Diasporic Playgrounds: How Coming-of-Age Stories Unsettle Official Multiculturalism in Carrianne Leung's *That Time I Loved You* and Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the perspectives of children in the short story collections *That Time I Loved You* by Carrianne Leung and *How to Pronounce Knife* by Souvankham Thammavongsa function to challenge government discourses on multiculturalism in so-called Canada. Through depictions of mental illness among immigrant and refugee families, acts of secret-keeping that keep hurtful information hidden, and rejections of heteronormativity, these coming-of-age stories resist attempts to assimilate migrants into an overarching storyline featuring success, gratitude, and transparency. The thesis's introductory chapter contextualizes Canadian Multiculturalism, reviews pertinent scholarship in diasporic studies within English Canada, and considers the place of the *bildungsroman* genre in this field. Chapter 2 embarks on a close analysis of the primary texts, exploring how immigrants and refugees who express mental illness and/or die by suicide subvert discourses that emphasize the potential prosperity of those who come to Canada. Chapter 3 addresses secret-keeping among the children of immigrants and examines how withholding information is a radical act practiced by those who are meant to be legible and grateful to the nation-state. This chapter highlights literary techniques such as unnamed characters and sparse language which contribute to secrecy within these texts. Subsequently, Chapter 4 discusses immigrant queerness and how it stands in contrast to the linear temporalities embodied and projected by hegemonic rhetoric. The final chapter of this thesis offers concluding thoughts on the unique epistemologies of migrant children: how their knowledges, which reach across space and time, hold something greater than the sum of their individual inheritances. Among these children is the wisdom to imagine more equitable societies and futures that prioritize justice and kindness.

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I am a child of immigrants, and I live on unceded Beothuk and Mi'kmaq territory. I wrote this thesis as a guest on these lands, and I am forever aware of this position. I earnestly hope I have done justice to these complex relationalities in the pages that follow.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Canada receives global praise as a country that celebrates multiculturalism, but government institutions have controlled these congratulatory discourses since their introduction. This has prompted immigrants and refugees to write back with their own stories. For over a century, writers have used storytelling as a means to convey alternate experiences of "Canada," countering hegemonic narratives of national benevolence with diasporic truths rooted in lived experience. Energized by the reductive discourses of the 1971 multiculturalism policy, more recent authors carry on this tradition through unique appropriations of genre and form, continually making space for emerging voices. In the short story collections of Carrianne Leung and Souvankham Thammavongsa, entitled *That Time I Loved You* (2018) and *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020), respectively, immigrant and refugee families work to reconcile complex identities through coming-of-age narratives. The many child protagonists of these texts blend curiosity and innocence with deeply embodied histories to reveal the intimate textures of each life unfolding in Canada. In doing so, they also challenge national narratives that commodify cultural diversity and simplify immigrant stories (Ash 402), allowing characters to imagine their own modes of belonging: a radical practice in itself.

Carrianne Leung was born in Hong Kong to parents who immigrated to Canada shortly afterwards. Her short story collection evokes the Scarborough suburb of her childhood, filled with characters whose situated knowledges reflect her academic background in sociology and equity studies (Douglas). While her young, racialized narrators are the primary focus of this

thesis, the white and adult protagonists of *That Time I Loved You* help to further characterize this heterogeneous suburb where cultures spill into one another across fences and streets. Thammavongsa likewise spent her youth in Canada, after her family of Lao refugees sought asylum in Toronto. She completed her undergraduate degree in English at the University of Toronto and published her first of many books while still a student (Boisseau). Thammavongsa's narratives in *How to Pronounce Knife* embody a range of refugee experiences. Half of the stories are recounted by young people navigating diasporic childhoods, and the other half by adults on comparable coming-to-voice journeys regarding sexuality, social positions, and changing family dynamics.

Both Leung and Thammavongsa have received attention for notable previous publications, including Leung's *The Wondrous Woo* (2013) and Thammavongsa's extensive oeuvre of poetry.[1] Their most recent works, the focus of this study, privilege the position of the child. Rotating perspectives enable multiple coming-of-age stories to intertwine, offering valuable new representations of diasporas in Canada. The linked short stories of *That Time I Loved You* allow insights in each chapter to tie into previous stories, while the interconnected themes of *How to Pronounce Knife* weave the collection together in similar ways. Through the complex cultural immersions of their young protagonists, and their deployment of narrative form, these texts suggest that the children hold knowledge about grief, hope, loyalty, and community that reaches across space and time.

This Master's thesis has at its heart my academic interests in diasporic literatures and postcolonial studies. Simultaneously, this research is profoundly personal. As a child of

[1] See *Small Arguments* (2003); *Found* (2007); *Light* (2013); *Cluster* (2019).

immigrants navigating my own path in Canada, I make sense of my experiences through storytelling. My roots grow in Newfoundland and Labrador, the only home I've known, but my life is deeply textured by the Indian parents who raised me here. I find meaning and validation in the stories of others who are likewise exploring the increasingly porous cultural boundaries of a world where so many are on the move. In a 2020 interview, Leung talks about her first encounter with a Chinese Canadian writer upon reading SKY Lee during her undergraduate studies; she shares how she did not even realize, until this point, that work like this could exist—writing that bridges distant places and philosophies while simultaneously anchoring, with intimate attention-to-detail, in the present space and time (Douglas). My experience upon reading *That Time I Loved You* has been similar to Leung's discovery of *Disappearance Moon Cafe*, and since that moment, I have felt a deep commitment to migrant stories and everything they contribute to notions of belonging, rootedness, and identity in this rapidly-turning world. Each immigrant life is incommensurably unique, yet there are threads that connect these narratives together. By focusing on these threads in my thesis, I create dialogue with past and present voices offering new ways to conceptualize diversity in the nation known as Canada.

As of yet, neither *That Time I Loved You* nor *How to Pronounce Knife* has received extensive scholarly attention,[2] but both collections have earned prestigious awards for their unique representations of immigrant life in Canada. These include a Danuta Glee Literary Award (2018) for Leung's work, and a Scotiabank Giller Prize (2020) for Thammavongsa's. In both the 1970s Scarborough suburb of *That Time I Loved You* and the less-distinct settings of *How to*

[2] Timothy August's 2021 article, "The Refugee, Recently," is the only scholarly consideration of *How to Pronounce Knife* to date, while *That Time I Loved* You has yet to be the subject of academic analysis.

Pronounce Knife, these texts write back against government discourse through form and content. They exist within a literary tradition that has been reimagining what Kit Dobson terms the "scripts of national belonging" (95) in Canada since the rise of diasporic literatures in the twentieth century, investigating what it might mean for migrants and their children to make this place their home. Ideas on belonging range from corporeal, embodied histories that acknowledge the "local as always implicated in the global" (Brydon 991) to constructions of "urban modes of being" (Dobson 90) that transcend national boundaries.

Scholars in the field of diasporic literatures are especially intrigued by second-generation Canadians and their complex inheritances. The children of immigrants "often construct identities in the space between the dominant mythologies of multiple 'homelands'" (Delisle 1-2); they become vessels for receiving stories, and are tasked with the role of refiguring these to make sense in and of their worlds. Not only do these young people form striking relationships with their parents, but they also explore "new forms of *intra*-generational relations" with their peers, allowing the second generation to "come to some sort of new terms with itself" (A. Mackey 229). The existing scholarship on second-generation worldviews,[3] while extensive and insightful, is mostly preoccupied with young-adult and adult perspectives; it often overlooks the point-of-view of the child, who sees and hears everything while cultivating a sense of sense that overlaps their many worlds. The children hold wisdom that we ought to listen to, and for this reason, my thesis uses standpoint theory to position their perspectives as

[3] Literary criticism on Canadian and American diasporic writing, with a focus on second-generation perspectives, includes: Brada-Williams (2004), Gabriel (2004), Caesar (2005), Brydon (2007), Smyth (2008), Dobson (2006), Banerjee (2010), Delisle (2011), Davis (2012), Mackey (2012), Wutz (2015), Dawson (2017), and Martins (2018).

invaluable. Drawing on this feminist theory as well as intersectional approaches to the *bildungsroman*, I aim to demonstrate how crucial knowledge is situated in the immigrant child.

The subversive coming-of-age stories in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* work to overturn hegemonic discourses of Canadian multiculturalism. The child protagonists in these narratives allow alternate stories to emerge about often-overlooked themes in immigrant communities—themes such as mental illness, secret-keeping practices, and queer identities—that are frequently eroded to make space for an overarching rhetoric on migrant pathways to "success." The voices of immigrant and refugee writers in Canada resist these reductive discourses, and, in the works of Leung and Thammavongsa, they do so through the complex cultural immersions of young narrators.

Multiculturalism Policy and Lived Diversity: Contexts

As this thesis intersects the political and historical spheres while remaining, at its heart, a literary study, a degree of contextualization is helpful in order to situate the short stories of Leung and Thammavongsa. Canada became a country on July 1st, 1867 when the British Parliament passed the *British North America Act*, a document that outlined the structure of government and distribution of powers in this newly-formed Dominion (McIntosh and McConnell). For over a century, the nation's constitution lay in the hands of Great Britain, and could only be amended by the latter. As Canada neared its centennial, however, the country moved towards patriating its constitution: a process that was rife with tensions that are inseparable, as this section will discuss, from the sociopolitical motivations surrounding the multiculturalism policy.

The nation's search for a unique, distinguishing identity has long been complicated by its diverse influences. Prior to the Second World War, immigration policies in Canada demonstrated profound racism, from head taxes on Chinese migrants to Wilfrid Laurier's ban on Black immigrants on the pretext of "climatic unsuitability" (Van Dyk). Roadblocks for Italian, Indian, and Japanese immigrants were also put in place during this time (Van Dyk). Moving into the latter half of the twentieth century, Canada was experiencing economic growth requiring increasing labour sources, and the country wished to carve out a distinct identity from the shadows of Britain and the United States. Despite this desire for a unique national character, the government reinforced Canada's British heritage by seeking white, Northern European immigrants for labour after World War II, only reluctantly turning towards Italy, Portugal, and Greece when supplies of the former began to dwindle in the late 1950s. The continuing economic boom into the following decade, coupled with a depletion of European immigration sources, resulted in a legal change in 1967. At this time, immigration laws were set up on a merit-based point system, allowing individuals from Asia and developing countries around the world to come to Canada if they were seen to have potential to contribute economically (H. Leung 108). A subsequent, and sustained, influx of immigrants from vastly diverse nations altered the social landscape of this country in ways that the government struggled to control and contain.

Parallel to these developments in immigration were the ideological changes that began during the 1960s in Quebec (Owram 23). Rising threats of separatism at this time led to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963, which aimed to strengthen equality between English and French Canadians while offering rhetorical emphasis on the

country's "two founding nations" (Kymlicka 18). When Pierre Trudeau became Prime Minister in 1968, one of his central goals was to appease Quebec and incorporate this province into the government's national agenda. However, when Trudeau began working with the ten provinces to patriate the Canadian constitution, this came at the cost of Quebec's signature. The *British North America Act* became the *Constitution Act, 1982*, but Quebec feared any political change that could compromise its language and cultural identity: for this reason, it chose to resist "destabilization of the status quo," even while deeming this status quo to be unsatisfactory (Owram 42).

The federal government's subsequent attempts to include Quebec in the constitution brought about the Meech Lake Accord of 1987. The premiers and federal leaders, under Prime Minister Mulroney, gathered at this lake in Gatineau Park, and discussed several proposed constitutional changes, the most notable of which would recognize Quebec as a "distinct society" (Everett 13). The Accord was given a three-year window to be ratified, but any potential consensus unravelled prior to 1990. Critics were uncomfortable with the possible weakening of federal power, the repercussions of Quebec's distinct society clause, and a lack of consultation with First Nations about these changes (de Bruin).

This background on Quebec's demands for recognition is closely entwined with the development and perpetuation of institutional multiculturalism. Charles Taylor, a philosopher, multiculturalism scholar, and proud Quebecois, perhaps captures the issue most succinctly when he suggests: "…this insistence that Quebeckers should treat their historical identity as just one among many is often seen by Quebeckers as a refusal of the fundamental duality of Canada, as a country comprising both a francophone and an anglophone society, each

integrating immigrants in their own fashion" (419). This idea of a "fundamental duality" forms the foundation of Canada's multicultural discourse, the first of its kind in the world (Guo and Wong 2). Yet, despite the fact that this policy was a recommendation of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, many citizens of Quebec viewed it as a dismissal of their status as a "founding nation" of Canada.

Pierre Trudeau's speech to the House of Commons in 1971 is widely recognized as a federal attempt to resolve the sociopolitical issues of this era through an official policy of multiculturalism. By introducing "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" (Kymlicka 19), Trudeau positioned English and French Canada at the forefront of cultural identity in this country, while ostensibly promoting respect for the many different ethnic groups that had made this place their home. The political motivations behind this policy were not subtle. While the Liberal party enjoyed a traditional support base in Quebec, they worried that the rise of separatism would threaten their popularity in the province (Gagnon et al.). Further, Trudeau was optimistic that this policy would garner votes for his party among communities of new immigrants in Ontario (Gagnon et al.). The result was a government move that was largely symbolic in its celebration of diversity and, more importantly, profoundly strategic in its centring of white, British- and French-descended peoples as true "Canadians."

Under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, this policy became the Multiculturalism Act of 1988, with the expressed goals of reducing discrimination and offering funding for programs to celebrate cultural diversity. The social landscape since this period, however, challenges the ability of Canadians to describe their nation "as a land in which diversity is a *fait accompli*" (Szeman x). In a self-reflexive move on the part of the government, the department of Canadian

Heritage conducted an evaluation of its Multiculturalism Program between the years of 2008 and 2015, and identified gaps in meeting unique local needs for project support; difficulties in communication and coordination; and a lack of national strategy for addressing systemic racism (*Evaluation of the Multiculturalism Program* iii-vi). Additionally, this research included survey results that indicated "over half (54%) of Canadians agree that there are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values" (25), raising concerns not only in relation to hostility and expectations of assimilation, but ultimately regarding questions of what these *Canadian values* might truly imply.

