinking to develop, based on their own location and personal experience, in this case primarily through Jeremiah. The Fur Queen's strategies are related to Lucy's and Evie's, however, insofar as they all value the process of building towards a different world, rather than seeing value only in the ideal. Significantly, though, Lucy and Evie want to imagine a whole new structure, if only provisionally and as a process, which we might connect to westernized notions of universalism, while the Fur Queen anticipates



the ongoing presence of the legacies of colonialism as they affect Indigenous peoples groups and so wants to build a new world out of that context that may be adopted or adapted by others in similar positions.

Surprisingly, few critics of Highway's novel have taken up the Fur Queen's political intervention. Instead, they have tended to focus on the politics of historical and ongoing colonialism and its attendant trauma, as well as questions of hybridity. Many critics mention the Fur Queen but none has centred the Fur Queen in their analyses. Instead, critics tend to look at her only in relation to the novel's main characters, Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis. Cynthia Sugars's article is the one exception, but her article is more about the state of post-colonial studies in Canada and how Highway is able to "combine a separatist identity politics with a deconstruction of cultural authenticity" through the Fur Queen (74), rather than analyzing the character in relation to the novel's political investments, as this chapter does. My chapter differs from the existing criticism in that it centres its inquiry on the Fur Queen's place in the novel to ask what strategies she uses to facilitate the brothers' building of a new world. Though she certainly exists in relation to the brothers, my chapter will foreground her position through her range of embodiments and the connections that she draws, rather than emphasizing the brothers' experiences and positions in the novel.

Because of the complexities of making the connections that the Fur Queen needs to, Highway writes this novel in a magical realist mode. Amanda Clear Sky puts it best when she explains the drawbacks of using realism to represent the events about which Jeremiah writes a play, a sentiment that applies in the case of the novel itself as well: for

her, it is impossible to “write a realistic [text] from a story that’s just not realistic” (279). Amanda, here, suggests that a full account of the effects of colonialism may not be possible in a linear, factually based account. At the very least, she suggests that an expression of the pain that accompanies the effects of colonialism as well as the hope for which the brothers fight are difficult to fully articulated in a realistic mode. Her observation recalls Elaine Scarry’s notion of responses to trauma as inarticulable. For Scarry, the expression of pain cannot be articulated in a factual account because there is no language that can adequately express the pain; rather it is articulated as a yell or a moan (4). While Highway’s response to these traumas is certainly articulate, it does not adhere to the kind of factual conventions that tend to be privileged, particularly in the discursive framework of bodies like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as Sam McKegney discusses in terms of legal testimonial narratives’ relation to fictional accounts (“From”). Highway’s text suggests that colonial logic and its resulting traumas are not fully communicable in a realist mode, or, at least, that a realist mode can only accomplish so much. Because of the intricacy of the story he is telling, and because of the degree to which seemingly disparate violences are so deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive, Highway uses repetitive imagery that appears in a range of contexts to discuss these histories.

Several critics further affirm the power of Highway’s writing style to tell this kind of story, though they do not always name it as magical realism. Wendy Gay Pearson, for example, says that

[t]he spectral nature of [the brothers’] memories of trauma allows Highway to invoke their stories in ways that surpass the limitations of the (auto)biographical

and the factual. Rather than locking the novel into a mimetic reproduction of the tragedy of native/gay lives, a narrative that cannot help being at once partial, marginal, circumscribed, and ultimately unfaithful to the complex reality of how native (and gay) people live in the present, Highway... allows his story to move beyond the generic conventions that normally separate mythic from realistic narratives, tragedy from comedy, and fiction from fact. (“How” 173)

Here, Pearson points out that the complexity of the narrative requires a degree of the fantastic in order to bring together its critique. Fagan builds on this work to bring in an Indigenous perspective: “in this move to more indirect communication, Highway is working within Aboriginal traditions” that “allow[] one to speak of one’s painful experience while treating it as fiction” (“Weesageechak” 216). Terry Goldie usefully elaborates on the power of a magical realist discourse, particularly with regard to temporality, in his assertion that magical realism “can be an agent which does not divorce the modern from the past, but rather offers the past a viable way of continuing in the present” (214-15). The novel’s genre allows for meaningful interactions between the brothers’ present, the history of colonialism in Canada, and pre-colonial times. Magical realism also usefully diverges from the fact-based account in which the speaker must disclose details to the listeners’ satisfaction—in this context, an Indigenous person telling the colonizer—in order for the story to be considered legitimate. Choosing a different mode of engagement works to refuse that system and its attendant assumptions and power dynamics; magical realism is the most effective way for Highway to draw the connections that he needs to draw and to do so on his own terms. This genre allows Highway to do work that might have otherwise seemed impossible: because realism tends

to privilege a fact-based account, it becomes difficult to express the crucial intricacies and complexities of the legacies of colonialism that affect the brothers.

Sam McKegney's comments about the generic mode of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* help to elaborate how and why this novel rejects a fact-based account of events and the political intervention Highway makes in doing so. McKegney astutely asks how a novel "that intentionally diverges from the testimonial paradigm, and, as such, cannot aid in the acquisition of retribution and restitution within the existing legal framework, [can] generate political effect beyond the individual healing of its author? And how can that effect be understood and discussed in non-hypothetical terms?" ("From" 138). He suggests that the novel provides a model for how "the Indigenous individual can perform such crucial psychological and spiritual work for her- or himself," but also emphasizes that this novel is "a reasoned response to the ideological problems underlying both Native and non-Native political realities and, more specifically, legacy discourse and the residential school claims process," insisting that it is an "extraordinarily political novel," and, he says, "all the more so because of its seductive avoidance of well-worn paths of testimonial discourse and non-fictional political argumentation" ("From" 173). Though he is supportive of the work that is being done in institutions like the TRC, for McKegney, the power of the novel is its ability to circumvent and its refusal of colonial institutions by writing on its own terms in a fictional form emphasizes Indigenous spiritualities and that responds to the historical and ongoing colonialism in Canada.

The connections that McKegney draws show the complex relationship between fiction and reality in a novel such as *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Though I do not want to

suggest that the novel is autobiographical or factual, it certainly takes up actual events, such as the violences and legacies of the residential school system, the history of AIDS in Canada, and the pervasive physical and sexual violence against Indigenous women.

Helen Hoy elaborates on the importance of attention to socio-political context, particularly for settlers reading Indigenous works:

Too-easy identification by the non-Native reader, ignorance of historical or cultural allusion, obliviousness to the presence or properties of Native genres, and the application of irrelevant aesthetic standards are all means of domesticating difference, assimilating Native narratives into the mainstream. Along the way, they are a means of neutralizing the oppositional potential of that difference. (9)

For this reason, it is difficult to treat the novel strictly as fiction, as some of its critics do, because of the way that reading it only as fiction participates in a kind of objectification that treats the novel as a specimen to be examined, rather than taking seriously the critiques that it launches. As Hoy continues, she emphasizes a common trap that non-Indigenous readers fall into when reading Indigenous texts, a point that can be applied to other contexts in which there is a significant power differential between reader and writer: there is a danger for the outside reader of “unfortunate occasions either for absolute, irreducible distance or for presumptuous familiarity. And, of course, reifying difference and erasing it are far from mutually exclusive approaches” (11). This kind of reading practice leads to the novel, at times, being treated as a site of exploration without attention to socio-historical context or, seemingly, a willingness to take the novel and the *Fur Queen* on their own terms.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Hoy’s work raises questions about my decision to work with the language of magical realism and dystopia when reading *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Magical realism, while not a western genre historically, is also not an Indigenous one, and it has been taken up by the west in ways that critics suggest can be

Facilitated by her mutable embodiment, her intermittent presence positions the Fur Queen as more of a connector for what might otherwise seem like disparate issues and events. The Fur Queen's sporadic appearances mean that, despite having the ability to change at will, she is not the singular site of knowledge that is typical of many cultural or religious systems. Instead, she brings together possibilities. Moreover, not only does she appear intermittently, but she is often only visible through symbols associated with her. The Fur Queen's most significant connecting moments, however, occur when she embodies different characters in the novel. Cynthia Sugars maps out her embodied presences well, emphasizing her presence "in the human world" through Jeremiah's encounters with her as

Lola van Beethoven, in her "white fox stoles" (99); "the mannequin in white fox fur" in Eaton's department store who whispers to Jeremiah (117); the woman at the concert hall, festooned in a "fur-lined cape... [and] constellation of diamonds" (138), who gives Gabriel and Jeremiah the tickets to the New Year's Eve Gala; and, in Jeremiah's school presentation, Marie Antoinette, "draped in ermine" and doomed to die (146). (215)

Sugars also points out her appearances in "more disturbing guises, disturbing because they force [Jeremiah] to confront the degradations that White settler history has imposed on his people, a legacy whose corrosive influence he steadfastly denies" as

the drunken Native woman ejected from one of the bars on Main Street, "her coat white, yellowed with age, polyester fur" (105); as the androgynous dancer with

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exoticizing and reductive. Dystopia, on the other hand, is a predominantly western genre. I have proceeded with these terms in order to facilitate drawing parallels across the three novels with which I engage. Doing so also allows for the possibility that these terms will signify for readers who have been educated in western systems, both settler and Indigenous. I do so provisionally, however, in order to acknowledge the potential that this is misreading Indigenous genres and inappropriately applying western terms that are irrelevant and may fall into the trap that Hoy emphasizes; in doing so, I am not trying to erase Indigenous epistemologies, but I recognize that doing so is a danger of using these terms. As with the non-normative characters' embodiments, I am much more interested in what these novels do than I am in applying labels, and I am using these terms as markers to facilitate that process.

the “white feather boa” who dances as though “baptizing Gabriel with sprays of holy water, a sorceress, a priestess” (168); and as the various Native women Jeremiah encounters in a Winnipeg bar after winning his concert trophy (215). (215)

Though Sugars uses the language of hybridity and misidentifies the “androgynous dancer,” her map helpfully shows the extent of the Fur Queen’s presence, which is crucial for an understanding of the Fur Queen’s role in writing her connectivity.<sup>67</sup>

Before I turn to the Fur Queen’s role in this process, however, it is important to discuss the position of Jeremiah and Gabriel to which she is responding. After leaving residential school in which he was abused, though he does not yet remember that, and was taught that Indigenous people are innately inferior to white people, Jeremiah arrives in Winnipeg to total isolation. This isolation is primarily race-based because he does not know any other Cree or Indigenous people: though his eventual strategy is to deny his racialization, it is hyper-visible to him from the beginning. Soon after he arrives in Winnipeg, for example, he finds the freedom from residential school liberating, but the loneliness and the race-based isolation in the city oppressive. He is excited about no longer living in a gender-segregated space, but he lacks confidence and is disappointed that “there were no girls to talk to. At his school, there may have been a thousand, but they were all white; not one spoke Cree. The exultation of his newfound freedom began to wilt...” (102). As he rides the bus home one day, we hear about his desperation to be a part of a community:

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<sup>67</sup> The yellowed white polyester fur of the coat, for example, signals to the reader that this woman, who we eventually find is Evelyn Rose McCrae, one of the women who is sexually assaulted and murdered, is associated with the Fur Queen.

Sitting bolt upright, staring straight ahead, Jeremiah tried to appear as though he was on his way somewhere—dinner with rock-musician friends, a movie with a busty blonde, for God’s sake, even bingo with his mother would do!—when in fact he had absolutely nowhere to go. All that awaited him was a basement room on the north side of the city, with a bed, a dresser, and a moth-eaten old piano. His landlady allowed him meals in her kitchen, and use of the washroom, but that was all. And what was there for him to do tonight? Play the piano. What was there for him to do tomorrow, Saturday night? Or all the nights of the week? Play the piano. His one consolation was that he would have no trouble meeting his daily practice quota [given to him by Lola van Beethoven]. (102-103)

Jeremiah quickly comes to the conclusion that he must observe white practices in order to fit in better: “He would invent an imaginary friend, who spied on white people but conveyed the information to him in the language only they shared” (102). He goes on to try to convince himself that solitude can be a good thing—“He thanked God that he has learned his father’s lessons on solitude: how time alone could be spent without need for crying, that time alone was time for shaping thoughts that make the path your life should take, for cleaning your spirit of extraneous—even poisonous—matter” (102-103)—but the phrasing makes clear that he probably spends a lot of time crying and despairing about this situation. Jeremiah then remembers his father telling him and his siblings semi-surreal stories about his isolation while out hunting for the family for weeks on end, showing that a feeling of communality does not only have to be between people, to which Jeremiah imagines a response that addresses the differences between urban life and hunting trips in the north: “‘Yes, but Father,’ he wanted to say from the back seat of a rapidly filling bus, ‘you never told us how to spend time alone in the midst of half a million people. Here, stars don’t shine at night, trees don’t speak’” (104). While Jeremiah is trying to pretend that he can cope with feeling so alone, he does not know how, and by



the time an Indigenous community reaches out to him, he has developed other strategies to cope with his isolation that lead him to resent their welcome.

Some critics do not see the predicament that Jeremiah and Gabriel are in and focus on the brothers' complicity with colonial values in the moments when the brothers defend colonialist logics or leave them unquestioned. If we consider the position the brothers were in, though, we must ask how many options Jeremiah and Gabriel had. Over and over, Jeremiah discusses feeling totally alone and alienated in Winnipeg: he has no one with whom he can work through what it means to be Cree in an urban space and has no support in his transition to living in the city.

One of these moments occurs when Gabriel arrives in Winnipeg and the brothers gleefully tell the first traditional Cree story we will hear: the story of the weasel and the Weetigo. Though it is never explicitly discussed again, the brothers' joint telling of this story provides them with a framework for thinking about how to live with histories of trauma: it is, I argue, about surviving a battle and living with its scars. This story is first told to the brothers by their Aunt Black Eyed Susan and is about how the weasel, Weesageechak, known more readily as the Fur Queen in the novel, is disguised as a weasel and fights the Weetigo. In the story, the weasel defeats the Weetigo by crawling into his "bumhole" and chewing up his innards (118). When he is done, the weasel is "covered with shit," and God holds him by the tail to dip him in water to clean him off, but the tip of his tail remains soiled (118-21). The brothers tell the story to each other while shopping in Polo Park mall, which itself acts as an embodiment of the Weetigo. The narrator makes clear that the brothers are not aware of the way that they become

embodiments of the weasel inside the Weetigo-mall, but instead of destroying the Weetigo like the weasel does, the brothers revel in it until it expels them: “Grey and soulless, the mall loomed behind them, the rear end of the beast that, having gorged itself, expels its detritus” (121). Throughout the scene, the brothers happily participate in the culture of the mall without recognizing these dynamics.

