Complicit Witnessing:
Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women’s Writing

By

Hannah McGregor

A Thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Literary/Theatre Studies

Guelph, Ontario, Canada
© Hannah McGregor, August, 2013
ABSTRACT

Complicit Witnessing: Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women’s Writing

Hannah McGregor
University of Guelph, 2012

Advisor:
Smaro Kamboureli

Complicit Witnessing: Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women’s Writing examines twenty-first-century literature by white Canadian women that represents, or bears witness to, the lives of “distant others” (Boltanski). Camilla Gibb’s Sweetness in the Belly and The Beauty of Humanity Movement, Kim Echlin’s The Disappeared, and Karen Connelly’s The Border Surrounds Us, The Lizard Cage, and Burmese Lessons: A Love Story can be read as examples of Canadian literature gone “global” and situated within the tradition of literature of sentiment that works to educate Western readers about the lives of distant others while also forging transnational affective bonds. In the context of globalization and the commodification of transnational empathy via neoliberal civilizing regimes, however, care for distant others is irrevocably complicit with a fantasy of distance that would produce the white Western woman as an innocent, rather than implicated, subject. These texts demand a rethinking of complicity beyond accusations of representational guilt based in Orientalist paradigms of power/knowledge. Through an understanding of Canadian literature as a middlebrow institution of national pedagogy, this project questions the discursive production of Canada as a benevolent middle power characterized by humanitarian outreach and white civility, and asks how Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work both endorses and complicates this view. Through the articulation of an ethics of complicity, this project argues for an expansion of the term beyond accusations of criminal
collusion to include the sense of enfoldment, implication, and complex affiliation that takes the form, in these texts, of affectively charged transnational (usually romantic) relationships. This focus on sentimental narratives and border-crossing affiliations complicates the ethics of reading that champions textual resistance. Instead, this project explores the tension between resistance and veracity through a methodological approach that heeds both textual complexity and paratextual framing. Complicity is a grounds for neither celebration nor outright dismissal, but provides a way to engage with books that expand the problem of distant suffering and responsibility for the other in the context of how discourses new and old both curtail and over-determine the possibilities of caring for distant others.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks first and foremost to my excellent committee, including Drs. Smaro Kamboureli, Jade Ferguson, and Monique Deveaux, for their mentorship, enthusiasm, and rigour. A dissertation is truly a collaborative endeavour, and I could not have asked for a more dedicated group of collaborators. I am grateful to TransCanada Institute for providing me with a warm and productive workspace, a thriving academic community, and financial support. I would also like to acknowledge financial and travel support from the School of English and Theatre Studies, the College of Arts, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

I have been honoured to be part of a variety of academic communities over the past four years, all of which have supported and fostered this work. At TransCanada Institute: Dr. Robert Zacharias, Dr. Jodie Salter, Cameron Kroetsch, and Shannon Maguire; our administrators Mollie McDuffe, Dani Shrestha, and Karen Bygden; and of course our indefatigable director Dr. Smaro Kamboureli. Through Editing Modernism in Canada: Dr. Paul Hjartarson, Dr. Dean Irvine, and the bevy of friends and colleagues—too many to name—who have provided much-needed encouragement, conversation, and karaoke.

Special thanks to my splendid cohort-mates and friends Nicholas (Murphy) Loess and Leslie Allin for hours of conversation and conviviality, and to Rosa Loess, Andrew Bretz, Cindy McMann, Andy Ernewein, Meghan Macneil, Marcelle Kosman, Trevor Chow-Fraser, and everyone else who has made Guelph home. Finally, and most ardently, thanks to my family and family-by-adoption: my parents Arthur and Wendy, my brother Adam, and my sisters Cosette, Jessie, and Vanessa. Everything would be impossible without you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... iii

Introduction. Canadian Literature Gone “Global” and the Ethics of Complicity .............. 1

Chapter 1. Authorizing the Self ......................................................................................... 40

Chapter 2. Representing the Other: *Sweetness in the Belly* and *Burmese Lessons* ........ 74

Chapter 3. Consuming the Other: *Burmese Lessons* and *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* . 118

Chapter 4. Bearing Witness to the Other: *The Disappeared* ............................................ 157

Chapter 5. Becoming the Other: *The Border Surrounds Us* and *The Lizard Cage* .......... 191

Conclusion. From Reading to Readers .................................................................................. 228

Works Cited .......................................................................................................................... 235
Introduction

Canadian Literature Gone “Global” and the Ethics of Complicity

The Global Novel

The announcement of the 2012 Scotiabank Giller Prize shortlist heralded both a new selection of institutionally acclaimed Canadian novels and a new sub-genre of Canadian literature. The jury citation for Will Ferguson’s 419, the eventual winner, asserts that the book points in the direction of something entirely new: the Global Novel. It is a novel emotionally and physically at home in the poverty of Lagos and in the day-to-day of North America. It tells us the ways in which we are now bound together and reminds us of the things that will always keep us apart. It brings us the news of the world far beyond the sad, hungry faces we see on CNN and CBC and far beyond the spreadsheets of our pension plans. Ferguson is a true travel writer, his eye attuned to the last horrible detail. He is also a master at dialogue and suspense. It is tempting to put 419 in some easy genre category, but that would only serve to deny its accomplishment and its genius.

(“Finalists”)

This brief description says much about the imagined readership of Giller Prize winners—institutionally sanctioned Canadian novels—as well as the features of this supposed emergent genre of the Global Novel. The “we” in the citation privileges North American readers: watchers of CNN and possessors of pension plans. These are people perhaps concerned with the state of the world but struggling with the contemporary ethical conundrum of how to care for it when it is offered as a sea of “sad, hungry faces.” In lieu of these numbing media representations, the citation suggests, we readers can only become attuned to the realities of places like Lagos
through the “horrible details” to which literature is particularly suited. It alone can turn the previously inaccessible site of cultural difference into an accessible representational object, and thus turn the “day-to-day” North American, balancer of spreadsheets and adherent of CBC, into a global subject, aware of our interconnection and our separateness, our proximity and our distance, our sameness and our difference.

The problem of how we can come to experience the interconnection of the globalized world, and what kinds of interventions might make real for us the lives of others, is of primary concern in a wide range of twenty-first century Canadian books that, taking the need for Canadian readers to learn about and come to care for foreign subjects as their starting point, thematize in different ways the possibilities and complications of what is frequently called “distant suffering.” Many of the assumptions evident in this Giller citation—particularly the location of the reading/witnessing subject in the West, the naturalized link between the “distant other” and suffering, and the validation of literature through the physical presence of the “travel writer” in the place being described—are reflected in the representational approaches of and promotional strategies behind the books this study discusses: Camilla Gibb’s *Sweetness in the Belly* and *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*, Kim Echlin’s *The Disappeared*, and Karen Connelly’s *The Border Surrounds Us*, *The Lizard Cage*, and *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story*. Each of these books takes place largely or exclusively within the Global South, in a locale that might easily be characterized as “foreign” to the implied readership: Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and Ethiopia. All are written by white Canadian women whose representational authority must be asserted through extra-textual narratives that demonstrate their

---

1 The phrases “distant suffering and “distant others” are generally traced back to Luc Boltanski’s 1999 book *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, but have been taken up as a more general concern in the work of media scholars; see Ong, Pedwell.
physical presence in, and affective relation to, the foreign site in question. And each, in different ways, thematizes the “forging of a new set of affiliations” (Klein 8) or atypical kinship groups as a means of exploring the possibilities and limitations of a transnational ethics of care. Taken together, they suggest the engagement of Canadian literature as an institution with the problem of distant suffering through which the other is rendered both an object of knowledge and a subject of care.

The most obvious form these border-crossing affiliations take is a romance between a white woman and a non-white man, which is open to being read as a legitimation of the white author’s affective link to, and thus ability to write about, a culture not her own. Camilla Gibb’s 2005 novel *Sweetness in the Belly*, for example, tells the story of a white Muslim woman, born of British parents but raised by Sufis in Morocco, who moves to Harar, Ethiopia, and falls in love with a local doctor; when she leaves Harar due to political unrest, she is haunted by the memory of her lost lover. This narrative structurally parallels Gibb’s description of her ethnographic training in Harar, the “intimate experience of having been there” and “the utter heartbreak of having to leave it” (“Telling Tales” 43-44). Kim Echlin’s 2009 novel *The Disappeared* is also a love story, between a white Canadian woman and a Cambodian man whom she meets in Montreal and follows back to Phnom Penh; it similarly links the protagonist Anne’s love for Serey to her emerging concern, both ethical and increasingly politicized, for the crisis of the Cambodian people in the wake of the Khmer Rouge genocide, and it does so through Echlin’s description of bearing witness to a strange woman’s story of loss in a Phnom Penh market. Most overtly, Karen Connelly’s 2010 memoir *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story* narrates the author’s own travels along and across the Thai-Burma border during the mid-90s, and blurs the line between love for a particular person and love for an entire place: “Am I just a parasite, falling in
love with this man because he brings me closer to his country?” (209). In insisting upon a profound personal connection to Burma, not just her lover Maung, the memoir retroactively legitimates Connelly’s earlier novel, *The Lizard Cage* (2005), which is set entirely within a Burmese prison and focalized through Burmese characters.

The links I am drawing here suggest a problematic reading of texts through the skin of their authors, an approach that ignores more than forty years of critical challenges to the discursive production and ongoing fetishization of what Foucault famously called the “author-function.” Such biographical readings, however, are not only made possible but actively promoted through the paratextual framing of these texts as forms of what Jennifer Henderson calls “veridical discourse,” “those discourses that establish their truth claims on the basis of unmediated experience” (15). Thus just as it is important for the Giller jury to assert that Ferguson’s novel generates its authenticity through the kind of “horrible detail” observed by a “travel writer”—an assertion that physically locates Ferguson in the places the novel describes—the framing of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work frequently emphasizes these authors’ personal and emotionally charged encounters with particular individuals in their books’ settings, encounters that entered these authors into relationships of emotional proximity or care for the not-so-distant other. They do so through what I discuss in Chapter 1 as “authorizing” narratives that simultaneously produce the author-function and the authority through which that author-function speaks.

Border-crossing affiliations are not limited only to books that explicitly thematize the intimate relationships of white women with non-white men and their cultures or countries. Gibb’s 2010 novel *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*, set in Hanoi, tells the interlocking story of three Vietnamese characters and, like Connelly’s *The Lizard Cage*, is focalized entirely
through non-white characters. Despite the lack of a white female focalizing character who can be easily read as an authorial avatar, however, *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* deploys a liminally positioned character, the diasporic Maggie, along with extensive discussions of tourism and outsider perceptions of Vietnam, to generate a space within the text for the outsider perspective of the implied reader. Even Connelly’s 2000 poetry collection *The Border Surrounds Us*, with its shifting pronouns and perspectives, follows an autobiographical structure that suggests the possible collapse of poetic persona and poet. In a series of texts that do not necessarily include a white Canadian woman as a character, then, the race, gender, and nationality of the author-function remains central to how these texts operate within the institutional framework of Canadian literature. The insistent embedding of authorial bodies in foreign locales offers an embodied link between the “us” of the implied readership and the “them” of the subject matter that is pivotal to the capacity of the Global Novel (or Memoir or Poem) to “tell[,] us the ways in which we are now bound together and remind[,] us of the things that will always keep us apart,” raising the question of whether these six books are about the foreign sites they represent or the impact these representations have upon the white subjects narrating, writing, or reading them.

**Canadian Literature’s “New Orientalists”**

Canadian novels that thematize global concerns are certainly not a recent phenomenon, nor is the link between a global ethics of caring for others and white Western femininity. Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly might be productively added into a genealogy of white Canadian women’s representations of the foreign that includes Margaret Laurence’s *This Side Jordan* (1960) and *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* (1963), Dorothy Livesay’s *The Unquiet Bed* (1967), Daphne Marlatt’s
Zocalo (1977), Gwendolyn MacEwen’s The Armies of the Moon (1972) and Afterworlds (1987), Margaret Atwood’s Bodily Harm (1981), and Di Brandt’s Jerusalem, Beloved (1995), to name only authors of the past half-century. “Complicit Witnessing” argues, however, that there is something distinct about this twenty-first century reincarnation of a familiar representational trope. Certainly Globe and Mail columnist John Barber suggests as much when he describes Gibb and Echlin as part of “a new Canadian movement” of writers who make “imaginative leaps across cultural boundaries”: “Call them the New Orientalists,” he suggests (n. pag.).

To account for such a shift, he argues that Canada’s new dominance in global politics has led to an increased confidence that allows writers to expand beyond their own national boundaries, much as the old Orientalists did in the context of British imperialism.

Putting aside the dubious appeal of such a label for the moment, it also fails to account for the shift in global politics that has fractured the paradigmatic East/West divide of Orientalism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls for new terminology appropriate to this shift: with “the increasing proliferation of Third and Fourth Worlds within the national borders” of countries like the U.S. and Japan, and “the continuities as well as the discontinuities between the haves and have-nots within the boundaries of nations and between nations and indigenous communities,” the binaristic language of East/West fails to describe the complexity of global circuits of power and capital (505-06). While Mohanty suggests that the language of North/South might function usefully as a “metaphorical rather than geographical distinction” (505), Barbara Heron sees this metaphorical worldview as part of “the disciplinary organization of individuals

---

2 Gibb addresses Barber’s label in a recent interview, arguing against the limitations of the term, which narrows the global reach of contemporary Canadian literature to the site of the Orient, as well as its colonial implications. While acknowledging that this representational trend might imply “a certain kind of arrogance,” she hopes that it is motivated primarily by “a creative impulse, that we’re finding our inspiration elsewhere, and that we don’t feel prohibited from doing so” (“‘Throw’” 262).
established through spatial concepts” in which the North is associated with “order” and “cleanliness” while the South is associated with “disorder” and “chaos” (34). Cognizant of the pitfalls of any language that metaphorically spatializes complex global systems, I draw on the language of the West—primarily in accordance with its ongoing widespread usage, including by the authors I discuss here—and the global South, gesturing toward the discursive homogenization of a range of places that are not necessarily related. The settings of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work fits this usage, particularly in light of Heron’s argument about the shift in understandings of the global South in the wake of 9/11. The “Orient,” she argues, signifies not so much an exotic foreign site as it does a space of danger; as a result, the global South or “Third World” has been rendered “a locus of relative safety and security for Northern subjects and our longings” through being available for or deserving of Northern aid (4). The world is thus structured in terms of others who are more or less in need of humanitarian aid, and thus available to capitalist expansion and other civilizing regimes, rather than the irreconcilable difference of two civilizations.

It is the global South as a space of marginalization and injustice demanding some form of intervention, rather than the “Orient” as essentialized difference, that these texts address. I read Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work as characterized less by a neo-imperial representational authority than by an affectively rooted desire to make the white, Western self at home within the space of the global South. They respond not to a sense of confidence but of crisis, emerging out of the globalization-induced dilemma of distant suffering. Characterized by their depth of feeling surrounding the cultures described, the overarching sense of responsibility to and for others, and recurring representational dilemmas regarding simultaneous anxiety over and need for the representation of a culture to which the authors do not belong, these books implicitly respond to
the contemporary crisis of witnessing brought on by globalization’s media-fuelled sense of interconnection and wide-spread global injustices.

In some ways, then, this project takes off from Kit Dobson’s assertion “that writing in Canada has become transnational” (xvii), but it does so by examining a very different set of texts in the light of very different concerns. Specifically, I ask how Canadian literature, in the context of globalization, functions as a middlebrow institution that—along with museums, documentaries, and other kinds of national knowledge production—functions to create a public archive that teaches the ambiguous “us” how to be in the world. In discussing literature as a middlebrow institution I draw on Christina Klein’s Cold War Orientalism, which examines the mid-century proliferation of American representations of Asia through “middlebrow intellectuals, texts, and institutions [that] tried to educate Americans about their evolving relationships with Asia” while also “create[ing] opportunities—real and symbolic—for their audiences to participate in the forging of these relationships” (7). Middlebrow institutions are ideally suited for the forging of transnational affiliations rooted in sentiment, and for the production of new collective national identities via these affiliations. The articles in Heike Härting and Smaro Kamboureli’s Discourses of Security, Peacekeeping Narratives, and the Cultural Imagination in Canada explore various institutional sites in terms of how they teach contemporary Canadians about themselves and their place in the world. Yasmin Jiwani, for example, discusses how the Globe and Mail’s circulation of popular discourses about Afghan women between 2000 and 2007 served as a means of emphasizing “Canadian benevolence” and justifying “the military intervention in Afghanistan” (733) through the generation of Afghan women as subjects worthy of sympathy, while David Jefferess uses a motley archive (an NFB documentary, the image on the new ten-dollar bill, and a popular political memoir) to
demonstrate the discursive production of Canada as a compassionate and humanitarian nation characterized by its non-involvement in global violence. While operating differently from public media, literature is characterized by its own forms of institutionalization, particularly through public modes of circulation and legitimation such as “awards, rewards, media privileges, [and] canonization” (Miki 110). Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s affiliation with major national literary awards frames them not only as Canadian authors (despite the frequent absence of nation-specific content in their work) but also as relevant to a reading public. Gillian Roberts sees the celebration of national culture via literary prizes as an “attempt[] to forge a national taste—a taste for the nation and its culture,” and by extension as part of the generation of “a unified habitus on the basis of shared nationhood” (14). The institutionalization of literature through prizes, book clubs, and bestsellers lists—what Roberts calls the “literary-value industry” (18)—thus encourages the circulation of literature under the sign of the nation-state even as that literature itself may resist such a bordered reading.