From the perspectives of immigrants whose communities are touched by these policies, official multiculturalism often fails to address or enhance their lived experiences. In 2002, UBC scholar Minelle Mahtani conducted a series of interviews with diasporic women in Toronto who identify as mixed race, discussing what these discourses mean to them. Many participants offered a view of multiculturalism as "an institutional project which funds and promotes staged ethnic representations, supporting the expression of cultural difference through food, family, personal and religious practice" (73-74). Several individuals shared that these superficial celebrations of heritage "did not communicate much sense of the daily realities of their lives" (74). A similar study involving second-generation high school students in Toronto found youth to hold positive outlooks on the concept of multiculturalism until the moment at which they "look beyond their local spaces and consider how racialized and ethnicized immigrants… are treated by powerful White people and institutions" (Ali 91). Some examples of these contexts include drawing suspicion in shopping malls (100), facing harassment at the hands of the police (101), and being subject to broad racial and ethnic stereotypes (101). These voices, while varied

and dynamic, each agree on one thing: diversity is crucial, but institutional multiculturalism does not do justice to the diasporic communities within Canada.

Adding to these reductive official discourses is the fact that migrants have been amalgamated into the same broad category. As Smaro Kamboureli observes, "'Diaspora' may commonly evoke displacement, but particular communities and individuals resist being subsumed into a single narrative; instead, they demand that we address their cultural, historical, and ideological specificities" (*Scandalous Bodies* vii). Meanwhile, there are powerful intersections between these communities. In discussing his hometown of Brampton, Paul Barrett reflects on the possibilities that dwell in "this unplanned project of cultural mixing," particularly among "young people who possess something like a critical awareness of multiculturalism as a state-sponsored, watered down substitute for antiracism, and also a lived reality and a source of new and exciting possibilities" (193). When diverse communities come together, there is a type of synergy in their interactions: an energy that concurrently reinforces their "ideological specificities" while exploring novel, cooperative ontologies. These ideas emerge from the ground up, envisioned by people who are responding to official discourses with creativity and ingenuity. This thesis focuses on one such group of visionaries: the artists and writers who are continually reimagining what it means to be a diasporic citizen of Canada.

Theoretical Frameworks: Young Wisdom, Nations, and Land Relations

This thesis aims to cultivate insight into the experiences of immigrants within the settler-colonial state known as Canada, but it is simultaneously important to remain critical of the very construct of the nation. In 1983, Benedict Anderson famously theorized the nation as

an imagined community: a population of individuals, most of whom do not know their fellow-members, who nonetheless collectively partake in a national vision rooted in European and capitalistic schools of thought (6, 38). Time and again, history has demonstrated that discourses of nationalism will leave select groups behind, and in Canada, this exclusion most often takes place amongst Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Colour (BIPOC) who "remain Other to the national imaginary" (Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies* 84): an imaginary, as discussed above, that is strategically depicted as white and Northern European. While examining ongoing police brutality towards Black people from a twenty-first-century perspective, Rinaldo Walcott argues that, "In Canada, generally speaking, Black people remain out of place" (*Critical Inquiries* 2). In a related, biopolitical discussion, Paul Barrett emphasizes the necessity for a "blackening of Canada by making visible the abjection of black bodies from the nation and by insisting that black people belong here" (21). In line with this thinking, I draw on Bengali-Canadian scholar Himani Bannerji to suggest it is crucial to remember that "Living in a nation does not, by definition, provide one with the prerogative to 'imagine' it" (66). The child protagonists in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* are people of colour who frequently experience additional marginalization due to gender, class, and sexual orientation. The image of "Canada," under construction since 1867, fails to make sense of these "irreconcilable contradictions" (Bannerji 64); and, as this section will discuss, institutional multiculturalism does little to address the issue.

The creation of national imaginaries, which inevitably privilege certain residents over others, also warrants a crucial positioning of diasporic citizens with respect to Indigenous Peoples. Scholars of Indigenous and Asian relations discuss the potential for collaborations

between different groups of marginalized peoples, while continually acknowledging the incommensurable histories that characterize these respective communities. In an article entitled "Indigenous and Asian Relation Making" (2019), Malissa Phung describes her practice of "genealogical disclosure" as preferable to tokenistic land acknowledgements, whereby she shares her family's refugee story while admitting that they came to live as "uninvited guests" on Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakado, and Tongva territories (18-19). She opens up dialectical possibilities between these groups while acknowledging her family's complicity in the displacement of Indigenous Peoples in North America. The crucial reason for this complicity, as Larissa Lai discusses further, is the fact that immigrants and refugees enter Canada "with papers that the Canadian government considers legitimate" ("Epistemologies of Respect" 99), thereby receiving citizenship from the same settler-colonial government that controls land rights.[4]

Simultaneously, there exists a profound potential for Indigenous and racialized diasporic communities to create alternative ontologies together, for "something like an Indigenous desire animates diasporic consciousness: the search for somewhere to belong that is outside the imagined community of the dominant nation-state" (Clifford 205). Before embarking on this work, however, we must centre "this fundamental loss—the loss of Indigenous lives and lands and livelihoods—in our theorizing and understanding" (Phung 22; Justice 12), only then moving

[4] It should be that noted many First Nations refer to North America as Turtle Island, choosing not to make distinctions between borders that were formed after colonial contact. While I use the term "Canada" to refer to the space in which Leung and Thammavongsa write their stories, readers are encouraged to view this word as a construct: one that evokes the exclusionary government practices that these short story collections collectively identity and begin to unravel.

on to explore potential relationalities. Within this possibility, I draw on Ien Ang's notion that "acknowledgement and acceptance of moments of incommensurability are crucial if we are to make the most, politically and theoretically, of the conditions of complicated entanglement in which we find ourselves" (58). These moments, according to Ang, offer momentum to continue striving towards communication, "forever chasing for an ultimate fullness of understanding and complete commonality that are never achieved "(58-59). The tension between incommensurability and commensurability is a potential space where discourses can develop that imperfectly bridge the worlds of immigrants with those of Indigenous communities. The perpetual state of incommensurability between the two offers a productive possibility for dialectics. Diasporic studies scholar Lily Cho perhaps articulates these disparate realities best in saying, "Not all elsewheres are equal, and not all dislocations are the same" (100). Using difference as a starting point, then, opens up our ability to explore new, connected ways of being.

In studying the multiple perspectival resonances that characterize "Canada" through fiction, I invoke standpoint theory to fully explore the epistemic possibilities in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife*. This feminist theory suggests that all knowledge is socially situated, and that individuals in subordinate positions hold insights surpassing those who are above them on a social hierarchy. While standpoint epistemology has traditionally informed research in the social sciences,[5] Brooke Lenz makes an argument for its relevance to literary criticism: "Because of its attention to social and ideological constructions and its

[5] Originating in Hegel's master-slave dialectics (Medina-Minton 440), standpoint theory has been further developed by philosopher Sandra Harding (1986), feminist scholar and scientist Donna Haraway (1988), and intersectional theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990).

openness to alternative readings, literary criticism offers an ideal site for an examination of the processes and provocations of standpoint theory" (100); in particular, literature offers a site where one may oscillate between individual perspectives and "larger social realities" (Lenz 100), frequently demonstrating, through fictional contexts, how these may interact with one another. Through an analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, Lenz demonstrates how standpoint theory allows a postcolonial character—an Antiguan woman in America—to challenge power relationships that "reify dominant ideologies and obscure the knowledge produced from marginalized locations" (101), focusing instead on the crucial ideas that emerge from those often-overlooked margins.

Research on standpoint theory has grown to encompass the experiences of marginalized genders, lower classes, and BIPOC. In 1987, Canadian sociologist and standpoint theorist Dorothy Smith proposed an approach which investigates the social and institutional contributions of women, "whose work has been both necessary" and "unrecognized" in their networks (153). Smith went on to introduce the concept of *institutional ethnography* to explore how everyday language and understandings are "rooted in social relations" (156) beyond their individual capacities, focusing specifically on the many forms of "textually mediated discourse" (152) that organize institutions. Three years later, American scholar Patricia Hill Collins offered critical nuance to this feminist theory through discussions of race: "Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African-American women's intellectual tradition" (2-3). Standpoint theory continues to vitally address the experiences of these aforementioned groups, and in conversation with existing scholarship, I further suggest that the

situated knowledges of children are vital: particularly those of the child protagonists at hand, who offer profound insights emerging from intergenerational and cross-cultural navigations.

Due to their unique social positions, these characters add nuance and complexity to the traditional coming-of-age story. A genre born in eighteenth-century Germany, the *bildungsroman* has historically featured protagonists "striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity" (Graham 1), particularly during periods of rapid social change. Theorists have characterized this writing as a "process of becoming" (Bakhtin 23) or a practice of "trial and failure" (Minden 5), but postcolonial and diasporic iterations of the *bildungsroman* challenge the Eurocentric model of social conformity, striving instead to alleviate a sense of "homelessness" experienced by those who are marked by displacements and colonial legacies (Hoagland 219; Cheah 242). As Stella Bolaki suggests in her book *Unsettling the Bildungsroman*, many ethnic protagonists turn to "less alienating spaces for empowerment and belonging" (25), particularly engaging their local communities in a type of joint coming-to-voice that brings in fragmentation, discontinuity, and space for diverse perspectives. These adaptations of the *bildungsroman* also embody the tension that erupts when characters who are plotting themselves "onto normative values (and implicitly into citizenship status)" simultaneously take on the task of "critiquing patterns of historical, economic, and cultural exclusion" (A. Mackey 228; Slaughter 1410). Coming-of-age stories have historically been associated with complex desires and multilayered conflicts, but in diasporic studies, these challenges superimpose themselves onto larger-scale questions of belonging, citizenship, and purpose.

A further element of the *bildungsroman* that is especially relevant to this study is how coming-of-age narratives, including diasporic ones, may facilitate an "enhancing [of] the contact zones" (Bolaki 13) between genres, troubling the boundaries between different forms of writing in order to draw on diverse stylistic possibilities. The very fact that Carrianne Leung and Souvankham Thammavongsa deploy the bildungsroman within a short story context highlights how this genre, whose translation is rooted in the German word for "novel," is being stretched, challenged, and re-appropriated. This technique is particularly apparent in *That Time I Loved You*, where linked stories blur the distinction between short story and novel. Characters recur time and again, but in different settings, and from different vantage points, allowing new and unexplored perspectives to emerge every time. Each short story stands independently, but together, they create rich and dynamic dialogues about the insights of children growing up during Canada's 1970s immigration boom, when the points-based system opened doors to skilled immigrants of diverse national backgrounds. In much the same way, *How to Pronounce Knife* deploys stylistic contact zones by means of ostensibly unconnected narratives that are linked intrinsically through overarching themes: in this case, the experience of fleeing from war in Laos and seeking asylum in the nation-state of Canada, a journey that often ends in subversively tenuous gratitude.

As such, both of these collections reflect the transformative ability of short stories to portray intersectional coming-of-age narratives. The short story genre is capable of depicting complex, transnational subjectivities, as indicated by a recent wave of literary publications around—and since—the turn of the twenty-first century from writers based in North America,

England, and beyond.[6] For instance, scholarship on American diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri discusses how her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) works "towards solving the problem of representing an entire community" within a single work, by "balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story" (Brada-Williams 453). In a similar manner, Gabriel discusses how Canada-based Rohinton Mistry creates "double diasporas" that challenge national narratives of culture in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (2), depicting individuals in rotating stories who dwell between multiple spheres of belonging. The colliding perspectives of the short story form hold a remarkable ability to represent diasporic experiences, with particular potential to capture the rich textures of migrant lives. This structure contributes to creating vivid, tangible characters and settings in the texts of Leung and Thammavongsa, with particular emphasis on how the worldviews of children can reimagine justice and equity in our societies.

[6] Short story publications around (and since) the turn of the century include Petesch's *The Immigrant Train* (1996), Chandra's *Sari of the Gods* (1998), Gillan and Gillan's *Growing up Ethnic in America* (1999), Gish's *Who's Irish?* (1999), Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Codrescu's *A Bar in Brooklyn* (2005), Bezmozgis's *Immigrant City* (2019), Mutonji's *Shut Up You're Pretty* (2019), Reid-Benta's *Frying Plantain* (2019), and Kellough's *Dominoes at the Crossroads* (2020).

Scholarly Context: Ruptures and Collisions

While *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* are recent publications, each text lives within a rich tradition, particularly among Asian Canadian[7] writers and scholars. Artists from these communities have worked to articulate their presence in Canada since Montreal-raised Eaton sisters, of Chinese and British heritage, began publishing in the late nineteenth century (Goellnicht, "A Long Labour" 2). Prior to the 1980s, these writers were largely outnumbered by European immigrants who became enveloped into a "nationalist project of Western settlement" (Verduyn 110), including well-known names Laura Salverson and Frederick Grove, of Icelandic and German heritage, respectively. Other forms of diasporic writing in the early twentieth century included literature of Swedish, Hungarian, Italian, Greek, and Ukrainian influences (Verduyn 109). In the second half of the twentieth century, the shifting sociopolitical climate associated with the points system introduction of 1967 and the Multiculturalism Act of 1985 ushered in a new wave of Asian Canadian artists across the nation. As Larissa Lai is quick to clarify, this was "not because of the act itself, but because community-based artists', writers', and activists' responses to its limitations added to an organic energy that was already there in racialized Canadian communities" (*Slanting I* ix). These creators worked to make sense of historical events by representing them through art, thereby

[7] The term *Asian Canadian* has been the subject of ongoing academic debate, particularly with regards to the decision of whether or not to hyphenate this identity. In this thesis, I espouse Minelle Mahtani's stance that the hyphen positions ethnicity "outside Canadianness—as an addition to it, but also as an exclusion from it" (78). I further draw on Karina Vernon's notion of the hyphen as an "incomplete equals sign" (85) that also acts to repress complicated origin stories and exclude an invisible third term: the ever-presence of Indigenous Peoples on the lands being discussed (86). I simultaneously recognize that Asian Canadian, even in its unhyphenated form, is insufficient to encapsulate the diverse, distinct cultural identities embodied by immigrants in this category.

communicating their own diverse insights on the Chinese Head Tax, the *Komagata Maru* incident, and the Japanese Canadian internments during the Second World War.[8]

The participation of refugees in this project of writing back intersects with that of immigrants. While the latter embody experiences ranging from voluntary migration to more pressured forms of relocation, refugees are marked by forced displacement. The connection between these groups in Canada, from a temporal perspective, exists because the development of multiculturalism policy took place during the Vietnam War, which forced individuals to flee not only from Vietnam but also from Laos, Cambodia, and beyond. As Timothy August explains in "The Refugee, Recently":

> Canada has conceptualized the role of cultural diversity and refugees at similar moments, as the ideology of Canadian multiculturalism was created as the Canadian populace was viewing images of Southeast Asian refugees on their television sets and shortly thereafter met this new immigrant population in person. (3)

As refugees settled across Canada, they worked to exercise agency over their own narratives, and by the mid-1990s, many Southeast Asian refugees, in particular, were being recognized for their "unique artistic value, recoding the refugee as something other than an object temporarily produced by geopolitical forces" (August 1). Refugees have always been storytellers, as Donald Goellnicht aptly points out, because "Narrative, or storytelling, is central to the process of claiming refugee status" ("Cross-Racial Refugee Fiction" 194). These narratives, initially curated with the purpose of seeking asylum, evolved with time and creative freedom to meditate on the policing of borders and boundaries and the complex influences affecting refugee children

[8] For discussions of these events, see Van Dyk, Johnston (2006), and Davis (2012).

who are coming of age in the diaspora. Some of the most prominent writers in Canada today offer refugee stories linked to personal and family histories—writers such as Kim Thúy, Sharon Bala, and Thammavongsa herself, recognized nationally for work that paradoxically calls into question the construct of nationalism.