This scene has been read in a range of ways that pathologize the brothers, but all of these readings miss some key contextualizing information. Commenting on their participation in the mall culture, for example, Buzny reads the brothers as “fail[ing] to realize the irony of their current predicament” as they “continue to allow the Weetigo to devour them” (9); for Buzny, they are totally unaware of any irony, and, moreover, are *participating in* the devouring. Fagan critiques McKegney’s suggestion that the story is ““simple comic relief” ([“From”] 92),” instead reading it as Gabriel’s effort to use “the traditional story to try to understand his own life, to develop his own ‘trauma theory’” (“Weesageechak” 218), in which each of the brothers dives into his trauma: “Though their paths are very different, both brothers are, in trying to escape their past, actually imitating many elements of that past. Like the black tip of the weasel’s tail, part of them is permanently stained by their abuse” (“Weesageechak” 218). For her, the abuse is inescapable, and, using metaphors of contamination, they are perpetual victims of it. In a different piece than the one that Fagan cites, McKegney reads this passage as being more about race:

[t]he boys don’t enter the mall to destroy it, but rather to implicate themselves in its processes. They go there to become more Euro-Canadian. The white weasel with a black tip of the tail, thus becomes, in Highway’s contemporary telling, the

two Cree brothers, covered by white cultural costumes, with only the darkness of their faces remaining unmasked. (“Claiming” 72)

Like Buzny, McKegney here points out the brothers’ gleeful participation in the system that oppresses them, regardless of the context in which the scene is read. Diana Brydon connects this story to the son of Ayash story, which I discuss below, but she too adheres to a discourse of contamination, though she does also register triumph:

In *Kiss*, th[e] non-gendered trickster-hero is complemented by a gendered creator-hero. Counterpointed against the weasel’s bawdy tale, runs the story of the Son of Ayash.... Highway’s novel depicts the past forty years from the Cree perspective, showing non-native readers ‘a new world’ in which they—that is, most of us—are the *Weetigo*, and he demonstrates how art can lead all races toward a potentially new world where the *Weetigo* is defeated by the weasel, outwitted by the Fur Queen, and eluded [*sic*] by the Son of Ayash. But not without the *Weetigo*’s guts touching all: the weasel is triumphant *and* compromised by his triumph. His coat remains marked by his passage through the entrails of the monster to this day. (25, emphasis original)

With these arguments, however, critics read the weasel, and, therefore the brothers, as compromised or stained. This line of thinking risks suggesting that people who experience trauma—those who have been through the belly of the beast, in this context—are only ever victims of that trauma, even if some space is left to see the power of survival.<sup>68</sup>

I would suggest that it is crucial to read their telling of the story in the mall not only as a scene of them participating in the mall culture, and, thereby enjoying the Weetigo-like capitalist culture. This reading is accurate, but it does not account for the fact that this is an early moment in the brothers’ lives in which the brothers engage in

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<sup>68</sup> Katja Sarkowsky and Lindsey Claire Smith provide more positive readings of this scene that focus on the brothers’ rewriting of the space of the mall, but they too miss some key context.

practices that they do not recognize as part of a colonial system. Their participation is a step in their learning, but it is also true that they have no other options: where else, for example, will they get clothing they need with their \$100 dollar budget from the Indian Agent (115)? They are children at this point in the novel and do not yet have any knowledge about alternatives or the histories that have been actively denied that shape this scene, so it is unfair to read them only as complicit in a Weetigo-like system. In this scene we see the naturalization of the colonial system, not only because of the boys' internalized racism and colonialism, but also because they do not have a choice but to engage in the system that harms them. It is because they do not yet have the skills to read that system and make conscious choices from there that they are unaware of its implications.

Accounting more fully for the context of the novel and moving away from metaphors of contamination, moreover, makes possible a consideration of a metaphor or scarring in this story, a strategy that better reflects both the brothers' artistic engagements as well as the novel's function more generally. This idea does not differ substantially from the idea of being marked or contaminated; in both contamination and scarring, there is a sense of permanence. The fundamental difference, however, is that instead of reading the black tip of the weasel's tail as evidence of being "stained" or "compromised," which perpetuates both the victimization of the brothers as well as the flawed discourse of "purity," reading this scene as a model for thinking about how histories persist in the present—as evidenced by their scars—moves away from a victimizing discourse. To put it more concretely, it is difficult to imagine and naïve to suggest that the brothers have not

been affected by their range of traumatic experiences—from the childhood sexual abuse, to the violence they witness, to the racism they experience and internalize—but they can carry those histories with them without those histories defining them.

This story, like the novel, is about how history persists in the present, but it is also about how history does not have to be definitive. Along similar lines, Cynthia Sugars points out that “[t]he point is not that the past is what is definitive of the present, but that the present, even as you gesture towards it, is always changing and hence is always already past and/or future” (72). Though she is discussing Indigenous autobiography in Canada, Deanna Reder (Cree-Métis) makes an important point about novels like this one, though it may risk essentialism: while these texts “grow[] out of many different, disturbed landscapes, beautiful and relentlessly enduring, [their] beauty does not celebrate the destruction of the fire but is undeniably the result of it” (277), a point that Sarah Wylie Krotz echoes in her discussion of music, though it applies in this context too: the novel “must mourn the violence and loss as well as celebrate the enduring beauty and resilience of the human spirit” (Krotz 200). That is, despite claims to the contrary, the novel does not show loyalty to colonial forces.

Instead it acknowledges those histories and shows how two brothers start to build from where they are with the support from a range of places that are brought together by the Fur Queen. Lindsey Claire Smith puts it well when she says that “there is no idyllic stage for a simplistic casting off of colonial influence. The brothers must accomplish something different” (158). Though she is discussing their experience of finding that violence exists despite it being an Indigenous space at the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow,

her point remains true in this context too: there can be no erasure of history or scars, but the present and future do not have to be only be about that history. Highway depicts the complicated process of learning and unlearning that is necessary for the brothers to make a life in the spaces that they inhabit. The brothers are not perfect heroic figures, and this is crucial in order for the novel to accomplish its goals. As Sam McKegney says, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* “provides a blueprint in the substance of its narrative for the process of personal and cultural introspection it champions, illustrating how the Indigenous individual can perform such crucial psychological and spiritual work for her- or himself” (“From” 173). *Kiss of the Fur Queen* operates as a model that might provide a potential path or schema to try to figure out how to build a different kind of world without trying to erase or deny histories of trauma. Instead of trying to attain some kind of purity—or, more likely, finding that they never can and lamenting that fact—the brothers, and readers, must learn that they can work from where they are with the scars that they have. That is not to say that there are no structural barriers and neocolonial practices that the brothers and other Indigenous peoples face—surely there are, and we see them throughout the novel. Rather, this story suggests that alongside holding individual and structural perpetrators accountable for the victimization they have enacted and continue to enact, people are not bound by those histories and victimizations; the weasel, as an embodiment of the Fur Queen, provides the brothers with a model for how to be dynamic survivors, which is a crucial skill in order for them to have the capacity to build communities that can thrive.

Despite this bright spot at the mall, Jeremiah's isolation persists, even after Gabriel arrives in Winnipeg. Immediately after an exchange with Amanda, the other Indigenous person at their school, in which she invites him to a pow wow, for example, Gabriel walks by and Jeremiah calls out to him, "I need to talk to you" (150). But he thinks to himself, "I need to talk to someone was more the point. And who else was there for him to talk to?" (150). While Gabriel reaches out, though not necessarily to people who are supportive, he and Jeremiah have not been able to give each other much support, and Jeremiah continues to turn inward to cope. With no support system or alternate models available, Jeremiah accepts the dominant narratives and, most distressingly, replicates them. The brothers have no experience knowing how they might resist these narratives. They have no knowledge of the history that Amanda, who is a member of an active Indigenous community, knows. While some criticize their complicity in these colonial narratives, given that the brothers exist in such a hostile and isolating place and have found ways of coping and surviving in and of itself is resistance, even if it is not ideal. Expecting the brothers to live in a context that only ever naturalizes the colonial project and not to have absorbed that ideology misses the point of the novel, which is about how they learn to build a world out of these circumstances.

Before I move on to discussing Amanda explicitly, it is also important to consider the way that Jeremiah's feelings of isolation are amplified by his shame and resulting self-hatred with regard to the negative representations of Indigeneity that abound alongside his early education. As his bus drives by bars on North Main, for example, he

sees that the only people who he encounters that ‘look like him’ are all being gleefully sacrificed:

Strands of country music—tinny, tawdry, emaciated—oozed through the cracks under filthy doorways. The doors opened and closed, opened and closed. From their dark maws stumbled men and women, all dark of skin, of hair, of eye, like Jeremiah, all drunk senseless, unlike Jeremiah.... He leaned forward to see if he could catch a glimpse, beyond the swinging doors, of horned creatures with three-pronged forks, laughing as they pitched Indian after Indian into the flames. (105)<sup>69</sup>

At this point, Jeremiah has no frame of reference through which to understand the connections between colonialism and addiction. Being in an all-white school with no connection to any Indigenous communities, he recognizes himself in the only people he sees, all of whom are struggling, being treated disrespectfully, and who appear to be reifying and legitimating the colonialist perspective on Indigenous peoples. Because he does not yet have the tools to read the structural inequities that are being represented, he interprets their struggles as individualized failures. Jeremiah has not yet learned about either the legacies of colonization or the ongoing colonization that people were experiencing, so he resorts to a pathologization of individuals and Indigenous peoples as a race; at this point he only knows the colonial narrative, and it will take a long time to unlearn it and to be able to see how the struggles that Indigenous peoples face are directly related to the structural violences they experience both historically and in the present.

The Fur Queen’s work to foster Jeremiah’s unlearning of colonial narratives begins with two significant characters through whom she works, Amanda Clear Sky and Ann-Adele Ghost rider, who act as models and fill in historical gaps, and, thereby, provide

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<sup>69</sup> This scene also recalls his early education about Heaven and Hell in residential school, where, again, all the people who “look like him” are in Hell (60).



them with tools for building a new world. As Klein states, Highway “underline[s] the role of tribal mentors who considerably foster the protagonist[’s] inner and outer growth” (36). Though I would not put it quite this way, Edgars Ošiņš suggests that the “spiritual liberation of Jeremiah is mediated by two guardian Native women—his former schoolmate... Amanda Clear Sky, and her grandmother Ann-Adele Ghost rider, an Ojibwa Medicine Woman” (228). While I do agree that these two women are very important for the Okimasis brothers, my argument is that there is a series of people through whom the Fur Queen facilitates the brothers’ ability to build a new world on their own terms;<sup>70</sup> Amanda and Ann-Adele support the development of some of the weapons that the brothers use. These two characters offer the brothers alternative models for how they might live in the world and knowledge of the real history of colonialism in Canada, both of which are necessary elements that foster the brothers’ abilities to work towards building a new world.

Despite the supportive role that Amanda Clear Sky ends up playing in Jeremiah’s life, their relationship begins rather adversarially because she raises questions about the dominant narratives of Indigeneity that Jeremiah has internalized and upon which he depends to survive the hostilities of Winnipeg. The tension between them arises because Amanda challenges Jeremiah’s worldview and threatens the illusions that he has built—particularly his erasure of his Indigeneity in favour of whiteness—as he endures his time in Winnipeg as a teenager devoid of any kind of support system. Amanda’s early interventions are meant to be supportive, but Jeremiah’s internalized racism and

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<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of Indigenous modes of facilitation of learning, see Maracle “Oratory.”

colonialism prevent him from interpreting them as anything other than antagonistic.

Amanda is a crucial facilitator of Jeremiah's learning in that she is his peer, but she does not have the same internalized self-hatred that has led him to embrace western logics that privilege a disembodied colonial whiteness. Long after their first meeting, Jeremiah is at last in a place to be able to rethink these logics, and she provides him with a model for how he might thrive as an Indigenous person in an urban space.

The learning that the Fur Queen facilitates through Amanda does not come easily to Jeremiah, and he initially responds with misogynistic aggression, which is crucial for the reader to see as we watch him unlearn what he has been taught by patriarchal colonial forces. Amanda and Jeremiah first meet at school, and though one might expect that having another Indigenous person in the room would be reassuring to him, and it might have been when he first arrived in Winnipeg, her presence makes him uncomfortable. Jeremiah's response to her is unexpectedly violent when she joins his class during a lecture about the history of Christianity and witch hunts because he feels that her presence makes his Indigeneity more visible:

Hearing—and feeling—the new arrival sliding into the seat not far behind him, Jeremiah was put on his guard: was it because this young—and undeniably Indian—girl confronted him with his own Indianness, which his weekly bus sightings of the drunks on North Main had driven him to deny so utterly that he went for weeks believing his own skin to be as white as parchment? He had worked so hard at transforming himself into a perfect little 'transplanted European'—anything to survive. He was suddenly enraged, unbalanced, diverting his terror by doodling, mindlessly, bloodlessly, into his notebook: 'Nine million women roasted. Live. And they deserved it.' (123-24)

Jeremiah maps his internalized self-hatred, shame, and anger about his current situation onto Amanda, but his anger is actually about the history and effects of colonization,

which becomes overlaid in this moment with the misogyny of colonialism and the history of the expansion of Christianity in relation to the burning of witches. It is noteworthy, moreover, that he does this all “mindlessly”; this is not a conscious association. In short, he displaces the cause of his distress onto her because she is corporeal and is easy to blame for reminding him of what he is trying to deny, unlike the history of colonialism, whose effects, as Alfred points out, are everywhere visible but whose diffuse nature makes blame difficult to place and connections difficult to draw.

Though the fact of Amanda’s Indigeneity coupled with her unapologetic insistence on filling in historical gaps with regard to the history of colonization in Canada initially make Jeremiah angry, she will eventually become a model for Jeremiah’s understanding of his Cree-ness. Verena Klein argues that Amanda “functions as Jeremiah’s cultural mentor, or, to put it differently, as his guide to an Indian identity” (46). Rather than thinking of Amanda as a guide, however, it is important to see the way that she uses the Fur Queen’s strategies: Amanda does show him a path, but *he* has to choose to follow it. While Jeremiah promotes a eurocentric view of history in class, for example, Amanda corrects him, drawing his attention to the genocides that have happened in North America and advises him that he “‘shouldn’t forget that [Indigenous peoples in Canada] have a history, too” (150). When he resists, effectively accusing her of ‘reverse racism,’ she tries to build solidarity with him, despite the harshness of her tone: “‘What use is there pretending to be what you’re not? You and me and your little brother, we’re the only three Indians in a school filled with two thousand white middle-class kids’” (150). Jeremiah’s impulse to avoid topics related to Indigeneity and his

implication that Indigenous peoples are trying to take too much space—replicating the dominant colonialist perspective—is his attempt to shut Amanda down in order to maintain what little stability he has made for himself. This kind of self-hatred is his coping strategy. She, on the other hand, is making visible what this narrative of “special treatment” and selfishness erases and denies: that there are serious ongoing injustices happening and that his refusal to acknowledge these facts plays into colonialist perspectives that further oppressions faced by him and Indigenous peoples more generally.