Indeed, as Kamboureli emphasizes in her preface to Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature, Canadian literature has been relentlessly institutionalized and instrumentalized in the interest of forces such as the state and global capital: “literature is inextricably related to certain practices of polity … but is never fully harmonized with them, thus registering the limits of cultural knowledge and politics. Complicit and compliant, literature is also purposefully defiant and joyfully insolent. Hence an incommensurability delineates

---

3 Sweetness in the Belly, The Beauty of Humanity Movement, and The Lizard Cage were all longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award; nominations for this award are put forward by libraries and listed according to country, thus emphasizing the national significance of the books. Sweetness in the Belly was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize in 2005, and The Disappeared was shortlisted in 2009. Connelly’s 1994 Governor General’s Award for her memoir Touch the Dragon is still prominently displayed on the cover of Burmese Lessons.
literature” (viii). As this incommensurability suggests, literature is both institutionalized and able to fragment that institution from within. Kamboureli describes this tension in terms of the dynamic of “stateness,” or the capacity of literature to “be instrumentalized by and concerned with the Canadian state,” and “elsewhereness,” or literature’s ability to “boldly point[] beyond” the state and thus beyond “contentment and complacency” (x). Stateness and elsewhereness are a particularly apt pair of tropes for my own consideration of how contemporary Canadian representations of the foreign can be read as both reflections of what Canadians want to know about themselves and responses to a desire to know about the rest of the world. When I refer to Canadian literature as a form of middlebrow institution, then, I do so to emphasize the link between its stateness and its implicit participation in forms of national pedagogy, not to question the incommensurability of literature itself. Kim Meyer asserts the link between literature as a middlebrow institution and Western desires to learn more about “the unfamiliar Other” (91-92), a desire that she reads as both “sincere” and in danger of “cleav[ing] to a progressive notion of difference made readable” (97). She gestures towards publishers’ tendency to “provid[e] ‘authentic’ information for these culturally sensitive, anxious [reading] groups” (99) through online reading guides and other paratextual apparatuses, and links them to the emergence of “readers anxious to acquire knowledge about non-Western cultures” (90). The pedagogical function of such middlebrow institutions is not simply directed outward toward those others who these anxious subjects feel they must understand, but inward toward the subject-formation at work in the satisfaction of this anxiety.

In the case of my own archive, then, I must ask to what degree a vividly told story of life in a Burmese prison, for example, functions “to grant full reality to the suffering of others” (Voparil 91), and to what degree it serves as a “national narrative” that “confirm[s] who we are
as a nation and as a people” (Razack, *Dark Threats* 118). Sherene Razack’s work on the public
generation, via books, documentaries, and news stories, of Canadian identity as compassionate
and innocent aligns with Daniel Coleman’s assertion that the primary metanarrative through
which Canadians “imagine ourselves as a community” is “the ongoing mantra of our own
civility” (25), a mantra that “has its foundations in White, British gentlemanliness” (27). While
both Razack and Coleman root their analyses in historical understandings of Canadian culture,
recent scholarship suggests that globalization has only accelerated and exacerbated the need for a
Western elite to both know and care about the global South, a manifestation of neoliberal subject
formation and professional training rather than radical transnational ethics. Carolyn Pedwell
examines how discourses of transnational empathy are entangled in “the international aid
apparatus” (165) such that “the ideal neoliberal citizen and development professional must be …
emotionally literate and expressive” (168). Jodi Melamed makes a similar argument, not about
international aid but about the pedagogical function of literature in the context of the neoliberal
commodification of affect. Through reading, elite Western subjects “learn to see themselves as
part of a multinational group of enlightened multicultural global citizens,” a self-imagining that
“prepares them for the part they play within disciplinary and civilizing/disqualifying regimes that
manage populations cut off from (or exploited within) circuits of global capitalism” (141). Like
Jiwani, Melamed links the production of representations of Middle Eastern women to the
political justification of military intervention (144), adding literature to the apparatuses of
neoliberal subject formation that perpetuate global injustice in the guise of alleviating it. While
Melamed’s argument is not made explicitly about Canadian literature, it is a logical extension of
Coleman and Razack’s work.
Should Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work, then, be read as forms of national pedagogy that assert the goodness and civility of (implicitly white) Canadians, operating through and extending neoliberalism’s civilizing regimes? Or are they more suitably approached as responses to the crisis of the distant other? Can they in fact function, as Meyers suggests, to alleviate middlebrow readers’ anxieties of ignorance? Or do they only serve to reproduce what is already known about an other “over-represented” through a history of similar transnational encounters (Ahmed, Strange 1)? A key point of the critiques articulated by Pedwell, Razack, and Melamed focuses on the production of certain kinds of Western subject positions in relation to the suffering of what Pedwell, drawing on Luc Boltanski, calls “the distant other” (164). Indeed, my argument about a distinct twenty-first-century shift in how Canadian representations of the foreign operate relies upon a parallel shift in how we understand our relationship to the rest of the world. In order to understand this relationship, I turn now to the problem of “distant suffering.”

**Distant Suffering**

This phrase is generally traced back to Boltanski’s 1999 book *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, which examines the possibilities and limitations of witnessing from afar, the politics of media spectatorship, and the gap between sentimental responses to images of suffering and real action. His work has been taken up, primarily by media scholars, as a central text in the contemporary debates over whether the media saturation of images of suffering bodies leads to a heightened sense of global connection or “compassion fatigue” (Ong 2). Both the concepts of distance and suffering require unpacking. As Jonathan Corpus Ong points out, the widespread use of the language of “‘distant suffering’ rather than, say, ‘televised suffering’ or
‘representations of suffering’ is telling for its emphasis on the geographical category of distance rather than technology” (11). The term assumes not only the witnesses’ location in “the West,” but also the construction of that space as “socially and culturally distant from both the conditions and cultural contexts of non-Western others, and estranged from the experience of suffering itself” (11). Taken for granted in the very problem of distant suffering, then, is an absence of relation, a “determined non-involvement” (Razack, Looking 170) in the suffering being witnessed. The crisis identified by Boltanski lies in how to make distant spectators care about suffering in which they are not implicated, but into which they might intervene.

The very possibility of non-involvement as anything more than a fantasy of autonomy has been interrogated from various perspectives. In Strange Encounters Sara Ahmed takes issue with the binary of distance and proximity. “Narratives which construct ‘the strange culture’ as their object (distance),” she argues, “are also contaminated by that very object (proximity)” (12). The image of the distant other as not-us, meaning Western spectators, and yet somehow our problem inflects that distance and difference with proximity, in this case the moral crisis of the spectator herself. The moment that distant suffering is made into a problem for us, it ceases to be about distance at all and becomes about us and the kinds of people (ethical, informed, cosmopolitan) we would like to be. Bruce Robbins articulates an economic critique of distant suffering in the light of global capital. For Boltanski, Robbins argues, the basic ethical problem lies in the lack of “preexisting affiliation” between sufferer and spectator (67): “His paradigm is fundamentally and unreconstructedly humanitarian; it suggests that there is no causal relation between the spectator and the sufferer, that the spectator is appealed to only on the basis of conscience and free will” (88). Against this model of disaffiliation and non-relation, Robbins asserts his own view of “causal interconnection” and “interests, both shared and colliding” (88),
insisting that “there may be experiential distance … but there is no causal distance, and there is not enough knowledge distance to let us off the hook” (90). He undermines the idea of distance itself, arguing that physical location or lack of kinship should not be collapsed into a lack of connection, particularly in a world bound together by the operations of global capital: “To put it crudely: every American except the very poorest has an objective and appreciable interest in the continuing exploitation of the rest of the world, the siphoning off of resources there so as to support a disproportionate level of comfort here” (90-91). Robbins undermines Boltanski’s paradigm of distant suffering by refusing the possibility of distance conceived as a lack of complicity with the suffering in question. In the context of this unavoidable complicity, he asserts, the political and ethical question of responding to the distant other is fundamentally different, a matter of Western subjects being willing to set their own interests aside to intervene in the systemic exploitation of the global South.

What does it mean, then, to argue that Western witnesses are always already complicit with the suffering of distant others? For one thing, it shifts the understanding of suffering from an emphasis on heightened moments of crisis to a systemic critique of global injustice and inequality. This broadened notion of suffering is key to an analysis of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work, which is only sometimes concerned with explicit images of bearing witness to the physical suffering or death of the other. Gibb has in fact argued for the value of shifting focus away from the narrative tropes through which Western readers have previously understood foreign cultures, such as the construction of Vietnam in terms of war: “When I went to Vietnam in 2007, it became immediately apparent the degree to which the war is a Western, rather than Vietnamese[,] preoccupation. Once you put the war aside, the possibility of a thousand other stories comes to light” (“An Interview” n. pag.). The Beauty of Humanity Movement,
accordingly, refuses the image of Vietnam as framed by its relation to the American War (as the
novel calls it), whether that image constructs Vietnamese subjects as enemies or victims. Like
Echlin and Connelly, Gibb is not interested in making explicit accusations of Western guilt;
insofar as these texts contain accusations, they are of a failure of transnational empathy or an
over-abundance of Western arrogance, not of explicitly political or military aggression. All of
the works examined in “Complicit Witnessing” engage with moments of intensified political
crisis, particularly via totalitarian government regimes that lead to instances of widespread but
largely internalized suffering: the Cambodian genocide, the military suppression of citizens in
Vietnam and Burma, and the Ethiopian Red Terror and famine. There are certainly grounds upon
which to argue for the implication of Western countries in many of these conflicts, from the
UN’s support of the Khmer Rouge (Pilger n. pag.) to America’s aid in the dictator Mengistu’s
escape from Ethiopia (“U.S. Admits”). The kind of complicity I read at work in these texts,
however, is both more pervasive and more nuanced. It implicates Western readers in the crises
represented in various ways: drawing attention to their own desires to consume familiar tropes of
the foreign, generating in-text affiliations with distant others such that they cease to be
meaningfully distant, and providing them with a knowledge that prevents the possibility of
claiming “I didn’t know” while constantly running the risk of constructing the other as an object
of knowledge for the compassionate Western self. This complicity is not the same as an
accusation of blame or of guilt, but it does undermine the possibility of claims to innocence or
non-involvement upon which, Robbins and Razack demonstrate, the humanitarian model of
intervention is premised.

Much of the scholarship on distant suffering focuses on the possibilities of success: what
forms of media successfully generate an affective response in Western witnesses, and what
strategies do those media adopt?[^4] When it comes to an understanding of how literature works as a site of ethical and political debate, however, success is difficult if not impossible to gauge. The questions that concern me are not whether readers of these books are literally moved to intervene in sites of global injustice but how the books themselves conceive of the possibilities of a transnational ethics that generates forms of affective complicity across national and cultural boundaries, and how the books simultaneously remain complicit in forms of hegemonic knowledge production that might reinscribe the very inequities they seek to redress. In short, I am interested in complicity as the representational situation of these books, a situation that gestures toward a potential shift in critical understandings of textual ethics and their relation to the problem of distant suffering.

**Complicity**

I have thus far identified a series of interpretive binds that arise when dealing with white Canadian women’s representations of distant suffering. The point of contact between these different problematics is complicity: the complicity of literature with national pedagogy, of empathy with neoliberal civilizing regimes, of Western readers in the suffering of distant others to whom they may or may not hope to extend a form of unimplicated care. At the same time, I have been arguing for a second register to the term, one that suggests the generation of affiliations or kinship between seemingly distant or different subjects. The term itself is available to these multiple significations. Complicity is an allusive word, defined as a state of both “being an accomplice … in an evil action” (def. 1) and “being complex or involved” (def. 2). To unpack these definitions further: “accomplice” suggests partnership and accompaniment, generally in a

[^4]: See Ong for a thorough review of recent debates.
crime or wrongdoing. “Complex” is defined as “[c]onsisting of or comprehending various parts united or connected together” (def. 1), while “involved” suggests being “[e]nfolded, enwrapped” (def. 1b). Involvement and accompaniment gesture to the sort of affiliations I have been outlining, while being enwrapped also evokes something of what Ahmed describes as the stickiness of complicity, the seeming impossibility of escaping a position of implication (“Phenomenology” 149-50). Jennifer Henderson draws on this etymology to argue that Canadian women’s settler narratives are “folded into [other] discourses” (18), leading to “the sort of unwitting involvement suggested by the pli’s (the folds) of words such as implicit, imply, and implicate” (18). She rejects the term “complicity” because of its suggestion of “criminal agency” (18), but criminality is only one dimension of complicity; it equally suggests the inevitability of interconnection and involvement, the complexity that results from this state, and thus the forms of responsibility or accountability that emerge from a recognition of our complex enfoldments and co-implications. Thus while I will continue to use the language of implication to suggest the bearing of responsibility, complicity should be read through these multiple significations.

In Burmese Lessons, Karen worries about how her increasing participation in a community of Burmese poets and politicals will, like the act of reading about others, “implicate” her in their lives (11). The sort of implication that comes from sitting in a cafe in Myanmar sharing noodles and favourite authors is equally enacted, she implies, through literature: “Good travel is like good reading: you go inside a new world and cannot resist it” (11). If Karen feels herself implicated in the Burmese cause, she hopes that her book (the novel she is composing, not the memoir she is narrating) will do the same work on geographically distant readers; one friend asks her to “Please write a good book so that it will become a bestseller and bring much attention to my little disaster country” (221). There is thus a link drawn between Karen’s
affective implication in Burma, strengthened by personal relationships that generate strong feelings of responsibility; the book’s ability to comment with authority and authenticity on the political crisis in Burma; and the implication of distant readers in the crisis being represented. Moreover, it is precisely because of her status as a white Westerner that Karen is given such responsibility. She comes from “the realm of freely circulating ideas and books and newspapers and technologies” (18) and thus has the ability to tap into a network of representation that has great power as well as great danger: it can represent, misrepresent, or fail to represent at all.

Karen is aware that, by producing any form of knowledge about the Burmese, she is implicated in the neocolonial practice of expert knowledge-production: “The Westerner knows. We are entitled to knowledge, among other things. That is what makes us experts. Everything becomes territory to us, everything becomes ours” (54). Yet to say nothing is also to betray the responsibility imposed upon her by her very presence in Burma, and amplified by the strength of her personal relationships. Karen’s situation exemplifies what I mean by complicity: she is implicated in the suffering of these others because of her proximity to them, both geographical and emotional, and that implication generates a responsibility to extend this affective proximity to those who share her cultural, and formerly geographical, distance (other Westerners) via representations that are, in turn, implicated in the neocolonial practice of authoritative knowledge production. Her memoir relies upon the authority produced by her physical presence in Burma as well as her knowledge of Burmese culture, but it is also resistant to taking a politically fraught authoritative voice (a resistance to authority that, as I argue in Chapter 1, is highly gendered).

This tension might be described in terms of the contrast between veridical discourse and the textual resistance of the other. The former, describing texts that rely on “unmediated experience” to “establish their truth claims” (Henderson 15), suggests the legitimation of texts as
acts of witnessing through the physical location of the authors in the spaces described. The latter, rooted in an ethics of reading, argues against the arrogance of speaking for or presuming to understand the other, insisting that “literature is good for us when it teaches us the resistance of the other” to being transparently represented or understood (Goldman, “Ethics” 190). While *Burmese Lessons* is the only memoir I discuss, the novels and poems equally operate according to the logic of veridical discourse, and thus enact a similar tension: this veracity is necessary to their legitimation as acts of witnessing to the experiences of distant others, but it also associates the authority of representation and the virtue of caring with the white outsider while producing the other as an object of knowledge. This tension plays out on different levels—e.g., between the representation of distant others as defiantly resistant to representation or as transparently knowable, or between the inscription of foreign places as accessible via reading or as incommensurable with their representations—and is expressed as different kinds of representational tensions within the books themselves. As I explore in Chapter 2, these books often both refuse and rely upon the discourses that authorize them, as is evident in *Sweetness in the Belly*’s treatment of the anthropological tradition in which Gibb is trained and *Burmese Lessons*’ critique of the Westerner’s claim to “expert” knowledge. Often this tension is most clearly enacted in a comparative reading of books alongside the “authorizing” narratives that circulate extratextually and function to affirm the grounding of texts in lived experiences of travel and personal stories of witnessing. This reading of books against the paratextual narratives through which they circulate is methodologically central to my argument about complicity, since a key dimension of textual complicity emerges from the dynamics of textual circulation.

In *The Textual Condition*, Jerome McGann argues for an understanding of texts as “a laced network of linguistic and bibliographic codes” (12-13)—that is, he insists that scholars
must pay equal attention to the material realities of books as circulating objects alongside their
textual and intertextual complexities. Danielle Mina Dadras expresses a similar understanding of
textuality in terms of “the dialectical relationship between what a text does and what is done with
text” and the “relationship between the aesthetic and/or political purpose of a text and the ways
in which that text is acted upon in the context of circulation” (Dadras 2). While the linguistic
codes of a text might be understood in terms of what a text does, or what it attempts to do—
produce an affectively charged representation of the suffering of distant others in order to
promote a transnational ethics of care, for example—bibliographic codes such as author photos,
award announcements, and reading guides shape how it circulates and often how it is read. What
both McGann and Dadras push for is a non-binaristic understanding of literature, in which
textual meaning and circulation are not opposed but deeply intertwined. Literature, regardless of
its ethical and political motivations, depends upon its circulation as a commodity in order to
do its work, a circulation that is in turn circumscribed by its own discourses: of nation, gender, race,
ethnicity, and so on. Recognizing this means shifting away from a simplistic opposition between
commodification, circulation, and promotion on the one hand and aesthetics, politics, and ethics
on the other. As Graham Huggan points out, within the “ideology of consumption” there exists
“a range of available options for both producers and consumers of culturally ‘othered’ goods”—
or cultural difference itself—including options that “engender new social relations that operate in
anti-imperialist interests” (Postcolonial 12). Chapter 3 takes up Burmese Lessons and The
Beauty of Humanity Movement as texts that expand this range of approaches by either situating
consumption as the starting point of ethical implication or refusing the possibility of an
understanding of cultural difference that is not rooted, to some degree, in tourism’s
commodification of culture.
It should be clear by now that I distinguish between explorations of complicity and assignations of guilt, in large part because to accuse a text or author of guilt implies the possibility of something like representational innocence. While “outing a critic’s complicity or outing a particular theory’s or method’s complicity” has been central to various critical and methodological turns—to whiteness studies, for example, or to ethics—it is a critical fallacy to imagine that such an outing “makes us, by default, more politically committed, more genuinely ethical, than her or him” (Kamboureli, “Politics” 39-41). Complicity as a political, ethical, and representational problem can be an effective conceptual tool for understanding without valorising the work of books that both seek to generate their own forms of transnational engagement and root that engagement in problematic discourses of the suffering other; it is also an important reminder that the enactment of ethical criticism should not turn into a fantasy of ethical purity on the part of the critic. While Ahmed uses the language of stickiness to describe this impasse, Kamboureli draws on images of captivity: “We all inhabit the same prison house of language and disciplinary practices” (“Politics” 41). Recognitions of complicity are also recognitions of this stickiness or captivity, or, to conceive of the same condition in different language, recognitions that we are “constituted by multiple intersecting discourses” rather than consisting “in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others” (Alcoff, “Problem” 21). Complicity points to a condition that stretches across disciplinary interventions, subject formation, and cultural production—a condition of mutually interwoven implication.