The Asian Canadian writers who have emerged over the past four decades challenge the idea of "two founding nations" by asking what it means to write Canadian Literature. As Diana Brydon and Marta Dvorák suggest in *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue* (2012), this might mean envisioning a field where "the Canadian may not disappear, but may well become destabilized and rearticulated" (10), or re-appropriated to coalesce with diverse literary traditions. I draw once again on Larissa Lai's insights to conceptualize diasporic Canadian, and specifically Asian Canadian literatures: "While there has been a tendency, certainly at present, but also at various historical moments to posit a linear and heroic history for Asian Canadian literature, I argue that it is in rupture and coalition the term has been most generative" (*Slanting I* 1-2). Ruptures and coalitions mark each significant moment in diasporic writing history, from the landmark 1979 publication of *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology* to the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop in Vancouver later that same year, featuring authors such as SKY Lee, Sean Gunn, and Rick Shiomi (Beauregard 4). Another such moment was Joy Kogawa's publication of *Obasan* (1981), a piercing reflection connected to her family's internment in Slocan, British Columbia, during the Second World War, and an act of resistance toward national narratives that often exclude this chapter of Canadian history.

Despite a tradition of Asian Canadian writing reaching back to the 1800s, it was only in the 1990s that these literatures began to prompt the formation of a distinct scholarly field,

through critics such as Roy Miki and Lien Chao who shifted the focus away from formalist studies and towards critical investigative potentials instead (Beauregard 54). The 1994 *Canadian Literature* special issue on Asian Canadian writing, the 1997 ACCUTE inaugural conference on Asian Canadian literature, and the 1994 "Writing Thru Race" conference each revolved around the notion that "historical and literary concerns are closely related in Asian Canadian culture" (Goellnicht, "A Long Labour" 1; Verduyn 115; Beauregard 60). History is inseparable from the production of literature by a group of people that the Canadian state has oppressed, in various ways, for over a century.

If we take a step back from Asian Canadian studies and consider, more generally, Canadian scholarship on diasporic writing, a further moment of rupture is Smaro Kamboureli's publication of *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (2000). In this text, she compellingly introduces the "sedative politics" of Canada's multiculturalism policy, which "sets out to perform the impossible act of balancing differences, in the process allowing the state to become self-congratulatory, if not complacent, about its handling of ethnicity" (82). *Scandalous Bodies* offers transformative readings of texts such as *Obasan* "at the intersection of diaspora and ethnicity" (Verduyn 137), and Kamboureli's TransCanada project extends this work into a series of workshops, seminars, conferences, and academic publications. Paving a path for many later scholars in this field, Kamboureli ushered in a new age of subversion in the study of English diasporic writing, filled with critical approaches to national imaginaries and pivotal discussions of how ethnicity profoundly influences the immigrant experience and its representations in literature.

Thesis Directions

Ruptures and coalitions take place each time a writer questions state-sanctioned representations of immigrant "normativity" and, for the purpose of this thesis, I focus on three main forms of subversion in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife*: depictions of mental illness, instances of secret-keeping, and resistances toward the heteronormative nuclear family unit. While immigrant experiences have textured many coming-of-age stories in Canadian literature, a notable distinction in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* is the presence of child protagonists instead of young-adult characters, the former of whom are still coming to terms with their complex inheritances. As Allison Mackey suggests in discussing the young-adult protagonists of Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* and David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, "the process of growing up entails a separation from origins, on the one hand, and a reworking of self-other relationships and the establishment of new kinds of ties, on the other" (249). Characters who have reached their teenage years find themselves grappling with the task of forming relationships with self and others that offer insight into their familial experiences in Canada. However, the child protagonists of *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* have yet to consciously recognize the nuances of their family histories and to fully understand the ways in which their own lives have been influenced by movement and migration. Instead, these inheritances crop up inadvertently, through surprising demonstrations of empathy and insight, or through novel connections with space and place-making. The child narrators have yet to wrestle with their sense of belonging, and as such are less focused on the *bildungsroman*'s traditional preoccupation with social integration.

Chapter 2 investigates one outcome of these unique age demographics, namely that the gravity of the child's position has not become clear to them yet, particularly in serious circumstances such as the duress of parents suffering from mental illness. I draw on Aritha van Herk's notion of the "triumphalist arc of the official Canadian immigration story" (350), focusing on the subversive possibilities of those families who stray from the trajectory of migrant pathways to success. This chapter explores the suicides, mental illness, addictions, and grief inhabiting *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife*, but also analyzes the function of radical joy, particularly among children, as a simultaneous, paradoxical, presence. In each of these contexts, the attitudes and insights of young people offer valuable knowledge about the experiences of their immigrant parents.

These young protagonists display moments of transition between childhood and adulthood through the secret-keeping practices I analyze in Chapter 3. This chapter is in dialogue with Carrie Dawson's scholarship on subversive silences among those who are meant to be uncomplicatedly grateful to the state ("Treaty to Tell the Truth" 3). It is also in conversation with Gayla Fujita's notion of attendant silence (34), a common practice in Japanese culture, yet one that is too often interpreted as "inscrutable" (Cheung 7) among immigrants who have brought this tradition to Canada. The child narrators of *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* often keep secrets instinctually, to protect loved ones from information that could harm them. They selectively withhold knowledge in order to take care of others. Far from being maliciously dishonest, the secrets of these short stories unveil kindness.

In chapter 4, I discuss a final potential for resistance towards national narratives: the queer immigrant, particularly the queer racialized child, who, by merely embracing this identity,

refuses to represent a "productive" future as seen by the Canadian state. Inherent to depictions of the queer, immigrant child is McCallum and Tuhkanen's concept of queer time (1), which liberates individuals from socially-scheduled life events such as marriage, career development, and children. Queer time is also embodied by every immigrant and refugee who chooses to start their life from scratch in a distant land, travelling "backwards" within these prescribed periodicities. This chapter argues that all migrant families embody a form of queerness, either through 2SLGBTQIA+[9] identities, or through an intrinsic otherness that creates dissonance with state expectations for so-called productivity (Blair 53). These resistances are embodied by the children in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* who explore alternative forms of gender expression and sexuality, as well as young people from families that resist the heteronormative, nuclear unit the government so often calls upon as the archetype. The nuances of these families redefine top-down discourses of multiculturalism in Canada, instead telling stories that capture the subtleties of articulating agency and striving for self-determination as a diasporic child in this nation-state.

My conclusion begins with an idea at the heart of this thesis: how intergenerational transmissions manifest themselves in surprising and powerful ways within immigrant children growing up in so-called Canada. These children possess something greater than the sum of their individual inheritances and lived experiences. I subsequently offer a review of the ways in which childhood perspectives unsettle official multiculturalism through familial mental illness, secret-keeping, and queerness. I go on to reiterate the need to continually position immigrants with

[9] Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and/or queer, intersex, and asexual identities. The + opens space for any other forms of sexuality and gender expression outside of cisheteronormativity.

regard to Indigenous Peoples, never equating their dispossessions even while exploring possible relationalities. I also insist that the racialized, diasporic coming-of-age story merits further scholarly attention for its subversive potentials, as do all research projects focused on the perspectives of those who often go unheard.

Chapter 2

Resisting Success Narratives through Mental Illness and Grief

In January of 2022, the Department of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) shared a video across its social media platforms in observation of Bell Let's Talk Day.[10] This short clip included animations of immigrants and refugees who were feeling lost, confused, or anxious during the process of adjusting to life in Canada, burdened by social and economic barriers that were taking a toll on their mental health. The narrator speaks at length about the many challenges that individuals may face when they are new to the country, eventually arriving at the statement, "In Canada, we work hard to teach people about mental health—that these kinds of difficulties are a normal part of life. This helps people understand what they are going through" (1:25-1:35).

This phrase accomplishes several tasks simultaneously: it serves to create a divide between many countries of origin and the ways in which things are ostensibly done "in Canada"; it fosters a top-down discourse in which the "we" being referred to takes on the responsibility of educating those who are new to this concept; and most significantly, it implies that this country is progressive and advanced in matters of immigrant mental health, consistently providing supports as well as closing gaps in service when they are found. And while many resources do exist to support the psychological wellness of immigrants and

[10] This annual fundraiser, hosted by Bell Canada, aims to collect money for various mental health initiatives across the country by encouraging customers to talk, text, and share social media posts linked to the campaign.

refugees,[11] the reality is that many individuals still suffer—from burdens that they have carried with them to Canada, from new challenges they encounter upon arrival, and from the pressure of deviating from a strong national narrative of migrant passage to success.

This chapter will explore the psychological ramifications of mental illness and grief that ripple across these immigrant families and their communities at large. As Aritha van Herk offers in her article entitled "Trembling Strength" (2021), "the triumphalist arc of the official Canadian immigration story is arrival, adjustment, advancement, achievement, and affluence. This is supposed to be an incline leading to all that is auspicious, although there is some concession that this diegesis can take several generations" (350). Within the framework of overwhelming expectations for prosperity and happiness, immigrants and refugees who acknowledge mental illness, as well as those who complete suicide, are intensely disruptive. This also rings true for individuals whose struggles do not fit within the parameters of "officially endorsed success stories" (van Herk 356) and those who exist outside of recognized presentations of mental illness in Canada.

In *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife*, the perspectives of children offer profound insights into the psychological realms where many of their parents dwell. Within these fictional families, it is often the child who sees indications of illness and grief in a parent—and the child who must interpret their community for their mothers and fathers in a type of filial role reversal. The positions of children are crucial to consider when exploring immigrant

[11] Examples include: the Multicultural Mental Health Resource Centre (based in Montreal); the Canadian Mental Health Association's list of contacts for culturally-appropriate, multilingual mental health services; the providers across Canada who support refugees with little or no Interim Federal Health coverage; and regionally-based refugee health clinics predominantly located in the urban centres of each province.

mental health, as these young people navigate complex, hybrid worlds—typically with dexterity and grace. The teenagers in *That Time I Loved You*, such as Georgie Da Silva and Rainey McPhee, are transitioning to adulthood, and thus beginning to realize the gravity of their positions as peacekeepers and translators in the family. Meanwhile, the younger children, primarily in *How to Pronounce Knife*, react more indirectly to the mental illness, suicide, and grief that permeates their lives. Their responses are filled with morbid curiosity for the grotesque details of self-harm, and a vague fear of further incidents that is difficult to articulate. There is a distance between the young children and the dark spaces where many of their parents dwell, and this distance allows them moments of radical joy that exist paradoxically alongside fear, anxiety, and grief.

The short stories that this chapter analyzes reveal presentations of mental illness among immigrant populations, and highlight the vital role that children play in recognizing the adversity faced by their parents. In *That Time I Loved You*, these dynamics are seen in "Flowers" through the relationship between Georgie Da Silva and his mother, who hears tormenting voices in her garden that eventually convince her to complete suicide. In a later chapter, "Rain," we hear Georgie's perspectives on what he has experienced during this time. In *How to Pronounce Knife*, "Edge of the World" offers unexpected expressions of grief among members of a refugee family that has been abandoned by a wife and parent, while "Randy Travis" illustrates the consuming intensity of addictions in a young refugee mother. Two additional stories, Leung's "Grass" and Thammavongsa's "Picking Worms," reinforce the migrant practice of nurturing joy even while living through trauma and heartbreak. These narratives each hold their share of despair, but resilience bubbles under the surface of every phrase. The complexity

of the immigrant experience lies in the fact that these qualities can exist simultaneously, and even synergistically. The presence of sorrow does not preclude the existence of radical joy, and as demonstrated by these texts, the former may, paradoxically, even help to allow for pockets of happiness in everyday life.

"Flowers," the second short story in *That Time I Loved You*, reveals intimate nuances of psychiatric illness through Mrs. Da Silva, a Portuguese immigrant in Scarborough. At the start of the narrative, this character is reeling from a letter which arrived two days earlier, conveying that her beloved mother, or mãe, has passed away. While Mrs. Da Silva has been hearing her flowers speak for some time, the shock and anguish of this recent news renders their voices not only clearer, but also more connected to her Portuguese roots: "Only when the flowers uttered the words in their familiar accent, as if they too had come from her fishing village in São Miguel, did the letter feel true" (22). In the unique circumstances of this person's life—of her displacement to Canada, the abuse she faces at the hands of her husband, and the isolation she experiences from the rest of the neighbourhood—the idea of suicide takes on a tone of hope and positivity. Suicide is not the end of a dark and unhappy life, but rather a way for Mrs. Da Silva to "go home, to her real home, away from this hose, away from this house in the middle of the block…She could fly away if she wanted. Her mother was leading the way" (25). She sees the ending of this life as a reunion with the people and places she holds dear, away from the neighbourhood that eyes her with skepticism and away from the man who brought her to Canada only to hurt her with neglect and belligerence for the rest of their marriage. As such, Mrs. Da Silva interrupts the "triumphalist arc" of Canadian immigration in several ways, not only by embracing the illness she experiences and eventually completing suicide, but also by

refusing to assimilate and deem this "new country" (23) to be her home. Mrs. Da Silva becomes one of several neighbourhood parents in *That Time I Loved You* to take her life,[12] marking a tumultuous and fearful period for the community.