What gets underscored in this scene, too, is the extent to which colonization has succeeded in alienating potential allies from each other: Amanda and Jeremiah, though from different nations, are facing related discriminations, but he does not see that because he remains invested in the colonial logic that surrounds him. Amanda is trying to build community with him, but he cannot allow himself to reach out because he is so deeply invested in the dominant ideologies that he cannot see past them. But because this is his main coping strategy, it is difficult to blame him: this is how he has learned to survive in a racist world. Notably, Amanda never retaliates by accusing Jeremiah of perpetuating colonialist investments, though it is clear that she could. Though her perspective is not narrated, we get the sense that she has a framework for understanding Jeremiah’s struggle; though Amanda will point out the flaws in his position, she is able to empathize with the desperation that underpins Jeremiah’s strategies, and instead tries to build community with him so that he might be able to operate differently, a strategy that will eventually work.

As with Amanda, Ann-Adele, who is another manifestation of the Fur Queen,<sup>71</sup> works to contextualize Jeremiah's experiences at the pow wow in Winnipeg by filling in historical gaps, but he is not yet ready to hear them. In this scene, Jeremiah's internalized self-hatred becomes mapped onto all Indigenous practices: "why shouldn't he hate this place, these cheap goings-on, this conquered race of people" (174). Ann-Adele is in attendance and recalls the history of colonization and the nerve that it took for the priests to claim that the dancing was "Devil worship" in a conversation with Jeremiah (176). His self-hatred resurfacing again, Jeremiah cannot yet see past the colonial narrative and resulting self-hatred that he has been taught from such a young age. Ann-Adele expresses her sympathy and names the colonial violences to a resistant Jeremiah in an effort to build community with him from the place that they now occupy, Winnipeg. But because his knowledge of Cree culture is so minimal and biased, he does not understand what has been lost and cannot see what the pow wow is trying to accomplish:

"You northern people," [Ann-Adele] sighed, as with nostalgia, "it's too bad you lost all them dances, you know? All them beautiful songs? Thousands of years of ... But never mind. We have it here." She, [like Jeremiah], was looking at the dance now. The drumming, the chanting crescendoed—pentatonic mush, Jeremiah opined.

And what the hell was this tired old bag yattering on about anyway? What dances? What songs? '*Kimoosoom Chimasoo*'? The 'Waldenstein Sonata'?

"Them little ol' priests," [she] persisted, "the things they did? Pooh! No wonder us Indian folk are all the shits." (175)

Though Reder calls Jeremiah skeptical of Ann-Adele's lamentation of the losses northern Indigenous communities have suffered (289), I would suggest that Jeremiah is taken in to

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<sup>71</sup> In Ann-Adele's first encounter with Jeremiah, she is wearing "[g]reen and pink beads [that] sparkled from her white deer-hide tiara" (175), which associates her with the Fur Queen.

some extent by Ann-Adele's narrativization of the history of colonialism in the north. But when she mentions "Devil worship," his memories of being taught about Heaven and Hell in residential school are triggered (60-62), and his internalized racism resurfaces. Not only is his educational history present in this moment, but we must recall as well that it remains unwise for Jeremiah to seriously consider this information because changing his thinking and unlearning his internalized racism would compromise too many of his coping strategies, and he cannot risk that at this point. Despite his resistance, though, Ann-Adele will continue to make these histories available to him, and he will eventually be able not only to hear them, but he will build his artistic work around the collaborative knowledge sharing mode that she teaches him. Though Ann-Adele appears at key moments and provides important context for the brothers' understanding of their histories and Cree-ness more generally, Jeremiah still cannot or will not see the histories of violence that she makes available.

This portion of Jeremiah's life is interwoven with his piano playing, which is encouraged by Lola van Beethoven, another of the Fur Queen's embodiments, facilitating his relationship to the arts in addition to giving him a reason to live as he is desperately alone in Winnipeg. Some critics are not convinced of Lola's association with the Fur Queen, though: drawing on Jennifer Henderson's work, Sarah Wylie Krotz, states that

[a]s "another woman in white fur" (96), Lola at once parallels and parodies the Fur Queen. In the latter respect, she functions as a kind of "anti-trickster" .... the "anti-trickster" is an oppositional, destabilizing force that encourages a turn away from Aboriginal ways of seeing.... the anti-trickster can be summed up simply as "Eurocentrism": while the trickster "emphasizes Aboriginal thought," ... the "anti-trickster" represents a cognitive force of artificial European thought, a differentiated consciousness, ever changing in its creativity to justify the

oppression and domination of contemporary Indigenous peoples and their spiritual guardians” (Henderson 58). (192)

For Krotz this alignment of Lola with western values has everything to do with her reading of the Fur Queen as hybrid:

Aligned both with white and Aboriginal culture, the Fur Queen is herself a hybrid figure who throughout the novel performs ‘double-edged enactments of promise and betrayal’ (Brydon). Lola’s opposition to her, then, is necessarily complicated. The model of benevolence, Lola inspires Jeremiah to work hard with the goal of winning the city’s prestigious competition in performance. (192)

While Krotz does acknowledge the connection between Lola and the Fur Queen, her article is too enmeshed in the discourse of “tricksters” to be able to consider how Lola operates in the text. Lola is important because she encourages and supports Jeremiah’s piano playing, which eventually becomes one of his weapons to build a new world. Though she is not overly generous or kind, she is significant because music is the one site of hope and connection for Jeremiah. The importance of piano cannot be overstated, as we hear that he spends hours in the public library listening to classical music, which is explicitly described in relation to the loneliness that he feels—the library “saved Jeremiah Okimasis from killing himself that spring,” and this music acts as an “antidote to the suicide-inducing loneliness of city Saturdays” (170). Though he still will not see how his racialization and artistry are compatible for some time, without Lola, Jeremiah might not have pursued the arts to the extent that he does and certainly would have felt even more alone.

Despite having piano as a site of hope, the marginalization of Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg continues to affirm for him the essential difference between Indigenous and

non-Indigenous peoples. The Fur Queen's embodiments as the young Indigenous women in Winnipeg who are sexually assaulted and murdered helps Jeremiah to come to an awareness of the effects of colonialism at the intersection of gender-based and sexualized violence, addiction, his internalized self-hatred, and his own role in this system.<sup>72</sup> The first of these women is Evelyn Rose McCrae, a young urban Indigenous woman who is thrown out of a bar and responds with claims that the bartender is on her land, as Jeremiah observes from his seat on a bus. He then witnesses four teenaged white men pick her up, suggesting that she is likely a sex worker. Though he is watching the situation from afar and cannot hear the details, he recognizes the young men as classmates, and he is disturbed by the racial dynamics in the interaction, particularly their lack of respect for her. Within a few days, Jeremiah discovers that his fears were not unfounded:

Gallantly, though not easily, Jeremiah left the episode behind him. Until, one week later, he thought he saw the woman's picture on a back page of the *Winnipeg Tribune*: the naked body of Evelyn Rose McCrae—long-lost daughter of Mistik Lake [which is the lake near Eemanapiteepitat where the “first priest arrived” (246)]—had been found in a ditch on the city's outskirts, a shattered beer bottle lying gently, like a rose, deep inside her crimson-soaked sex. Jeremiah would report the image he had seen [of the young men picking her up].... But the Winnipeg police paid little heed to the observations of fifteen-year-old Indian boys. (106-107)

By appearing in this context, the Fur Queen brings together sexualized, colonialist, and misogynist violence with land dispossession as viewed from the perspective of a

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<sup>72</sup> Highway is also raising awareness about the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women long before this crisis got any national attention, though Indigenous communities had been trying to raise and combat the issue for decades. With that said, though, these women are notably positioned as functioning in service of Jeremiah's education, rather than having narratives of their own, though, as we will see, Jeremiah does become implicated in this systemic violence.



residential school survivor; Evelyn Rose McCrae is not just a sex worker who happens to get murdered. Based on histories of colonialism and racism, she is socially positioned as disposable to the extent that the police are not interested in even investigating her murder. Though Jeremiah cannot yet put all of these pieces together, the Fur Queen is facilitating this recognition.

The Fur Queen pushes Jeremiah to recognize his role in the system when she offers him a choice about whether to see a ballet or to intervene when he suspects that another woman will be assaulted and murdered. In this moment, the Fur Queen simultaneously embodies a young, pregnant Indigenous sex worker<sup>73</sup> and the glamorous woman who offers the brothers tickets to the ballet that will set Gabriel on the path to becoming a dancer. As the glamorous woman approaches, Jeremiah is unsure whether or not to intervene as a young, pregnant sex worker across the street, who is accompanied by the ghosts of Evelyn Rose McCrae and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix,<sup>74</sup> is being picked up by a group of young white men who Jeremiah again recognizes as his predatory classmates:

“Hey, chickie.” Rob Bailey’s reedy voice insinuated itself into the gauze-like wash of light. “You look like you could use some cuddling.” Evelyn Rose McCrae and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix appeared, keeping vigil by their teenaged sister with the sad synthetic rose. The impulse to race across the street overwhelmed Jeremiah, the need to scream: “Go! Go back inside the bar! Go home, go anywhere, but don’t stay here!” (137)

Just as he is about to intervene, Gabriel interrupts and the woman approaches:

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<sup>73</sup> This young woman, who comes to be called the Madonna of North Main is associated with the Fur Queen especially when she is described as wearing a “star tiara” (216).

<sup>74</sup> Madeleine Jeanette Lavoix, like Evelyn Rose McCrae is murdered, but it is Gabriel who partially witnesses it as he is having sex behind a bar (132). Gabriel’s response is never narrated, but we know that he is aware of what happens, but because he was having queer sex behind the bar and would need to explain his presence there, he “would say nothing” when the brothers see her picture in the paper (132).

“Jeremiah!” Gabriel’s voice. “Jeremiah, what are you doing?” Gabriel took a step towards him just as the woman in the cape of midnight velvet burst, like a gust of wind, down the staircase.

Perfumed air billowing before her, hazel eyes glimmering, she stopped directly in front of Gabriel.... Then, from her cape, a slender hand dropped a small pink envelope into Gabriel’s gloved hand.

.... Inside were two white strips of paper .... “Hold them up,” Jeremiah’s voice more bark than suggestion. In the insufficient light, they read: ‘New Year’s Eve Gala. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet. December 31, 1969, 10:00P.M.’

Before they remembered to breathe again, the brothers Okimasis were drifting through the large glass portals of the Jubilee Concert Hall, their hearts a jumble of disbelief. (137-39)

Despite being concerned with the violence against the sex worker, Jeremiah chooses the lavish gala over intervening as the young woman is being approached and is likely, he suspects, to be viciously assaulted and murdered, which does wind up being the case. While Jennifer Henderson suggests that “the women [who will be murdered] become visible in moments of ambition and pleasure for Jeremiah and Gabriel” (197), I read them, instead, as being present in moments when the brothers make choices.

The choices the brothers make, particularly those of Jeremiah, stay with them and teach them a lot: in these moments, Jeremiah begins to understand the systemic violence that these women experience and the connection between systemic and physical violences. Jeremiah and Gabriel may go to the gala for pleasure, but the decision is made more so out of an escapist impulse: Jeremiah does not know how to handle the situation, as we see with his uncertainty about intervening, especially given that these are his peers and we know that she is not the only woman that they are likely to target—even if he stopped this interaction, they will find someone else, and there would surely be social consequences at a point at which he already struggling. It is also a decision that arises out

of a desire to escape poverty: the brothers would otherwise never have had the opportunity to attend an event like this—they are even stopped as they walk in to ensure that they have tickets, marking them as outsiders to the space—and they are so excited about the tickets that they forget even to breathe. In the face of this offer, the young woman appears to be erased from Jeremiah’s consciousness as he chooses the path that is easier, that is pleasurable in a way that he would not otherwise be able to access, and that will introduce Gabriel to ballet, though he does not yet know this. Jeremiah knows, however, that his decision has very different consequences for the young woman.

The effects of the Fur Queen’s embodiments show some of the stakes of this decision, and we see Jeremiah begin to make these connections; while at the ballet, Jeremiah begins to see himself both as complicit in and as a victim of the violence. Though the music is compelling, his mind wanders as he watches, and he imagines the murder of the young woman and her unborn child and then he becomes the victim of the grotesque assault: “The shards [of a beer bottle] loomed closer. And closer. And it was Jeremiah’s own groin that suddenly rammed into them, again and again” (138).<sup>75</sup> In this scene, he is identifying to some extent with the women and recognizing his complicity in the misogynist and colonialist violence because he walked away. His recognition is conflicted, however, as he has been subject to sexual assaults, though he does not yet remember them. While he expresses colonialist misogyny, particularly towards Amanda, he is also horrified by the violence experienced by Indigenous women and feels

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<sup>75</sup> It is unexpected that the weapon is not being rammed into his groin, as has happened to the murdered women; rather that his groin is rammed into the shards, though it is not clear who or what is in control of his groin’s movement.

distressed and helpless in the face of it. Because these two lines of thought—that he is both complicit in the violence, to some extent, and a victim—are conflicting and unsettling to his world view, he puts the image out of his mind as quickly as he can: “Shaken, repelled, he opened his eyes, willed the vision [of the shards of glass] away” (144). While he implicitly makes a connection between the colonial and misogynistic violence experienced by murdered Indigenous women and the violence that he has experienced, both in terms of the sexual abuse but also violence more generally, the connection happens as his mind wanders; just as when he “mindlessly” doodles misogynistic things about Amanda, he is not yet fully aware of the connections. As we can see, the Fur Queen is providing Jeremiah with opportunities to reflect not only on the violence that these women experience, but also to connect their experiences to his own and his implication in the violences, as well as emphasizing the need for active resistance as a new world is built.