Critics who have examined the political, ethical, and critical importance of complicity in Canadian literary and cultural studies tend to formulate complicity not in terms of the “criminal agency” that Henderson rejects (18) but rather in terms of the impossibility of non-involvement or innocence. Razack, for example, argues that a recognition of complicity must precede any
form of meaningful politics; she calls for a feminist anti-racist politics based on radical and ongoing interrogation of one’s own complicity, which she calls a “politics of accountability” (Looking 159). Interrogating the desire of white feminists to express an essentialist solidarity with women of the global South, she points out that such an essentialism is based on discourses of “innocence” and a “determined non-involvement in the social relations being analyzed” (170) and calls instead for a politics of anti-essentialism based on an ongoing negotiation of complicity and accountability, of “how our own positions of middle-class respectability help to sustain and produce” the violence experienced by other women (159). In her discussion of Canadian peacekeeping narratives she suggests that this position of “determined non-involvement” is in fact characteristic of Canadians’ self-construction as a people: “A Canadian today knows herself or himself as someone who comes from the nicest place on earth, as someone from a peacekeeping nation, and as a modest, self-deprecating individual who is able to gently teach Third World Others about civility” (Dark Threats 9). Even in the face of a moment of marked violence, like the Somalia Affair (1993), that challenges this image of Canadian innocence, we continue to “remember ourselves as the principal victims,” insisting that “it was our very niceness and national naïveté that led to the debacle in Somalia. … We cannot imagine that we are implicated in the crises we set out to solve” (11). This fantasy of innocence does not simply ignore the complicity of Canadians with transnational forms of racialized violence, but constitutes that complicity; a recognition of non-innocence is therefore central to exposing the dark side of peacekeeping and undermining the “racial scripts” upon which it is premised. As the opposite of innocence, complicity in Razack’s work suggests accountability for the suffering of others without recourse to accusations of criminal guilt. At the same time, her emphasis on feminist solidarity and humanitarian intervention invokes the other face of complicity: the sort of
implication Karen recognizes while sharing a meal and conversation with Burmese writers and intellectuals.

Barbara Heron’s work on Canadian women’s participation in international development work similarly links complicity to both the desire for transnational connection and the impossibility of innocence that accompanies that desire. Heron’s primarily anecdotal work, rooted in her own experience as a white Canadian woman with a history in international development, explores some of the possible range of complex motivations and desires that may underpin development work. She argues that “the necessity to think of ourselves as moral prohibits substantial reflection regarding how we are implicated in these issues, that is, by participating in enactments of domination to which race is central. We are crucially invested in not seeing ourselves in these terms because of our need to remain innocent in order to protect our own moral selves” (151). We thus strive to forget “our history as white subjects” as a way of “absolving ourselves of responsibility for who we are in the world” and, by extension, of “accountability for the ways in which we are implicated in perpetuating relations of power” (155). Recognizing the potential impasse of coming to terms with our non-innocence, she emphasizes that women genuinely invested in the ethical dimensions of development work must continue to accept their accountability for histories of white terror and complicity with ongoing global inequities, without letting this accountability paralyze the possibility of ethical action. Similar arguments can be found in other scholarship on white women’s political activism. Take for example Gada Mahrouse’s warning that “involvement with social justice activism obscures our complicity in current power imbalances and allows us to conceive of ourselves as innocent,” and her call for a pedagogy of racial privilege that pays attention to how the intention to do good should not be mistaken for a lack of ongoing implication in the power dynamics being critiqued
or actively opposed (183). This critical emphasis on complicity signals scholars’ resistance to discourses of innocence as they have been historically linked to whiteness, femininity, Canadianness, or all three.

Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work evokes this critical problematic of the relation between ethics and innocence; it refuses the possibility of a model of cultural interaction rooted in non-complicity, whether that interaction is tourism or political activism. It also complicates Razack and Heron’s analyses by responding to the problem of complicity via what might be termed a representational vulnerability rooted in that other sense of complicity as deeply felt responsibility for others. In “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Alcoff points out that responding to this eponymous problem through a retreat from speaking “may be motivated by a desire to find a method or practice immune from criticism” and thus to “avoid errors”: “The desire to find an absolute means to avoid making errors comes perhaps not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation” (22). By recognizing the problem of speaking and then speaking anyway, these books relinquish the position of mastery implied by their own authorizing narratives. Whether through Anne’s compulsion to speak Serey back into existence in The Disappeared or Teza’s shoring up of language against the obliterating silence of the prison in The Lizard Cage, these books depict situations in which abstaining from speech is not an option. Their representations of distant

5 Mahrouse’s article emerges from the 2009 R.A.C.E. conference “Compassion, Complicity and Conciliation: The Politics, Cultures and Economies of ‘Doing Good,’” the title of which emphasizes how “doing good” and the enactment of compassion continues to be entangled in complex ways with various complicities.
suffering do not originate, then, from a position of innocence, but from a position of implication that drives the need to speak for distant others regardless of the possibilities of error or criticism.

This attempt to complicate and expand critical understandings of complicity should not be mistaken for a veiled desire to redeem white civility, though it would be hypocritical of me to deny that “Complicit Witnessing” is potentially complicit with just such a desire. Complicity offers neither celebration nor outright dismissal, but provides a way to engage with books that expand the problem of distant suffering and responsibility for the other in the context of how discourses new and old—from the “goodness” of white femininity to the market value of transnational empathy—both curtail and over-determine the possibilities of caring for distant others. By putting texts into conversation with their authorizing narratives, as well as locating them within their various enfoldments and discursive frames, I work toward an understanding of the Canadian Global Novel (or Memoir or Poem) that responds to the ethical problem of how we are both bound together and kept apart.

**Ethics and Representation**

Above I contrasted veridical discourse with the textual resistance of the other, paired terms that gesture toward the ongoing and wide-ranging debate about literary ethics and representation. Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work does not automatically invite an ethical reading, at least not in terms of how the relation between ethics and literature has been theorized in recent years. Scholars like Derek Attridge, Doris Sommer, and Marlene Goldman have emphasized the ethical value of textual resistance, the critical perspective that I have summarized (albeit reductively) with the phrase “literature is good for us when it teaches us the resistance of the other” (Goldman, “Ethics” 190). Literature as a site of alterity, or what Attridge calls “textualterity: a
verbal artifact … that speaks of that about which it has to remain silent” (29-30), does not function as a transparent point of access to the other but rather as an encounter with an incommensurable alterity, a “slap of refusal” that “detain[s] [readers] at the boundary between contact and conquest” (Sommer 201-02). Bringing together a Levinasian definition of ethics as “an infinite responsibility [to the other], a responsibility which does not suit my wishes: the responsibility of a hostage” (Levinas, Levinas 206) with a postcolonial critique of the violence of representation, this school of ethical criticism values anti-representational literature that “put[s] the knowing ego into question through the process of the exposure to and recognition of alterity, absolute Otherness” (Meffan and Worthington 136). Meffan and Worthington summarize the ethical critique of representation, with its roots in the postcolonial understanding of power and knowledge:

[T]he violence of narration operates not as analogous to but as parallel with colonial violence. It is a violence that can be seen to operate at the level of politics insofar as it is a violence that occurs as an effect of representation … And representation, as Edward Said reminds us in Orientalism, is as reliant on exclusion as inclusion. Indeed, it is representation that objectifies the Other, reducing the Other to an object available to and constituted in the processes of colonial observation … And seeing is, of course, synonymous here with knowing. Representation is a partial and exclusionary process by means of which one comes to “see,” that is, to know, the Other. The products of this knowledge are, inescapably, constructed within the limits of one’s own perception. The consequence is a violent reduction of the Other to the order of the same, regardless of the good will of the observer or representer. (Meffan and Worthington 133)
This emphasis on the violence of representation and the ethical value of texts that challenge the possibility of knowing others is seemingly at odds with the kind of literature this dissertation engages, books that work to “bring[] us the news of the world” in its “horrible detail,” that purport to make the foreign real for an implied distant reader. Indeed, if representing the other is an ethical violation, then Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work might be described as distinctly unethical, in the sense of being complicit with objectification via representation. But complicity, as I have already argued, leads away from claims of guilt or innocence. The more pertinent question becomes not whether these texts are ethical, but how they construct and enact their own conceptions of literary ethics.

With the possible exception of Connelly’s poetry collection *The Border Surrounds Us*, which describes the other as “a tunnel / you and I will never enter” (39) or as a series of “worlds / she could not fathom, with freedom / wrapped around her like a cape / she could never pull off” (25), the books examined here link the possibility of caring for distant others with the imperative to understand their lives. Via Gibb’s insistence on offering correctives to familiar tropes of foreign places (the association of Ethiopia with famine and Vietnam with war), Echlin’s privileging of empathy and the possibility of transcending cultural difference through border-crossing kinship, and Connelly’s insistence that the Western subject must enter into the perspective of the other and understand the world through his eyes, these books consistently root ethics in a capacity for understanding and therefore an imperative to understand.

Goldman poses the question of literary ethics bluntly: “Why are critics of Canadian literature attracted to the idea that literature and literary criticism should be ethical or good for us?” (“Ethics” 191). Unpacking the phrase “good for us” she calls for greater attention to all three words. How is “good” being defined, who is the “us” whose “ethics are [at] stake,” and
what does it mean to theorize literature as being “for” something, i.e., “as doing good on our behalf, in effect acting as a prosthetic in our efforts to access the other” (191)? The books I am discussing promote an understanding of literature as an avenue through which Western readers/witnesses can learn about and thus come to care about distant others. As such, they evoke what is at stake in Goldman’s question: the instrumentalization of literary ethics in the interest of producing the reading subject as ethical on terms familiar to that reader.

While the poems in *The Border Surrounds Us* frequently place the other on the opposite side of an unscalable wall, books like *The Disappeared* and *The Lizard Cage* invite readers to imaginatively pass through that wall into the space of the other. “Imagine,” *The Disappeared*’s protagonist Anne writes, “waking up one morning and teenaged voices outside shouting, Comrades, it is Year Zero” (69). The person addressed here is Serey, her lost lover who did not experience Year Zero because he was a student in Montreal when the borders closed, but Anne also addresses herself as the one who desperately wants to imagine her way into Serey’s country’s history in order to better understand him and strengthen their love. At the same time, Anne also addresses the reader whose implicit positioning shares her original distance; as she travels to Phnom Penh and becomes immersed in the politics and culture of Cambodia, the reader shares her increasing affective investment in a once-distant crisis. Chapter 4 reads *The Disappeared* as a novel that hails readers as vicarious witnesses and, through the figure of Anne, invites readers to participate in the formation of emotional and ethical bonds through a process of empathetic identification. Chapter 5 expands the problem of ethics and identification via *The Lizard Cage*’s exploration of becoming other, marked by a shift in focalization from a white outsider with a strong personal bond to the foreign to the most literal of insiders: Teza, a Burmese political dissident serving a twenty-year solitary confinement sentence in an unnamed
prison. The intensity of Anne’s claim to belonging and the claustrophobic interiority of Teza’s perspective make very different arguments about the relationship between representation and ethics, suggesting that the other is, if not transparently knowable, then certainly accessible, recognizable, and loveable.

Through the tropes of empathy and care for the other, these texts engage with a different school of literary ethics, one that is generally traced back to Richard Rorty via David Hume and that argues for sympathy, empathy, compassion, or sentiment. What these terms have in common is their emphasis on fellow-feeling as a form of border crossing that can “forg[e] affective ties strong enough to bridge the divides of nation, ethnicity, race, and gender to generate inclusive concern for the well-being of others” (Voparil 89). Of particular interest in this dissertation is the gendered dimension of sentimentality and empathy, from the history of women’s sentimental reading communities, to the link between empathy and the porousness of the female body,⁶ to a feminist ethics of care. A care-based ethics promotes “caring and empathy and relationships between people” through a focus on interdependence rather than autonomy (Robinson 11).

According to Fiona Robinson, a feminist ethics of care breaks down the traditional association of care with the domestic and the local, and justice with the public and international, by expanding the model of domestic or intimate ethics onto an international scale (18). While it risks its own complicity with essentialist models of femininity through naturalizing gendered behaviour associated particularly with “white, middle class girls” (21-22), proponents argue that, with its

⁶ Ahmed demonstrates the link between gender and openness to others in her analysis of nationalist rhetoric surrounding the invasion of foreign others. “The soft nation,” she explains, “is too emotional … and too easily seduced into assuming that claims for asylum, as testimonies of injury, are narratives of truth. … The use of metaphors of ‘softness’ and ‘hardness’ … are of course gendered: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by others” (Cultural 2).
basis in affective bonds and transnational kinships rather than abstract notions of justice or obligation, an ethics of care is uniquely non-violent and responsive to the “particularity” of others (102). A primary link between Rorty’s emphasis on sentimental education and Robinson’s argument for an ethics of care lies in the importance of recognizing the suffering of others as real, a recognition that is enhanced by affective connections to distant others. As Christopher J. Voparil articulates, “[r]ather than an ability to see distant others as ‘one of us’ as the operative element in making us more likely to come to their assistance, … an ability to grant full reality to their suffering is the more powerful force and a better ground on which to build a politics of sentiment” (102). Connelly echoes this emphasis on the importance of granting “reality” to the suffering of others in her account of writing *The Lizard Cage*: “Particularly in countries which are ruled by fear, the history, the unspoken customs, the gritty daily details, the very reality of lived lives often elude even the keenest of travellers” (“In the Skin” 57, her emphasis). It is the need to make the lives of others “real” in the sense of being knowable or imaginable that causes Connelly, as well as so many scholars interested in care-based ethics, to turn to realist fiction as a primary site of generating ethical affiliations.

Shameem Black takes up this stream of ethical thought, drawing links between sentimental reading communities, transnational feminist networks, and the flow of feeling across political borders. She traces sentimental reading communities back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an early form of transnational ethical network through which readers “bonded with each other through the experience of witnessing figures in pain” (79). Black then follows this thread through the mid-nineteenth century upsurge of middlebrow Orientalism in the U.S., that “smooth[ed] the international flows of capital, manufactured goods, and raw materials” via “the flow of feelings across national borders” (Klein 53, qtd. in Black 277n12). Klein
discusses sentiment as key to the production of a new, “nonimperial” national identity for the U.S. during the Cold War capable of producing “cosmopolitan citizens of the world who possess a global consciousness” (9). Like Black, she emphasizes sentimental narratives in terms of their combination of “education, participation, and the cultivation of emotions” (12) and highlights how they function primarily to forge new communities. I quote Klein at length here, because her description of sentimental narratives aptly summarizes the genre’s investment in the textual generation of transnational affiliations of emotional proximity, and thus the applicability of the term to the work of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly:

First, sentimental narratives tend to focus not on the lone individual but on the “self-in-relation”; they uphold human connection as the highest ideal and emphasize the forging of bonds and the creation of solidarities among friends, family, and community. Second, a sentimental text explores how these bonds are forged across a divide of difference—of race, class, sex, nation, religion, and so on; the sentimental is thus a universalizing mode that imagines the possibility of transcending particularity by recognizing a common and shared humanity. Third, these sentimental human connections are characterized by reciprocity and exchange, often of a personal, intellectual, or material nature; the paired acts of giving and receiving serve as the mechanisms through which differences are bridged. Fourth, emotions serve as the means for achieving and maintaining this exchange; the sentimental mode values the intensity of the individual’s felt experience, and holds up sympathy—the ability to feel what another person is feeling, especially his suffering—as the most prized. Finally, the violation of these affective bonds, through the loss of a member of the community or the rupture of communal ties, represents the greatest trauma within the sentimental universe. (14)
From *The Disappeared*’s focus on Anne’s desperate attempt to refute the violation of her affective claim to Cambodia by reclaiming the body of her lost lover, to *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*’s account of how the exchange of various goods, gifts, and commodities generates new communities; from *Sweetness in the Belly*’s focus on Lilly’s participation in various communities defined by hybridity and heterogeneity, to *Burmese Lessons*’ validation of friendships and romances that cross borders of race and culture—the books discussed in “Complicit Witnessing” clearly align with Klein’s definition of sentimental narratives. At the same time they are historically and contextually distinct: the period Klein examines lies between WWII and the Vietnamese War, a sixteen-year span during which a lack of direct conflict alongside an increasing sense of America’s place on the world stage in the context of decolonization generated the need for new forms of “political, economic, and military power” (6). The books I am examining were written on the far side of four decades of war, genocide, military coups, and closed borders that shaped much of the global South as inaccessible and unknowable except through a visual rhetoric of emaciated bodies and human skulls. With the recent surge in neoliberal globalization and the accompanying opening of borders at the end of the 20th century, places like Vietnam and Cambodia became newly accessible for Western travellers, including writers. What these writers seem to be responding to, however, is less a new desire to forge affiliations than a sense of the failure in the West’s responsibility to do just that: to respond to the crises of distant others, to know and care enough or in the right ways.

Both Black and Klein demonstrate sentimental discourse’s double-sidedness; for Black it is likely to “detract attention from problems that lack strong sentimental appeal” (89), while for Klein its potential function is “as an instrument for exercising power” (15). In both cases
sentimentality frames distant others as more or less grievable,\(^7\) a discursive operation that may lead to political interventions into distant suffering as well as the extension of neoliberal civilizing regimes. Contemporary campaigns protesting “violence against women” are a key example, demonstrating how sentiment can function as a “unifying device” that forges transnational feminist communities through the trope of suffering bodies (Black 88-89) while simultaneously “reflect[ing] assumptions about whose suffering is worthy of concern” and thus “play[ing] a powerful role in shaping the visibility of particular kinds of people” (76). Producing distant others as worthy of care raises the spectre of those other others who remain the objects of “the well-tended conditions of disregard” (Stoler 256) and the problem of whether sentiment can ever not be complicit with the exercise of power.

Sentimentality thus reintroduces complicity as a critical tool. Sentimentality is complicit with global capital expansion under the guise of humanitarian feeling, and risks “lead[ing] observers to ignore their own possible complicity with the pain of others” (Black 81) as is the case in Boltanski’s articulation of distant suffering. At the same time, sentimentality is based upon a model of subjectivity characterized by porosity and the flow of feelings; it is “bound up in its relationships to other beings,” capable of “establishing robust affective bonds” with distant others (77). Flows of feeling might promote the circulation of global capital, but they also have the potential to “challenge the hierarchies and interests that structure those global flows” (277n12). Black, faced with the undeniable complicity of sentimental fiction in the production of the other as an object of compassion and with neoliberal regimes of differential recognizability,

\(^7\) The language of discursive framing and differential grievability alludes to Judith Butler’s recent work, particularly in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, in which she explores how media shapes the differential recognizability and thus grievability of subjects. I draw extensively on Butler’s work in subsequent chapters.
responds by placing sentimental fiction at the bottom of a hierarchy of border-crossing fiction, acknowledging that it “lacks the pleasures of formal literary complexity that characterize … more sophisticated novels” (70-71), but that, by “helping [to] make heterogeneous communities more than empty abstractions” (97), sentimental fiction might break through cultural barriers in situations where “the barrier was relatively weak in the first place” (78). Faced with the stickiness of complicity, Black responds by turning away from sentiment and realism in favour of the anti-representational strategies of dense modernist texts that “foreground[]” their “linguistic, figurative, and generic operations” and thus “interfere[]” with the transparency of discourse” (Attridge 4). When it comes to the ethically charged task of “envisioning alterity” (Black 1), then, Black establishes a scale of literary value that tentatively redeems sentimental fiction on the grounds of its border-crossing capacities while ultimately discrediting it as less capable of transcending real cultural, political, and linguistic barriers than more formally complex and “sophisticated” novels.

Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work operates in the mode of sentimental realism, though to greater or lesser degrees and never complacently. *Burmese Lessons*, while framed as non-fiction, introduces textual lacuna that remind readers of the gap between text and reality; *The Disappeared* is a highly stylized novel with roots in both myth and poetry, while *Sweetness in the Belly* contrasts its pseudo-ethnographic adherence to detail with a metafictional critique of representation. There is a productive disjunction, however, between these texts’ somewhat ambivalent relation to realism and the ways in which they are framed as forms of veridical discourse based in unmediated experiences that thus provide direct access to foreign cultures, a framing that operates through paratextual apparatuses such as author interviews, acknowledgement sections, and reading guides. This disjunction, which my readings emphasize
by always placing text and paratext in conversation, complicates the books’ investment in an ethics of care and in the possibilities of transnational affective bonds. Like Black, I am hesitant to redeem sentimentality, as such a project of redemption, particularly on the part of a white Western woman, suggests the reinscription of racialized civilizing regimes under the guise of a feminist ethical intervention. But I do not read any of these books as straightforwardly offering such a redemption, even if they are framed as though they do. Further, central to this project is the problem of taking seriously books that circulate as book-club friendly women’s literature, and thus as less deserving of serious analysis based in sophisticated literary ethics. While I read these texts as enacting a tension between veridical discourse and the textual resistance of the other, I strive not to privilege resistance over veracity, to redeem the books discussed here by counterbalancing their complicity with their value. Through their complicity with histories of Western knowledge production, the goodness of white femininity, and the consumability of racialized bodies, the books I am examining make impossible any notion of a benevolent ethical posture that is not self-regarding to some degree and in the process call for a different understanding of the ethics of reading, one that incorporates rather than rejecting realist representation and the commodification of the other.

**From Authority to Ethics**

The methodology I have outlined emphasizes reading paratext alongside text, circulation alongside textual meaning, and author-function alongside character focalization. It also uses the concept of complicity to bring together the various registers in which these books operate: the promotion of literature as veridical discourse, the colonial histories of representation, the commodification of difference, and the ethical problematics of bearing witness to or occupying
the perspective of the other. Because I am refusing to establish a hierarchy of literary quality or representational innocence, the primary organizing principle is not, as in Black’s work, sophistication, but rather stakes. That is, with each chapter the stakes of the representational approach rise, both in terms of the possibilities of understanding and responding to distant suffering and in terms of the potential fraughtness of such an approach. By moving through increasingly risky approaches and thus increasingly complex forms of complicity, I structurally discourage any desire, on the part of myself or readers, to move past complicity, emphasizing instead that these books operate through their complicity rather than despite it. All of these texts can be read as acts of representation uneasy with their own representational genealogies; as middlebrow commodifications of cultural difference; as attempts to bear witness to the incommensurability of the other’s body in pain; and even as forms of imaginatively becoming other. Thus read together, the chapters that follow put forward a methodological approach to reading texts that operate through their own complicity with a bevy of troubling historical and contemporary racial scripts, and that thus defy easy categorization, valorisation, or dismissal.

Chapter 1, “Authorizing the Self,” begins by addressing how Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s books circulate as forms of veridical discourse and the accompanying problem of reading them through the “skin” of their authors. Through an exploration of “authorizing” narratives that produce the author-function in terms of discourses of authenticity and authority, I explore the “conditions of possibility” (Henderson 11) through which these books are legitimated and even rewarded as offering access, for Canadian readers, to a foreign culture. I offer a close reading of Gibb’s “ethiopian photo album” as an example of how authorizing narratives operate to frame textual meaning and shape possible readings, and how they waver between constructing the other as resistant or transparent. Chapter 2, “Representing the Other,” shifts from the
production of the author function to the troubled history of representing the foreign via readings of Gibb’s novel *Sweetness in the Belly* and Connelly’s memoir *Burmese Lessons*. While framed as veridical, both books engage with and problematize the discourses that paratextually authorize their representations. Neither book, however, uses the rejection of these discourses to establish its own innocence or non-complicity; instead they explore the twin imperatives to produce knowledge about distant others as a means of engagement and to problematize knowledge-production because of its colonial inheritances.

*Burmese Lessons* provides the bridge to Chapter 3, “Consuming the Other,” through protagonist Karen’s liminal situation between white expert and tourist. This chapter engages with the critique of literature that, like tourism, provides a particularly consumable form of foreign culture for a readership hungry for cultural difference. While *Burmese Lessons* suggests that consumption might provide a gateway into a more implicated relationship with another culture, Gibb’s *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* further complicates discourses of tourism and consumption in order to locate the ethical potential latent in the rendering-consumable of the foreign. The question of how the foreign becomes palatable to distant witnesses intensifies in Chapter 4, “Bearing Witness to the Other,” which draws on Judith Butler’s recent work on differential grievability to ask how distant others are rendered grievable. Echlin’s *The Disappeared* is a novel engaged with the problem of bearing witness to a wide-scale loss of life. It frames this problem through the personal journey of the protagonist Anne, a potentially radical figure who calls for the breaking down of barriers between self and other through new kinship communities based in love and the possibility of cross-cultural empathy, but whose impact on the grievability of distant others is dependent upon her recognizability as a white Canadian woman.
In Chapter 5, “Becoming the Other,” I consider how the ethics and politics of bearing witness shift in the absence of an authorial avatar like Anne. Comparing Connelly’s poetry collection *The Border Surrounds Us* with her novel *The Lizard Cage*, I ask what these different representations of life in Burma under a military dictatorship tell us about the possibilities, limitations, and generic affordances of telling the other’s story. Via Shoshana Felman’s spatial metaphor of bearing witness, in which she figures the task of the witness as communicating the unspeakability of the inside to an outside that must be moved to ethical response, I pick up another through-line of my argument: the liminality of these white woman authors in relation to the spaces and events their texts describe. The blurring of inside and outside recalls other blurred binaries—of intention and reception, innocence and guilt, distance and proximity. For Felman, that liminality is pivotal to the act of bearing witness, and Connelly’s work demonstrates an appropriately ambivalent relation to the imaginative act of entering the prison. Drawing on Dorothy J. Hale’s understanding of novel reading as an ethical act of voluntary self-binding, I show how Connelly’s complicity with the problematic act of becoming other (which Ahmed critiques as an extension of white privilege and mobility) is the very representational strategy upon which she stages her ethical call for radical compassion toward all others. What is perhaps the most appropriative approach to representing the other has arguably the greatest impact, implicating the reader in the violence of the prison while also challenging the scope of the readerly gaze.

“Complicit Witnessing” grounds its arguments in the comparative readings of texts and paratexts and the productive tensions that emerge as a result. In the conclusion, I gesture toward the possibility of adding to this conversation through the analysis of contemporary reading communities, particularly globalized and networked communities such as those found on
The reality of these communities undermines binaries such a distance and proximity, as well as the assumption that white Canadian women’s representations of the foreign are being read only, or even primarily, by other white Canadian women. Opening up the gap between implied or paratextually produced readers and real readers is an important next step in understanding the circulation and contemporary signification of representations of distant others, to the point of challenging whether the concept of the “distant other” is in fact relevant in the context of globalization. As the next logical step in this research, it emphasizes my call for serious attention to the work that the contemporary middlebrow does, and how it generates complicity as both a situation of mutual co-implication and a complex enfolding in discourses that continue to produce the foreign as a site of difference.
Chapter One

Authorizing the Self

“[T]he discourse that sets off in search of the other with the impossible task of saying the truth returns from afar with the authority to speak in the name of the other and command belief.”

(Certeau 69)

“Authorizing” Narratives and the Production of Representational Authority

A Google.ca search for “kim echlin disappeared” brings up 378,000 results; at the top of this list is the Penguin.ca promotional page for the novel featuring a synopsis, review excerpts, and the option to buy the book.8 Dominating the page, however, is a video of Echlin. After introducing herself and her book, Echlin proceeds into a narrative about her own trip to Cambodia:

When I first arrived in Cambodia, I had an extraordinary experience. I was in the market in Phnom Penh—the Russian market—and a strange woman came up to me and sat beside me on the bench. And she just wanted to chat—I was by myself. We talked a little about Canada, and we talked a lot about Cambodia. And then, out of the blue, she said to me, “I lost my whole family during Pol Pot.” And she said to me, “I don’t want you to do anything, I just want you to know.” If there was a single moment [that inspired the book], beyond my general interest, I think it was that moment of what it meant to somebody to be witnessed to. (“The Disappeared,” transcribed from video)

The video continues with other descriptions of Echlin’s attempts to get the cultural, geographical, and historical details of her novel right: personal travels and years of research,

8 Google search performed March 4, 2012.
contacting Cambodian tour companies to request photographs of particular landscapes, listening to Cambodian period music. The novel is thus shaped as a form of veridical discourse. Its capacity to tell “the truth” about Cambodia is established through evidence of the author’s own travels and acts of witnessing—evidence that functions as a supplement to the novel itself, both adding value to the narrative and suggesting that the novel is somehow incomplete without the explanation or contextualization provided by such a supplement. Being supplemental to the text, this evidence is not necessarily encountered by all readers, and thus cannot be understood as essential to readerly understanding; as paratextual information directed at potential or actual readers, however, it reflects how the book is framed and how it circulates.

I refer to these forms of supplementary evidence as “authorizing” narratives and read them as blurring the distinctions among authorship, authority, and authenticity, claiming for the author-function the ability to depict places and events authoritatively and authentically. The scare quotes around the word “authorizing” are meant to draw attention to how the same narrative can construct both the author-function and the authority of the text in question. These narratives are not only intended to quell anxieties over “appropriation of voice,” but also satisfy readerly desires to access the other through the travelling body of the author by understanding that gendered and raced body to be inscribed within the novel itself. Authorizing narratives appear in various forms, from author biographies and photos to newspaper interviews and promotional websites. The video described above constitutes perhaps the most straightforward example of an authorizing narrative, and thus helps to exemplify its key characteristics. First,

---

9 The *Penguin Readers Guide to The Disappeared* includes an interview with Kim Echlin in which she tells the same anecdote described above and concludes by saying that “my experience in Cambodia was that many people wanted the truth to be told” (*Penguin* 240).

10 While I will subsequently drop these scare quotes, I intend for this meaning to remain.
authorizing narratives discursively generate the author as a unified subject responsible for a text by claiming to speak directly on behalf of the author. Second, they are distinct from but explicitly or implicitly connected to the text in question, with the tension between proximity and distance often emphasized by a difference in media. And third, they encourage a reading of the text through the body of the author by narratively inserting that discursively generated author into the space of the text, thus constituting a bridge between author-function and narrative.

In the case of an explicit memoir like *Burmese Lessons* the authorizing narrative has less work to do, since an expectation of referentiality and a presumed collapse of author with narrator already constitute the genre’s horizon of expectations. In the case of Echlin’s *The Disappeared*, on the other hand, the authorizing narrative overtly labours to make these connections. First, it uses the medium of video to speak explicitly in the voice, even the face, of the author; she even names herself: “My name’s Kim Echlin, my book is *The Disappeared*.” Second, the narrative of Echlin encountering a woman in a marketplace in Phnom Penh, while appearing in various forms within *The Disappeared*, is framed explicitly in the video as a moment of being “witnessed to.” Finally, that first-person narrative is tied explicitly to the novel such that a reader encountering the moment in which Anne, the protagonist, experiences a markedly similar moment of witnessing is invited to read through the body of Echlin the author in order to understand the novel’s veiled veracity. That the video is a markedly different genre and medium, circulating online through different means (links, posts, and URLs) allows the authorizing narrative and the book itself to maintain the appearance of independence while remaining intimately interconnected. The video is a somewhat weak example of an authorizing narrative because its

---

11 I will discuss the various forms of this justifying narrative more extensively in Chapter 4, but in brief, it appears as a dedication, as a fictionalized episode in the novel, and again in the acknowledgements section.
explicitly promotional function, posted to the publisher’s website below an “add to cart” link, threatens its purported independence. Nevertheless, the narrative and the novel it authorizes remain both intertwined and independent: while *The Disappeared* can be, and most certainly is, read without the aid of this narrative, the story of Echlin’s moment of personal witnessing is fundamental to how the novel circulates in terms of gaining both knowledge about and care for distant others. This chapter concludes with a more complex example of an authorizing narrative that clearly raises the problematic of complicity and the tension between veridical discourse and the resistant other: a single page on the author website of Camilla Gibb, entitled “ethiopian photo album.”

By offering a reading of how authorizing narratives circulate alongside published books, this chapter explores the particular mechanisms through which texts are situated as authoritative and authentic; in the case of the six books discussed in “Complicit Witnessing,” this authenticity operates via, rather than despite, the whiteness of their authors in a variety of ways, including the generation of biographically rooted knowledge and the evocation of familiar tropes such as the link between white femininity and the racialized other. The circulation of authorizing narratives is closely related to the problematic of complicity as discussed in the introduction, evoking as it does both strong affective relationships to distant others and neoliberal discourses of intervention rooted in differential recognizability. In part, I read these narratives as a sign of anxiety about potential misreadings, including accusations of appropriation against white authors writing about cultures other than their own. Authorizing narratives thus attempt to negotiate these texts’ complicity with a complex history of representational power and violence. Following Henderson’s concern about the “criminal agency” implied by the term complicity, my focus on the construction of the author-function destabilizes the notion of authorial agency as the locus of
textual meaning and thus ethical responsibility, paying heed instead to how the “conditions of possibility” of a text depend upon its enfoldment within a discursive economy (Henderson 11). Authorizing narratives generate an author’s authority to represent, and thus—in the case of white women representing the foreign—the same narratives generate complicity as authority’s necessary double.

White Femininity and Conditions of Possibility

The six books discussed in “Complicit Witnessing” thematize whiteness to hugely varying degrees. In *Burmese Lessons*, for example, the narrator Karen continually reminds readers of her own racially marked body and how it signifies differently in expensive Bangkok hotels or refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border; *The Disappeared* is an interracial love story that focuses as much on the white woman’s desiring and vulnerable body as it does on the genocide in Cambodia; and Gibb’s *Sweetness in the Belly* interrogates the relation between race and identity through a protagonist who is a white Ethiopian Muslim living in diaspora in her parents’ homeland of England. Connelly’s *The Lizard Cage* and Gibb’s *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*, on the other hand, are both novels that continue to deploy paratextually the whiteness of their authors while including few or no white characters in the narrative. In this case the question of reading whiteness becomes more fraught, and the question of how the whiteness of an author adheres paratextually in the absence of its textual presence is a complex and essential one.

Authority and its affiliation with white femininity is key to understanding how these authorizing narratives function. Texts that circulate widely and authoritatively, through bestseller lists or prestigious literary awards, raise the questions of how the author’s voice has been
legitimated as appropriately authoritative, what role that authority plays in the text’s circulation, and how that authority might circulate extratextually alongside the text itself. Henderson calls for greater attention to how white women have historically accrued authority through their embodiment of norms of conduct, their self-governing and governing of others, and their responsibility for moral education, all of which constitute a situation of “discursive implication” (13-14). In her approach to reading women’s writing, Henderson is writing against a “liberal politics of reading” that praises the individual liberated female self without “take[ing] account of complex social histories” that shape the possibilities of her narrative (4). Henderson instead locates narratives within the historical and political moments from which they derive their “conditions of possibility”: “the publication of the narrative and its circulation among readers are events that should be read as integral to the moment itself” (11). Despite the historical gap between the texts Henderson considers and those I engage with here, the question of what “is extracted from the woman writer in return for her accession to public speech” (15) remains pertinent, however different the answer. Henderson focuses on discourses of “collective security” and “racial well-being” (15) as the textual inscription of settler women’s implication in “the elaboration of racist knowledges and practices” (12), while this dissertation explores the generation of care for distant others as a contemporary instantiation of white civilizing regimes. The conditions of possibility of a text, her argument suggests, also indicates the ways in which that text is complicit with the discourses that allow it to gain representational authority and thus circulation.

Henderson’s link between representational authority and complicity suggests a parallel link between authorizing narratives and the construction of whiteness as synonymous with representational authority; this latter link draws upon some critical commonplaces of
postcolonial theory, particularly Edward Said’s understanding of the “Orient” as a product of the essentializing gaze of the European subject. In the case of the books I am reading, this authority stems in large part from narratives of the authors’ travel to the places being described, which generates the perceived veracity of their representations. For Henderson, veridical discourse alludes not only to “those discourses that establish their truth claims on the basis of unmediated experience” but also to the link between authority and “an alleged distance from power” (15). The paired assumptions that unmediated experience produces true accounts and that women are distanced from power and thus more capable of authentic representations of different cultures need to be problematized as much in contemporary white women’s representations of the foreign as they are, by Henderson, in settler women’s personal narratives.

There are two kinds of “discursive implication” that I would like to gesture towards in white women’s representations of the foreign. The first is the ongoing construction of white femininity as distanced from power, including in the sphere of global politics; the second is the association of white femininity with compassion and moral conduct within the sphere of humanitarian intervention. Both these constructions of white femininity contribute to the generation of a representational authority that, as I will demonstrate below, adheres through the authorizing narratives that circulate alongside texts (even while the texts themselves, as subsequent chapters will explore, complicate their own claims to authority). I will briefly unpack these discursive implications as a prelude to articulating my understanding of the contemporary middlebrow author-function, its link to discourses of authenticity, and the production of authorizing narratives that bring together these various discursive forces.