Mrs. Da Silva's reason for being dissolves when her son comes of age, and through this turn of events, Georgie symbolizes a link between old world and new, between confusion and clarity, and between his mother and father, tenuous though these ties may be. Georgie is the one who hangs a clothesline in their garage, allowing Mrs. Da Silva to reminisce on joyful memories of hanging laundry with her mother by the sea together in São Miguel; he does this despite the fact that his father said "no" to the clothesline and would almost certainly beat him for installing it (23). He completes this small task for his mother because "Georgie loved her" (23). He takes care of Mrs. Da Silva in ways that often reverse their filial relationship, ensuring that they put "something on the table before his father came home" (31), not for the sake of Mr. Da Silva, but rather for his mother's protection in this volatile relationship. Georgie is the warmth that cushions Mrs. Da Silva from harsh neighbours and the cruelty within her own home. As such, when Georgie shows his mother the first paycheck he has earned from working part-time with his father, she interprets this as a sign that she may finally let go: "Only Georgie made sense, and now, he didn't need her anymore" (25). This realization is not one of disappointment or resentment towards her son; rather, Mrs. Da Silva experiences profound relief at the fact that she may finally end this life in search of her "real home."

[12] It is noteworthy that Mrs. Da Silva is the only immigrant parent who is part of the neighbourhood suicide epidemic. The other deaths include Mr. Finley (1), Janine Bevis (52), and possibly Mr. Lems (18), whose passing leaves the community uncertain as to whether he died due to suicide or the effects of chronic alcohol use.

Although Georgie does not narrate his own chapter, we see the insight he has gained and the pain he has endured in "Rain," as he deals with intrusive curiosity from a new neighbourhood teenager named Rainey McPhee. When this friend begins to fixate on questions about self-harm and suicide, probing Georgie about his mother's death in the process, he says, "Lorraine. My mom was fucking crazy… It may have had something to do with my fucking crazy dad. All I know is that sometimes, there is no 'why' or 'because.' It's fucked up" (187). Behind the anger and impatience here is an understanding of the complex etiology of mental illness, as Georgie has witnessed firsthand in his life. Biological factors and existing vulnerabilities combine with an individual's personal adversities to devolve into illness. While onlookers wish to pinpoint a specific cause or tipping point, taking comfort that they may protect themselves by avoiding these factors, Georgie understands that these realities are sometimes inevitable.

Georgie navigates life in Scarborough by stepping carefully between his school, neighbourhood, and house, but boundaries are blurred at the place where his mother died, in the garage of their family home. This space is left open to the watchful eyes of the neighbourhood, although it belongs to the house that contained turmoil and faction on the inside. The garage is where Georgie sets up a lawn chair to mourn his mother after her passing, observing the streets from his perch under the clothesline. This is also the place where Rainey comes to ask him her invasive questions. In many ways, the garage is where the various aspects of his life come together to form some semblance of meaning to Georgie. He gains clarity here about the struggles of his family as well as the ways in which the rest of the neighbourhood seems to perceive the Da Silvas. By positioning himself at this post, Georgie also insists that the community remember and contemplate his mother each time a passerby catches sight of him

in the lawn chair. He offers a radical reminder of Mrs. Da Silva's death, preventing his neighbours from pushing this suburban tragedy to the margins of their thoughts. Through his fierce presence in the garage, Georgie advocates for his late mother, creating space for memories of Mrs. Da Silva to dwell and be protected. He communicates that his mother's presence was deserving of acknowledgement and respect, despite the ways in which she diverged from her community that privileged appearances and pretenses of wellness.

The filial affection, protectiveness, and eventual parting of ways in the Da Silva family see their parallels in Thammavongsa's "Edge of the World," narrated by a young girl whose mother struggles to find belonging in both her society and marriage. In contrast to the distinctly sketched characters in "Flowers," these individuals are nameless, unable to be wholly seen or understood even while displaying vivid, tangible qualities in their words and behaviours. When the child in Thammavongsa's story begins to attend school, her mother visits her room each night to ask if her daughter may read to her: "The books she liked best were the scratch-and-sniff ones, and the ones where animals popped out at you… There was one book about a sheep, with a cotton patch inside. My mother would pet the cotton with her finger as if it was alive" (99). These passages depict a further parent-child role reversal, as the girl learns to read English and comfort her mother who is in awe of these picture books. They also represent something more ominous that the narrator recognizes in hindsight: "I never thought to ask my mother why she slept in my room most nights. I was just glad not to be alone in the dark" (100). We learn that, much like Mrs. Da Silva, this mother is profoundly lonely in her life and marriage, but love for her child keeps her at home until she feels she can depart. Mrs. Da Silva registers Georgie's growing independence when he receives his first paycheck, while the mother in "Edge of the

World" learns that leaving is an option when she and her daughter go to the park and watch a couple living across the street angrily end their relationship, the half-dressed man not even taking the time to properly pack his belongings (103). At this point, the child's mother looks at her and says, "I never have to worry about you, do I," and later that same night she packs her bags to leave (103). There is a longing for independence, a chance for a new beginning, in both "Flowers" and "Edge of the World" as struggling mothers reassure themselves that their children will be safe even in their absence. And yet, both examples point to a despair that creates misguided assumptions, as the young people suffer chronically in the absence of their mothers. In death as well as physical departures, these mothers part ways with troubled domestic lives, willing their children to understand and perhaps even forgive them with time.

Further, the departure of the mother in "Edge of the World" unveils textures of grief in a refugee family that has already experienced aching loss. This grief is rendered particularly compelling through the story's retrospective narration, where the opening pages and central events unfold from a child's point-of-view, before this child steps back and shares her ongoing adult heartbreak. While we are initially left with hope that she will recover from the loss of her mother, the conclusion dissolves any such possibilities. The adult's perspective here reveals how the child, now grown up, still experiences vivid dreams about her mother, whose face and voice are indistinct yet powerful memories at this point: "I wake from these dreams raw, a child still, though I am forty-five now, and grieve the loss of her again and again" (104). This oscillation between childhood and adult points of view contributes to the story's subversions of the *bildungsroman* by challenging the genre's traditional forward momentum into adulthood. Progressive temporalities are further troubled by the fact that grief has no timeline for this

person who held an intense childhood bond with her mother—a connection that would leave the two of them laughing together at dinner parties about fellow Lao refugees who "worried sick" about trying to fit in (98). During these same parties, the child's mother would also speak to her about Laos, Thammavongsa's English narration giving way to a metafictional Lao language that describes the food and flavours of a distant homeland: "She said the food in Laos just tasted better and that maybe someday when I was older we could go back and visit. She said all this to me in Lao" (97). The narrator's chronic grief at losing this relationship speaks to the position that many children of refugees hold, embodying "past losses that remain unreconciled and that continue to haunt the present and future" (Goellnicht, "Cross-Racial Refugee Fiction" 201). These compounded bereavements make healing difficult as layered grief envelopes a character who is perpetually reeling from loss.

On the other hand, this person's father offers no such demonstrable affect: "My father did not grieve. He had done all of this life's grieving when he became a refugee. To lose your love, to be abandoned by your wife was a thing of luxury even—it meant you were alive" (104). While the child feels intergenerational losses that intensify her heartbreak, her father, the refugee who came to Canada in his lifetime, feels gratitude to simply be alive. These remarkable responses to the flight of a loved one, at the extremes of anguish and apathy, are touched by the family's position as refugees. The pain and resilience of the past meet challenges in the present moment, fostering an "emotional range of opportunities" (August 10) for writers like Thammavongsa to portray the intergenerational resonances of migration, loss, and new beginnings.

In a similar way, the mother in Thammavongsa's "Randy Travis," who is also unnamed, lives with addictions that are inseparable from her experiences as a refugee, where the process of seeking asylum laid the groundwork for the psychological fixations she is unable to shake. Upon arrival in Canada, this woman and her family receive a welcome package from their refugee settlement program containing winter clothes, underwear, and a small radio. The latter becomes a lifeline for the mother, as well as a means for fostering dependency amid displacement: "There were other items in the box… but it was the radio she cherished most" (43). Through this radio, the mother comes to know and love the voice of American country singer Randy Travis, to whom she proceeds to send an interminable number of postcards and letters. She asks her child to write and address these in English for her, and with every letter gathers hope and despair simultaneously as she waits for a response, creating moments of humour even among the serious themes of this story: "We must have sent out hundreds of these cards, spending money on stamps and envelopes, my mother always hoping to get something back. It wasn't any different than what she had done to come to this country, she said" (49). The connection between asylum-seeking and addiction is profound in this story, the former acting as a slate for struggles that occur after finally arriving in Canada. Sending hundreds of letters into the void, hoping desperately for a response, is a practice to which this family is accustomed.

That her refugee claims were finally processed and accepted gives this mother enough fuel to channel her fixations elsewhere: initially towards Randy Travis, a relatively harmless focus, but later towards casinos where she succumbs to a gambling addiction. Like "Edge of the World," this story begins with the perspective of a child while eventually offering the wisdom of

hindsight from the same character's adult viewpoint: "When I think of it now, I'm not surprised that, a few years later, my mother would find something else to devote herself to. This time it was slot machines" (52). It is possible this mother held tendencies towards addictive habits even before becoming a refugee, but it is also clear that the prolonged unrequited correspondences of asylum-seeking render this problem significantly worse. Uncertainty and red tape unite to intensify hardship, and the mother hangs onto an optimism that ironically becomes her downfall, allowing the slot machines to swallow her hope "coin by coin" (53). This addiction eventually consumes her, and she is one day found collapsed in the parking lot of the casino she frequents, defeated by the mental and physical pain of chronically unanswered hopes.

Like many other refugees to Canada, the aforementioned family went through a process of indoctrination, with government welcome packages and citizenship ceremonies that were meant to mark their allegiance to a new nation. At the same time, there is a disconnect between symbolic welcomes and an ensuing sense of belonging among these individuals. When the mother mentions her experience at the citizenship ceremony, she describes how her mouth simply moved in a series of rehearsed sounds: "Whether or not you understood the oath you made, you had to move your lips" (44). And while a package full of "snow pants, mittens, and new underwear" (43) greets the family upon arrival, this image of a heartfelt reception is in dialogue with scholar Carrie Dawson's work on performative symbols of national benevolence. When the first plane transporting Syrian refugees arrived in Toronto in December of 2015, the dominant image accompanying media stories was of "Prime Minister Justin Trudeau presenting a small child with a new winter coat" (Dawson, "Treaty to Tell the Truth" 2). This picture

circulated alongside national headlines to reinforce the warmth and generosity of the Canadian state while shifting the focus away from these refugees and their distinct, nuanced realities. The lived experiences of immigrants and refugees are often secondary to government self-importance, and these individuals are instead seen as "passive objects of analysis rather than complex objects of knowledge" (Dawson, "Treaty to Tell the Truth" 1). Their histories are reduced and reshaped to feed an "idealized version of Canadian multiculturalism" (Granados 30) in which hardships and illness are short-lived: these are merely symptoms of transition or lingering dispossession that have no place in this nation of second chances. To demonstrate struggles, therefore, is subversive—even if the demonstration is a simple acknowledgement within one's inner circle. To hear voices, feel suicidal, or succumb to addiction is to write against the grain of a national narrative.

While many immigrants and refugees have uncommon ways of experiencing mental illness—from flowers that speak Portuguese to refusals of grief in a man who has simply run dry—they also pursue unexpected ways of cultivating pleasure in day-to-day life. In a 2020 interview with *The Paris Review* about *How to Pronounce Knife*, Thammavongsa shared, "Laughter is very important to me. The cornerstone of all these stories is laughter. To me, laughter isn't frivolous. It is a way of surviving" ("Laughter as a Shield"). She highlights the importance of laughter in the face of pain, discomfort, and numbness as well as in moments of joy that must be cherished. Research on hope in the humanities is in dialogue with this idea that pleasurable emotions can hold transformative political power. As Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen offer in *The Routledge Handbook of Transformative Global Studies* (2020), "Hope is commonly perceived as a counter-force to top-down mechanisms of power," a site for

"resistance" and an energy source for social pursuits of equality and equity (236). Philosopher Jonathan Lear specifies that *radical* hope is "directed toward a future goodness" that is as-yet imperceptible and beyond comprehension (103), conveying that this radicalism is rooted in the strength of a hope directed towards ambiguous potentials. At the same time, the notion of hope, like resilience, can be appropriated by those in power to intensify marginalization (Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 232; Coleman and Ferreday 315), feeding "neoliberal ideology" that puts individuals to work for the economy and pressures vulnerable populations to bear the "burden for overcoming, surviving and thriving through crises" (Fraile-Marcos 3-4). A further conceptualization of hope finds a middle ground in Lauren Berlant's idea of cruel optimism, in which individuals seeking "the good life" find themselves impeded, ironically, by this very pursuit: attachments to prosperity and upward mobility within fraught systems actually become "obstacles to… flourishing" (1-2). Berlant's theory speaks to the harms of neoliberal ideologies, but the difference here is that the optimism stems from the subject themselves, harmful though it may be. In the following discussions about the laughter, hope, and resilience of immigrants and refugees, I wish to centre the grassroots discourses of these creative and complex populations, rather than lend credence to hegemonic systems of governance that ask individuals to simply "adapt to new circumstances of stress and crisis" (Fraile-Marcos 4). I also wish to emphasize the clarity and spontaneity of hope among these groups. The kind of hope at hand is neither perniciously optimistic, nor is it imposed by hierarchical systems. Rather, it is instinctive, stemming from moments of unmitigated joy and meaningful connection. In this form, pleasure can be a powerful tool for resistance and subversion.

Both *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* demonstrate that there is space for humour and lightheartedness even while enduring the unbearable. Although the children in Leung's first story, "Grass," are worried about the suicides of Mrs. Da Silva and other neighbourhood parents, and terrified that one of their own will be next, they are equally devoted to focusing on their play, which draws them in irresistibly. As June explains, "Sometimes we would forget all about the suicides because our games would be so fun, but then a kid would come running up the street with some new observation to report, and we remembered. It was too difficult to play hard and be scared at the same time" (10). These times of fear are interspersed with radical joy, particularly among children, who experience acute highs and lows of emotion. As Hilary Sloan writes, "joy cannot be joy without a certain intensity" (420), and this intensity is easily manifested among young people who are insistently alive.