The murdered women appear again after Jeremiah wins a major piano competition, but this time in the context of Jeremiah’s understanding of his Indigeneity and his western-ness as incommensurable. The competition happens after he and Gabriel have a falling out and Gabriel leaves Winnipeg for Toronto. Jeremiah laments Gabriel’s departure in his performance—“Jeremiah played a northern Manitoba shorn of its Gabriel Okimasis” and, in the song, begs him not to leave him (213)—showing that his western piano playing can be done with Cree content. Indeed, for Jeremiah, the landscape with which he grew up is written into the music, even though he did not compose it, but no one else seems to recognize it; they only see that he plays well and consistently

emphasize his status as an outsider. Jeremiah is celebrated over and over as the ““first Indian to win this gruelling contest in its forty-seven-year history...”” (214). Because of the incommensurability that he sees between his Cree-ness and the western art form, as is confirmed by these exoticizing experiences that position him as a “model minority,” Jeremiah decides to leave his career as a pianist: “He had tried. Tried to change the meaning of his past, the roots of his hair, the colour of his skin, but he was one of them. What was he to do with Chopin? Open a conservatory on Eemanapiteepitat hill?” (215). Based on the colonialist space in which he exists, and despite the Fur Queen’s support of his artistic career, Jeremiah remains caught up in colonial discourses of incommensurability; he cannot see how these two parts of his identity can co-exist, but with the Fur Queen’s support, he will eventually learn how to think outside of these discourses.

In addition to the white population seeing him as exceptional for the dissonance they perceive between his Indigeneity and his piano playing, it is further emphasized for him by his experience immediately after the competition, at Hell Hotel. Alone again in Winnipeg, Jeremiah goes to the bar, contemplating self-harm that would end his ability to play piano. There he encounters the Fur Queen embodied in the murdered women.<sup>76</sup> As her embodiment changes between the three women, Jeremiah seems to feel more hopeless: the youngest woman’s assertion that his win makes her so “proud to be a fuckin’ Indian” increases Jeremiah’s inability to conceive of how his musical abilities and what he understands his racialization to mean can coexist; he can no longer pretend to be

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<sup>76</sup> Though Madeline Jeanette Lavoix is never explicitly associated with the Fur Queen, her presence in this moment and her association with the other two women implies this connection.

white and his internalized colonialist belief that Indigenous peoples are essentially different from non-Indigenous peoples makes him believe that he must give up piano. This statement confirms for him that he will never be able to be a part of this white world, and he decides to leave that career path and begins work at the Winnipeg Indian Friendship Centre. The Fur Queen brings together the external and internalized racism that Jeremiah experiences, his deep social isolation and desperation for a community, and puts them in the context of histories of colonialism, though Jeremiah does not yet see them. The Fur Queen's role here, more specifically, is to get Jeremiah thinking about what it means for a Cree man to play classical piano and whether or not these two elements of his existence are actually incommensurable, or if it just seems that way because they are socially positioned as incommensurable by privileged people who are invested in the status quo and do not want to imagine otherwise. Though he will eventually be able to reimagine what his participation in the arts can be, at this point it seems impossible to continue.<sup>77</sup>

We can see evidence of Jeremiah's learning in his work after he quits piano, but it is not the revolutionary work that the Fur Queen advocates. The murdered women and the violence they experience stay with Jeremiah, and his work with the Winnipeg Indian Friendship Centre's Street Patrol, which he refers to as a "purgatory," in which he "scrap[es] drunks off the street," seems to be a way for him to try to make up for his complicity in abandoning the young woman (221). But it is also him making an effort to build an Indigenous community; in doing this work, he is trying to build the kind of

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<sup>77</sup> The novel, in part, is taking on the discourse of hybridity. This is an avenue I hope to pursue in future work, but it is outside the scope of this chapter.

world in which different options might have been available to him, as well as to these women, in addition to contributing to a world in which Indigenous women were not treated as disposable or, as Smith puts it, “inherently rapable” (16). The problem, the novel suggests, though clearly emphasizing that the work of organizations like the Winnipeg Indian Friendship Centre is very important, is that it remains reactive instead of constructive. The world that Jeremiah will develop the skills to build is one that operates by both supporting people who struggle, as we him doing in this job, but that also builds spaces for people to thrive.

Years after quitting piano, Jeremiah encounters the Fur Queen as Amanda again, and with her encouragement he is set on the path that leads him to be able to see himself as whole instead of as being divided into two incommensurable parts in addition to learning how to draw his own connections between sites of violence through a return to the arts. After Abraham’s death, Jeremiah reaches out to Gabriel to ask for help, and Gabriel’s solution is to go camping at which point they stumble upon the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow, where they run into Amanda. After abandoning Gabriel in a moment of need, Jeremiah is reintroduced to the piano by Amanda’s father and has a discussion with Amanda about the importance of the arts, thereby suggesting that the arts are compatible with his racialization.<sup>78</sup> Amanda makes clear her position on artists and social responsibility, telling Jeremiah that he is “a born artist” and insisting that being an artist is “a responsibility, a duty” and that he “can’t run away from it” (259).<sup>79</sup> Jeremiah’s

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<sup>78</sup> Immediately before this scene, Chachagathoo and the Fur Queen become explicitly linked with Amanda, as Chachagathoo’s face changes into Amanda’s as she wakes him from a nightmare (253).

<sup>79</sup> Though it is outside of the scope of my chapter, it is notable that Amanda does not seem to include herself in this “artist” category, despite being an actor. This may be related to gender dynamics in the

reintroduction to piano differs substantially from his earlier piano playing: while Jeremiah initially uses music and an event like the gala that the brothers attend as a kind of escapism to survive deep isolation and to enjoy luxuries to which he otherwise would not have had access, Amanda's reintroduction happens in an Indigenous space. Moreover, in this case she emphasizes the social responsibility of the artist, making visible to Jeremiah that he can move in a different direction with his piano playing; this moment fosters his eventual understanding of the arts as a tool he can use to build a new world because he can be both Cree and a pianist.

The other skill that Jeremiah develops with the support of Amanda and Gabriel is the importance of collaboration. After Jeremiah abandons Gabriel at the pow wow,<sup>80</sup> Gabriel leverages this betrayal to force Jeremiah into a collaboration with him that will change both of their lives. Sitting at a piano as Gabriel instructs “felt eerily natural,” but Jeremiah remains resistant: “the keyboard invited, enticed, but belonged to others now” (265). Jeremiah protests, asking, ““What is this? Penance?”” to which Gabriel replies, ““Yes. For running like a rat from those spineless fag-bashers? Yes. Play!”” (265). This collaboration includes “beaded drumstick [with which Jeremiah] pounded at the bass strings of the [piano]” and the calls that they made as children to the caribou while the “piano [acts as] a pow wow drum propelling a Cree Round Dance with the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century” (267). While the inclusion of Cree content has appeared in his earlier performances, this one differs because he is now playing music *he*

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novel, in which it is consistently women who are doing support work for the brothers. As happens so often, the brothers are the main characters and the women around them seem to exist only to help them as Faris warns of magical realism, but is true of most—if not all—genres.

<sup>80</sup> This abandonment resonates with Jeremiah's decision not to intervene when the young pregnant sex worker is approached by people Jeremiah suspects will harm her.



has composed with Gabriel, instead of someone else's, and he is putting it into his own context in the twentieth century, demonstrating that his understanding of Cree-ness is becoming more dynamic.

This unnamed collaboration becomes a rebirth of sorts for Jeremiah—he marvels at how their “casual improvisation had grown, in ten months, into a showpiece” and knows that it is solidifying his relationship with Gabriel (267)—and leads to more artistic work. As Sugars explains, linking Amanda and Gabriel to the Fur Queen in their work with Jeremiah, it is “the weakened, dispirited, hopeless, alcoholic Jeremiah, that Gabriel and Amanda Clear Sky will attempt to rebuild—but only through the intervention of the Fur Queen” (Sugars 81). Though Jeremiah resists to some extent, he also seems willing to try to collaborate with Gabriel because he does not know what else to do and because he knows that he needs to be able to start building a community in a way that he never could because in Winnipeg he was isolated as an Indigenous person, even though a community did eventually reach out to him, and Eemanapiteepitat, he was too westernized. This building comes together through an ability to understand the arts, and, thereby, himself, outside of an exclusively western framework as well as understanding Cree-ness in a dynamic way through his collaborations with Gabriel.

This collaboration also has an effect on Gabriel, who has already begun to see the power of the arts. Shortly before this collaboration, when the brothers are at the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow, Gabriel admires the ceremonial dancing and he recognizes the importance of the dance for what Alfred calls a “spiritual revolution”: “Gabriel saw people talking to the sky and the sky replying. And he knew he had to learn this dance.

Someday soon, he might need it” (244-45). He eventually sees the magic of his own work, both in his dancing and in his insistence that Jeremiah work with him in their first collaboration. In language reminiscent of the scene at the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow, in which Gabriel recognizes the power of dancing in an Indigenous context,<sup>81</sup> the narrator explains that after the brothers’ first collaboration,

Gabriel knew his magic had worked, for the audience was speaking to some space inside themselves, some void that needed filling, some depthless sky; and this sky was responding. Through the brothers, *as one*, and through a chamber as vast as the north, an old man’s voice passed. ‘My son,’ it sighed, ‘with these magic weapons, make a new world...’ (267, emphasis mine).

Crucially, it is both the art itself and their collaboration does their building work, though it is only Gabriel who recognizes it at this point. It is in the moment of the recognition, building on Amanda’s assertion about the responsibilities of artists, that it becomes clear that the arts will be the brothers’ “weapons” for building a new world.

While many suggest that the brothers are compromised in their fight by virtue of using western art forms as their weapons, Krotz points out a flaw in that logic. Though Jeremiah feels disconnected from piano playing for the period of time between when he wins the championship and when he begins to collaborate with Gabriel, his piano playing eventually helps him to embrace his Cree-ness and his social responsibilities as an artist: “the realization not only that he *can*, but that he *must* use his training as a pianist to reconnect with his Indian-ness [*sic*] is what spurs the creative awakening that reunites him with his brother and gives him access to a positive artistic community” (197,

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<sup>81</sup> One of the epigraphs of the novel is Duncan Campbell Scott’s statement about the need to eradicate Indigenous peoples’ dancing (ix), demonstrating the power of the arts—especially dance—particularly in an Indigenous context.

emphasis original). In this context, the origins of the weapons become a moot point; the brothers use the weapons that are available to them. Moreover, it is when Jeremiah and Gabriel collaborate using these forms that they begin to make the new world; the collaboration is the weapon as much as the art forms are.

The collaborative process's relationship to undoing the colonial narratives is not straight-forward, however, and it develops as the narrative progresses. Amanda's participation in the brothers' next collaboration, a play that is a modern retelling of the Son of Ayash, *Ulysses Thunderchild*, becomes a catalyst for Jeremiah to rethink his strictly western narrative strategies; with her feedback and eventual collaboration in conjunction with Gabriel, Jeremiah becomes able re-engage the arts on his own terms and with a politicized purpose. Like the weasel and the Weetigo story, the son of Ayash story is about an encounter with the Weetigo, but rather than concentrating on the scars that result from the battle, this story invites its listeners to think about what weapons might be used to build a new world. This story is partially delivered by Abraham on his deathbed as he is given his last rites by a priest (227-28). In it, the son of Ayash is told by his mother that “the world has become too evil. With these magic weapons, make a new world” and so Ayash “journeyed down into the realm of the human soul, where he met evil after evil,” the worst of which was Weetigo, “the man who ate human flesh” (227). The story ends here—we never hear from Abraham who wins—but, as we know about this novel, the point is more about the battle and the process than it is about declaring a winner. The crucial idea is that a different world is possible and that the brothers will need tools to make it.

The Ayash story has an immediate effect, particularly on Gabriel, both personally and in terms of his thinking about the power of the arts. In *Ulysses Thunderchild*, Jeremiah writes a part for Amanda, sets the son of Ayash story in contemporary times, and does more obvious building and reaching out than did their first collaboration. Jeremiah describes the play in relation to James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "if James Joyce can do 'one day in the life of an Irishman in Dublin, 1903,' why can't I do 'one day in the life of a Cree man in Toronto, 1984'?" (277). When Gabriel asks Jeremiah about the modern twist, Jeremiah responds with the community building pedagogical investments of the play: "I want my *Muskoosisuk*<sup>82</sup> to get it. Could we relate to Dick and Jane and that damned dog Spot when we were kids? No. Ever wonder why the school dropout rate for Native people—?" which Gabriel interrupts by saying, "Okay, okay, I wasn't asking for a dissertation" (278). That is, Jeremiah is explicitly trying to build a space for the Indigenous children to whom he teaches Cree to be able to access Cree stories. The play further empowers the brothers to continue with their collaborations, takes up Amanda's suggestion that artists have a social responsibility, and is the first moment that they explicitly tell a Cree story for an audience.

For Jeremiah, it is in writing *Ulysses Thunderchild* that he begins to see the power of politically engaged art, particularly as it fosters connection building for young people. Here Jeremiah clearly moves from a position of 'art for art's sake' of his earlier piano playing days<sup>83</sup> to art with a social function. This is also the play that facilitates his

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<sup>82</sup> English translation: "little bears"

<sup>83</sup> This is not to say that his earlier piano playing is useless, however—it is clearly serves him well—but it has limitations that he later moves past with the support of the Fur Queen.

memory of his abuse, but this remembering comes about because the audience does not know how to read the priest rising out of the Weetigo costume (285), showing the power of both producing art as well as being its audience. As Smith explains,

Gabriel's global performances and Jeremiah's pedagogical integration of Cree mythology into a perhaps unexpected urban scene presumably have and will lead others to a sense of spiritual restoration as well as solidarity, which in turn may fuel activism that has historically occurred in urban centres. (159-60)

Playing “whiteman” music is no longer enough for Jeremiah to do the building that he needs to do;<sup>84</sup> he now creates his own works, as Krotz points out (198), particularly ones that contribute to his ability to bring together the present and the past and recognize connections between what had previously seemed like disparate parts of his life. In working on *Ulysses Thunderchild*, Jeremiah learns how to wield his weapons to build a new world and discovers to which audience he is speaking.

Though Jeremiah is the playwright for this text, it is written more collaboratively after Amanda and Gabriel point out that the play is too invested in realism. Based on their comments, Jeremiah sees the ways in which a realistic representation undermines his work and does not convey the issues he is trying to raise, even as the play is based on a Cree story and despite having had Cree content in their last collaboration. Amanda draws attention to this tension when she tells Jeremiah that he is

“trying to write a realistic play from a story that's just not realistic.”  
 “And what, pray tell, is this story all about?” [he asks]

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<sup>84</sup> This is a reference to the scene in which Jeremiah is reintroduced to piano at the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow. In that scene, he plays what he knows—classical music—but the listeners call it “whiteman music” and ask him to play something else. Because he does not know anything else, Alodius, Amanda's father, takes over. Interestingly, the crowd is responding to classical music's association with high culture, stuffy white western-ness; it is not that they necessarily want to hear traditional Ojibway or Cree songs. One member of the crowd, for example, requests “Havah Negilah” (256).