The ongoing construction of white women as distanced from power and thus uninvolved in systemic forms of oppression is central to a particular genealogy of critical whiteness studies.
Sara Ahmed locates the origin of whiteness studies not in scholarship on “how white people experience their whiteness,” as in the work of Richard Dyer or Ruth Frankenberg, but in “the direct political address of Black feminists such as [Audre] Lorde” and “the Black critique of how whiteness works as a form of racial privilege” (“Declarations” par. 2). While the early work of white scholars often called for whiteness to be recognized or to become marked, Ahmed points out that “Whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it. To those who don’t, the power of whiteness is maintained by being seen; we see it everywhere” (par. 14). The debate over whether feminism is inflected by whiteness has been a heated one. While “[f]eminism has usefully problematized the notion of a monolithic white identity by raising issues of gender” (Alcoff, “What” 8), white women’s consistent focus on their own marginalization as women risks blinding them to the fact “that there [are] margins other than (and marginal to) those on which white women [are] located” (Hill, “Introduction” 5). According to Alcoff, the debate within the feminist community has focused on “the question of whether white women benefit on the whole from whiteness, or whether whiteness is a ruse to divide women and to keep white women from understanding their true interests” (“What” 10). Alcoff’s history of feminist debates over whiteness and gender culminates in Marilyn Frye’s argument that white women’s assertion “that white women are primarily women” is simply another exercise of white privilege: the ability to decide that race is not relevant, like the ability to declare that whiteness is invisible, signals the power of whiteness itself (11). Claiming the ability to write about another culture is thus an

12 Examples of this include Dyer’s insistence on seeing white identity as racialized rather than the norm, and Ross Chambers’s “The Unexamined,” in which he argues that whiteness is “atomized into invisibility through the individualization of white subjects” while “nonwhites are perceived first and foremost as a function of their group belongingness” (192).
extension of this power that arguably enacts the force of whiteness even while claiming to
subvert its hegemony.

In the contemporary context, the production of white femininity as distanced from power
is perhaps most clearly evident in the response of white feminists to 9/11. A variety of critics
have noted how the plight of Afghan women was mobilized as a justification for U.S. military
intervention, an intervention that operated under the guise of white feminist solidarity.13 Sunera
Thobani argued that 9/11 became a revitalizing moment for white Western feminism, allowing
women’s rights activists to become newly prominent public intellectuals under the guise of
concern for women’s rights in Muslim countries. Through placing themselves in a position of
shared victimhood, white feminists both positioned Western womanhood “as the mark of the
‘universal’” and constructed Muslim culture in terms of “death, violence, and misogyny” that
equally threatened all women (Thobani, “White” 129). In this moment white women’s political
power emerged precisely from their public construction as distanced from power, a paradox
epitomized by First Lady Laura Bush’s November 17, 2001 radio address, in which she called
for “[c]ivilized people throughout the world” to “speak out” on behalf of “our mothers, our
sisters and daughters” and to support “[t]he fight against terrorism” because it “is also a fight for
the rights and dignity of women” (Bush n. pag.). For a figurehead of Western imperial power to
adopt the voice of universalized female vulnerability bespeaks the ongoing discursive power of
white femininity, as well as its contemporary function as a veil for civilizing regimes that extend
the reach of global capitalism under the guise of feminist solidarity.

13 See for example Jiwani’s “Helpless Maidens and Chivalrous Knights: Afghan Women in the
Canadian Press” and Sunera Thobani’s “White Innocence, Western Supremacy: The Role of
Western Feminism in the ‘War on Terror’” and “Gender and Empire: Veilomentaries and the
War on Terror.”
Frye’s work on white femininity continues to be cited as an ongoing reminder that white women are not as distanced from power as they might construct themselves to be. In an iconic quotation, featured prominently in the introductions to both *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* and *White Women in Racialized Spaces*, Frye describes the crisis of discovering her own whiteness and the unavoidable bind of complicity:

> It seemed like doing nothing would be racist and whatever we did would be racist just because we [white women] did it. … Am I racist if I decide to do nothing? If I decide to refuse to work with other white women on our racism? My deciding, deciding to do anything is poison to her [a feminist of color]. Is this what she knows? … It becomes clearer why no decision I make here can fail to be an exercise of race privilege. … What is this “being white” that gets me into so much trouble after so many years of seeming to me to be so benign? (qtd. in Hill, “Introduction” 6, Najmi and Srikanth 15)

Frye’s attempt to understand why her own agency might be “poison” to a feminist of colour is a matter of coming to terms with the complicity of her own whiteness with forms of privilege that she cannot dismantle. The complicity of her whiteness with the oppression of women of colour is not at odds, however, with its seeming benignity. In fact, the construction of white femininity in terms of goodness is key both to its hegemonic power and to its discursive deployment as one of the conditions of possibility for white women’s texts about foreign places.

The links between the figure of the white woman and discourses of benignity, innocence, virtue, or morality, have a long and complex history that I can only sketch in here. Samina Najmi and Rajini Srikanth argue that, while any attempt to state simply what the white woman *is* or *means* once again reifies this figure, historical analysis suggests that one of the main tools of oppression wielded (or constituted) by white women is the discourse of their own goodness or
innocence, closely linked to their vulnerability (16-17). Examples featured in their edited essay collection range from an analysis of the figure of Mother Teresa as “the quintessential image of the white woman in the colonies, working to save the dark bodies from their own temptations and failures” (19), to a discussion of American captivity narratives in which white women deployed narratives of victimization that concealed actual experiences of heightened agency (20), to a refutation of the critical commonplace that colonial women were more culturally sensitive than men through a study of Victorian women travellers in Egypt (23). They conclude that “[w]hite women give racism a veneer of innocence” and that “in doing so they invest themselves with a vulnerability that has easily been deployed to oppress men and women of color”; in fact, they argue that slavery “was constructed on the body of the fragile, pure, and chaste white woman” (17). While such a statement demands the kind of qualification and contextualization performed by the collection’s essays, the provocative claim that innocence and vulnerability are extensions of white power suggests how authorizing narratives build upon a history of signification attached to the white female body through which the narratives in question are read.

Heron’s work on white middle-class women’s role in development work hints at this history as well as suggesting the representational economy in which Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s narratives circulate. Heron accounts for the predominance of white middle-class women in development work through the concept of subject formation, arguing that establishing morality or goodness via helping others allows women—who are subjects insofar as they are white and middle-class but non-subjects insofar as they are women—to imagine themselves becoming whole white bourgeois subjects (6). In essence, women need to perform their goodness
in order to achieve wholeness,\textsuperscript{14} with the result that “goodness” has become central to the social construction and performance of white womanhood (8-9). The definition of goodness is tautological for Heron. Whiteness gains its cultural capital through claiming the ability to “know[] the right thing to do”: “‘Right makes white,’ in the sense that whiteness is constituted through doing what is ‘right’” (9). It should be clear from this argument that Heron defines whiteness not as an intrinsic quality of certain individuals, nor necessarily as encoded in the skin, but rather as a matter of particular modes of conduct.\textsuperscript{15} The bourgeois\textsuperscript{16} identity produced during the Enlightenment and the height of colonialism, and in many ways enduring into the present day, combined class, gender, nationality, and race alongside “[t]he demonstration of ‘cultural

\textsuperscript{14} This argument seems to dispute Henderson’s insistence that settler women, despite their seeming exclusion from power, were in fact at the centre of a culture of normalization. Despite this, I read Heron’s understanding of white womanhood as continuing to associate women with the perpetuation of normative forms of social power. The effect of incomplete subjecthood is not to render women powerless but rather to generate a sense of ethical incompleteness that drives the subject toward a fantasy of perfection via a “normalizing power [that] sets an ideal that can never quite be attained, yet must be striven for” (Miller and Yudice 15). To understand the self as incomplete is thus to perpetuate the norm by striving for an ideal of completeness determined by the needs of the State (15).

\textsuperscript{15} In this definition she echoes Henderson, who defines race neither as a reified construct nor exclusively a property of bodies but as connected “to forms of conduct” (18). Her understanding of race is influenced, via Ann Laura Stoler, by Foucault’s \textit{Society Must Be Protected}, in which Foucault describes race as an extension of biopower functioning as a state mechanism that “introduc[es] a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (254). Race as a form of state-controlled difference fragments the biological field, manufacturing difference as a technology of control while also establishing a biologized and war-like relation between groups such that “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (255). In this equation, Henderson argues, white women’s moral authority lies in their ability to extend the discipline of the state to those of the inferior race, to propagate moral and hygienic improvement for the sake of the health of the population.

\textsuperscript{16} Heron prefers to speak of bourgeois identity rather than whiteness because, in her opinion, it more accurately encapsulates the complex of race, gender, and conduct that constitutes Northern forms of whiteness (6).
“competencies”’ that “enabled the distinction to be made between those who were ‘truly white’ and those merely ‘held to be white’” (29). Whiteness thus becomes something that is both performed and desired; the features of this performance and the object of these desires shift, however, with the spheres in which whiteness is operating. In the context of the neoliberal discourse of helping distant others, the desire is to become the kind of self who performs her whiteness in terms of transnational empathy and intervention.

Desire is central to Heron’s thesis as that which, in the stead of duty, compels white women to help “Southern” others. While the West’s responsibility toward others has become “a kind of national calling” in Canada, narratives of helping others focus consistently on “the effect that ‘helping’ the passive Other will have on our own life experiences” (5). This emphasis on helping others as a way of improving the self is internalized as desire, specifically “white/Northern women’s desire for other people’s development” (6). The desire to help the other is paired with a “desire to know the Other [that] takes various forms: romanticizing, identifying with (being ‘at one with’), caring for, saving, being seduced by, and being transformed through this relationship” (34). All of these relations can be read as forms of white fantasy about the racialized other. They also contribute substantially to the work of authorizing narratives that focus on the effect of travel on the white subject and that consistently emphasize not simply knowledge but different affective registers of affiliation. My argument is not that any trace of ethical interest in the fate of others, separated by geographical distance and degrees of privilege, necessarily becomes an exercise in white subject formation. Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s texts constantly complicate the problem of representing, and of caring for, an other who is marked as foreign. One of the conditions of possibility for the circulation of these texts, however, is the deployment of authorizing narratives that focus upon lived experiences of travel.
in order to generate a sense of both authority and authenticity. The author is constructed as the one who has been there, who has seen, and who can share that experience with readers who become vicarious witnesses.

**From the Author-God to the Author-Neighbour**

The argument that the six books discussed in this project share a representational situation relies upon a potentially controversial reading of the “skin” of the author as relevant to the text itself, a methodological move that is only exacerbated by the above emphasis on the discursive force of white femininity. To argue that these narratives are accompanied by and read through their authors’ bodies in ways that generate an overdetermined relation between author-function and text requires an understanding of the particular ways in which a historical individual becomes discursively intertwined with her textual production. In the context of three twenty-first century authors who are promoted as book-club friendly award winners, that means understanding how middlebrow authorship in particular functions in the contemporary moment.

What does it mean to continue to read texts through the lens of their authors’ gender, race, and nationality long after Roland Barthes’ 1967 announcement of the author’s death? In the seminal essay “The Death of the Author,” he argues that the author is a modern invention, the product of a society obsessed with the individual; the author is thus “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology” and tyrannically dominates the “image of literature to be found in ordinary culture” (143). Contrary to the critical impulse to locate the meaning of a work in the person who produced it, Barthes insists that “[w]riting is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142). This focus on the textuality of the text and resistance to the
use of the author as a total explanation has had enormous impact on literary studies, but Barthes’ thesis has not been without critics, particularly feminist and postcolonial scholars who argue that the timing of the author’s death—corresponding with the emergence of strong authorial voices from previously marginalized subjects—is no coincidence. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford are suspicious of the timing of the death of the author, “just as women and scholars of color were beginning to publish,” and point out that many scholars continue to value authorship as a point of access to a representational “authority” previously denied to minoritized subjects (355). Their argument is borne out in the work of minoritized writers in the mid-to-late twentieth century, who responded to “the legacy of [colonial] repression” by “claim[ing] the right to retell their collective histories” (Black 24). If authorship can be a means of recovering authority, it is because of the ongoing presumed link between text and authorial biography, a link that remains not only a commonplace of middlebrow reading practices but also a point of critical interest, fundamental to how narratives circulate and signify. It is for this reason, I believe, that the death of the author was answered not with the cessation of all authorial criticism but with increasing critical focus on the discursive and textual production of the author as a function that interpellates readers into particular understandings of and relations to texts.

I am of course drawing here on the Foucauldian concept of the author-function, which distinguishes between the author-as-historical-person and the author-as-social construct (or the “author” and the “author-function”). In his essay “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault responds to the death of the author by providing a “sociohistorical analysis of the author as an individual,” focusing on “the conditions that fostered the formulation of the fundamental critical category of ‘the man and his work’” (115). In his analysis, the author becomes an explanatory and “authenticati[ng]” device, explaining events through “an author’s biography” and
“neutraliz[ing] the contradictions” within a body of work through narratives of maturation or influence (128). An author-function is as different from the historical writer as it is from the narrator, arising instead out of “the division and distance of the two” (129)—as well as, I would add, the perceived proximity. An author’s name accompanies and shapes the reception of particular texts by being collapsed into the identity of the historical author herself. Calling for analysis of the author-function in relation to the “themes and concepts that an author places in his work,” Foucault insists on reclaiming the authorial subject, “not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions,” that is, how the illusion of the subject in the form of the author-function shapes texts (137-38). It is this function that interests me, hence my emphasis on the interaction between authorizing narratives and texts.

The work of the author-function upon a text is informed by generic expectations. Life writing, for example, establishes a particular relation between author-function and narrator, narrowing the gap between the two to the point of collapse. This generic expectation—what Philippe Lejeune calls the “autobiographical pact”—can, according to Larissa Lai, alter or even undermine the “intentionality” of a text, silencing or shifting aspects of the text to make it signify differently through the presumed collapse of author and narrator (87). In her discussion of ethnic autobiographies, Lai reminds us that the writing of the self is always “exterior” and social; interiority is an illusion, “a performative effect of autobiography rather than its ‘originating centre’” (98). This illusion is promoted and sustained by strategic marketing devices that undermine the gap between author and narrator in order to generate an experience of authenticity for readers. The expectation of representational transparency that accompanies life-writing as a genre is amplified where the author-function is constructed as a minoritized subject who might be perceived to lend her text autoethnographic authority. Texts that are “sanctioned through the
legitimizing power of the authentic voice” risk becoming “a new kind of ethnography rife with stereotypes … made all the more salient precisely because it is the native who speaks” (Lai 108). In the case of the life writing I am considering (both Connelly’s memoir and various authorizing narratives by all three authors), although the author is constructed not as a “native” but as an outsider to the cultures being represented, the strategies used to authenticate her voice are remarkably similar. In the case of other genres, particularly fiction, the author functions differently. The texts I am examining fall along a representational spectrum: in Connelly’s *Burmese Lessons*, for example, there is a perceived identity of author with narrator associated with the genre of life-writing; in Echlin’s *The Disappeared* there is similarity without identity (the narrator is a white Canadian woman living in Cambodia, and the author is a white Canadian woman who visited Cambodia); while in Gibb’s *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* the presence of the white woman has disappeared from the novel, though arguably the outsider perspective associated with authorial consciousness remains in the American-raised Vietnamese figure Maggie. What unites these texts is how their authorship is formulated paratextually as key to the meaning and authority of the texts themselves.

Paratexts are what stand between text and public, a threshold that influences without determining the meaning of the text. In his seminal work on paratexts, Gérard Genette defines the paratext as that which differentiates between a text and a book, serving both to present the text to the public as well as “to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form … of a book” (1). Genette’s work is useful for his focus on the function of the author, particularly the contractual function of the author’s name. This function varies, as my discussion above suggests, with genre: “slight or nonexistent in fiction, it is much greater in all kinds of referential writing, where the credibility of the testimony, or of its
transmission, rests largely on the identity of the witness or the person reporting it” (41).

Genette’s use of the word “witness” here indicates why I am arguing that, in the case of the novels of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly, the contractual function of the author’s name and the referential dimension of their writing remain very much present despite the generic expectations of fiction. These authors are produced as witnesses to distant suffering; in fact, I might go so far as to call their works “novels of witness” that function as a sort of testimony to something the author experienced and is attempting to communicate to a public that did not share that experience.17 Their referentiality is established at the level of all kinds of paratexts, from epigraphs, acknowledgements, and cover art, to authorial biographies, interviews, and publishers’ promotions.

Paratextual analysis as method has proven particularly useful in the context of scholarship on racialized or minoritized writing, in which the identity of the author exerts considerable determining force over the reception of the text. Both Graham Huggan and Wendy Waring have drawn upon Genette’s work to explore how paratextual apparatuses render potentially resistant texts complicit with discourses of exoticization or othering. Both critics attempt to complicate standard readings of postcolonial fiction, arguing that paratexts construct readers as “anthro-pological tourist[s]” and globalized “market reader[s]” (Waring 462, 464) while shaping the texts as sources of “indirect access to ‘exotic’ cultures” (Huggan, Postcolonial 155). At the same time, both critics emphasize “the heterogeneity of the book’s reception,” signalled by “cues for interpretation” directed toward “readers of different cultural backgrounds

17 I will discuss narratives of witnessing further in Chapter 4, but should stress at this point that there is an important distinction between the belated witnessing of historical events at work in Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work and the narratives of witness associated particularly with survivors of the Holocaust as theorized by Forché, Felman and Laub, and Agamben.
and competencies” (Huggan, *Postcolonial* 170). Waring warns against “too readily … homogenis[ing] … the reading positions of the text,” arguing that marketing and readership are not identical and thus that, while a book might be obviously marketed toward white Western readers, different paratexts can indicate “a heterogeneity of reception to which professional readers … should pay heed” (462). It is necessary, then, not to assume that texts are read as their paratexts indicate they should be, or as an author-function would encourage them to be. Cover design and blurbs, author bios, epigraphs, and other dimensions of “commercial packaging” function like a genre in that they generate a “horizon of readerly expectations” that the work itself might then confirm, modify, or exceed (Huggan, *Postcolonial* 165, 168). I move forward with this warning in mind, then, referring to how authorizing narratives shape the desired reception of a text while acknowledging that reception is always multifaceted, heterogeneous, and unstable.