The last story in Thammavongsa's collection, entitled "Picking Worms," similarly underscores the vitality of laughter among refugees in Canada. The narrator, a young girl, describes how groups of Lao refugees would sit down at dinner parties and discuss their passages: "…but no one cried or talked sad. They all laughed. The sadder the story, the louder the laughter. Always a competition. You'd try to one-up the person who'd come before you with an even more tragic story and a louder laugh" (167). In this narrative, sadness and laughter do not vie for space; rather, they exist in harmony, each enhancing the other to create a vibrant palette of emotions. In a 2017 book investigating Holocaust-related humour, Liat Steir-Livny explains, "Black humour has been presented as an effective tool for oppressed minorities to withstand attacks by their oppressors" (43), allowing individuals to rise above excruciating

circumstances and foster strength and resilience in the process (44). As such, laughing at one's misfortune becomes a powerful strategy for managing these conditions. Both *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* demonstrate that immigrants and refugees hold coping strategies that are as unique as their symptoms of distress. Although the latter are asked to "tell verifiable stories of persecution and trauma" to attain asylum (Dawson, "Treaty to Tell the Truth" 1), they can push back against these discourses through narratives that allow space for joy and contemplation—space for the intricacies not accounted for by official multiculturalism.

The hardships faced by immigrants and refugees are integral parts of their stories, but even more important is what takes place after these difficulties surface. *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* show us that resilience lives in places we might not have thought to check: it lives behind garage doors where a teenage boy keeps vigil for his mother, and on the streets of Scarborough where children throw frisbees with unparalleled joie-de-vivre. Resilience is also not synonymous with survival. The strongest of individuals may be the ones who leave their families or end their lives because they have realized they must explore something just beyond reach. Migrant families that unveil mental illness, along with its far-reaching sequelae, serve to challenge government rhetoric, particularly through the children who embody each of these challenges and heartbreaks as they navigate their communities. These children also demonstrate that while some of this suffering is here to stay, there is likewise beauty and joy that lives alongside the pain: beauty and joy that are held and nurtured by this younger generation as they search for belonging in the lands to which their parents relocated. Through sharp childhood insights, frequent filial role-reversals, and oscillating perspectives, these short stories contribute to subversions of the classical *bildungsroman*,

revealing how characters challenge the forward momentum of traditional coming-of-age narratives.

Chapter 3

How Secrets Hold People Together

The Government of Canada's webpage on Immigration and Citizenship includes a *Features* section where one may "Watch inspirational stories from former refugees about coming to Canada" (*Refugees and Asylum*). This link takes viewers to a series of videos that extoll the dedication of community members, authority figures, and refugees as they each work seamlessly to facilitate the transition of new arrivals who are actively integrating into Canadian society. These videos include interviews with immigrants and refugees who praise the country for its values, clips of international students hiking joyfully along coastal trails in their new hometowns, and animations of racially diverse children waving Canadian flags at the screen, elated to have arrived in this nation. In each of these presentations, immigrants and refugees are grateful to be in Canada; they are uncomplicatedly overjoyed to have made this place their home. Crucially, each represented individual is an open book, meant to be legible to Canada's government and its existing citizens; they are transparent in their emotions and thoughts, with no space for ambivalent feelings below the surface.

Gratitude and candour have their place among these stories, but representations offered by the government, media, and popular culture deny the complexity of the immigrant experience. To trouble the reductive nature of these depictions, it is crucial to focus on the words that remain unspoken, creating silences that speak volumes. Among subjects who are meant to be transparent to the state, the practice of secret-keeping is an act of subversion, challenging Canada's desire to "shore up pleasing national myths" about the gratitude of these

individuals who sought asylum or refuge in this country (Dawson, "Treaty to Tell the Truth" 3). These silences host alternate truths that unsettle official discourse.

The secrets held by children are particularly radical. In his text *Growing Up* (2002), an investigation of Canadian childhoods from the First World War to the present, Neil Sutherland suggests, "One can visualize the geography of the culture of childhood as a personal landscape made up of concentric circles, with the child's family at the centre and the whole community encompassed by the outer ring" (223). Moral and religious instruction, including lessons on the importance of truth-telling, were initiated in many households and reinforced in schools as well as religious institutions across the country (Sutherland 261). Sutherland's work is helpful in considering the interactions between child, family, and society, but the aforementioned concentric circles are strongly inclined to blur or reshape themselves amongst immigrant and refugee families: where different contexts may espouse distinct values and beliefs systems. In these cases, children often select their own constellations of influence, and hold the agency to decide for themselves whether secrets and lies hold an important function in their interactions.

It is helpful to bear in mind two key notions regarding childhood innocence. Firstly, the image of the transparent and pure child is a construction—one that can be traced back to Victorian England's strong societal emphasis on honesty (Bernstein 4; Kucich 5). Secondly, this construction has been inherently raced from the beginning, curated such that whiteness, youth, and transparency overlap in nearly all representations of the concept (Bernstein 6). Parallel understandings of childhood innocence exist in other settler-colonial states, each influenced by Britain yet unique in their national context (Jablonka 381). Within the framework of Canadian multiculturalism, the image of the child represents the country's historically inherited beliefs

while simultaneously embodying a neo-colonial present: one that is self-congratulatory in opening the door to immigrants and refugees while nonetheless holding these individuals to the expectation of sincere gratitude for simply having been allowed within these borders.

While Western societies often associate honesty with morality, many examples in literature and real life serve to trouble this cultural binary. In her text *Secrets, Lies, and Children's Fiction* (2013), Kerry Mallan discusses what she calls "lies of necessity" (42), whereby secrets and lies are necessary for the safety and survival of characters facing persecution. She offers the examples of India and Treasure from Jacqueline Wilson's *Secrets* and ten-year-old Annemarie in Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, demonstrating how situations of abuse, neglect, and war may necessitate dishonesty in order to protect the wellbeing of individuals in need (particularly relevant are Holocaust stories that uphold these values). Such discussions add nuance to patterns of cultural valuation of honesty, but they tend to represent circumstances where a character is in imminent physical danger, neglecting to address the moral grey area of lies that are told to protect feelings and promote comfort. Further, as Cheung offers in her text *Articulate Silences* (1993), "despite the many positions on speech and silence in the Western philosophical tradition… attitudes toward Asian and Asian American reserve have been mostly critical or patronizing" (2). Racialized reticence is seen as cold and menacing when, in reality, "the most common Chinese and Japanese ideogram for 'silence' is synonymous with 'serenity'" (Cheung 127). While Asians living in the diaspora undoubtedly embody a range of mannerisms, those who come across as quiet are perhaps less likely to be "inscrutable" (Cheung 7) than to be practicing what Gayle Fujita calls "the sensibility of silence" (33). This sensibility is characterized by careful attentiveness and quiet grounding in the present moment (34).

This background on secrecy and lies sets the stage for interpreting moments of dishonesty within diasporic literatures in Canada. This chapter will analyze the short stories entitled “Wheels,” “Kiss,” and “Sweets” from *That Time I Loved You,* as well as “How to Pronounce Knife,” “Edge of the World,” “A Far Distant Thing,” and “Picking Worms” from *How to Pronounce Knife*. These stories represent a variety of contexts in which secrets and silence hold pivotal importance: in filial relationships, between close friends, through internal denials, and metafictionally, in the form of textual omissions. Many of the children in these stories are of Asian heritage, with parents who come from societies that emphasize collective harmony over the individualism often associated with Western modernity. And while psychological research in Canada has shown that a child’s cultural environment may “influence their decisions about the circumstances where they might lie” (Munsey), the children of immigrants hold particular knowledge about the power of information and the value of secrecy in preserving relationships. The examples of dishonesty in this chapter stem consistently from individuals who believe that the truth would be unnecessarily harmful to those who seek it; the lies at hand are never told for personal gain. With this background in mind, I ask: do the discourses of Canadian multiculturalism account for the uniquely positioned moral perspectives of children growing up in the diaspora? Among these individuals, may dishonesty be sanctioned as the kindest option when one holds potentially harmful knowledge?

The secrets that characters keep from one another highlight insight and kindness while also reinforcing the agency of those who tend to be seen as “powerless, hopeless, and innocent” in the eyes of the state (Dawson 70; Nyers 1070-71). In *That Time I Loved You*, this practice is most clear in the character of Josie, June’s closest friend, whose childhood is

complicated beyond June's understanding due to multiple factors: a lower family income, the pressure of parents who expect high domestic contributions, the death by cancer of her favourite aunt, and, notably, the sexual abuse she experiences at the hands of this aunt's husband, her uncle Bill. Despite Josie's frustrations with June's naiveté, and the shrewd understanding that June is unaware of her relative privilege, Josie loves her best friend because "June was fiercely loyal" (108). She does her best to return this loyalty and protectiveness, aiming balls at Bruce's new girlfriend while they play hockey on the street (103) and holding steadfast patience as June consistently tries and fails to help her friend with household duties (110). Josie's kindness is most apparent in the poignant secrets she chooses to keep from June, out of pure protectiveness towards her best friend. She keeps her secrets despite a painful awareness that they will alter this friendship irrevocably. While walking to school together one day, Josie goes as far as to say, "So, I had my first kiss," before refusing to give June any further information (103). This scene is at the end of the chapter "Wheels," told from June's point of view, and June herself understands that "…something had changed between us permanently. Where before there was nothing but open space, and I couldn't tell where she began and I ended, there was now a low-lying wall" (103). When Josie becomes the focus of the subsequent chapter, "Kiss," we see the thought process behind choosing to share select information with June while hiding the fact that her uncle was abusing her: "Because Josie knew June as well as she knew herself, she knew what her best friend could and could not bear" (125). For this reason, out of compassion for June, Josie chooses to attribute her sadness entirely to the death of her aunt—a cause she knows June can understand (125).

While many Eurocentric institutions emphasize the importance of assertiveness and vocalization, viewing silence as a type of passivity (Cheung 1), scholars of diasporic literature investigate alternate meanings of moments where characters choose to remain quiet or withhold information. Although they certainly hold oppressive or suppressive connotations at times, "silences—textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations (as against moral, historical, religious, or political authority)—can also be articulate" (Cheung 4). In her analysis of *Obasan* in *Scandalous Bodies*, Smaro Kamboureli states, "Silence and speech are the two determining factors of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*" (175). Kamboureli goes on to examine the role of the voice (or absence thereof), offering new readings of passages where quietude dominates. When Naomi's mother sets to work rescuing chicks that are being attacked by their mother hen, soundlessly scooping them into her apron, her silence is neither weak nor passive: "…here silence signifies love and protection; it is to be understood not as lack of words, but as discourse in the body. The body's language—steady eyes, calm face, deft fingers—is translated into silence in the realm of linguistic articulation" (179). In this passage, communication takes place through physical language; there is no need for words as Naomi's mother performs this task, simultaneously assisting the animals and consoling her daughter who is watching. Nonverbal gestures frequently accompany silence and secrets, offering compassion and comfort through alternate forms of expression. In much the same way, when Josie tells June she misses her aunt while omitting the fact of her uncle's abuse, "she opened her palm for June to take," (125), and then allows her friend to lean her head upon her shoulder. The two girls connect through physical contact even while the weight of a secret lives between them. Each gesture in this scene—the secret, the open palm, the head gently resting on a shoulder—

reinforces the tenderness of this friendship, every act a calculated move on the part of Josie to preserve the relationship while concurrently protecting her friend from harsh realities. The secret she holds is born out of love and selflessness, giving her agency and decision-making strength even as she keeps her silence.

Refugee silences take on a further subversive role as subjects meant to be transparent to the state choose instead to be partially unintelligible, complex citizens with a "measured recalcitrance" towards the narratives often projected upon them (August, "The Refugee, Recently" 5). A significant step in the process of seeking asylum in Canada is the completion of the Basis of Claim (BOC) form regulated by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. In addition to providing demographic details, claimants must answer a series of questions about the traumas they have experienced, the safety risks they face in their home countries, and their sources of protection, or lack thereof (*Basis of Claim Form*). Each of these answers is then judged according to what Lianne Moyes calls the "prevailing codes of intelligibility" (112) that produce and delineate citizenship. Although many claimants face linguistic and psychological barriers to demonstrating a credible, well-founded fear of ongoing persecution (Dawson, "On Thinking Like a State" 61), these narratives form the foundation of their claim process, which eventually leads to a hearing. Refugees are meant to be open books at every stage of this journey as they earnestly lay their stories on the table for assessment. At the same time, this process leads to images of asylum seekers as undifferentiated masses, or "speechless emissaries" (Dawson, "On Thinking Like a State" 67; Malkki 388-89) who are turned into statistics based on an official's ability to understand their specific social and political realities. To escape this Foucauldian-style institutional regulation, with no clear escape from the

judgment of authorities, refugees are perhaps most agentic, ironically, in their silences. Conditioned by the state to offer information when requested, and taught that legibility facilitates asylum when their lives hang in the balance, refugees who practice silence are radical.

The titular short story that opens Thammavongsa's collection offers several instances of dishonesty on the part of a first-grader who recognizes that truth and directness would be unnecessarily hurtful to her parents. The mother and father of this child repeatedly discard notes sent home by the girl's teacher, unable to comprehend the English messages and confident that "if the contents were important, a phone call would be made to the home" (4). Yet, when the child fails to dress up in pink like the rest of the girls on picture day, she tells her teacher that she simply had not given her parents the letters: "She didn't want to lie, but there was no point in embarrassing her parents" (5). She goes as far as to tell her mother, at pickup time, that she does not know why the other children are so dressed up (6). These decisions imply that the shame Joy's parents would feel upon learning these realities outweighs, in the child's mind, her own embarrassment at taking the blame and sporting a green jogging suit in the class picture. At the age of six, she holds the capacity to make this discernment: caught between the respect and admiration she has for her Lao parents, and the specific knowledge she holds as a child growing up in Canada, Joy learns to navigate this blended identity. Simultaneously, she resists an institutional and social command to wear pink as a young girl in her school picture, challenging the patriarchal and hegemonic norms that associate her gender with this colour.