“Magic.”

Magic? What did she want, a bunny pulled from a hat, a woman sawed in half, water turned into wine?

Finally, all diplomacy, sympathy, and tenderness, Gabriel spoke up. “I think what she means, Jeremiah, is that it’s all up here—” he tapped his forehead, “when it should be down here—” he pointed to his groin. What the hell. “It’s all head, Jeremiah, all head and no gut.” (279-80)

Most important here is Amanda’s likening of Jeremiah’s narrative to magic, particularly given Jeremiah’s limited understanding of what “magic” can mean.<sup>85</sup> Amanda is making an argument for cognitive schemas outside of western realism—or what I call magical realism—as a mode that can more fully express the complexities of the story Jeremiah is trying to tell, which resonates both inside the narrative as well as with regard to *Kiss of the Fur Queen* itself. While McKegney discusses this question in relation to a Cree versus a Christian world view—“[b]y initially failing to break out of the ideological system imposed on them by the forces of evangelical Christianity, the brothers are not yet able to unlock the empowering capacity of traditional Cree thought” (“From” 165-66)—I would suggest that a less essentializing reading would be to think about a departure from hyper-rationality encouraged by a colonial system in relation to a magical realist mode that can be read as resisting that logical framework. Amanda demonstrates that the strictly factual logic that Jeremiah has internalized is not adequate to accomplish his goals. Though we are not told what exactly the play’s content is, beyond the reference to the Son of Ayash story, the sense of the scene is that it contains elements that are not logical in the context of a colonial world view; part of Amanda’s point is to encourage Jeremiah to reflect on the way that colonialism and the suffering it imposes is unimaginable—and, therefore,

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<sup>85</sup> It is important to note that in a Cree context, “magic” may signify spirituality rather than literary genre. The novel appears to leave interpretation open to some extent, insofar as it is never explicitly defined.

illogical in ways that line up with *Salt Fish Girl*'s narrative gaps—and neither can its pain and effects be captured in a realist mode, at least from her perspective. For Jeremiah, the move away from a realist mode allows his work to become a site of imaging through magical realism because of the way that it refuses the colonial logic outside of which he is struggling to think.

While Amanda frames the problem of the play's mode of expression in terms of realism, Gabriel relates it to embodiment, together showing the connections between Highway's view of the potentialities of anti-colonial magical realism as an embodied genre and the colonial disembodiment of realism; both are suggesting that the play cannot rely exclusively on a traditional western narrative style. Instead Jeremiah needs to resist his usual strategy of closing down the body and adhering only to the kinds of logics he has been taught in school and the coping strategies he has developed to deal with trauma. After giving Jeremiah their criticisms, Gabriel tells Jeremiah to watch the performers as they improvise:

[b]efore Jeremiah could pull himself back together, the actors were shouting, wailing, and snarling as, like ping pong balls, they hurled themselves across the sun-splashed space, so in the grip of improvisation they had eyes like demons.

“Yes!” Gabriel flailed his arms like an orchestral conductor fencing with an *agitato*. “Fill that space. Feel it with the tips of your fingers, your forehead, the soles of your feet, your toes, your groin.”

Jeremiah banged at the piano—dissonance like shards of steel—though he had no idea why. “What are you doing?” he yelled at his brother.

“Play!” Gabriel screamed back. “Just play!”

....

Jeremiah clawed at the keyboard, tidal waves of red smashing at his eyeballs.

“Aiaiaiaiaiaiaiyash, oogoosisa, oogoosisa...” Shooting to the ceiling, the wail dove, resurfacing as samba-metered hisses. And one by one, the company fell in with the chant, a dance, a Cree rite of sacrifice, swirling like blood around the altar and bouncing off the bass of the piano like, yes, magic. (280)

Although hurt by the criticism, with encouragement from Amanda and Gabriel and with a demonstration from the actors in the room, Jeremiah is able to begin to get outside of the colonial logic that has informed his world view and artistic practice up to this point. Once the group has had an opportunity to collaboratively break out of the colonial logic that informs the play as written, they come together into a Cree chant that translates to “son of Ayash.” This transformation in modes, from the strictly disembodied western logic to an embodied one that is magical and Cree-centric, allows the play to engage in magic, and they all feel it. The novel risks, here, linking Cree-ness to mysticism, but the narrative resists this reading both because the criticism comes from an active member of the Ojibway nation who is familiar with these kinds of stereotypes, but also because it is not mysticism that she is suggesting that Jeremiah embrace; rather, her argument is about the way that magic is meant to account for things that cannot be accounted for otherwise. Amanda is not arguing, however, for a total rejection of the western framework—she is not suggesting, for example, that Jeremiah write the play in Cree instead of English, as doing so would undermine his. She is insisting, rather, that there are also other legitimate epistemologies that he must learn to embrace and use as his weapons.

It may seem counter-intuitive to think of the arts in terms of weaponry; however, the word is entirely appropriate: the brothers are trying to survive in a genocidal system that was built to destroy them and all Indigenous peoples. As Alfred says, “the war is on” (38). For this reason, the brothers absolutely need weapons. McKegney states that the brothers realize that they must “‘make a new world’ through art” (“Introduction” 8).



Moreover, Cynthia Sugars discusses the ways in which the Weetigo acts as a metaphor for all kinds of violences that require weapons to combat: The Weetigo

represents at once the abusive priests of the residential school, the modern commercialized metropolis, the internal ‘dark night of the soul’ of the initiate’s quest for self-revelation, as well as the cannibalizing monster in Cree legend (who, metaphorically, resides in the recesses of every human heart/society). (74)

Pearson builds on Sugars’s reading to suggest that the Weetigo stands in for all oppressive structures: “the priest is the Weetigo, the monster who devours small children, but he is also the spirit of whiteness, of heteronormativity, and of masculinity whenever those function within the oppressive and dogmatic logics of inside and outside” (“Odd” 90). From these readings we can see that the brothers must use their weapons to challenge a range of problems; they cannot address only one issue as they build their new world, such as racism or colonialism, as all of the sites of oppression are connected because of the ways in which they are undergirded by an overall structure of domination.<sup>86</sup> The brothers must also consider issues like homophobia and misogyny as well, particularly given the extent to which the novel sees them as being related.

The political potential of artistic collaboration develops further when, instead of focusing on the Weetigo, Jeremiah writes a play about Chachagathoo, the Cree shaman who is another embodiment of the Fur Queen,<sup>87</sup> and whose story has had a complicated history in the brothers’ lives. Because of its relationship to the process of colonization, the story of Chachagathoo is not initially told in the novel; her story is positioned vastly

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<sup>86</sup> This is reminiscent of the Combahee River Collective’s statement that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (325).

<sup>87</sup> Gabriel makes this connection: “In the silken light, above the hunter’s head, the white fox winked. Somehow, its askew little grin made Gabriel think of the wicked Chachagathoo” (196).

differently by different people. Sherill Grace argues that this story “is delivered in fragments over the course of the narrative” because “[Chachagathoo’s] power (erased by the strategic misogyny of Catholicism) can only be glimpsed and recovered very gradually” (n.29). Initially, the brothers’ parents tell them that she is evil:

Like all children of Eemanapiteepitat, [the brothers] had been told since early childhood that they were never to mention the name of Chachagathoo inside the house. And they didn’t. All that they had heard of Chachagathoo was whispers that trickled through the village, from time to time, like some unpleasant, unwanted news. (90-91)

The figure of Chachagathoo is positioned as the stuff of nightmares, but this is a deliberate association fostered by colonial forces because she was a community leader who resisted them.

The full story of Chachagathoo is told to the brothers by Ann-Adele Ghost rider when they are adults at the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow, but Jeremiah is a resistant listener. Jeremiah’s discomfort with pow wows, dancing, and Cree traditions more generally persists throughout his life, but Ann-Adele continues to be someone who might give him some context for his uneasiness with them while also fighting for him to be able to see their importance. As we hear when he is at the pow wow, “[a]gainst all reason, Jeremiah was still frightened of this dance, this song, this drum, ‘the heartbeat of our Mother, the Earth,’ as he had heard it said on more than one occasion. Like the door to a room off-limits to children, it still made his blood run cold” (243). Later that day, Jeremiah and Gabriel are present as Ann-Adele tells the story of Chachagathoo, who, we learn, is one of the most significant sites upon which colonialism in Eemanapiteepitat is written. As Ann-Adele says, when desperation struck due to a famine and people turned

to the newly arrived priests to see if they could help, “Chachagathoo, the shaman, warned that *K’si mantou*, the Great Spirit, would not abandon them” (245). The mention of Chachagathoo’s name, however, makes the brothers nervous because they had been taught that she was evil: they have been told that she has *machipoowamoowin*,<sup>88</sup> which they associate with the sexually and otherwise abusive priest, so it is no surprise that Jeremiah responds as strongly as he does. Ann-Adele persists with the story, though, describing how a community member “became possessed by Weetigo, the spirit who feasts on human flesh” and links this occurrence to the arrival of colonial forces because “the first priest arrived on Mistik Lake” as the Weetigo possession happens (246). As Chachagathoo is curing the man, the priest interrupts and the man dies. The priest then accuses Chachagathoo of witchcraft and “had her sent to jail in Winnipeg. There, in despair, she hung herself” (246). Disturbed by this history, Jeremiah resorts to colonialist misogyny, calling Chachagathoo a witch, but Ann-Adele passionately asserts herself:

“No!” Ann-Adele Ghost rider startled them with the passion, and the pain, inside her voice. “No, no, no! Chachagathoo was the last shaman in that part of the world, the last medicine woman, the last woman priest!” (246-47, emphasis original)

At this point, Jeremiah is still not able to acknowledge the histories that Ann-Adele is sharing and continues to avoid the topic, but this story will become very important for him.

Gabriel, on the other hand, does not share the extent of Jeremiah’s discomfort, and his ability to hear these histories leads him to reimagine the arts in a way that will also support Jeremiah’s understanding in the long term. Gabriel explains their history of being

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<sup>88</sup> English translation: “bad dream power”

told that Chachagathoo was evil to Ann-Adele, to which she responds with more contextualizing history, “Your parents’ generation? In the north? Lied to and lied to and lied to!” After Jeremiah abruptly departs, Gabriel wants to explain his behaviour to her, but “[w]hat he saw, however, was her sadness, the exhaustion”; he can see the amount of work that she is putting in to sharing these histories and how hard it is for them to be ignored. Ann-Adele does succeed, however, in that this line of thought changes Gabriel’s understanding of what is possible in the world: “Then it struck him: if *machipoowamoowin*, bad dream power, was obviously powerful enough to snuff out a human life, then would not *mithoopoowamoowin*, good dream power, be as strong?” (247). In this scene we see not only that Ann-Adele is sharing the histories to which the brothers do not have access, but we also see how laborious this process is for her, and, therefore, the degree of responsibility she feels to pass it on. She also contextualizes how colonialism has led some Indigenous communities to believe their stories—here, we might think back to Miranda and Hannah, though each of them differs in their motivations for “buying into” the dominant systems. This is Ann-Adele using *her* weapons to build a different world. Sylvie Vranckx explains the importance of inter-nation knowledge sharing that we see in this scene: Ann-Adele’s knowledge of the history “suggests a history of intercultural contacts between the Cree and this other Algonquian people, but also the need for different Native cultures to share their knowledge and resources” (299). Though the telling is not heard by Jeremiah, a shift does happen when Gabriel recognizes this work as *mithoopoowamoowin* and begins to think

differently about his artistic practice, while Jeremiah is still not ready for a paradigm shift.

Instead, Jeremiah's fear of non-western spiritualities and knowledge systems remains overwhelming and demonstrates how devastating colonialism has been to people of his and his parents' generation. Reder makes an important point to explain his fears: "[i]t is not accurate to say that [Jeremiah] is distanced from his own culture because his own culture is infused with Catholicism, that is itself distanced from traditional practices. Jeremiah has been taught by his parents to be suspicious and frightened of what existed before colonialism" (289). Sugars echoes Reder in pointing out that

[s]ignificantly, the Church is no longer the only repressive force here; this role has been taken up by those community members who have most thoroughly absorbed its colonialist attitudes towards aboriginal peoples.... it is the brothers' parents who steer them away from their cultural traditions by labelling the community's ancient shaman a witch and devil-worshipper and forbidding the brothers to speak her name. (75)

Although neither Reder nor Sugars state it, it is important to bear in mind that the brothers' parents' adoption of Catholicism is a function of the desperation at the time and the power of colonialism; judging and blaming them as individuals misses the point of the story, obscures the power structure of colonialism, and reinscribes the discourses of authenticity—that one cannot be both Cree and Christian—in ways that are counter-productive. What I am trying to do, instead, is to contextualize the history of how these belief systems came to be practiced and to emphasize the novel's suggestion that learning about traditional Cree practices might be beneficial for people who have been cut off from traditional practices by colonial forces. In this scene with Ann-Adele, the Fur

Queen's connecting powers make visible the degree to which colonial violence, misogyny, and counter histories are crucial to read together. She has this knowledge that fills in gaps and explicitly challenges what the brothers have been taught both in school and by their parents, while explaining how their parents were misled, rather than simply pathologizing them. Her telling of the story of Chachagathoo is a pivotal moment in the novel that will eventually provide Jeremiah in particular with the ability to connect history to the present moment. While the brothers do not register the importance of the story of Chachagathoo and the history of colonialism's impact on families like their own at the time, with the exception of Gabriel's thoughts about *mithoopowamoowin*, it resonates throughout the rest of the novel, both politically and in terms of filling in historical gaps.