It is nonetheless possible to read particular implied—or even discursively generated—reading communities or reading subjectivities through how texts are framed and circulated. When I refer to the books discussed in “Complicit Witnessing” as part of a middlebrow institution of knowledge production, I draw on Klein’s discussion of how “middlebrow intellectuals, texts, and institutions” educated a public about “their evolving relationships” with the world while also presenting these relationships as participatory, “as a set of activities in which [the public] could invest their emotional and intellectual energy” (7). This emphasis on “education and participation” (7) is evident in the current dominant middlebrow institution—

---

18 Kamboureli reinforces this argument but with an emphasis on the instability of texts themselves rather than the heterogeneity of readers: “a text can never function as a fully reliable vehicle of its author’s objectives—as is the case with all linguistic constructs, it follows the grammar of its own textuality, thus suspending and subverting the representational transparency attributed to language” (“Limits” 943).
book clubs—which Beth Driscoll describes as “part of the middle-class package of values that includes education and self-improvement” (112). She describes the contemporary middlebrow as a space between mass and popular culture associated with “elements of literary culture such as bookstores with coffee shops, writers festivals, literary prizes, lists and book groups” and strongly affiliated with a female readership (110-12). Identifying the work of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly as part of the contemporary Canadian middlebrow via the distribution of reading guides and the receipt of mainstream literary prizes elucidates why their circulation has been so strongly shaped by authorial identity, as a dimension of middlebrow reading practices is a collapse of text and author or a fetishistic fascination with the body of the author. Similarly, Meyer argues that reading guides often elide “the possibility of authorial practice” by treating the text as “unequivocally” authoritative (101). The function of paratexts remains primarily that of interpellation into a discourse of authenticity directed toward “market readers—tourists, book browsers in the neo-imperialist marketplace” (Waring 464). In the case of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work, the implied reader as tourist is invited to identify with a similarly positioned author via authorizing narratives. In the case of postcolonial fiction or ethnic autobiographies, as Huggan and Waring argue, paratexts interpellate readers into the position of tourists, encouraging them to consume the difference of the represented other.

The paratextual production of contemporary middlebrow authorship is also increasingly digital. In her analysis of shifts in authorship in the digital era, Erin Elizabeth Greer encourages closer attention to how the Internet’s proliferating paratexts—including blogs, chatrooms, and promotional websites—render the author less like “Barthes’ Author-God” and more like “the Author-Neighbor,” characterized by a fetishized image of authorial subjectivity (“Part 3” n. pag.). In her close reading of an author’s personal website, Greer examines sites where the online
production of authorial subjectivity intensifies in ways that exceed its material instantiations, specifically “a downloadable ‘Reading Group Guide’ and the author blog.” In Chapter 4 I discuss the downloadable Penguin Reading Guide produced to accompany Echlin’s The Disappeared in terms of its ability to “both condition[] interpretations and also interpolate[] the reader as a person with a highly personal and emotional investment in the work.” The guide’s emphasis on readerly affect and education constructs reading as an act of what I call vicarious witnessing—bearing witness through the mediation of the text and, via authorizing narratives, of the author’s own purported experience.

Digital paratexts construct the author in implicit parallel to her own text and characters, such that reading the work of authors like Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly can be understood as a means of access to the authors’ lived experiences and, by extension, to the lives of those they encountered on their travels. Greer argues that the purpose of this parallel construction is to “establish[] a loose personal link between [the author] and her readers” by “nurtur[ing] a sense of identification and intimacy” and “a demystified rapport between the author and her audience.” Readers are thus invited to participate in the lives of authors, and therefore in the narratives that authorize their texts. As these narratives frequently emphasize the personal connections forged by authors across cultural and racial divides, their intimacy allows readers to imagine themselves as involved in these connections such that they become “emotionally rich relationships” that readers can “inhabit imaginatively in their everyday lives” (Klein 8). The authorizing narratives I am exploring thus produce a representational authority merged with intimacy, rather than the distance of the objectifying gaze, by emphasizing personal experiences of engagement in which readers can at least imaginatively participate.
The “Cult of Authenticity”

A primary function of the link between authors’ bodies and their texts is the establishment of representational authenticity. As Lai argues, even if the author is dead and “all language is quotation[,] … the coincidence of the marginalized writer with her autobiography” remains a powerful oppressive force that can leave “the subaltern … numbed by the emptiness of her own words” (94). The texts of marginalized or ethnic writers circulate through their racialized bodies in ways that render those texts more appealing and assimilable, or digestible, to a middlebrow readership by inscribing texts within discourses of authenticity. In this light, the body, the paratext, and the text itself enter into a relation that implicitly validates ethnographic readings. This fetishization of the authorial body has been intensified in recent years by “Western media-driven, visually orientated, capitalist-consumerist society,” which renders the authorial body “highly visible and highly sought” (Myler 87). Kerry Myler demonstrates that contemporary middlebrow reading communities thrive on “the merging of author, writer and character” (90), with the authorial body serving as a “mediator between the book club selection and its potential consumer” (98), and between the text’s potentially disturbing dimensions and its marketability (99-100). She explores situations in which the disjunction between authorial body as mediating device and textual bodies produce new critical possibilities including awareness of how authorial bodies curtail the possibilities of textual circulation: “If the body that writes is not, in fact, subject to Barthes’s death sentence, but continues to function in the promotion, marketing and commodification of literature in a Western, visually orientated, image-saturated, media culture, then that body is central to the construction and perpetuation of ideas about who can write, what they can write and what kind of writing is the ‘right’ kind to read” (105-06). Thus the circulation of stories about Burma, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Vietnam through the bodies of white Canadian
women—bodies that are not kept out of view to promote the authenticity of the text but in fact foregrounded in terms of their mobility—suggests something about what kinds of voices are authorized to tell stories, as well as what kinds of stories are promoted as desirable by middlebrow institutions. In the context of white women’s representations of the foreign, this establishing of a link between readers and author, alongside the already discussed establishment of the author as authoritative, satisfies the readerly desire for access to the foreign as a site constituted as authentic.

Authenticity is of course a matter of discursive production rather than an indication of identity between text and culture; it is, in the words of James Clifford, “something produced, not salvaged” (“The Others” 165). In the context of globalization, authenticity is produced as that which has been threatened by globalization’s flattening out of cultural difference and by the corrosive influence of modernity. Oscillating between a fantasy of “unmediated access to other people’s life-experiences” and a “symbolic representation of what is felt to be missing from one’s own” (Huggan, Postcolonial 172), authenticity speaks to the contemporary anxiety over the loss of unmediated experiences characterized by cultural difference. The resulting “cult of authenticity” (157) is evident in both the hunger for literary representations of the foreign and the rise of the global tourism industry. As John Goss argues, tourists and souvenir-purchasers are in search of an authenticity that is always out of reach because it can only be acquired by taking what was authentic, and thus outside of the market system of modernity, and bringing it into that system by consuming it (330). Goss’s argument suggests that the desire for authenticity is linked to a construction of the other as possessing that authenticity; by logical extension the self (in this case the white Western tourist or reader) is lacking in authenticity and must seek it elsewhere. A function of desire, authenticity fetishizes the other as being different (Ahmed, Strange 118). It is
thus associated with racial or cultural difference insofar as it functions as a fetish for the neoliberal subject’s impossible desire to escape global capitalism through global capitalism.

Contemporary tourism is theorized as a practice of looking that finds the authentic through the very act of seeking it out. It thus recalls other acts of looking that use the gaze to generate authenticity. In her study of photography of atrocity, Susan Sontag emphasizes how photographs are shaped by the expectation of authenticity, which is explicitly opposed to artistry; representational refinement is associated with contrivance or, worse, emotional manipulation, which risks “arous[ing] facile compassion or identification” (27). Viewers expect that representational authenticity will generate authentic ethical responses while overt aesthetic decisions taint the act of looking, rendering it voyeuristic. A visual vocabulary of authenticity is thus directly linked to moral authority: a photograph gains authority insofar as it authentically and without artistry represents the suffering of others (57). Sontag’s argument that photographs earn their cultural capital through the illusion of immediacy, intimacy, and authenticity (58) can be expanded to other artistic representations that purport to represent a form of suffering that is actually taking place, like the social realist novel. If a creative text, by its very nature, cannot function as an unadulterated document of witnessing, then authorizing narratives can step into the ethical void left by this distance between reality and representation. By generating immediacy (in the sense of both proximity to an experience and unmediated artistic expression), these narratives reassure readers that they are not being manipulated by the author. The generation of authority and authenticity within the frame of autobiographical narratives of witnessing brings these texts closer to the desired documentary status of a photograph.

It should not be assumed that the deployment of authenticity goes only one way, that it is necessarily a strategy of the dominant culture to fetishize and commodify difference in its
various forms. Certainly the appropriation debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s gesture toward a tactical use of authenticity\(^{19}\) as a means of reclaiming the right to speak on behalf of one’s own culture. Be it strategic or tactical, however, cultural authenticity in literary texts operates via the author-function. As a form of classification and discourse, the author-function provides a vital link between the text and the site of cultural difference it purports to represent and to which it provides access. In the case of the texts examined by Huggan, Lai, and Waring, that link is constituted by the author’s membership in the culture in question. Authorship is thus collapsed directly into authenticity via the discourse of autoethnography. In the case of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly, authenticity is related to authorship differently. The productive disjunction between authorial bodies and textual bodies calls out for authorizing narratives that might mediate this disjunction through the establishment, via physical presence and affective care, of both authority and authenticity. The non-identity of authorial and textual bodies is overcome only by generating relationships between these bodies—relationships in which middlebrow readers are invited to participate. Authenticity thus remains associated with cultural and racial difference and the white author-function becomes a point of access to that difference, an avatar through which the authenticity of the foreign comes into view.

“*ethiopian photo album*”

The home page of camillagibb.ca features a series of hyperlinked images. A photograph of the author takes users to the “news&blog” page and a black and white childhood photo links to “bio&contact,” while the remaining four images of her book covers lead to title-specific

\(^{19}\) See Bradley for a detailed analysis of the ethical implications at play within appropriation debates.
information. Under each title’s individual page, users have access to “reviews,” “publishers,” and an “excerpt.” Additional information is hidden under some of these tabs: a brief plot synopsis, for example, or a guide to book club discussion. The page for *Sweetness in the Belly*, Gibb’s 2005 novel set in Harar, Ethiopia, has one additional tab: “ethiopian photo album.” The photo album features four categories of images, each linked through a single photograph. “Places” links through an image of a white mosque silhouetted against a bright blue sky; “Faces” a very young Ethiopian girl smiling for the camera; “Activities” an older woman in traditional dress weaving a basket; and “Things” a tobacco pipe (Fig. 1).

The images are of Harar, the walled city where Gibb lived in the mid-1990s, conducting fieldwork in the community for her PhD in cultural anthropology, and where *Sweetness in the Belly* is set. They are never marked as such, labelled more generally as “ethiopian,” but several captions mention prominent Harar locations. Each of the four link-images, when clicked, opens a pop-up album of small but brightly coloured photographs; these photographs cannot be saved or downloaded, nor can they be expanded for more detail. Users cannot interact with the images in any way other than viewing them, undermining Greer’s claim that online paratexts are collaboratively produced by authors and readers. The fixity of the images renders them visual icons attached to their particular location rather than free-floating and recontextualizable representations. They are locked into the context of camillagibb.ca.20

20 The question of whether photographs are characterized by fixity or mutability recurs in criticism of the discursive and political force of the image. Sontag describes the photograph as a “freeze-frame” (22) and a force of objectification (81), arguing that the iconic quality of photographs makes them more memorable but less ethically effective than narratives (122). Writing specifically about the ethnographic deployment of photographs, Poole argues that historic emphasis on the fixity of the photograph may be read as a sign of anxiety over the refusal of the photograph to render the racialized other as a coherent object of knowledge, pointing instead to the “excess,” “contingency,” and “confusion” that inevitably destabilize representations of the other (172).
How does this photo album help to further illustrate the work of an authorizing narrative? First, the website itself discursively generates the unified authorial subject, and that subject remains present on every page as the base of the URL; indeed, the URL visually embeds the photo album within the authoritative name of the author: http://camillagibb.ca/sweetness_album.cfm. Second, the photo album offers a visual narrative of travel through the documentation of place, person, and culture, but one that is distinct from *Sweetness in the Belly* itself, never making direct reference to the novel or to characters or events therein. The medium of the photograph further sets the album apart because it offers a unique
perspective on Harar that is neither identical nor reducible to the perspective offered in the novel. Finally, the photo album offers a link between author and novel that is all the more powerful for being unnamed. The album is not glossed or contextualized, but embedded within the page devoted to information about *Sweetness in the Belly*, on a website dedicated to Gibb’s writing. Gibb is thus implicitly generated as the body behind the camera, demonstrating photography’s “uncanny ability to index the presence of the photographer” (Poole 166). To suggest that the photograph indexes the photographer’s presence, however, says nothing of how that presence signifies or of how the relation between photograph and photographer is mediated and framed (Butler, *Frames* 82).

Judith Butler’s interest in the framing of photographs helps to clarify the relation between the production of “Camilla Gibb” as an authority on Ethiopia, the “ethiopian photo album,” and *Sweetness in the Belly*. Frames are the “politically saturated” means through which we “apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others” (1). Through the movement or circulation of an image or a text the frame, concealed as the “norm,” is broken apart in order to be reinstalled; this breakage allows for “other possibilities for apprehension” or for an interrogation of the operations of power that constitute the frame (12). Butler uses the concept of the frame to demonstrate how images make their own arguments and interpretations: “We do not have to be supplied with a caption or a narrative in order to understand … that the frame functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself” (71). In representing an image while concealing the frame that governs that image’s representability, the photograph paradoxically presents itself as delivering reality while it in fact “withdraws reality from perception” (75). What is at stake here, for Butler, is the regulation of responses to images; thus we are called upon to continue interrogating the frames through which images enter “into
larger circuits of communicability” (78). What sorts of frames regulate responses to the images that constitute Gibb’s “ethiopian photo album”? How do these frames inform the arguments that the photographs are able to make?

The frame I see at work here is the ongoing dominance of the author-function as a discursively produced unifying device, including the invisible but ever-present authorial body. The frame of the author website in which the photo album is located doubles as the politically saturated frame that largely shapes the reading of the photographs. It is thus interesting that the photographs are formatted such that they cannot enter “into larger circuits of communicability” but remain fixed within their frame, resisting the break in authorial authority that might occur if they shifted elsewhere. Such is the power of the frame that the photographs do not need to be attributed; Gibb’s name does not need to appear on them anywhere for the implication of her authorship to be apparent, just as her body does not need to be seen in order to be felt.

My account of the authoritative framing of these Ethiopian photographs also suggests the link between visual representations of the other and “the reification, racialization, and temporal distancing” of photographic subjects (Poole 160). Photography has indeed played a “privileged role … in the crafting of a racial common sense” via the discipline of anthropology (162). Gibb has written about how her ethnographic fieldwork in Harar “informs the cultural, religious, social, economic, and political details of” *Sweetness in the Belly* (“Telling” 40), and the “ethiopian photo album,” I argue, shares a similarly ethnographic impulse. In Chapter 2 I suggest that the novel both draws upon and complicates ethnographic practices of representation. Nevertheless, the presence of the photographs within Gibb’s author website frames them as a confirmation that her ethnographic training leads to particularly reliable representations of Harari culture. The documentary quality of the photographs extends to an implicitly documentary
quality in the novel. Photography operates here as a “privileged site[] for communicating a feeling of cultural immersion, a sort of substitute for the personal experience of fieldwork” (Poole 169). The author is produced as the one who knows enough about Harar to represent it accurately while the novel is produced as just such an accurate representation; users/viewers/readers are thus invited into the frame-produced “reality” of the images such that looking at them, like reading the novel, might become a vicarious experience of the act of travel. There is a racial logic at work in this act of looking. The depiction of Harari subjects, combined with the invisible presence of the white photographer “behind” the image and the authoritative presence of the white author at the top of the page suggests a hierarchy in which the racialized other “is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees” (Sontag 72).

I bring up the racializing implications of ethnographic photographs not as a way of levelling accusations against Gibb or even the website, but to return the discussion to the problematic of complicity. Poole argues that critical emphasis on the complicity of “the anthropological project … with the racializing discourses and essentializing dichotomies that characterized New World slave societies and European colonial rule” (170) has fostered an environment of suspicion toward visual representations of the other, a suspicion that “comes at the expense of silencing the capacity of both ethnography and photography to unsettle our accounts of the world” (160). In her own survey of the relation between ethnography and photography, Poole emphasizes that the desire for photographs to provide “coherence, accuracy, and completion” has been consistently undermined by “the twin menace of intimacy and contingency” (163-64).21 Both sides of this menace are captured in the destabilizing force of the
encounter, which contains “within it the specter of communication, exchange, and presence” (166) as well as suggesting “an opening toward both newness and ‘the other’” (172). The trace of the encounter, and thus of the “‘slippery’ or unstable quality of the racial referent,” has dominated more recent studies of visual ethnography, along with “the importance of gazes as a potentially destabilizing site of encounter within the photographic frame” (171). Poole interrogates the historic complicity of photographs with the racializing force of ethnography to demonstrate how the ethical force of the encounter consistently undermines objectifying modes of representation. Once again complicity suggests that even as there is no purely ethical act untroubled by its implication in hegemonic power, there is similarly no possibility of a purely objectifying act that is not at least potentially troubled by the face of the other.

Indeed, the face and the destabilizing gaze feature prominently in the “ethiopian photo album,” specifically in the section entitled “Faces.” Here fifteen images of Harari men, women, and children gaze directly into the lens of the camera in a way that reminds viewers of the presence of the ethnographer/photographer in the field (166) (Figs. 2 and 3). The granting of subjecthood—a return gaze—to the ethnographic object and the self-reflexive insertion of the outsider into the culture being described are also central representational strategies of *Sweetness in the Belly*. Even as these photographs illuminate the function of an authorizing narrative that constructs the author as the one who knows because she has been there, and thus as the one who can take readers there in her stead, they also undermine the absolute authority of the representing

---

21 While Poole associates intimacy with the destabilizing force of the encounter (166), Sontag suggests that intimacy—along with immediacy and authenticity—is an effect of the perceived documentary quality of the photograph, the emphasis on which distracts viewers from the degree to which photographs are also interpretations (58).

22 Elsewhere I expand upon this topic in terms of the collapse of the field site and the home site (see McGregor).
subject through the force of the return gaze. As documents of travel, these images become a means through which the reader can “imaginatively dwell in the place of another through the texts, testimonies, archaeological data, and other means at the disposal of the scholar,” and thus through which “the strangeness of the cultural other [can] be conveyed” (Barbieri 25). But they also contain traces of that “discourse of the other” that remains present even when the written discourse about the other subsumes and alters it through the deforming discourses of authenticity (Certeau 78).