Of further significance are the textual silences in this story. Like several others in the collection, the opening narrative demonstrates a reluctance to reveal personal information about characters. The protagonist is referred to as "the child" in Thammavongsa's third-person narration, and never addressed by name when she is speaking with her family. The only person who refers to her as "Joy" is the child's teacher (7), a figure of authority who attempts to know and understand her, not to mention correct her pronunciation of the word "knife" (5; 8). It is also noteworthy that the girl's first lie—telling her teacher she had not brought the letters home—takes place immediately after the teacher calls her by name, as if in response to an address she did not desire (5). The text's use of "spare unembellished prose" (August, "The Refugee, Recently" 5) has a tendency to avoid the intimacy of names as well as the vulnerability of lengthy confessions and emotional expressions. Instead, the stark, stripped phrases of *How to Pronounce Knife* create distance between characters and readers, fostering a type of "detachment" that resist traditional calls for empathy towards the plight of refugees and the challenges their children face (August, "The Refugee, Recently" 5).

Although her father teaches her the wrong pronunciation of "knife," leading her to articulate the word's first letter in front of the entire class, Joy fiercely defends him (9). Her childhood obstinacy and tantrum in the principal's office give way to a more profound reflection that encompasses her family's history: "She never gave up on what her father said, on that first sound there. And none of them, with all their lifetimes of reading and good education, could explain it" (9). Despite being lectured, on this day, about how "things are the way they are" (8), Joy steps forward to question *why*, exactly, she is meant to accept lessons without critical thinking—why the institutions she belongs to continue to perpetuate

incomprehensible norms and then punish those who raise issues with them. She also offers questions about the value of formal education in relation to the lived experiences of her family, correctly pointing out that even those who have spent the most time in school, and the most time studying the English language, still cannot explain this linguistic anomaly.

While the chapter ends on a questioning note, with the child wondering about what other information her father may not know, she ultimately chooses not to tell him that he was incorrect about the word *knife*; instead, she shares that she has won a prize thanks to his reading advice (9). The child comes to realize that there are more important achievements than being correct, and also higher priorities than surpassing one's parents in knowledge and education. By accepting the prize from her teacher and sharing this puzzle with her father, Joy conveys that the lessons from her father still hold the most merit to her. Her parents may not understand certain Canadian realities or specific nuances of the English language, and her schoolteachers may not know what takes place in her home, but Joy knows both of these worlds intimately, and navigates them with tenderness and care even at the age of six.

The symbol of the puzzle as a vessel for intergenerational, cross-cultural navigation resurfaces halfway through Thammavongsa's collection in "Edge of the World," where a young school-aged child comes to learn that her mother's lived experience as a refugee offers knowledge unparalleled by formal education. The child in this story, much like Joy, has recently entered the school system—the age at which a young person begins to develop the cognitive skills required for "tactical deception" (Mallan 4). When she completes a puzzle in front of her mother, the latter points to Laos, showing where they come from; to Canada, demonstrating where they currently live; and then to the floor, saying, "It's dangerous there. You fall off"

(101). The ensuing disagreement, in which the child insists that the world is round, leads to a realization on the part of this young person. When her mother stops in her tracks to say, "Just because I never went to school doesn't mean I don't know things," the child contemplates:

> I thought of what my mother knew then. She knew about war, what it felt like to be shot at in the dark, what death looked like up close in your arms, what a bomb could destroy. Those were things I didn't know about, and it was all right not to know them, living where we did now, in a country where nothing like that happened. There was a lot I did not know. (102)

This debate about the shape of the world percolates under the surface of the story, and while the child does not remain silent, she arrives at an acceptance of her mother's wisdom despite the factual incorrectness of her assertion. Instead of repeatedly insisting that the world is round, the narrator simply recognizes that she and her mother are different people, shaped by their distinct lived experiences: one, as a young refugee in a new country, and the other, as a diasporic child in Canada (102). Years later, as a forty-five-year-old watching television, she sees a picture of the Earth and is reminded of the conversation that preceded her mother's departure from the family. She speaks to her mother out loud, saying "It really is round" (104). Refugee sounds and silences in this story accompany moments where the younger generation discerns the complex epistemology of their parents' wisdom. The child may attend a school where a teacher presents didactic lessons while pointing to a globe on her desk (101), but she insightfully discerns that her mother knows things that she will never understand. For this reason, she sinks into a quiet contemplation while disagreeing with her mother about the shape of the world (104). Years down the road, at age 45, she speaks into the void not necessarily to

correct her mother, but to connect with this woman who is no longer in her life—the woman whose teachings she carries with her after all these years.

These children of refugees, filled with deeply embodied family histories and rare situated knowledges, meet their counterpart in the preadolescent narrator of "A Far Distant Thing," who carries on the tradition of protective secrecy while displaying a stronger ability to articulate her choices. This girl withholds a range of information from her father, who works hard on the line of a nail polish factory and eventually surpasses the other employees in his productivity and success (154). He frequently advises his child to stay away from her best friend, Katie, because "he thought Katie's family was a bunch of nobodies and I'd end up a nobody too if I kept spending time with them" (152). This father is full of optimism for the future, and his child routinely tries to nurture this attitude while hiding any information that could disappoint him. When he mixes red and white paint, in a moment of softness, to give his daughter the pink walls she admires in her friend's room, the narrator neglects to tell him that the colour became too dark and smudged due to poor mixing: "I had my own room, after all, and he was trying" (153). She allows him to feel the glow of success and resourcefulness at having mixed red and white when he could not afford the pink paint.

This example of protective secrecy creates a foundation for larger-scale lies in "A Far Distant Thing." When her father's factory lays off its less productive workers, he asks his child why the remaining colleagues keep coming up to him and spitting out the word "thief" (154). Instead of translating the cultural and linguistic meaning of these attacks, the narrator "told him I had never heard of this word before. Then I turned away so I wouldn't have to look at his face as he told me, 'All you have to do is work hard. That's all it is, hard work'" (154). She allows

her father to continue dreaming about the possibilities for his family in Canada, protecting him from instances of racism and xenophobia as he imagines a bright future for his child. At the end of the story, when the narrator has reached adulthood and spots whom she believes is her childhood friend Katie walking down the street, she does not tell her father that this woman appears successful and put-together, despite his predictions that she would be a "nobody": "I wanted to tell him that he'd been wrong about Katie…I wanted to tell him that, but then he told me there was mould on the walls again and that I'd let it get out of hand" (161). In choosing silence, and enabling her father's speech instead, she allows him to continue believing in his own correctness and authority. This not only dispels a line of thinking wherein the refugee family suffers systemic barriers to economic success (the narrator being a cleaner while Katie presents as a white-collar employee), but it also fosters compassion as a daughter strives to preserve the dignity of her father and his belief in "Canada" as a land of supposed opportunity and potential.

While Thammavongsa's stories are replete with characters who keep secrets from each other out of kindness, there is also a child who keeps secrets from herself, practicing a denial that can be seen as self-preservation as she reflects upon the fate of her father. The protective dishonesty seen in previous examples turns inwards in "Picking Worms" as the story's fourteen-year-old narrator reflects upon her family's escape from Laos when she was a toddler. She remembers how her father pushed his wife and child to the other side of a river they were crossing, but also how his head went under, bobbed up for a moment, forming soundless words, and then went back underwater for good. Despite this distinct memory from the age of

two, the narrator still offers herself hope that her father may have survived, misleading both herself and her mother in the process:

> Afterwards, my mother asked me if I saw what happened to my father, and I said I didn't. I didn't want her to know. Now I like to believe he ended up somewhere in Malaysia. Maybe he lost his memory and was living with a new family. Just to know he is living, that's good enough for me.
>
> The last sound he made wasn't a sound, even. (172)

At a young age, this child learns to alter the truth in order to shield her mother from a painful reality they both understand on some level. Even more remarkable, however, is how she has enhanced this fiction in the twelve years since, allowing herself to picture her father alive and well, in a distant land and perhaps with a new life, but living nonetheless. This is a possibility that she holds onto fervently and revisits in quiet moments where she seeks comfort, such as when her mind wanders while picking worms at the hog farm with her mother. In a life where this child is excepted to answer to others—to her mother, but also teachers, her friend-turned-boss, and further authority figures, this small act of dishonesty gives the narrator a semblance of agency over her family's fate. She may realize that her father has not survived, but she chooses to be gentle with herself, inventing a necessary fiction that offers solace in times of need.

A final type of secrecy is a metafictional silence that provokes readers to ask questions about perspectives omitted from the text. *That Time I Loved You* offers a series of rotating vantage points, with June narrating the opening, middle, and closing stories. June is the only character who uses first-person point-of-view, but her neighbourhood friends Josie, Darren,

and Rainey each receive a chapter focusing on their personal stories. These narratives allow readers into their private worlds, at times light and playful, and at times dark as they deal with sexual abuse, anti-Black racism, and suicidal thoughts in their respective chapters. The perspectives in *That Time I Loved You* are rich and diverse, but there is one notable gap—a deafening silence in the fact that Nav Sharma, one of Josie's closest school friends, does not narrate a chapter in this text. Instead, Nav's story is told through the eyes of Poh Poh, June's grandmother who has come from Hong Kong to live with her family in Scarborough. Poh Poh watches closely from the sidelines as Nav starts to explore profound questions surrounding gender identity and sexuality. She notices the child's hair grow longer in the fall of her arrival year (155); she admires the delicate grace of Nav's stature and facial expressions (154); and eventually, she becomes the one to offer Nav her tremendous collections of wigs as this young person begins to investigate different forms of physical presentation (158). Readers also learn, through Poh Poh, that Nav is eventually beaten by school bullies for wearing sunglasses that belong to an older sister, and repeatedly called a "fag" by these same children (162). In many ways, Nav's journey can be seen in light of Sedgwick's notion of the closet as an "open secret" (22) —one which this character has not vocalized to anyone at this point, and yet something that others observe, discuss, and target, based on the way this individual presents in public.

Stepping back from these eventful passages, which entwine the stories of Nav and Poh Poh, one cannot help but wonder why Nav does not receive an independent chapter, instead of being subsumed into that of June's grandmother. Does this child not hold the confidence to articulate their own perspectives? Is Nav too early in this process of self-discovery to feel comfortable presenting these truths as conclusive? Arguably, the chapter is structured in this

manner so that we may learn vital information about Poh Poh: specifically, that Nav's journey brings up related questions about gender and sexuality that she has had to put aside since the early days of her marriage (156). In respecting Nav's need for protection at this stage (including the child's uncertain pronoun preferences), the narration instead sheds light on the struggles of Poh Poh, who can finally revisit these important questions after drawing inspiration from Nav. Further, instead of focusing on the child's perspective, there is an emphasis on *reactions* towards gender explorations: on the cruelty of certain classmates, the fierce rush of defence from several friends (163), and the compassion of June as she develops empathy and understanding towards this companion of hers (165).

Metafictional silences are also present in the fact that Indigenous voices are omitted from both *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife*, although the latter indirectly acknowledges the importance of Indigenous presence on the lands where their characters live. In the above discussion of Thammavongsa's "Edge of the World," the narrator recognizes that the lived experiences of her mother—of fleeing Laos and being "shot at in the dark" (102)—have educated this person in a way that school could never accomplish, but the child also concludes this thought by saying, "Those were things I didn't know about, and it was all right not to know them, living where I did now, in a country where nothing like that happened" (102). That the child ostensibly believes "nothing like that happened" in Canada indicates that her awareness falls short of Indigenous dispossession and ongoing systemic violence against BIPOC; and yet, she recognizes there are truths beyond her scope of understanding, too. She acknowledges the weight of all she does not know, and in doing so, she begins to position her family with regard to Indigenous Peoples: involuntary migrants with their own griefs, whose

settlement in Canada nonetheless "remains predicated on the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples" (Phung, "Indigenous and Asian Relation Making" 22). As Daniel Heath Justice emphasizes, "we must honestly and clearly name that history before we can untangle the complications that different newcomer populations have brought into that relationship" (12). The metafictional silence here represents the innocence of the story's young narrator while simultaneously pointing us towards a crucial conversation, unnamed and just beyond reach. It also embodies a type of hope for "kinship, love, and political solidarity with Indigenous peoples" (Phung, "Indigenous and Asian Relation Making" 22; Justice 10-12) despite the settler status of immigrants and refugees. The child may not know this yet, but her humility and open-mindedness hold the potential to work towards repairing the colonial violence of the Canadian state. The significance she assigns to the knowledge she does not know and the hesitation to make assumptions regarding another's perspective are key to nurturing this potential.

Secrets are pivotal to holding people together in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife*. These texts demonstrate that concealing information can also be a revelatory and agentic act, as children of immigrants take a powerful role in caring for, protecting, and nurturing their loved ones by singlehandedly carrying the burden of difficult knowledge. While secrets may also take the form of internal deception or metafictional silence, their purpose remains steadfast: to safeguard feelings and foster compassion. Too often, acts of dishonesty paint immigrants as "inscrutable" (Cheung 7), unworthy of model minority status as seen on government pamphlets and brochures. However, the child narrators of these texts are culturally and racially positioned to challenge top-down discourses on the morality of secret-keeping. They dwell comfortably in the ample grey space between "right" and "wrong" and

demonstrate, through their actions, that the thought and consideration that go into telling lies can often outweigh the relief of sharing the truth with another.

Chapter 4

Questioning the Heteronormative Nuclear Family

In October of 2013, former Governor General David Johnston delivered a Throne Speech to open a new session of Parliament under Stephen Harper's Conservative government. This presentation covered extensive ground, from the dismissal of a prospective carbon tax to Malala Yousafzai's reception of honorary Canadian citizenship. However, one key trope resurfaced time and again during the delivery of this speech: the word "families" is mentioned in 33 different instances (Johnston). The Prime Minister's office filled this talk with mentions of "Canadian values" and the importance of protecting the families of the nation, leveraging these notions as incentive to address the cost of television subscriptions and cell phones plans, the accessibility of nutrition labels, the need for air quality improvement, and the Conservative government's desire to allow parents to object before drug injection sites open in their communities. On the topic of immigration, Johnston stated that those who come to Canada must "work hard to learn our language, our values, and our traditions" to in turn be "welcomed as equal members of the Canadian family." The concept of family overwhelms this rhetoric, from the appropriation of the "Canadian family" in need of protection to the metaphor of the nation as one communal family from coast to coast, curiously unified in its needs. In an insightful analysis of the Throne Speech, Edward Lee suggests that the Conservative Government evokes these images to construct a version of family that is narrow in scope, furthering a government agenda while dismissing the profound diversity that is inherent to true

definitions of this concept; in other words, “At the centre of his discourse is the protection of the white cis and hetero family” (Lee 148).