Chachagathoo's story differs significantly from the weasel and the Weetigo and the Son of Ayash because it is not fictional or metaphoric, though it is told to a group of people at a pow wow, suggesting that it may become a traditional Cree story. This possibility seems more likely because of the play that Jeremiah writes based on the story; like *Kiss of the Fur Queen* itself, *Chachagathoo* puts the contemporary world in its proper context. We do not get an extensive description of the contents of *Chachagathoo: The Shaman*, but we do know the story that Ann-Adele has told, and we know that this story is based on fact within the narrative. We see Jeremiah writing part of the play in Eemanapiteepitat, where the events took place, while visiting Mariesis (291). In the play we hear of Misigoo,<sup>89</sup> played by Gabriel, presumably a member of the community,

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<sup>89</sup> English translation: "eagle"

desperately praying for the return of the caribou (293). He then encounters the Weetigo, and as Misigoo seems to be losing the battle: “[s]uddenly, the creature leapt into the hunter’s mouth. And was gone” (294). Though it is not clear at what point in the play this scene happens, given what we know of the story, this must be the moment at which a member of the community becomes a Weetigo whom Chachagathoo tries to cure. There is no further description of the play’s content, but we do hear that the play is a huge success and has been “given the award of the theatre season” (296). Though we never actually see a representation of Chachagathoo in the play, we know that she is a heroic figure who dies as a result of colonial violences and that the brothers can now see her as a cultural icon whose story must be told.

While the previous two collaborations are important because the first includes Cree content and the second provides a call to action, *Chachagathoo: The Shaman* is significant because it connects historical trauma to the present. Moreover, the importance of Chachagathoo’s story and the writing of the play about her is both what it does for the brothers and what it allows them to do. It was when he first noticed the waving flame on the island where Chachagathoo was captured and Mariesis describes the “bad dream power” that Gabriel connects it to the priest, and, therefore, the Weetigo (91). And it is in Ann-Adele’s elaboration of the story that Gabriel puts together that “good dream power” must be just as strong (247), which starts him on a path to find that hope in art. Indeed, Jeremiah even describes Gabriel’s performance make-up from *Chachagathoo* in these terms: “Everything was as Gabriel had left it: the eyebrow pencils, the make-up—magic weapons of a shaman, a weaver of spells” (302). With Chachagathoo’s story, Jeremiah

and Gabriel find a way to use their weapons to tell a factual story in a way that is not loyal to the colonialist narratives to which they and their parents have been subjected.

Taking a significant story from their childhood that was invested in the same colonialist framework that has harmed them and so many Indigenous peoples and retelling it in a way that is accessible to a wide audience allows the brothers to focus their attention not on the Weetigo figures that have tormented them, but instead to tell a story of a fallen hero, enacting their own politics of refusal. As Bruce Erickson puts it, “[c]ollaborating on the play, *Chachagathoo the Shaman*, [Jeremiah and Gabriel] re-narrate the past of their lives in order to understand the real effects of colonial imposition on Native lives” (326). Chachagathoo’s story brings together the context of the history of colonial misogyny that informs the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, as well as providing an overall look at the limited options Indigenous peoples have had in the face of the colonial forces.<sup>90</sup> As with the witch hunts, furthermore, Chachagathoo’s demonization carries an implicit threat to any dissenters that if they do anything other than condone these actions, they will be subject to the same kind of

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<sup>90</sup> While Chachagathoo’s perspective is never narrated, it is fair to speculate that she would not have hung herself had there been another option. From Ann-Adele’s description, we can tell that she was committed to staying and working in her community without intervention from colonial forces; her suicide must have been her last chance to act autonomously while in the custody of colonial forces. Though Ann-Adele says that “she hung herself out of despair” (246), what we know of Chachagathoo does not support this reading, though everyone has their limits; I would speculate that this was a desperate act, but not a despairing one. Chachagathoo could, presumably, anticipate what would happen to her based on the atrocities that she likely experienced while in custody and with no other recourse, saw suicide as her only choice, if we are even to believe the story of her death, which would have been passed on by the same authorities who held her and who, therefore, have a vested interest in perpetuating a particular narrative about her death. As with some critics’ readings of Gabriel’s death, it might be tempting to read her as sacrificial, but doing so individualizes Chachagathoo, instead of reading her in the context of the violence of colonialism. Nevertheless, telling this story explains for the brothers and for the audience how colonialism works and is made material in people’s lives.



treatment. Because of the history of her pathologization, it is crucial for the brothers to tell her story and show the impact of colonialism and the power and violences of its ideological foundations. *Chachagathoo* explains why and how colonialism has affected Indigenous peoples and has led to a range of consequences, including the loss of language and culture; social isolation, especially in urban spaces; residential school abuses; colonialist misogyny; and higher than average rates of suicide and addiction; and, perhaps most devastatingly, the internalization of racism and colonialism. With this play, Jeremiah and Gabriel use their weapons both to explain how the world came to be as it is, giving Ann-Adele's knowledge of Chachagathoo and other historical traumas a platform from which to be shared, and undermine a pathologizing and individualizing discourse about Indigenous peoples.

With Amanda and Gabriel's support, Jeremiah has moved from work that has Cree content to breaking out of the logical and narrative structures that he has been taught, and in a final move, begins writing a story that takes a Cree-centric approach but that also links the history of colonialism with present day issues; he is now telling a story that is not a traditional story, but, rather is creating his own story that may one day become one. We do not hear much about the genre of *Chachagathoo*, but we do not need to: Jeremiah, for the first time, seems able to refuse the hold that colonial logics have on him. He is no longer making "mindless" associations; he is now able to take what he needs from both contexts, but always in the service of supporting Indigenous peoples' access to the stories.

Part of the work of this novel, however, is that Highway shows how complicated this process of unlearning is, as we see when Jeremiah reverts to colonial logics and how he again is able to refuse them with Amanda's support. We might even call this final moment between them a collaboration. As Gabriel is dying, he makes clear statements about his wishes, boundaries, and what will happen if they are not respected:

“When I die, I want Mom to be allowed her Catholic mumbo-jumbo. But I do not want priests anywhere near my bed. Do you hear me?”

“As if she would agree to such a thing,” said Jeremiah bitterly.

“If she doesn't, I will not see her.” (299)

But, shockingly, Jeremiah backs down and breaks what should have been an unbreakable promise to Gabriel when Mariesis arrives from Eemanapiteepitat and pressures him:

“Jeremiah, you've got to get a priest,” Mariesis urged, in Cree, over her older son's shoulder. Jeremiah said nothing. “If your brother doesn't get his last rites...” Mariesis was crying now.

“Mom!”

“His soul will go to hell, *tapwee!*”<sup>91</sup>

“Okay, okay, okay.” Jeremiah's Cree was like machine-gun fire. “We'll get him a priest! We'll get him a priest!” (301)

When Mariesis returns to Gabriel's room with a priest in tow, we see the stakes of the ritual for her; she is desperate to ensure that Gabriel does not have the worst fate that she can imagine as a devout Catholic. As fire alarms blare because of the smoke of the sweetgrass from the ceremony that Ann-Adele is performing and Jeremiah argues with the fire chief about having the right to have Cree rituals at Gabriel's death, Mariesis is adamant about the priest's role. But it is Amanda who steps in and models how one might

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<sup>91</sup> English translation: “Really (or) yes, really”

refuse her as well as the institutional forces that are trying to interrupt the ceremony, which helps Jeremiah to make the same refusals:

“Open up,” [Mariesis] barked in Cree. “Let the priest in.”

“No,” Amanda barked back, in Ojibway.

“*Nibebeem macheeskooteek taytootew!*”<sup>92</sup> cursed Mariesis with murder in her eyes.

“He will not go to hell,” screamed Amanda, her native Ojibway allowing her to understand just enough Cree.

Monstrous in full kit, the fire chief came face to face with Amanda.

“Madam,” he stated, “you’ll have to move.”

“No.”

....

“Jeremiah!” Mariesis wailed behind the great wall of fireman. “Let this priest in or I’ll kill you!”

Jeremiah yanked the door, reached under the fire chief’s armpit, shoved the midget priest away, pulled Mariesis inside, and slammed the door a third time. (304-305)

While Jeremiah gives in to Mariesis’s pressure and betrays Gabriel’s last wishes initially, Amanda steps in to help him stand up to her, symbolically helping him to refuse the history of colonialism that has been forced upon them all, but to which he in particular tends to bow. With her support, they can together reject this history, privilege Cree rituals, and, most importantly, honour Gabriel’s last and most pressing wish:

Ann-Adele Ghost rider lit a tiny sprig of cedar—after sweetgrass, sage, and tobacco, the fourth sacred herb—and one last puff of smoke rose. Jeremiah stood with his back against the door, his mother biting his restraining hand. For God had finally come for his brother, banging on the door, demanding to be let in. The scream of the fire alarms and engines became a woman’s wail, then another, then another, until one hundred voices were wailing the death chant.

....

Through the smoke and candle light, the Fur Queen swept into the room. Covering the bed with her cape, she leaned to Gabriel’s cheek. (305-306)

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<sup>92</sup> English translation: “My baby will go down to hell”

In refusing entry to the priest, Jeremiah makes the requisite space for Gabriel to have the death that he wants and deserves to have.

In addition to her knowledge of history, Ann-Adele's ceremonial knowledge becomes crucial as Gabriel dies, as she models a way to work with a range of belief systems. McKegney points out that

[i]n order to render historical knowledge and monetary gains productive in terms of post-residential school Indigenous empowerment, Highway argues, tribal values—analyzed, interpreted, adapted, and adopted—must be reinvigorated in Indigenous communities (including urban Indigenous communities) to provide the foundation for alternative conceptions of the position of First Nations vis-a-vis the state. (“From” 173)

This ceremonial knowledge, like the dancing that Gabriel witnesses at the pow wow, are enormous sites of empowerment. Ann-Adele works in tandem with, though independently of, Amanda's refusal to let the symbols of colonial logic take up space in Gabriel's death. Like Amanda, Ann-Adele knows that the colonizing forces are not willing to be unobtrusively present; if the priest and fire chief are let into the room, they will not merely stand by respectfully as she performs the ceremony because part of their eurocentrism is the assumption of their essential superiority and ‘responsibility’ to control Indigenous peoples. In contrast to the ideological underpinnings of the colonial forces, Ann-Adele replaces the rosary that Mariesis puts in Gabriel's hands with an eagle feather. Notably, though, Ann-Adele stops before discarding the rosary, and instead hangs it “on a cross-dressed Ken doll,” as Henderson points out (196), near his bed (303). Susan Knabe suggests that this

gesture is a recognition of the complex ways in which Gabriel's identity as a queer native man has been formed; while it need not be read as reconciliatory, it

certainly does, when combined with the image of Gabriel's white lover, Robin, gently cradling the dying man's head, suggest alternative ways of mediating the disparate elements of Gabriel's experience. (131-32)

Rubelise Cunha, on the other hand, claims that "[t]he Catholic rites are replaced by an Indigenous ceremony," but she does not note that Ann-Adele does not discard the rosary. Unlike Knabe and Cunha, I am not convinced that Ann-Adele's gesture has much to do with Gabriel's sexuality or that it is a gesture of replacement. Rather, I would suggest that Ann-Adele, here, is making room for a range of belief systems within Indigenous communities, particularly those of Mariesis in this context. But along with making room, Ann-Adele is privileging the belief system that makes the most sense to Gabriel, which we know based on a discussion with Jeremiah (183-84). Ann-Adele's ability to perform the ceremony means that Gabriel can decide for himself which traditions will be practiced at the time of his death. Ann-Adele's knowledge contests the naturalization of Christianity, its pathologization of Indigenous cultures and ceremonies, and colonial histories, which the brothers, especially Jeremiah, need to see is not only possible, but empowering, while also leaving room for other possibilities. This is not a hybrid ceremony, but rather is one that allows for a range of investments while respecting Gabriel's wishes about what happens in proximity to him, a choice that he could not make as a child.

This scene is the first time that Jeremiah is able to directly act in his own interests against the colonial forces. Embodied in the priest, the fire chief, and Mariesis to some extent, with their investments in what a death ceremony ought to be, couched in the language of rules and administration, these forces initially compel him. With Amanda's

support, and despite his mother biting his hand and threatening violence, Jeremiah is able to resist the colonial narratives and thereby honour and protect the person who most needs it. This time Jeremiah does not abandon a sex worker for escapism, or his brother because of his own homophobia and because abandoning him is easier than standing with him. But despite his ability to resist, it remains clear that the process of unlearning will be long-term and will have setbacks. This is not a reason to lose hope, however; making the kind of substantive change that is required to build a new world must necessarily be complicated, require support, and be imperfect if it is going to value a building and learning process.

Despite inevitable setbacks, the interaction of the characters and stories, all of which are connected to the Fur Queen, offers the brothers the ground work and opportunities to imagine how a different kind of world might be built. But it is not until Jeremiah and Gabriel begin their artistic collaborations that they begin to build one; these stories lay out the power of and need for the arts in building a new world because the arts have the potential to teach in ways that other methods cannot. The Fur Queen's building differs significantly, though, from that of a figure like Lucy: while, surely her long term goal is an entirely new system, she starts from the brothers' self-conceptions and supports them as they begin doing local work that speaks to their pan-tribal urban Indigenous community and educating non-Indigenous people along the way if possible, though this is not their priority. This educational work is visible in Jeremiah's social work and teaching Cree to children, but that work remains reparative. The brothers' work is most effectively articulated in the brothers' artistic collaborations.

The Fur Queen facilitates the necessary connections for *Kiss of the Fur Queen* to make its argument about strategies to address histories of colonialism and, more than just survive, how to build a world in which Indigenous peoples, especially urban Indigenous peoples, can thrive. In this framework, there must be positive models, knowledge of histories that do not merely replicate dominant norms, and creative works that help to imagine beyond an either/or discourse of victimization and that also shows the relevance of traditional cultural knowledges in contemporary times, and support systems that continue to push our own learning. As McKegney explains,

Highway explores the ‘meaning’ of the Residential School experience not through factual regurgitation, cathartic though that may be, but through *storytelling*. And I want to emphasize that such storytelling is not just an aesthetic response to Highway’s artistic sensibility—though that is certainly a factor—but that it is political; and potentially more politically effective than its alternative.... [H]e inverts the assimilation process, taking a non-Native reliance on notions of objective history and subjecting it to Cree mythology, arguing that the mythic and historical pasts are never entirely distinguishable, nor are they separable in any absolute way from the present or the future. (“Claiming” 68, emphasis original)

McKegney is right about the effectiveness of the novel’s strategy, but it is doing more than this too: *Kiss of the Fur Queen* not only lays out the weapons that need to be in place in order for the building of a new to be world possible, but it also demonstrates what a learning process might look like for someone who has internalized many of the dominant narratives and must unlearn them and work through both internalized self-hatred and externalized violences, particularly in an urban space. As Smith explains, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

documents and envisions an Indigenous cityscape that is rooted in the stories of those whose removal from ancestral lands does not lead to a lack of Indigenous culture but instead brings about a uniquely urban but nonetheless articulate sense

of Native identity.... for [Highway's] characters, fulfillment comes not from an in-between Cree identity, but rather from locating and transforming Cree identity within an urban, transnational landscape. (160)

McKegney builds on this point, emphasizing the pedagogical importance of this work:

“[L]ike Jeremiah, Highway *is* a Son of Ayash; he creates the world anew through narrative, not only for himself, but for those who hear his stories” (“Claiming” 73). The book does double duty, then, by both having Jeremiah work through these issues and also by having him act as a model for this process while resisting traditional “hero” narratives’ quick fixes and easy answers.