It is possible, then, to read these photographs in terms of the resistance, rather than the transparency, of the other. In my own desire to identify resistance, however, I am reminded of Beth A. McCoy’s reading of a lynching photography exhibit and her problematization of captions that seek to frame black subjectivity in terms of resistance. McCoy describes a series of
photographs of “Frank Embree, a black man lynched in Fayette, Missouri, on 22 July 1899” (164). In the first photograph, although “Embree faces the camera, it is impossible to tell whether he meets its gaze or not; yet, according to the caption, he is ‘defiant’ and ‘stares directly into the camera lens with undiminished dignity’” (165). Such a declaration, McCoy argues, “betrays a desire that black masculinity be represented as a resistant subject” (165), a desire that seeks to locate white supremacy “safely in the past” (164). My reading of the resistant power of the gaze in the “ethiopian photo album” betrays a similar urge to rescue the photographs from colonial ethnographic discourse. At the same time, the selection of these potentially resistant photographs for Gibb’s website gestures towards the ongoing construction of the white woman as distanced from power and as characterized by a compassionate or ethical relation to the other, as well as the establishment of her representational authority through her personal encounters with distant others. By providing a space for the subjectivity of the other via the returned gaze, the images strike a balance between authority and its seeming opposite, an ethical response to the face of the other. Indeed, even Poole’s emphasis upon the ethical force of the encounter can be, and has been, problematized. Ahmed argues against an understanding of the possibility of unmediated encounters because they always “reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference” (Strange 8). If “each encounter reopens past encounters” (8), if the construction of a resistant black subjectivity can be read as a desire for white innocence, if an emphasis on the discourse of the other becomes a way of discursively constructing a particularly ethical self, then how do we read Gibb’s authorizing narrative? Is it irrevocably complicit with the dominance of the white subject at the expense of the racialized other, or does it suggest an opening within representation itself onto the destabilizing force of alterity?
The answer must be: both. Such is the nature of complicity that it does not erase, nor is it erased by, traces of the ethical. “ethiopian photo album” presents on a microcosmic scale the central problematic of theorizing complicity in relation to white women’s representations of the foreign. The very texts that construct the white author-function as capable of authoritatively and authentically representing the foreign consistently undermine that authority through a resistant, and ethical, emphasis on the alterity of the other; at the same time this ethical resistance reinforces the construction of white femininity as moral, sensitive to the call of the other, and thus particularly capable of producing accurate representations of the other. This representational bind is repeated in the work of Connelly and Echlin, and amplified by the network of published texts and authorizing narratives. I have offered a particularly lengthy reading of Gibb’s author website here as a means of unpacking some of these theoretical and methodological problems, but as my readings proceed I will continue to incorporate authorizing narratives and their production of the author as someone who has been there and has, through the act of travel, “return[ed] from afar with the authority to speak in the name of the other and command belief” (Certeau 69).
Chapter Two

Representing the Other: *Sweetness in the Belly* and *Burmese Lessons*

“[A]lthough no representation is above critique, it is possible to dramatize the process of conceptualizing others without inevitably trapping them within the prison of one’s needs and desires.”

(Black 254)

Insiders and Outsiders

At the end of Chapter 1 I argued for a reading of Camilla Gibb’s “ethiopian photo album” as an authorizing narrative that constructs an author-function capable of producing authentic representations of Ethiopian culture, anchored in the insider knowledge and professional expertise of an Oxford-trained cultural anthropologist. *Sweetness in the Belly*, the novel that “ethiopian photo album” authorizes, is narrated in the first person by Lilly Abdal, a white British woman raised by Sufis in Morocco, then relocated to Harar, Ethiopia, until the deposition of Haile Selassie forces her to seek refuge in England, her parents’ native land that she has never seen and with which she has a fraught relationship. The novel’s action begins in two different moments, moving between 1969 with a sixteen-year-old Lilly arriving at the gates of Harar and 1991 with a thirty-seven-year-old Lilly working as a nurse in London. The narrative covers much of the years between, with the exception of a conspicuous gap between 1974, when political turmoil forces her to leave Harar, and 1981, when she meets another Harari woman in London and forms the beginning of a new community of refugees. The unnarrated years constitute, arguably, the traumatic core of Lilly’s story—leaving behind the country of her heart, entering a strange land in which she paradoxically appears to belong, living in the isolation of the refugee—but, alongside the most violent dimensions of the Ethiopian Civil War, they are described only in
passing and from a distance. In part the novel is making an argument for a representation of Ethiopia that does not cater to narratives of crisis and disaster; in this sense it resists media depictions of famine, war, and displacement in favour of intimate depictions of culture and everyday life both in Harar and, later, in diaspora.

The novel thus not only represents Harar, but also stages an argument for how Harar ought to be represented. It is accompanied by various paratextual apparatuses that confirm the authoritative position from which this argument is staged. The cover design of the 2006 Anchor paperback edition, for example, features a photograph credited to the author and a quotation from Barbara Gowdy (another white Canadian novelist who has written about Africa) praising the novel as “a deeply imagined immersion into the lives of people for whom war, poverty, marginalization and exile are the commonplace trials” (back cover copy). If the lives of these distant others are something into which the reader and the author must immerse themselves through imagination, then these people, this quotation suggests, are characterized by their difference from the implied reader as well as their familiarity with “war, poverty, marginalization and exile.” The book’s opening pages also feature review excerpts that emphasize “the authority of Gibb’s scholarship on social anthropology” (Elle Canada) and the novel’s ability to “transport us behind closed borders” (The Gazette [Montreal]) through its “details of a most unusual place” (Quill & Quire) as well as Gibb’s “willingness to face the outrage that’s bound to dog a book about a culture and a religion that are not her own” (NOW Magazine [Toronto]). The willingness of readers to accept Gibb’s ethnographic training as a source of representational authority is indicated in Eleanor Ty’s reading of Sweetness in the Belly as an example of minority subjects writing about diasporas to which they do not belong; she justifies Gibb’s inclusion in the category of the minority subject, alongside Dionne Brand and
Michael Ondaatje, through her fieldwork: “While Gibb is not an ethnic minority like Ondaatje and Brand, as an anthropologist, she has spent time living in Ethiopia and has experienced first-hand the difficulties she describes in her novel” (100). Spending time in Harar might not render Gibb an honorary Ethiopian, but it certainly enters her into a category of representational authority more legitimate than that of a mere tourist or traveller.

It is thus in terms of foreignness, border-crossing, and (somewhat risky) representational authority that the book has been marketed to a Canadian readership, a fact that does not eliminate the possibility of differently situated readers (members of the Ethiopian diaspora, for example), or “a range of available options” for the consumption of “culturally ‘othered’ goods” (Huggan, Postcolonial 12). Bearing in mind Huggan and Ware’s warnings against homogenizing reader positions in relation to a text, I read the novel as situated, through various paratexts and authorizing narratives, as an exercise in cultural border-crossing that evokes the details of an unknown culture for the entertainment and edification of a first-world readership. In this sense it resembles what Huggan calls the “anthropological exotic,” a discourse and “mode of both perception and consumption” that “invokes that familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (Postcolonial 37). It also recalls Black’s description of middlebrow fiction as “entertainment education, a form of storytelling explicitly designed to educate its audience about political or cultural issues through melodramatic narratives” (68), a designation that again implies an essentialized distance between reader and text that positions the culture being described as foreign.

23 Gibb’s website, through its inclusion of reviews from Republika Indonesia, Malaysia Star, and Ethiopian Observer, makes it clear that Sweetness in the Belly has been read by a range of communities (“Sweetness Reviews”).
But texts and their authorizing narratives are non-identical, and a novel like *Sweetness in the Belly* is not necessarily read as its paratexts indicate it should be. The novel exceeds its paratextual positioning to offer its own commentary on the unstable binary of insider/outsider, thus compromising its claims to authority. In fact, as I argue, the novel rejects the anthropological authority of its author and the representational innocence I linked to white femininity in Chapter 1. Engaging intertextually with the genealogy of knowledge production about foreign places, it deploys the liminal positioning of the focalizing narrator as well as a non-linear structure to problematize the possibility of anything like a pure “inside” or “outside” to a culture, thus refuting the ethnographic model of culture as “enclosed difference” (Marcus, “Uses” 117). Lilly’s complex negotiation of her insider/outsider status in Harar and her strong identification with the Muslim diaspora in London mark her as a hybrid and liminal subject, situated outside the dominant cultural norm in both cities. Thus, in choosing to focalize the novel through the perspective of Lilly, Gibb provides neither an insider nor an outsider account of Harari culture. This focalization clashes in productive ways with the invisible authority of the white ethnographic gaze constructed in the “ethiopian photo album”; in contrast, *Sweetness in the Belly* is highly concerned with the perspective through which both Harari and English culture are being interpreted.

The novel’s attention to the problem of interiority and exteriority is evoked in the prologue’s image of the walled city of Harar’s gates. Readers initially seem to be invited inside the city, following the track of the sun as it “makes its orange way east from Arabia, over a Red Sea, across volcanic field and desert and over the black hills to the qat- and coffee-shrubbed land of the fertile valley that surrounds our walled city” (1). This opening sentence deploys a cinematic aesthetic framing that positions readers as outsiders, sweeping across the landscape in
a journey that recalls some of the visual tropes associated with representations of Africa as “the Land of Wide Empty Spaces” (Wainaina n. pag.). At the same time, the deployment of the first-person plural establishes that the narrator belongs on the inside of “our walled city,” and thus draws the readers both into the city and into her community. Such is the force of the first-person plural that it can locate readers at once outside and inside of the community it evokes.24

The prologue goes on to describe the symbolically liminal figures of the hyenas, once “the only outsiders permitted access after dark,” but even now, with “the gates … splayed open,” still clearly suggestive of the tension between inside and outside through their affiliation with thresholds: “For all the fear they inspire … if a hyena must die, one hopes it might do so on one’s doorstep” (1-2). The hyenas are evoked not visually but culturally; that is, they exist only in relation to how they are understood from the Harari perspective; they are not signs of exotic difference but described as informational entry points akin, for the reader, to the open gates. The prologue concludes with a final image of interiority that calls up the sensual experience of being physically located within the city’s walls, listening to the “ninety-nine muezzins” calling from their “ninety-nine mosques,” creating “the particular sound that is heard as godliness in Harar” (2). The use of the passive voice (“is heard”) leaves the grammatical subject doing the hearing in doubt, an ambivalence that introduces the (possible) difference between the reader and the Hararis such that the reader—at once invited to step inside of that sound and located beyond its reach—shares Lilly’s liminality. As the novel will reveal, this position is one of neither seamless

24 “English draws no distinction between the inclusive and exclusive forms of the first person plural. With a single exception, the Marathi language of western India, no Indo-European language draws that distinction. … Outside the Indo-European world, however, the inclusive/exclusive distinction abounds” (Chen 2).
cultural interiority nor exteriority, and her perspective cannot be reduced to that of the native informant or, as Gibb’s authorizing narratives might have suggested, the ethnographer.\textsuperscript{25}

A liminally positioned protagonist is of course not unique to \textit{Sweetness in the Belly}, but Lilly’s liminality can be read as an attempt to negotiate the representation of a culture that is marked as other to the author but not as beyond the bounds of the author’s expertise. The ways in which Lilly’s liminality restricts and enables her unique perspectives on Harari and English culture reveal a narrator who can speak \textit{about} Harar \textit{to} a readership unfamiliar with it, without claiming absolute cultural authority. This liminality is most pronounced at moments where Lilly’s perspective shifts between complicity with and critical resistance to the culture in which she is located. While her complicity signals her enfoldment within a community that shapes her subjectivity, her capacity to critique enacts its own form of complicity with forms of white civility that “make her palatable to a ‘western’ audience” (Grekul 12). The representational struggles of Lilly as a character, and Gibb as an author, thus enact the complexity of complicity in its doubled sense of affiliation and implication.

There are two moments during Lilly’s early days in Harar that speak to her first attempts to negotiate her liminal cultural identity. The first is the description of the circumcision of the young girls in the family with which Lilly has been living. At this point in the narrative, Lilly is a teenager and still a relative newcomer to Harar, struggling to find a place within the social

\textsuperscript{25} There are various moments in which Lilly’s ethnographic perspective, particularly in her capacity as cultural translator, is suggested. Living in London, for example, Lilly is “called upon … to explain to a doctor that the scars on someone’s back are not the result of abuse but the well-intended evidence of leeching or cupping” (259). In an earlier passage, Lilly explains to the implied reader the social hierarchies within Harar: “the Hararis owned the land and controlled the lucrative trade” of crops, while “rent[ing] the land to peasant farmers, all Oromo, who tilled and tended the gardens in return for a 10 percent share of the harvest” (83-84). I read these expository narrative interruptions as ethnographic because they produce knowledge about an implicitly unfamiliar culture to an implied readership of outsiders.
structures of the community. After being rejected by Sheikh Jami, the holy man whom she
originally came to Harar to meet, Lilly is taken by his youngest wife Nouria to live with Nouria’s
cousin Gishta, a poor widow with four young children. While Lilly’s adoptive brother, Hussein,
is welcomed into the household of the Sheikh, Lilly, a young woman with conspicuous white
skin and a connection to the loathed foreigner Muhammed Bruce Mahmoud, is exiled to a life of
poverty and labour. Early in her time with Nouria and the children, Lilly witnesses Nouria’s
four-year-old twin daughters receiving “absuma,” circumcision, at the hands of the local
midwife. Lilly is positioned explicitly as ignorant of this ceremony and of the gendered societal
expectations of Harar: “Had my mother not taught me anything?” (71). When two of the women
gathered for the ceremony ask her “what new Harari words [she has] learned lately,” Lilly replies
with “‘Absuma gar’ … wanting to keep the attention on Rahile” (73). The laughter that follows
is as unreadable to Lilly as it would be to readers unfamiliar with Harari culture; indeed, only
through Lilly’s ability to read cultural cues does the implied reader gain understanding.
Positioned as a reader who does not understand the definition of “absuma,” Lilly responds in
horror—“‘What is she doing?’”—when the midwife removes one girl’s labia with a metal blade
(75). The ceremony is described in grimly methodical detail interspersed with affective
descriptions of the suffering of the girls. Rahile is described as “whimpering, her lips trembling,
her eyelashes fluttering over her glazed eyes” (75-76), while the suffering of Bortucan is not
narrated because Lilly “had to turn away” (77).

Lilly’s ignorance of this cultural custom can be explained by her recent arrival in Harar,
but her negative reaction suggests that she is judging cultural difference from a perspective at
some remove. What forms the basis of this critique? From what position, as critical outsider or
dissenting insider, does Lilly stand in relation to Harari customs? While she appears to stand in for a Western perspective garnered somehow through her ongoing contact with her British guardian, Muhammed Bruce, and some recollection of her parents, Lilly is too young at this point in the narrative to have fully embraced the “alternatives” offered by that heritage. Her seemingly instinctive rejection of “absuma,” then, must be corroborated by a cultural insider who can lend the critique authority—both for Lilly, who is attempting to locate herself in relation to Harar’s gendered cultural norms, and for the implied reader, who is similarly positioned as one who needs this culture explained. The role of culturally informed critic is played by Dr. Aziz Abdulnasser, the young doctor who will become Lilly’s love interest and the primary symbol of her affective connection to Harar. Aziz is a Muslim Harari, but his father’s Sudanese heritage means that he is black and thus rejected by many Hararis who value light skin as a marker of class. Alongside his Western medical education, this racialized exclusion causes Aziz to become a voice of cultural critique, particularly of “local custom” justified in the name of Islam.

Aziz becomes one side of the two forces that create and complicate Lilly’s experience of being a cultural insider in Harar—the forces of critique and complicity. On the one hand her deepening relationship with Aziz encourages her to adopt or at least explore his position of critical exteriority, while on the other hand her marked difference encourages her to make herself as complicit with the gendered norms of Harari culture as possible. Complicity, in this sense, refers

---

26 The Random House “Reader’s Guide” for the novel includes a question about this scene that explicitly parallels Lilly’s experience with a similar one had by Gibb: “While living in Ethiopia, Camilla Gibb witnessed a female circumcision. A doctoral student in social anthropology at the time, she says she had to ‘understand it in the context of the community in which it was taking place, and not judge.’ When Nouria’s daughters are circumcised … how does Lilly react as the only Western-born character in the scene? How did you react as a reader?” (“Reader’s Guide” n. pag.). This question suggests the paratextual collapsing of Gibb’s perspective as cultural anthropologist, Lilly’s association with the West, and the presumed positioning of readers as outsiders to Harari culture.
not to “an ‘evil partnership’ with colonialism” (Marcus, “Uses” 123) but to the “entanglements” and “forms of collaboration” with “‘natives’” that characterize ethnographic fieldwork (Marcus, “Affinities” 89). Lilly’s affectively charged relationship with Hararis and Harari culture signals, then, a form of attachment that cannot be uncomplicatedly designated cultural interiority but that strives to forge new kinship bonds across the borders of cultural difference.

If Aziz is the avatar of Lilly’s critical awareness in Harar, Gishta is her guide to complicity, ideally situated, as another self-created Harari, to understand what it takes to move from outsider to insider. As a member of the low-status Oromo ethnic group, Gishta “had once been on the outside herself” (125), and while her situation of hard-earned “belonging” within the more powerful Harari community at first makes her deeply suspicious of Lilly, it eventually allows her to transfer her knowledge of strategic cultural performance. Under Gishta’s tutelage, Lilly undergoes an “apprenticeship, becoming a young woman of Harar,” in a process deliberately designed to induce “conformity” (130). These performances include a focus on dress and behaviour, the outward markers of Harari femininity. Gishta earned her place as a prominent Harari woman by “adopt[ing] the language, the manner, the dress and the customs of the Harari” (126), and she strives to find Lilly a place in a similar fashion, buying her a veil, then trousers, then encouraging her to have a formal outfit made for attending weddings and funerals (133). Gishta dyes Lilly’s hair deep red, paints her nails, uses hot honey to depilate her arms and legs, and has her ears pierced (132). The line that Lilly draws, however, and the second point of critical resistance that interests me, is at having her gums tattooed black. She is told that it will make her teeth look whiter, but she refuses: “Long, long ago I’d used toothpaste. I knew there were gentler alternatives” (133). This time Lilly’s refusal is couched explicitly in a recollection of her own Western origins, her sense of “alternatives.” This same word is evoked at another
point by her guardian, Muhammed Bruce, who during her childhood at a Sufi shrine takes her to Marrakech twice: “I just wanted to make sure you were aware there were alternatives,” he tells her, though at the time Lilly does not understand what there are alternatives to (105).