Not only do current citizens often embrace notions of family that diverge significantly from the above, but immigrants and refugees frequently arrive in Canada within families that sharply contrast with the smiling, two-generation nuclear ones that pepper government pamphlets and immigration brochures (*Immigrate to Canada*; Blair 53). Under the current Liberal Party leadership, the government’s Immigration and Citizenship website offers a photograph of a child posing happily in between her mother and father, all three of them grinning at the camera against a sunny backdrop of glistening foliage (*Immigrate to Canada*). Similar portraits can be seen on the pages entitled *Refugees and Asylum* and *Living in Canada*, each replete with children of colour, usually flanked by parents who are beaming with pride and gratitude. These federal immigration documents appear to have borrowed the Harper Government’s construction of family and simply layered some racial diversity overtop of it, with little difference in conceptualization between Conservative and Liberal parties. As such, reductive depictions of existing citizens extend to similar representations of family structure among immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada.

This chapter will question the depiction of heterosexual, two-generation, nuclear families in representations of immigrants and refugees, focusing on the stories in *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* with characters who stray from this norm. In Leung’s collection, unconventional family dynamics are evidenced in “Things” through Darren’s household, held together by a stern and loving single mother, as well as the shifting relationships that ensue when June’s grandmother moves to Scarborough from Hong Kong in

"Sweets." Further, in the latter story, Nav Sharma's explorations of childhood queerness under the gentle guidance of Poh Poh symbolize intergenerational and cross-cultural resistances of immigrant heteronormativity. A subsequent analysis of June's family, by means of the clichés her mother employs from the first short story, "Grass," to the concluding one, "That Time I Loved You," investigates how even in its nuclear form, this household is dysfunctional. In *How to Pronounce Knife*, the closing story entitled "Picking Worms" is in dialogue with non-traditional families and queer temporalities: through the highly intuitive single mother who takes her child worm picking, through the portrayal of other refugees on this hog farm who left respected careers in Laos, and through a teenager named James, who tries and ultimately fails to shape the young protagonist's views of family structure. Although "Canada" may have been constructed under the guise of the white and heterosexual family unit, these narratives deconstruct this myth by portraying those who are already "living on the margins of social intelligibility" (McCallum and Tuhkanen 1)—queer in more ways than one, and resisting official discourse simply by dwelling outside of recognized ways of being.

I also wish to draw attention to those rare occasions when subversive families do enter the picture. These unconventional immigrants are often subsumed into a nationalist discourse of diversity tolerance. There are signs that this narrative is gradually shifting away from tokenization of those who are anti-normative, but queer[13] immigrants and refugees who tell

[13] The word *queer* in this chapter is used in the context of reclamation. Despite its pejorative history, the term exists in many circles today as one that celebrates 2SLGBTQIA+ identities that have survived historical and contemporary persecutions (Walks 13). It has also been reclaimed as an umbrella term to unite diverse genders and sexual identities (Walks 13), as well as a metaphor for practices that are anti-normative, subverting social conventions and taken-for-granted "stabilities" (Nash and Browne 20). As this chapter aims to demonstrate, there is inextricable overlap between each of these meanings of the word.

their stories persuasively tend to reinforce a "prevailing narrative that frames Canada as a site of LGBTQI freedom" compared to many developing countries of origin (Lee 144-45). This is a concept which David Murray terms the "queer migration to liberation nation" narrative, filled with assumptions on the part of the nation-state that has moulded these migrant stories to suit its needs (Murray 3). The offering of asylum to persecuted individuals is of course valuable, no matter the intention, but at the same time, this "nationalist morality tale" (Murray 3) helps to strengthen Canada's rhetoric of "root[ing] for the underdog," as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently phrased it.[14]

Simultaneously, these discourses of the nation-state create a "newish version of homonationalism" (Murray 6), or the construction of parameters along which queerness is recognized and sanctioned, leaving out those whose identities are not considered credible or legitimate. One such example Murray offers is that of an "Afro-Caribbean woman from a rural, impoverished community in St. Lucia who has had sexual relations with women and men" (50) but who may not necessarily identify with the label "bisexual." This could be due to discomfort with the language used by Canadian institutions, the limitations of such terms to capture fluid identities, or the fact that the lenses through which queer refugee claims are processed often "reflect primarily white, middle-class experiences and beliefs about those sexual and gendered identities" (Murray 51). If a person seeking asylum does not present as a "'normative' homosexual, bisexual or transgender refugee," obediently demonstrating marginalization and

[14] Trudeau offered this statement to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, when the latter addressed Canadian parliament on March 15th, 2022 to discuss Russia's invasion of Ukraine (National Post).

oppression as the nation sees fit, they may be denied the frequently-touted shelter of the Canadian state (Murray 6). The restriction of queer refugees to those who meet national standards of persecution not only reflects a questionable government understanding of diversity; it also indicates a profound desire to control said diversity, to decide which forms of "difference" are acceptable and representative in this nation-building project.

Where does this leave the children of immigrants and refugees who are growing up in Canada? Depictions of "Canadian" families and viable futures often fail to make space for intersectional and queer immigrant identities, or else commodify these when they are featured. This puts the children of immigrants in a position where they are "growing sideways" (11) or "growing towards a question mark" (3) as described by Kathryn Stockton in her text *The Queer Child* (2009). Intricately entwined with these questions are temporalities of linearity and forward movement. In her discussion of Tuyen, the young queer protagonist of Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*, Jennifer Blair addresses how this character inadvertently embodies the idea that refugees need to be "made good," echoing Canadian immigration discourse that "makes continual use of the trope of temporal progress" (52). The aforementioned government publications accomplish this as well: replete with pictures of families and specifically young children, many of these documents "adhere quite closely to a normative temporal trajectory of life events" (Blair 53) with a heavy focus on marriage, parenting, and domestic life. The pull towards heteronormativity is so strong that even queer immigrants are drawn into these storytelling mechanisms. In his consideration of the *Canadian Refugee Apparatus*, David Murray discusses how queer refugee narratives are "rendered literally and figuratively straight… in that they follow an essentialist, linear path" (21): stifled, closeted or persecuted in their countries of

origin, immigrants and refugees purportedly come to Canada for freedom and celebration of sexuality and gender identity. The stark contrast between past and present, origin and arrival, reinforces straight temporalities that obscure queerness in their dominance.

These hegemonic discourses visualize migrants walking straight lines of progress and prosperity, but in reality, immigrants and refugees are living in queer time. In their 2011 book on the topic, McCallum and Tuhkanen describe queer time as "at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst, erratic, arrested" (1), dislodging individuals from socially-inscribed concepts of forward-motion that schedule marriage, children, and career development within normative periodicities, or reversing and inverting these timelines, sending people backwards on a road usually seen as unidirectional. The act of immigration is relatedly an act of queering time: adults who have established rich and complex lives in their countries of origin are suddenly starting over when they arrive in Canada, often transitioning from professional careers to entry-level work with certifications that do not translate internationally. This makes immigrants subversive through their very existence.[15]

Leung's short story entitled "Things" reveals how a child raised by a single immigrant mother develops the insight to understand profound anti-Black racism while challenging these linear temporalities. Although Darren dreams of meeting his father in Jamaica one day (136), it is his mother in Scarborough who has imparted her wisdom and lessons to him. Darren's mother came to Canada at the age of eighteen and "scrubbed enough toilets…to put herself

[15] In recognizing that McCallum and Tuhkanen theorize queer time using primarily 2SLGBTQIA+ examples, I further draw on scholars who employ these temporalities metaphorically to study any contexts involving disrupting the "linearity of straight time" by going against "the uniformity, normativity, and 'presentness' of 'reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality'" (Nicoll 177; Muñoz 22).

through nursing school" and obtain steady, satisfying work as an emergency room nurse (137). In this narrative, Darren's mother offers the classic first-generation immigrant rhetoric of working hard for a better life, presenting a belief in progressive temporalities even though she has left her husband and is raising her son alone in Canada. Darren's mother admonishes him for scoring poorly in math class (127), and states with pride that she now works in a job where white people need her when they are at their weakest (137). At the same time, she creates a home environment where Darren learns immeasurable respect for his mother, understanding that "all the lessons were held in his mother's hands," even when he does not quite understand them yet (138). One of the most poignant teachings that this parent has offered Darren is a message that revisits him at a moment of need, when he faces explicit anti-Black racism at the hands of his math teacher:

> A memory flashed into his mind. The day he and his mother were walking through Agincourt Mall, eating ice cream with candy pieces in it. His mother had been picking out the candy in hers and giving it to him. Then, out of the blue, she took his hand in hers and made them stop walking. "When you grow up," she said, "it won't happen slowly, like it does for other kids. It will happen all at once. On that day, you will change, and you will remember that day, that moment, for the rest of your life." (144)

The memory of this conversation presents itself at a time when Darren requires his mother's wisdom; the understanding of these words "crystallized" as he faces a racist and abusive teacher who has wrongfully accused him of cheating (144). As such, his mother's words allow Darren to trouble the linear progression of time. This child does not grow older in measured, incremental ways; instead, he is forced to grow up "all at once" (144), as his mother predicted

that day at the mall. Unlike most of his peers and classmates, Darren faces an abrupt, jarring transition from childhood into harsh and unjust adult realities. These troubled temporalities are specific not just to second-generation children like him, but also to Darren's position as a young, Black, boy growing up in Scarborough. His experiences with this math teacher highlight the unique challenges of a Black child in a classroom where other children of colour are treated with patience and respect.

Darren's unique perspectives stem not only from the people who have shaped him, but also from his passion for comic books and drawing, which becomes a lens through which he identifies real-life superheroes and villains. This boy spends his free time sketching both the characters in his comic books and the people in his life, whom he depicts as heroes, too, each with a set of unique strengths. His mother encourages his artwork, but refuses to buy him the "twenty-four pack of Laurentian pencil crayons because she said twelve was enough" (128); as such, Darren has no choice but to creatively layer colours over one another to draw the people in his world, mixing reds, oranges, and browns with an expert eye for blending. This artistic mind allows Darren to see powers in everyday people, and to harness courage at times when it is greatly needed. He does not hesitate to push back when the school bully calls his mother a "dirty [n-word]" (132), to retaliate when his best friend, Nav, is beaten by older students for wearing pink sunglasses (163), and to perceive something unique in Tanya, the only other Black student in math class, who is fully ignored by Mr. Wilson: "Darren thought Tanya had a strange ability. She was so visible and yet invisible. But perhaps the ability wasn't in her but in others. They chose to look or they didn't" (136). Special powers abound in Darren's comic books and real world alike. As an immigrant child from a single-parent family, he is uniquely positioned to

see the value in others who defy convention, and to use his creative abilities to depict these ordinary individuals as superheroes. He uses this lens to view himself, as well. We learn early in his chapter that "Darren was pretty sure he had secret powers like the superheroes in his comics" (132). He reflects on how he felt extraordinarily strong the time he fought the school bully, although Larry Lems was "a good fifteen pounds heavier and three inches taller" (132), and how even the teacher struggled to pull Darren off this boy because the former was still "possessed by the other-worldly strength" (133). Channelling the powers of his favourite superhero, the story's titular "Thing," Darren carries himself through the world with a readiness to find special abilities among people who are often overlooked and underestimated. He pictures every character of his life through the colours of his Laurentian pencil crayons, allowing him to uncover nuances and undertones that empower each of these individuals.

The short story "Sweets" in *That Time I Loved You* likewise challenges the heteronormative nuclear family, this time through the arrival of June's grandmother, Poh Poh, who inverts filial roles in the household. Before the arrival of Poh Poh, the family consists of June, her mother, and her father. Her parents work office jobs and glow with pride at the land they have purchased in Scarborough (6). All the while, June's mother, Mei, fills out endless paperwork to bring Poh Poh to Canada, viewing this as her filial duty to allow her parent to "go soft in all the right places" (149) at this stage of life. When Poh Poh enters the home, she turns Mei into a daughter again, and June into a granddaughter—one who strikes her as a "disrespectful wretch" (151) in this country where people appear shockingly lenient in their parenting techniques. At the same time, this change in dynamic unsettles Mei's role in the parent-child relationship; she finds herself taking care of Poh Poh, giving her suggestions on

how to fill her time, teaching her which apples to pick at the grocery store, and instructing her on how to answer the phone (150). As Poh Poh bitterly summarizes it, "She was her daughter's child now" (150). The linear progression from child to parent (to eventual grandparent) dissolves in "Sweets" for both Mei and Poh Poh, as both find themselves inverted within this filial relationship. Complexly entwined here are the cultural expectations that compelled Mei to sponsor her mother's immigration when the latter was living an active and satisfying life in Hong Kong. While Poh Poh recognizes that Mei was simply fulfilling her duty, she also resents her child slightly for uprooting her: "[Mei] thought her mother would appreciate the tranquility. Sometimes Poh Poh wondered if this daughter of hers ever knew her at all" (149). The arrival of this character is subversive in many ways. Not only does she alter the structural framework of the family, offering an older generation that unsettles the nuclear nature of June's household, but she also complicates the cultural makeup of the home. The tensions in parenting strategies and familial responsibilities that develop as a result defy official representations of immigrant family structures.

Poh Poh challenges the conventions of her new Scarborough suburb in one more significant way: through the subtle but powerful queer qualities she expresses, and through her encouragement of parallel qualities in Nav. In the late fall of her arrival in Canada, Poh Poh notices that Nav's hair has grown longer, and this observation brings her back to her youth in Hong Kong, when she faced judgment from her community for wanting to wear her hair short and cropped (155-560). Poh Poh wishes she could regain those locks so that she may give them to Nav: Nav, who "gazed at June's heart-shaped earrings and pink socks with the same hunger the others had for the candy" during their after-school gatherings (154). Poh Poh identifies

intimately with the desires she observes in this child, and this gives her an inner window to Nav's thoughts and feelings: "In him there was a secret of something both pleasurable and shameful. Poh Poh saw this" (154). In this short story, Leung draws a connection between older generation and young, bypassing the parents who chose to put down roots in Canada, and instead forging bonds between those who find themselves in Scarborough somewhat unintentionally. The middle generation focuses on pathways to social conformity and economic success: June's white-collar parents express shock at Poh Poh's suggestion of smacking their child for discipline, stating cultural differences between China and Canada (152), and Nav's family of entrepreneurs emphasize the importance of studies and good grades to their children (139). Meanwhile, the young and elderly allow their minds to wander into spaces of subversive potential, choosing not to subscribe to the conventions of the nation-state when such conventions attempt to alter them fundamentally.