Moreover, the book also raises questions about concepts of hybridity. Reading the novel as hybrid, Krotz, for example, insists that “the novel is an equally transculturated form, and any questions that Highway asks of classical music must be asked of it as well” (198), but the novel does not support this reading. Highway’s novel is not about hybridity, as so many suggest, but rather is about how to resist colonial logics with the weapons that are available alongside how to build capacities and alternative weapons. So when Krotz suggests that “[t]he political force of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* lies in its ultimate refusal to privilege any single cultural or generic influence” (199), what she, and other critics who make similar arguments miss, is that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* absolutely does privilege Cree-ness, but the novel emphasizes that it cannot ever make claim to or rely on a *knowable* or *authentic* Cree-ness because of the destruction that colonialism enacts. Due to the history of colonialism, the idea of cultural authenticity no longer works; it only divides peoples. Though cultural revitalization, through capacity-building language classes for people who do not have their language(s) is an absolutely essential



strategy in resisting colonial forces, for example, people also need to be able to work from where they are with what resources are available to them, as the brothers do. As Sherill Grace points out, “the Windigo [what Highway calls the Weetigo] that Highway confronts seems unstoppable. Like all artists and story-tellers, the most he can do is to give us some weapons with which to fight back and a renewed energy for the fight” (259). Though Grace leans towards defeatism here, she is right that Highway’s novel does provide some weapons, but I would suggest that the most important of these tools is the Fur Queen’s capacity to draw connections that respond to discourses of hybridity and the way that she makes this skill available to the brothers. Part of the colonial project has been to both enact violence while also erasing itself as the site of the violence so that it is difficult to make these connections and, thereby, to ensure that the system does not change; it is in the interests of colonial forces to perpetuate the myth that the range of sites and consequences of colonialism that the novel foregrounds are disconnected, disparate, and individualized.

What Highway needs most to accomplish his goal of making the connections between the sites of violence and the sites of possibility is a flexible character whose embodiment can take a range of forms—one who can foster imagining. While Lucy and Evie are also non-conforming, their non-conformity mainly functions to provide them with an outside perspective because of their ability to see the structures in place as well as their experience in seeing different worlds. The Fur Queen is also able to see the structures and has the benefit of experience, but because her character is not part of the world in the way that Lucy and Evie are, her non-conformity allows her a higher degree

of mobility. I argue that through the *Fur Queen*, the novel suggests that unquestioned investment in dominant discourses limits possibilities for imagining; they leave no room for alternatives. Because of this structural impossibility, the *Fur Queen* is not interested in fostering an inclusive nation; rather, the novel focuses on building a different world on a small scale that will eventually lead to a larger scale change. As Alfred says, “[w]e will begin to make meaningful change in the lives of our communities when we start to focus on making real change in the lives of our people as individuals” (32). Highway sets the novel in what appears to be a hopeless dystopia, at least from the perspective of Jeremiah, and then uses magical realism to move the *Fur Queen* between spaces, times, and planes of existence in order to suggest that there are other possibilities.

She makes visible the connections between historical events and the present, and in connecting these circumstances to Cree stories, both old and new, shows how history is always present, but does not have to be definitive of the present or the future. Through the connections drawn by the *Fur Queen*, especially through her embodiments as Amanda Clear Sky and Ann-Adele Ghost rider, and the stories of the weasel and the Weetigo, the son of Ayash, and Chachagathoo, the novel offers a model for how Jeremiah and Gabriel do—and how the reader might—navigate the colonial present and build a different future. As McKegney shows, “Highway’s semi-omniscient narrator performs the role of spiritual translator for the majority of the text, while his protagonists learn, as the story goes on, to perform this task for themselves” (“From” 154). The goal of the *Fur Queen* is to support the brothers’ abilities to make their own connections.

After learning to use the weapons that are available to them, with the responsibility that they have as artists, the support of strong models and the historical knowledge that they need, they not only tell Cree stories, but they bring visibility to histories that have been actively suppressed. The danger of the colonial narratives resurfacing is perpetually present, as we see in *Salt Fish Girl*'s warning about "next time" and as evidenced by Jeremiah's actions in Gabriel's death scene, but this is not a defeatist position: what it shows is that the unlearning of these narratives is long term and a process. There is no silver bullet solution, and showing that that is the case—even if it is not ideal—is the early work of creating a new world with the support of the Fur Queen. There is no straightforward way to unlearn the destructive narratives that have made the world what it is, but that does not make it any less revolutionary. With the support of the Fur Queen, the brothers, through their artistic practice, are building a world that acknowledges history without being bound by it, one that is for Cree and other Indigenous peoples, one that will foster further learning in others, and, most importantly, one in which they do not need to rely exclusively on the Fur Queen to make connections; they have come a long way towards having the skills and knowledge base to make their own, even as it will continue to be a process.

Making Connections: The Dystopic Present and Imagined Futures

“we must dream and enact new and better pleasures,  
other ways of being in the world,  
and ultimately new worlds”  
-José Esteban Muñoz (1)

José Esteban Muñoz’s work on utopia helps to bring together my readings of *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, *Salt Fish Girl*, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* insofar as his work encourages us to look towards the future as a site of hope. Though his work is about reading the concept of queerness as a site of potentiality, its investments resonate with the work I have argued that these novels do: his work “offers a theory of queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present” (18). His attention to temporality is crucial for my work because of the ways that the past and present are positioned as the impetus for imagining a different world. Muñoz’s work insists upon the need to find the sites of hope that build communities, despite the smug skepticism that many academics, at least stereotypically, espouse. In relation to this move towards imagined futures, my dissertation has been asking how and why three novels with complex relationships to the Canadian nation-state, written in a magical realist form, imbue characters from different racialized backgrounds and whose genders and embodiments do not conform to social norms with the ability to imagine alternative forms of community-building.

My argument is that the non-normatively gendered and embodied characters in the magical realist-dystopian novels—dystopian in their settings and magical realist in their responses—*Not Wanted on the Voyage*, *Salt Fish Girl*, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

operate to make power structures visible and foster an imaginative response to them in an effort to bring communities together to build a more equitable world. These characters are not interested in a politics of inclusion; instead, they are interested in a creative collaboration that begins from addressing the needs of the marginalized, a possibility that none of the other characters in their texts are able to imagine, and thereby critique the dominant formulation of nation in the Canadian context and show that another kind of world is possible. Because we can read them as magical realist-dystopias that take on the long-term project of imagining alternatives to the dominant social order, these novels have more explicit space to do this imagining than other genres have readily available.

These novels complement each other because they all ask questions about how we might go about building a different world, and they see value in the *process* of accomplishing this goal, not just in the end result. The novels are set in dystopian moments of catastrophe and use magical realism to navigate these spaces. These are all novels with pedagogical investments. Through these novels, readers are invited to think along with the characters about the social structures that are in place and the impacts that those structures have on themselves and on marginalized populations. The novels each approach this work differently: *Not Wanted on the Voyage* encourages people with privilege to think about how that privilege has come to be and at what cost; *Salt Fish Girl* does the messy work of trying to think through how one works with loved ones who are invested and imbricated in these systems of power; and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is pitched mainly at urban Indigenous peoples who are struggling in order to model how one might live with history and learn to think outside of oppressive internalized systems, with a

secondary interest in educating settler audiences about the long-lasting and myriad effects of colonization. That the novels' imagining is done in a magical realist genre is not surprising: this genre arose out of sites where imagining alternatives was necessary for survival. Magical realism also allows the narrative to make the familiar unfamiliar by taking the reader out of a recognizable context and putting her into a parallel world in order to make critiques and question the logics and investments of the former order.

The novels work with varying degrees of magic realism as they take up the project of imagining a different kind of world. Although they all begin with a kind of origin story, they differ quite significantly in terms of both the setting and the scale of their critiques. Findley is concerned with the large scale questions: Lucy points out the violence built into (white) western social formations, as embodied in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*'s antagonist, Noah and works towards a reimagining of social structures that are more equitable than the white supremacist heteropatriarchy that determines the lives of marginalized groups. This novel emphasizes the possibilities of imagining and uses magic realism to encapsulate the entire socio-political structure: Findley is engaging with the arbitrary nature of the privilege that accrues to particular subject positions, the resultant choices and compromises made by those who do not have access to that privilege, and the importance and possibility of imagining an alternative structure. He does so by setting the novel in the distant past at a crucial moment in the history of the west, during the time of Noah's ark: the novel raises life-and-death questions in terms of who is allowed on the ark and the conditions under which people on the ark live. Part of the work of the novel, however, draws the reader's attention to the way that this power

dynamic reflects dominant society in contemporary times: the stakes of these questions are just as high in contemporary society as they are on the ark. That is, the ark is a strategic transposition of the social power structures in the world around Findley, particularly those of Canada. By moving the story to another time and place, Findley allows the reader to examine the power structure from a distanced position, thereby facilitating her ability to see the problems with the hope that she will make the connection to the contemporary moment.

In terms of temporality, Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* takes a different approach by being set in multiple times and places: at the beginning of the world in the ancient past, like Findley; in industrializing eighteenth-century China; and in the future at a point at which the logical conclusions of contemporary social and political practices are made visible in the west coast of what was formerly Canada and the U.S. The magical realist elements in this novel appear in terms of the movement between timelines, in the re-embodiment of the two main characters, Evie and Miranda, over these different timelines, and in the futuristic ethical questions that get raised with regard to cloning and labour. This novel is about learning how to read rhetorical strategies, euphemisms, and omissions perpetuated by those in power and the structures that support them, which the general population is meant to take for granted. In the futuristic timeline, cities act as nation-states that, as with Findley, speak to current socio-political structures that determine who will and will not thrive in the present system. In addition to asking questions of the reader, *Salt Fish Girl* emphasizes education in the context of trying to spread awareness within intimate relationships about power structures in which a loved one is unaware of her implication.

Lai's novel has a dual purpose and works in both large and small scales: it explicitly demonstrates the education process as it happens between two people who love each other, but it also makes large-scale critiques and leaves logical gaps within the text itself that invite the reader to begin to question the world around her.

*The Kiss of the Fur Queen* raises related questions, but it differs from Findley's and Lai's novels in that it is set in contemporary times and in a recognizable place: 1980s Winnipeg, Manitoba. Instead of imagining a different place as a dystopia, this novel hones in on the dystopic experiences of urban Indigenous peoples and uses magical realism to allow the Fur Queen to show a relationship between (seemingly) disparate issues. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, like *Salt Fish Girl*, moves between large and small scale critiques, but focuses on the smaller scale. As the rest of the world goes on as if nothing is happening, and, indeed, flourishes as a result of this settler utopia/Indigenous dystopia, Highway is careful to map out the sites of hope within the dystopia: this is not a novel that victimizes. Instead, it looks unflinchingly at colonial practices, their impacts, and explores the complicated ways in which one might live with that history, showing the larger implications of its small scale focus. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* looks at an urban Indigenous experience of colonial trauma, both individually and structurally, as well as internalized colonialism, homophobia, and racism, and brings together its critique of the myriad effects of colonialism through the magical realist capacity of the Fur Queen. The novel emphasizes the empowered ability to work from where one is with the skills that one already has (whether one recognizes these tools yet or not), the importance of access to and sharing of alternative histories that reframe colonial narratives, the importance of



traditional Indigenous knowledges, and the power of collaboration and creativity to survive, thrive, and live with the legacies of trauma in its imagining of a different kind of world.

Because of the complex purposes to which the magical realist genre has been put in these novels, a degree of flexibility in my reading practice has been necessary to enable a reading of the texts alongside each other, particularly with regard to the topic of nation. The fact that these are all Canadian literary texts, however complicated the term “Canadian” is, means that their engagement with the idea of building communities raises questions about the Canadian nation-state. That is, while none of the novels explicitly names Canada as the site of their critique, they cannot be read entirely outside of this context because they are so clearly invested in ways to build communities outside of the structural inheritances of their societies; as with *Kiss of the Fur Queen*'s discussion of history, the history of the nation remains present in discussions of large scale community building in Canada, though its presence does not have to be definitive. Though Lucy, Evie, and the Fur Queen tend to privilege their most immediate communities, they are also always already addressing larger socio-historical and geo-political structures that have everything to do with the nation-state and the complexity of lines that it draws around “insiders” and “outsiders.” They do so both in explicit ways, such as through legislation, and in more implicit ways, such as through the dominant cultural imaginary, as we see, for example, in the social naturalization of oppression against particular groups in each novel.

Given that Canadian identity is frequently imagined as being less clearly delineated than that of other nations, such as the U.S., it is perhaps not surprising that these authors would address the process by which geo-political communities are constructed. This is not to say, of course that the “uncertainty” of Canada is a foregone conclusion: there are laws, such as the Indian Act,<sup>93</sup> in place that articulate clearly just what it means to be “Canadian” and who is subject to race-based policing, but there are also gaps in that legislation insofar as it is not completely successful in this policing; as Evie says of unexpected outcomes that governing forces did not and cannot anticipate, “[t]hey couldn’t control for everything” (158). This policing, however, co-exists with the Canada’s national narrative of benevolence. Eva Mackey explains this cultural imaginary as follows, showing the mutually constitutive nature of state practices and the cultural imaginary:

In contrast [to the American image of “cowboys chasing and killing ‘Indians’”], the Mounties in the Canadian image are symbols and representatives of the kind and benevolent *state* – the state that supposedly treated, and still treats, its minorities more compassionately than the USA. (2, emphasis original)

This complexity exists in a symbiotic relationship with the cultural imaginary that attributes negative characteristics and, therefore, barriers to particular groups of people, thereby illustrating the boundaries around and erasure of conflicting histories of what “Canadian” means. As Mackey goes on to explain, “national identity is produced in face-

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<sup>93</sup> This is not to suggest that the Indian Act should be abolished, however. Jo-Ann Episkinew, among others, shows very clearly that there are protections in place within this legislation (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 33). The legislation, however, primarily serves the interests of the settler nation. The point I am making is about the differential governing practices, over-policing and criminalization, and access to adequate healthcare and social services that marginalized populations face as supported by this kind of legislation.

to-face encounters in multiple sites, as well as through representations, institutions, and policies” (6). These facts of the treatment of minoritized populations are over-written by the national narratives and operate as a rhetorical strategy to facilitate an erasure of and justification for state and cultural practices that we might call “polite” oppression.

Texts such as those used in my project draw our attention both towards and away from the practices of the nation-state. As Dionne Brand explains, “[n]ation-states are configurations of origins as exclusionary power structures which have legitimacy based solely on conquest and acquisition” (64), and these texts work towards building a different kind of community, but we cannot divorce this work from its implicit response to the legacies of violence that construct the nation. Part of the political engagement of these books are their suggestions of alternatives as well as their refusal to grant the nation-state the kind of primacy it imagines itself as having. *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is set in a long-passed world—one that has particular social structures that reference the nation-state in that they are top-down and articulated by Noah—but these structures are contested by Lucy and her collaborators as only one option. *Salt Fish Girl* takes up the nation-state more explicitly, but is looking at it in terms of late capitalist globalization in which the corporation has superseded the nation-state. In this text, though, geo-political relations have shifted, rather than having changed substantively; people remain subject to these corporations to differing degrees based on their perceived conformity to social norms, and Evie’s task is to do consciousness-raising in an effort to build alternative structures and communities. Finally, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* most actively refuses to acknowledge the nation, though it is implicitly visible throughout the novel’s discussion

of colonial practices. Like Lucy and Evie, the Fur Queen facilitates an alternative socio-political engagement. Hers is small-scale, local, and is particularly interested in supporting urban Indigenous peoples as they face ongoing colonial practices. The parallel sentiment across the texts is that the nation-state has vested interests in an idealized citizenship and works to enforce conformity. These top-down structures are actively hostile to bodies that challenge them, so the novels and the characters who inhabit them are working through the process of how to make their own spaces.

It is significant, then, that the characters who facilitate these alternatives are all non-normatively gendered or embodied, all primarily presenting different queer femininities, while also being divine. This non-conformity bears interrogation, however, as there is a need for careful attention to the representation of characters with non-normative embodiments as Namaste discusses. In her reading of Marjorie Garber's work on gender non-conformity as a symbol of cultural crisis, Namaste articulates the problems with many representations and readings of gender non-conforming people:

As a literary critic, Garber is interested in the representation of cross-dressing.... But what is missing from her research is a conceptualization of transvestite identity as a real, lived, viable experience.... Garber implies that the transvestite is an effect of performance and nothing else. Insofar as she reduces the transvestite to a mere tropological figure, a textual and rhetorical device that points to the crisis of category and the category of crisis, she has effectively undermined the possibility of 'transvestite' as a viable identity in and of itself. (14-15)

That is, characters whose genders do not conform to the dominant norms are often used as metaphors instead of being treated as having any connection to the actual lives of trans\* people. None of the authors I take up position their novels as investigations of the oppressions that are experienced by people with non-normative genders or embodiments

specifically, though they are all concerned with the oppressions experienced by marginalized peoples. There is a danger in the way that they, and perhaps I, draw parallels between these sites of oppression, in addition to the dangers of potentially tokenizing these characters as always already outside of the body politic with a “special ability” to see and understand social problems and structures. The authors, however, have constructed strong, dynamic characters who are able to see the social structures that remain invisible and normalized to everyone else in the novels. Though each of the characters experiences violence differently, they are related in that they are also the ones who imagine an alternative social structure; they are among or closely related to the populations who experience the most violence, but they are also exceptional within those populations.

It remains significant that the characters are outside of those social structures in various ways, particularly as they are all divine: Lucy is an angel who can change her appearance at will, Evie is the reincarnation of a god who has lived through many kinds of marginalizations, and the Fur Queen is Weesageechak, a divine being who can move through time and space and also change her appearance at will. While in many cases people outside of the norms are severely disempowered, in the case of these novels, they are powerful figures fighting alongside other marginalized peoples. While their power is not necessarily directly attributed to their divinity, their extra-social positions and lifetimes-long experience mean that they are more readily able than others to see the repeated pattern in top-down social structures.

It is crucial to recognize how their gender non-conformity alongside their super-human positionality affords them an ability to see outside of the dominant structures—this is not an exclusive function of one site or the other—particularly given that the authors are not self-identified trans\* people, to the best of my knowledge. These are well-developed characters whose experiences, I suggest, demonstrate the violence that they incur without being only victims of it; they are the strongest voices who have the most agency in their narratives, while the remainder of the characters are largely at the mercy of the structures that shape their lives. We also cannot ignore, however, the gender dynamic. On the one hand, it is fantastic to see feminine characters given these special skills, but it also naturalizes this work falling to feminine people (or clones, as the case may be), a concern that Faris raises with regard to women in magical realism. At the same time, feminine people are most likely to experience these violences, so it is not unrealistic that they are most likely to be responsive to it.

That the characters' relationships are overwhelmingly positioned in relation to normatively gendered women raises questions about the gendered contexts of the novels: Lucy works predominantly with feminine people, and her husband, though not feminine, does not display dominant masculine traits; Evie is queer and all the clones of her series are feminine; and the Fur Queen consistently embodies feminine subjects—with a couple of instances of a queer hyper-femininity and one person whose gender identification is unclear—in support of two cis brothers who are horrified by gender-based violence experienced by Indigenous women, though they, especially Jeremiah, also have misogynistic moments. Despite this potentially problematic emphasis on femininity,

however, these texts would not have been as compelling had the heroes been (uncomplicatedly) masculine, in addition to their rewriting of the overwhelming masculinization of deities in many religions. The gender dynamics of these novels are complex, and it is worth noting which characters enact what labour, how that labour does or does not refer back to traditional gender roles, and what the ends of this labour are, in addition to seeing the potential romanticization of the non-normative “outsider.”

These questions about the potential tokenization of the characters become more complicated when we think about their exceptionalism in relation to their social context. While the characters upon whom I have focused do not fit norms, they tend to be associated with cis-women whose gender identities are relatively uncomplicated. In this way, the novels are not really about gender at all; they privilege dominant feminine characteristics, such as collaboration, over dominant masculine ones, such as individualization, but there is very little questioning of the boundary between the two, despite the non-conformity of Lucy and the Fur Queen.<sup>94</sup> The novels do not only naturalize gender boundaries, but the characters whose embodiments are non-normative are largely outside of the social contexts in which they exist. This isolation and exceptionalism risks leading to an exoticization and romanticization of their abilities: the novels position this outsider status as both isolating in that there is no one else like them, though there is no representation of the characters discussing this isolation, except for Nu Wa, and enabling, insofar as it allows them to see things from outside the system. All of

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<sup>94</sup> Since Evie is more embodiment non-conforming than gender non-conforming, her context is not relevant to Namaste’s concerns, though she remains her own kind of “outsider” who is like Lucy and the Fur Queen in that she isolated and enabled by this exceptionalism.

the work falls to these outsiders, but they are the ones who realize that the work needs to be done and possess the skills to do it. As many anti-racist scholars point out, this labour consistently falls on the bodies of those marginalized by these systems. We might then read the projects of these novels as raising questions about gender and embodiment boundaries, but then naturalizing them as other social formations become unstable. The novels suggest that when social foundations change, the oppressions faced by many will also change without naming gender as a site of this change, which leads me to wonder if the work these novels are doing winds up leaving this site of critique out because the project seems to become too unwieldy if it is left in? Is this another case, as Halberstam describes, of gender becoming a stabilized category in the face of other social category destabilizations? Do the novels reify the idea that gender non-conforming people are not 'of this world,' but instead are ghettoized, if celebrated, as only ever exceptional people whose lives are not liveable?

Like all art, these novels are not unflawed, but they are making interventions into their socio-historical contexts in ways that are useful. *Lucy, Evie, and the Fur Queen's* outsider status facilitates their abilities to imagine a different kind of world and this parallel is particularly important, given that it arises out of novels addressing very different racialized and ethnicized histories; I suggest that each of the authors sees gender as a site of possibility because of the extent that it is a naturalized and unquestionable identity category in the dominant imaginary. The novels respond to moments of dystopic devastation, and they use the possibilities that magical realism offers in order to imagine



alternatives. In their own ways, they are asking about geo-political relations in Canada and are proposing their own theories about how to respond.

The novels are all hopeful and are utopian in their efforts to imagine alternative social structures, and so instead of keeping these voices marginal, the authors bolster their voices with special abilities and position them as visionaries. One notable difference in this context is that the worlds that Lucy and Evie are trying to build are worlds of which they will be a part, while the Fur Queen seems likely to remain a divine figure who moves in and out of the newly imagined world. The Fur Queen is not exempt, however, from the pain of existing in the current, flawed world: we see her pain when she embodies some characters, but it is also clear in her conversation with Jeremiah after Abraham's death, when she talks about people needing her and the sense of hopelessness that might emerge if she were not around (232-33). Though she is often smiling, the meaning of her smile is never made clear, and that she bothers with the human world at all suggests that she has an investment in it, and, therefore, that it is painful to both witness and participate in this world. Though they are implicated in different ways, all of these characters have investments in the worlds that they are trying to imagine.

The novels' engagements with their socio-historical moments are a call to action for people who are comfortable and a call for solidarity for those who are not. They affirm the action that is being taken in the interest of building a different kind of world while also insisting on the importance of attention to the process by which that action comes to be: despite being about imagining a different world, each of the novels ends ambiguously. In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the final scene has Mrs. Noyes on the ark,

praying for rain because she cannot imagine that anything substantive will change; in *Salt Fish Girl*, Evie and Miranda have run away to a place where the environment has not yet been destroyed by the corporations, though Miranda knows that there will be a next time; and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* ends with Gabriel's death from AIDS, though the sense is that Jeremiah will be able to continue with his work, now having the tools that he needs. These narratives do not have happy endings that we can use as guides. Instead, they continue their work of showing us that change will be a process and that the work is not done.

Written in the contemporary moment in Canada, all of them with vexed relationships to the nation, the novels are not only describing their own dystopias, but are also inviting the reader to ask, how do we live in our own? All of the novels point out that we live in a world where the horrors that the novels address are commonplace. How do we sit with that knowledge? How do we work towards building a new world while also valuing the process that the building requires? How do those of us with privilege to lose embrace the fear of that loss? How do those of us with little or nothing to lose work against the systems that have made that the case and against internalized oppression to see our inherent value and believe that something different is possible? And when we learn the answers to those questions, how do we find the tools for building?

One point that this project has been trying to make, drawing from *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, *Salt Fish Girl*, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, is that the arts is one place to start the work of imagining otherwise. This emphasis on the power of the arts is made most explicit in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*'s discussion of artistic practice, but it is implicitly

evident as well in the work that the novels themselves do; each novel is an artistic production that imagines otherwise. The novels' strategies are not new—the arts have often been used to imagine otherwise—but these novels are unique in their explicit description of strategies for building as well as their look at this work in the Canadian context. They bolster the concern about the dismissal of the humanities as without purpose, and they also implicitly raise concerns about the position of gender in our reading practices. Part of the reason that these characters are exceptional is that there is not enough room in the Canadian cultural imaginary for queer bodies to be fully realized as an integral part of communities; this is part of why Lucy, Evie, and the Fur Queen must imagine alternatives. Because of the way that these characters' embodiments question naturalized foundational “truths” about the world, the authors see their non-conformity as sites of hope to question other ones, primarily the self-perpetuating top-down social structures that shape the world. These novels argue that there is a fundamental connection between social organizing structures like gender and nation, if imperfectly. In showing that these structures are not natural or the only way a world might look, the novels make room within the confines of the dominant structures to imagine alternatives.

These novels also want readers to have an expansive understanding of what “revolution” means: it happens on both large and small scales; it is not a prescribed set of actions, but, rather, is adaptable enough to meet the different needs of different peoples; and it can be a slow process. These novels provide readers with tools, but they also suggest that we already have other ones, and we always have. Drawing from these novels,

my project is trying to start a rumour. It is trying to help build literacy skills that elucidate the opacity of naturalized social systems and work against the individualizing logics that lead us to believe that we are not responsible for each other, while also trying to love each other as our process of learning hurts and, potentially, directly harms each other. It is trying to show how collaborative creativity and knowledge sharing can foster the requisite community-building to encourage people to see themselves as whole, despite histories of trauma, without also drawing parallels between kinds of trauma and the needs of different peoples. These novels have a lot to teach if we are willing to learn.

Bringing these novels and their strategies into the educational space of university classrooms has the potential to be a revolutionary act, though universities have complicated histories in relation to revolution. There has been amazing work done on campuses by people fighting systems, but there has also been incredible destruction wrought by institutions like universities. Universities are top-down systems, and people with doctorate degrees are meant to act as “experts” on topics in ways that arise out of the same logics against which these novels are fighting. For those of us who are teachers in institutions like universities, especially those universities on unceded territories or that are imbricated in work that serves the interests of corporations or the military, it is imperative to think about our responsibilities on large and small scales: we must ask ourselves not only which texts to teach, but how, where, to whom, and in whose interests will we teach them? What are the possibilities that arise out of this teaching, and what are the limitations of it? How do we protect the possibilities, while addressing the limitations, both in ourselves and in the institution? How do we account for and support learning both

inside and outside the classroom? And how do we hold each other accountable for these enormous responsibilities while recognizing differences in kinds and modes of revolutionary action? These are not questions I can answer; as the novels demonstrate, the development of revolutionary thinking is a process. We will not necessarily know in advance that we are doing well, and neither will we be able to foresee all of the new problems that will arise.

We can, however, use these novels as models as we move forward. Each of these texts emphasizes the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing; in their own ways, they are providing readers with guidelines, or maps, for how one might engage in large scale social change. As Muñoz explains, queer aesthetics “frequently contain[] blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity” (1), and this is certainly the case in these novels: Lucy shows the power of an idea and how it can ignite a revolution, Evie shows how reading beneath the facade of dominant socio-political structures can lead to a revolutionary paradigm shift, and the Fur Queen shows how to translate revolutionary ideas that connect seemingly disparate sites of violence from a localized positionality to a larger audience through collaboration and art. In short, all three characters demonstrate for the reader how revolutionary thinking starts and grows, though we need to be cautious about celebrating their representation as gender and embodiment non-conforming beings. The magic of these novels is that they help readers to identify social problems and see the urgency of them. They foster our critical analyses: they start and perpetuate long-circulating rumours, they help us to see structures, and they show us that we already have the tools that we need to respond. These novels show us that we can start from where we

are, that we need to start small, but that despite the pervasive narratives that work to naturalize the current order that is dystopic for so many of us, another world is possible. Most importantly, they show us that the change starts with imagining.

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