The future is unclear in many ways to Nav. In Lee Edelman's discussion of the "Child as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value," queerness in all its forms acts as an oppositional force against the prevalent, linear social narratives that political discourse imposes upon citizens of a nation (4). This line of thinking asks: if politicians draw votes by advocating for the children of tomorrow, where does this leave those who fall outside the expectations and possibilities of heteronormative reproduction? At the same time, it is helpful to remember that while queer time is not future-focused, Canadian government queer time often is. In this context, Nav questions the timelines that liberal, queer Canadian discourses espouse. The *It Gets Better Canada* project released a statement on the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia, which most recently took place on May 17th, 2022: "At *It Gets*

Better Canada, we're creating a new way forward, one where 2SLGBTQ+ youth are empowered to reclaim their right to love and be loved-just as they are" ("International Day Against Homophobia"). Not only does the title *It Gets Better* imply a linear narrative towards hope, but the philosophy of this non-profit is focused on forward motion, reminding youth that their struggles are finite and their futures, bright. Yet, Nav represents countless immigrant children who are conspicuous even before coming out: their unique challenges offer no such promises that things will, in fact, get better with time. As such, children who are unable to picture themselves as adults, within the confines delineated by official rhetoric, find themselves trapped in a liminal space where state-sanctioned adulthood seems unattainable. Nav's journey under the guidance of Poh Poh, and the hours these two spend together trying on wigs (159), puts this child in a marginal position where queerness is unearthed and nurtured, but its influences on Nav's future are yet to be determined.

While June's community is productively destabilized by Poh Poh, in the older woman's connections with Nav as well as her effects on the home, the household's hitherto-nuclear family is dysfunctional long before the grandmother's arrival. This is best captured through the communications between June and her mother, who chooses to speak almost exclusively through clichés during formative moments of her daughter's life. In "Grass," when parents in the community begin to die by suicide, June asks for an explanation and Mei replies, "There's more than meets the eye" (9). This is the first instance of cliché use in *That Time I Loved* You, and June goes on to explain that her mother "liked English sayings. She said they were great conversation starters, and she used them a lot in the staff lunchroom at the office…" (9). These phrases are significant in that they are often devoid of meaning, particularly since Mei tends to

use empty phrases that she herself fails to understand. In the final short story, as she applies June's makeup before Josie's birthday party, she looks at her daughter and exclaims, "A face only a mother can love!" (201). No doubt she has heard this expression used out of context, because when June inquires as to what she means, Mei conveys she did not know this implied her daughter was ugly (201). In an article entitled "The Meaning of Clichés," philosopher Tom Grimwood writes that these expressions "come to supplement the loss of… stable and fixed cultural truths" (94) in modern society. Not unlike foundational myths which provided "fictional points of social cohesion" (95) to ancient communities, clichés function as "fixed points of reference" (95) in contemporary western society; the difference between the two is that the cliché "holds no proper meaning and is, ultimately, entirely arbitrary" (95). In Mei's case, these sayings allow her to grasp at a culture and its signs, as well as to elude serious responses when her daughter confronts her asking for the truth. These interactions indicate that even in its nuclear form, Josie's family embodies profound cracks in communication and understanding. This family structure may be most commonly called upon as the government's archetype, but it is deeply imperfect and dysfunctional.

Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* similarly questions the heteronormative nuclear family through its final short story, "Picking Worms," where a single-parent refugee household resists assimilation at every turn. This closing story introduces a mother who wakes her teenage daughter in the middle of the night to take her to a hog farm, where the two of them will work as worm-pickers. The mother, who has already been working at the farm for some time, demonstrates profound knowledge and intuition in the art of worm picking, using endless techniques to lure these creatures out of the dirt in the most effective way possible,

and out-performing other pickers by a landslide (168). This story embodies queerness not only through the protagonist's non-normative family structure, but also through the other refugees who work at the hog farm, who, back in Laos, "had been doctors, teachers, farmers with their own land" (175). These individuals overturn linear understandings of career and family, leaving respected professions and nuclear households to "grop[e] for faceless things in the night, this shit of the earth" (175). The process of seeking asylum is queered even further by the fact that the narrator's family lost its father and husband during the very process of escaping from Laos (173). They are forced to begin again in every way possible, severed from family members and financial stability, now facing the prospect of defying "Canadian" values by their very existence.

This refugee family also confronts tropes about the "economic immigrant" through the tensions that arise between the narrator's classmate, James, and her mother, after the former absurdly receives a promotion that her mother worked hard to earn. When James expresses interest in visiting the hog farm, the mother is initially warm and welcoming to him. However, when he is given a managerial position because he "spoke English so good" (176), she is infuriated: "What the fuck. He's a fucking kid. And they accuse us of taking their jobs" (176). This parent has been quietly excelling at her role since long before James entered the picture, but she goes largely unnoticed in comparison to this young, white, English-speaking co-worker. In this manner, "Picking Worms" takes traditional immigrant-fearing rhetoric and turns it on its head. Part of Edward Lee's analysis of the 2013 Throne Speech involves the concept of economic migration: "…the more recent focus on 'Canadians First' reinvigorates the fear of migrants, precarious or otherwise, 'stealing' jobs from 'hard-working' citizens. Ideologically produced as commodified objects, migrants with precarious status exist solely for the economic

benefit of prosperous Canadian families" (150). To challenge this misconception of migrants stealing jobs, Thammavongsa offers a story in which management is so blind to the merits of a migrant employee that they choose to give their supervisory promotion to a school-aged child, instead. She presents a refugee character who is productive and enterprising, embodying traits typically associated with the "threatened citizen," and demonstrates the systemic barriers this person faces although she exceeds other worm-pickers in her skills and yield. In doing so, Thammavongsa demonstrates the power of the atypical refugee to perceive and dismantle the misjudgments that oppress them, even while this oppression remains intact.

Despite frequent reminders of their unusual life, the mother in "Picking Worms" instills the values of independence and self-sufficiency in her child, ensuring that her daughter feels no obligation to create a conventional family when she grows older. This parent dismisses the possibility of marrying again, insisting that to find herself a white Canadian man would mean to compromise her culture and dignity: "They probably will want me to say things like 'Me lope you long tie' and pump me like one of them hogs. I got my pride and I ain't lowering it for no man. I rather be alone" (170). The tone of disgust in these lines, particularly evident in the language of being "pumped like a hog," conveys how fiercely this character would choose to be single over settling for a man. Her mother's autonomy has a profound influence on the young protagonist of "Picking Worms." This child is paired with James for their Family Dynamics class in school, and when tasked with the job of "raising" an egg, she expresses a desire to do this without a co-parent: "I didn't want to be anyone's partner. I wanted to raise the egg we were given on my own" (173-74). James, mustering his authoritative patriarchy, tells her, "I'm not going to let you raise it alone" (174), and because collaborative work earns them more points

on this project, the narrator agrees. The coercion she faces in this forced partnership is in dialogue with national biases toward immigrant reception, since having a spouse and nuclear family puts one in a favourable position to receive entry into Canada; this setup receives more points, so to speak, in the homework assignment.[16] That these social pressures begin with school-aged children reveals an early indoctrination, creating norms that these young people will likely embody and enforce as they grow older.

While the protagonist entertains James's opinions at work and school, she ultimately sides with her mother's perspectives, adding fuel to her family's resistance of hegemonic rhetoric. When James initially asks her to the school dance, the narrator agrees because her mother wishes her to have this experience (173). However, when James interposes himself into their lives, taking the manager position at the hog farm and inflicting his parenting views in Family Dynamics, the protagonist faces a choice: she may align herself with her mother, who can no longer tolerate James and all that he symbolizes (178), or she may go to the dance and mingle with his values. When James arrives at the house that night, she chooses to turn off all the lights and hide in the dark as the boy rings the doorbell. She watches him through a peephole as he begins to sob, but still refrains from allowing him inside (179). This decision is not only an act of solidarity with her mother, who lost a career-advancement opportunity to

[16] The government's information page for Express Entry among skilled workers instructs potential applicants to answer a series of questions to assess their eligibility. The first among these is "What is your marital status," with follow-up inquiries about spousal education and work experience in Canada. These marital points are titled "human capital factors," and contribute to the sum total of a person's score for Express Entry (*Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) Criteria*). Favouritism towards the nuclear family unit is also evident in the fact that immigrants may only bring partners and dependent children with them to Canada: parents, grandparents, siblings, and other dependents require extensive and often futile administrative efforts (*Which Family Members Can Come with Me?*).

James; it is also a choice on the part of a refugee child to embody teachings passed down from her refugee parent, and to allow these lessons to permeate the ways in which she navigates her world. She may be growing up in Canada, but she does not have to agree with the idea of James holding her egg or taking her mother's rightfully-earned promotion. Their family creates a life in Canada that is unapologetically certain in its beliefs, with no desire to make compromises to move up in social and economic hierarchies.

The characters of *That Time I Loved You* and *How to Pronounce Knife* each question the inherent significance of that word, *family*, which holds Latin origins in the term *famulus*, meaning household servant (Harper). These short stories also reveal how individual domestic units superimpose themselves onto a national metaphor of the united Canadian family. The etiology of servanthood is relevant here in the ways that the nation makes demands of its immigrants and refugees to conform to heteronormative, linear, and nuclear paradigms, intending to protect the "Canadian" family as it has long been represented in official discourse. The characters in these narratives demonstrate how existence in a queer, single-parent, or multi-generational home overturns official definitions of this concept. These lives are radical in their very essence, and many individuals practice further subversion by fiercely defying normativity in their bodies and expressions, both privately and publicly. A child who is assigned the sex "male" at birth wears pink, heart-shaped sunglasses to school, and a Chinese grandmother gives this young person colourful, voluminous wigs to don and admire at every opportunity. A Black boy summons his favourite superhero to help him combat racism in the classroom, and a teenage girl rejects her date to the school dance after this person threatens the peace of her single-parent household. In troubling straight temporalities, these characters

also challenge the structure of the *bildungsroman*, which has traditionally focused on a trajectory of linear progression from child to socially-conforming adult. These young protagonists, knowingly or not, unsettle government expectations of immigrants and refugees in their core beliefs and embodied practices. Blending the influences of those who came before them with the specific wisdom they hold as the first generation to grow up in Canada, they take linear paradigms and infuse these with all the circuitous, twisting beauty that comes with their positions.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Synergistic Possibilities Among the 1.5 Generation

In his article "The Refugee, Recently," Timothy August introduces the concept of the "1.5 generation," exploring how "the first generation of refugees most often worked long hours and/or multiple jobs" and were processing trauma, linguistic barriers, and aesthetic roadblocks that prevented them from capturing the enormity of their experiences through art (10). This generation was often focused on survival, but something remarkable emerged amongst their children, many of whom were young and partially cognizant refugees when their parents sought asylum in Canada. August offers, "This narrative gap produced, then, a generation of story hunters and creators, born and/or raised in a multicultural Canada trying to create, interpret, and find narratives for themselves" (10). These observations, while especially pertinent for refugee families, ring true for countless immigrants, many of whom fall on a spectrum between forced displacement and more voluntary forms of movement. The adults who relocate to Canada carry complex realities within them, but it is often their children who start to investigate their inheritances by finding their voices through art. This is true on a metafictional level, as well. As Carrianne Leung and Souvankham Thammavongsa demonstrate, the brilliance of the 1.5 generation is not limited to authors, but also applies to their corresponding characters, diasporic children engaged in urgent world-making projects.

Intergenerational transmissions—trauma, joy, wisdom, and grief—live in abundance among the children of immigrants and refugees. In them is the possibility of something greater than their individual inheritances. There is a type of synergy in this generation, one that blends embodied histories, familial teachings, and diasporic experiences, then fosters a wisdom that

exceeds the sum of these respective elements. The children of immigrants and refugees refuse to accept the identities so often handed to them by government archetypes and social apparatuses. They insist, instead, on carving out their own versions of what diasporic childhood truly means.

In this thesis, I have explored three unique contexts in which immigrant children exercise agency and self-determination. With great debt to existing scholarship in Asian Canadian and diasporic studies, I have investigated the unique vantage points of children in the contexts of family mental illness, protective secret-keeping, and queer practices, highlighting how their perspectives subvert the reductive government discourses of and since the 1971 multiculturalism policy. Many of these discourses simply take different forms today, from throne speeches and public statements to pictures on government websites that try to delineate immigrant and refugee ontological possibilities.

As diasporic literatures continue to flourish, expanding the oeuvre of texts that write back against top-down rhetoric, it is critical, first and foremost, that immigrant and refugee writers continually remember that they live on unceded territories. Marginalized though we may be, we are also complicit in Indigenous dispossession, granted citizenship by the same settler-colonial government that controls land rights. It is vital to centre Indigenous epistemologies in these conversations as we work towards social, economic, and environmental justice, in so-called Canada and beyond.

My hope is that this thesis has shed light on how critical it is to lend significance to the racialized, diasporic coming-of-age story. At the same time, I feel that this project has only scratched the surface of a field filled with rich possibilities: a field that may help us to veritably

reimagine many of the dire, twenty-first-century political and material circumstances in which we find ourselves, from the aching sequelae of an interminable pandemic to a crisis of clean drinking water amid countless Indigenous communities, to violations of reproductive justice and routine mass shootings south of the border entrenched in white supremacist ideologies that undoubtedly spill into Canada. Going forward, what can we learn from the perspective of the child? How may we listen—*truly* listen—to their vital situated knowledges without blemishing such views with adult lenses? Finally, where else can we look for other, previously unheard points of view that may enhance and enlighten our current social paradigms?

Between the pages of most books are vital, varied perspectives that demand our attention. In literature, as in the real world, we must do our best to hear those voices that might otherwise go unnoticed.

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