Both instances of critical resistance have to do with bodily alteration and suggest Lilly’s implicitly or explicitly Western perspective. As Lisa Grekul points out, this refusal turns Lilly into “a white character whose identity is conveniently selective in its ‘otherness’” (14). Her white body remains unmarked by her time in Harar, such that in London she passes undetectably for a local, asked about her “adventures in Ethiopia” (172) or mistaken, when overheard speaking Amharic, for a missionary (170). Between childhood and teenagehood Lilly shifts from being unaware of the existence of alternatives to recognizing and choosing between them. This maturation, and the ability to view cultures from both the inside and the outside, is at least in part a result of her experience of being rejected from the cultural centre of Harar. It is no coincidence that this rejection, which leads her to begin understanding the “alternatives” once proffered by Muhammed Bruce, is a direct result of her affiliation with her guardian. Lilly’s relationship to Muhammed Bruce aligns with her whiteness and gender and her attempts to forge a place within Harari society in ways that complicate the novel’s representational politics via the association of white femininity with a particular kind of powerless goodness. Muhammed Bruce is a professional tourist who lives within the culture while maintaining a relation of distant condescension to it that lacks the affective investment displayed by Lilly, particularly in the portions of the novel set in London.  

Sheikh Jami explicitly rejects Lilly on the grounds of her

---

27 Lilly describes her life as “stretched across an African canvas, one lip of which is permanently stapled to the wall of the Ethiopian city that once circumscribed [her life], the other lip flapping loosely over the motley tapestry that is London” (22). Muhammed Bruce, on the other hand, recognizes that “it’s time to leave” Africa when he sees “the passing of an era … when Europeans had roamed the earth in pursuit of adventure” (250).
association with Muhammed Bruce when she first arrives in Harar, calling him a “charlatan” (49), but only much later does she understand the root of this rejection. Muhammed Bruce, she finds out, “was legendary as one of the most dangerous pilgrims who had ever set foot on Harari soil” (211). He “claimed to be an albino Pakistani” (211) and performed the role of pilgrim while “hiding his secrets” in a nearby tree, in the form of “a roll of banknotes, a passport of the man who called himself Muhammed identifying him as Bruce Mac-something of the United Kingdom, a flask of alcohol, a book about Harar and a set of playing cards depicting naked boys” (212).

This list of items suggests metonymically the history of white colonial travel in the Middle East, and marks Muhammed Bruce as the representative of that history, combining capital-fuelled cross-border mobility, a purely performative approach to religious and cultural difference, and the history of “the nineteenth-century voyage en Orient,” in which homosexual encounters with the locals were “quasi-obligatory” (Clifford, Routes 72). James Clifford, describing the historical figure of the “traveller,” emphasizes the importance of cross-dressing to the history of travel writing, exemplified by figures like “a Richard Burton or an Isabelle Eberhardt passing as ‘Orientals’” (Routes 73). There is a significant difference between Lilly’s apprenticeship, in which she becomes a young woman of Harar through the receiving of gifts and bodily performances of Harari femininity, and Muhammed Bruce’s deceitful masquerade. And while both keep their white skin unmarked, Muhammed Bruce recodes it in terms of aberration—albinism—rather than colonially inflected exteriority, while Lilly has no choice but to perform the part of the “farenji” or foreigner. She interprets her physical transformation as a sign of an internal change, continuing to identify as a Harari and to find her community within the Harari diaspora after her return to London; he claims an unfounded insider status by rejecting
his own whiteness. Paradoxically, his attempt to conceal his whiteness is associated strongly
with his attachment to the privileges of a white colonial identity, including wealth and cross-
border mobility. Lilly, who is made vulnerable by her poverty and lack of passport, as well as her
gender and age, experiences her whiteness differently while in Harar, not as a form of power but
as an additional source of vulnerability.

Muhammed Bruce is a paradigmatic example of the “detached flâneur who delights in
encounters with difference, displays a … stance of openness toward other cultures, but is always
just passing through” (Molz 5). The adaptability of his body suggests a form of cosmopolitan
mobility affiliated with whiteness, which, in J.G. Molz’s words, “travels well” (15). The list of
items—“a roll of banknotes, a passport …, a flask of alcohol, a book about Harar and a set of
playing cards depicting naked boys” (212)—at first deemphasizes what proves to be the most
important item, an ironic gesture that alludes to the hegemonic history of cultural representation
by positioning the “book about Harar” as a seemingly neutral item, wedged between the more
alarming alcohol and nude playing cards. The book in question, however, is Sir Richard Burton’s
First Footsteps in East Africa: A Journey to Harar, which stands in for the history of colonial
travel and representation.

In a pivotal passage, Gishta brings Lilly the “battered volume” in which select passages
have been underlined and translated:

Gishta looked over my shoulder as I read the underlined passages. Burton called the
place “a paradise inhabited by asses.” He denounced the people as “religious fanatics,”
“bigoted,” “barbarous,” “coarse and debauched,” “disfigured by disease,” with ugly
voices: “the men’s loud and rude,” “the women’s harsh and screaming.”
He boasted of being the one to break the guardian spell said to protect the city and its people. He had sought to tear away the shroud of Islam and render the Harari people naked, vulnerable, beholden. To subjugate through contamination. (213)

The inclusion of multiple quotations from Burton’s book suggests the importance of this intertextual foil to *Sweetness in the Belly*. While Burton is described simply as a “famous explorer” (212), he is of course also a key figure in the history of anthropology, and *First Footsteps in East Africa* constitutes an early ethnography.28 Read in conjunction with the authorizing narratives that assert Gibb’s representational authority in terms of her ethnographic training, *First Footsteps* becomes a pivotal intertext. The language of the second half of this passage is intensely sexualized and clearly associated with the violence of masculine colonial travel that “consecrate[s] [the] authority” of the male traveller via “his access to the mysterious and feminized Other” in the form of “sexual encounter” (Clifford, *Routes* 72). The image of forcibly unveiling Harar positions this Ethiopian city as a feminized and exoticized cultural other that can be violently subjugated by the colonial adventurer. At the same time, the politics of unveiling evoke the Orientalist construction of Muslim culture as “backward” and in need of development: “To be unveiled is linked to being ‘developed’ and modern, while being veiled is synonymous with being locked in a retrogressive state that calls for some sort of intervention” (Ansari 59). *First Footsteps*, especially through the novel’s selective citations, operates as a violently Orientalist representation of Harari culture that the novel cites in order to reject.

28 Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-90) “was vice president of the Anthropological Society of London … and briefly president of the London Anthropological Society” as well as a prolific author and translator; he is thus frequently understood as “an intellectual progenitor of a discipline which abhors his values and ignores his work” (Lyons 148). He also famously disguised himself in order to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, thus suggesting another continuity between Burton and Muhammed Bruce.
When Nouria suggests to Lilly, “Maybe one day you will write another farenji book and tell the truth” (213), the narrative positions Lilly as at once similar to and markedly different from Burton and Muhammed Bruce: she is still marked as a farenji here, but as one able to “tell the truth.” Lilly does not, however, go on to write a book about Harari culture, a book that would implicitly offer a more nuanced and respectful ethnographic perspective on Harar. Indeed, once in London Lilly resists the position of the cultural informant, repeatedly refusing requests for information about her past or her time in Ethiopia, refusals usually marked by her departure in the midst of conversations with the curious Dr. Gupta.29 Instead, she is positioned within such a book, a novel written by a farenji that explicitly rejects the colonial representational history signified by *First Footsteps* and offers an alternative view of Harari culture, one that readers are encouraged to understand as “the truth,” bolstered by the perspective of Lilly as one whose legitimate knowledge is in this passage confirmed by other Hararis. In this sense, Lilly’s encounter with Burton’s book can be read as a textual (rather than paratextual) authorizing narrative that legitimates the novel through a declaration of distance from other, rejected modes of representation. This metafictional moment constructs *Sweetness in the Belly* as the representational alternative to Burton’s violent, masculinist, Orientalist perspective.

Lilly’s figuration as the farenji capable of “tell[ing] the truth” about Harar is linked to her role within the community as well as her race and gender, which are themselves not unrelated. Living with Nouria, excluded from the religious teachings of Sheikh Jami, Lilly starts her own school, teaching Qu’ran first to Nouria’s four children and then to all the poor children in the neighbourhood. Lilly’s madrasa, her “local school” (102), constitutes an alternative community

---

29 See for example the scene in which Lilly responds to his offer of his own “scattered” family by “excus[ing] [her]self” (153), or another in which he asks: “You’ve been to Ethiopia?” and she responds only “Mmm” (172).
within Harar that asserts the right of poor children or those otherwise excluded from the cultural centre of the city to learn Qu’ran. While some parents are at first hesitant to entrust their children with the farenji woman, the proof lies in her overwhelming success: “They are as good as the rich children at the madrasas!” declares one father (206). When Gishta encourages Lilly to bring the children to Sheikh Jami to show off their accomplishments, Lilly is hesitant, knowing his hatred for outsiders, but Gishta insists that this will be different because Lilly is not one of those touristic foreigners, like her guardian, who expects to both gain access to the interiority of Harari culture and maintain the mobility of the outsider, but “a farenji doing good by teaching the poor children of Harar” (208, my emphasis).

This plot point does not mark Lilly’s enthusiastic acceptance into the centre of religious power in Harar. Sheikh Jami casts her out a second time, and later, when the political turmoil of 1974 begins to threaten the walled city, her students abandon her for a madrasa set up by Sheikh Jami’s apprentice, Idris: “When times are uncertain, people prefer the authority of a man,” Idris informs her (359). Lilly never achieves the position of a cultural insider, but her “desire to change the lives of poor children” (304), in Aziz’s words, is central to her character and to the position from which she speaks about and on behalf of Harari culture to an implied readership of outsiders; it is the reason why she is able to “tell the truth” where a white man could not. At the same time, the general interpretation of her teaching as a form of “doing good” is contingent upon, rather than independent from, her outsider status. It is not a matter of duty but of an unexpected (due to her foreignness) and thus marked goodness. Lilly’s goodness is contingent upon the white femininity that places her outside of the colonial power associated with Muhammed Bruce and Burton, as well as the religious power signified by Sheikh Jami and her adopted brother Hussein. Rejected from the religious centre of Harar, Lilly finds herself
consigned to the domestic realm of women, which is figured clearly in terms of its distance from power insofar as power is conceived in terms of politics—women in Harar, Lilly explains, “were truly kept away from politics” (333).

What the intertextual deployment of Burton’s work accomplishes in the passages set in Harar, then, is a construction of Lilly as a white woman who, as a result of her gender, is more capable of representing Harari culture authentically and truthfully. In this sense the novel aligns with a representational history of white women in exoticized spaces producing narratives characterized by the “values of authenticity, indigeneity-by-proxy, and irreducible exteriority to the machinations of power” (Henderson 8). Henderson explains how white women’s travel writing in the nineteenth century emphasized their ability to “penetrat[e] … the domestic space” (42-43) of racialized others “by means of a sympathetic understanding encoded as a form of feminine expertise” that positioned women paradoxically both inside and outside of power (43)—inside because of their representational authority, outside because of their gender. In conjunction with Lilly’s determination to keep herself bodily unmarked, her association with goodness conjures the colonial heritage of white femininity figured in terms of an “innocence” (Najmi and Srikanth 17) that extends from her skin to her position within Harari society. The question to ask of *Sweetness in the Belly*, then, is whether Lilly’s liminality is deployed in a way that positions her as a cultural authority, her narrative authenticated by her distance from power as well as by the legitimating deployment of masculinist and Orientalist paratexts. The answer is revealed, I believe, by turning to the half of the novel set in London.
Colonial Intertexts

I have deliberately read the portion of the narrative describing Lilly’s time in Harar independently, as much as possible, from the portion set in London; such a reading is inevitably false due to the novel’s structural incorporation of the two perspectives—it shifts back and forth temporally and geographically—but it is also a strategic mirroring of the “ethiopian photo album,” the authorizing narrative that focuses exclusively on Harar as an object of representational fascination. The Harari portion of the novel rejects an ethnographic image of culture as “enclosed difference” by instead demonstrating Harar’s internal cultural hierarchies and striations, and focusing on many characters who are different kinds of border-crossers, from Gishta’s class ascension to Aziz’s resistant politics. At the same time, however, it situates Sweetness in the Belly as a representational alternative to First Footsteps in Africa that engages as much as it rejects the ethnographic heritage in which Gibb was trained. Something of the ethnographic perspective of the outsider is maintained through the narrative’s contrast between complicity and critique; that is, those characters excluded from the cultural centre are most capable of levelling critiques against it, a perspective that is equally ratified in Aziz’s political agitation and Lilly’s madrasa. This portion of the narrative thus confirms, to some degree, the perspective that, “[i]n order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding … In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful fact in understanding” (Bahktin, qtd. in Marcus, “Uses” 117). Further, it endorses an image of Lilly that emphasizes her goodness and associates it with a distance from power linked to her whiteness and her femininity through the juxtaposed figures of Sheikh Jami and Muhammed Bruce. She is, as Grekul puts it, “the most ‘impeccably liberal’ of white characters” (2). In isolation this narrative could be critiqued for its complicity
with colonial histories of white women’s travel writing that construct women as “innocent bystanders” (Najmi and Srikanth 23) in the colonial project, or with a white desire to identify with or even become the racialized other. This narrative does not stand in isolation, however, but moves dynamically back and forth between Harar and London, between Lilly’s childhood experience of “apprenticeship” and her adulthood experience of exile. In London the meaning of being a cultural insider, and of being a white woman, changes drastically, and the intertexts that may have functioned as authorizing narratives in one context demand a more nuanced reading.

The most obvious way in which the London passages complicate the representation of Harar is in the re-evocation of Burton’s First Footsteps with a difference. Shortly after the description of the secrets Muhammed Bruce had hidden in a tree, the narrative returns to London, where Lilly is living in council housing, working as a nurse, and forging a community of fellow exiles. She is also being wooed by an Indian doctor, Robin Gupta, who takes an interest in Lilly’s complex cultural past:

“I’m reading about your city,” Robin says proudly. He has a copy of Burton’s First Footsteps in East Africa in the pocket of his white coat.

The sight of it provokes a pang of possessiveness. “You know, Hararis find Burton’s portrayal of them very insulting,” I tell him.

“Mmm, it’s fantastically romantic and condescending,” he agrees. “It reminds me of much of the colonial literature about India. I should lend you the book he wrote about the Sindh.” (249)

The cultural authority that briefly adhered to Lilly, as the farenji qualified to “tell the truth” about Harar, is challenged here by the introduction of Robin as the figure of the critical, resistant reader. Robin casually lays claim to his own colonial history and in so doing suggests yet another
variety of liminal subjectivity: the outsider capable of critically negotiating representations of a culture with which he is unfamiliar by drawing transnational comparisons. Faced with Robin’s position, Lilly experiences “a pang of possessiveness” that suggests the experience of a threat to her own identification with Harar, a paradoxical pang considering that Robin has just used the second-person possessive, calling Harar “your city.” When Lilly responds, her use of the third person—it is a portrayal not of “us” but of “them”—indicates the identity confusion she encounters in this moment, a confusion that is only amplified when Robin expands the object of colonial representation to include India in a way that challenges her desire to understand herself as fundamentally different from him.

This passage also complicates the use of *First Footsteps* as an intertext, since it ceases to be simply the foil against which *Sweetness in the Belly* can be contrasted, and becomes an object of critical interest, “fantastically romantic and condescending.” The novel’s treatment of the history of representing others is further complicated when, on a visit to Robin’s flat, Lilly encounters an unfamiliar book that challenges the novel’s seeming vilification of Muhammed Bruce as a metonym for colonial knowledge production: “A title catches my eye: *Tales of the Sufis of the Sahara*. The name tears at my heart: M. Bruce MacDonald. I pull it off the shelf by its thin spine. I open the cover, turn the first and second pages. There, a dedication printed on the creamy white page: ‘For Lilly’” (391). The fact that this dedication forces her to “swallow the lump in [her] throat” (391) refutes any simplistic binary between Lilly and her guardian as an alternative model of relation between white outsiders and foreign cultures. Lilly becomes associated with her guardian’s book through this dedication, while his possible condemnation is undermined by her affective response. Whereas in Harar Lilly is distinguished from other farenji by her cultural investment and her devotion to Islam, in London her entanglement with her
British heritage becomes increasingly clear. This hybrid identity not only complicates her self-identification as a white Harari, but also allows her to negotiate her position in London strategically, making her a better ally for her community of exiles because “I can translate the forms for them before kneeling down and putting my forehead to the same ground” (9). By the end of the novel Lilly has recognized that her affiliation with England is not “random,” as it is for her Ethiopian friends: “for me, England was the only logical place, where the roots of my history, as alien as these might seem, are actually buried. My journey ends here” (400). This hard-earned conclusion is hinted at in the description of Muhammed Bruce’s book as “creamy white,” a sensual evocation of its physicality that strikes her both visually and affectively, as the book names her and thus enfolds her into the colonial inheritance that she has previously rejected. If she was at one point characterized as “a farenji doing good by teaching the poor children of Harar” (208), she has become “a white Muslim woman who grew up in Africa making macaroni cheese for [two Ethiopian children] in a council flat in London” (165), a portrait of cultural hybridity.

Where her British education offered her “alternatives” in Harar that allowed her to resist gendered cultural norms, in London it aligns her with the history of colonial expansion and education, linking her hybridity to a kind of colonial complicity that once again appears under the sign of Sir Richard Burton. When Lilly quotes to Robin her guardian’s truism, “Well-roundedness is the goal of a British education,” Robin replies that it “sounds familiar” (247), suggesting the colonial continuities between Muhammed Bruce’s insistence that Lilly read more than the Qu’ran and the use of English literature in the colonial project in India.\(^\text{30}\) Lilly goes on

---

\(^\text{30}\) Gauri Viswanathan has linked “the institutionalization of English in India and the exercise of colonial power,” arguing that “certain humanistic functions traditionally associated with literature—for example, the shaping of character or the development of the aesthetic sense or the
to contemplate how those books, which rendered her different in Harar, make her more “west-leaning” than the other exiles with whom she identifies, including her best friend Amina:

As west as Amina leans, … those books I mentioned to Robin, those points of reference that Muhammed Bruce introduced me to would be foreign to her. They’re not part of the vocabulary we share. I remember reading Dickens and Jane Austen … and of course *The Arabian Nights* (the original, quite brutal and salacious) …

Muhammed Bruce’s choices were more deliberate than I’ve ever realized. He supplemented my diet of Islam with doses of other realities. He must have envisioned a time when I would have to make my way in the wider world … (247-48)

From a character whose perspective is validated through the explicit rejection of a colonial representational history, a rejection that seemed to construct her white femininity as a position of “innocence,” Lilly has become a figure who was always already implicated in that colonial history, raised on the tales of the same author whose orientalizing representation of Harar caused her to be rejected by Sheikh Jami. If in Harar this education was hinted at through references to “alternatives,” in London it is a pivotal component of her border-crossing identity, an education in “other realities” that has allowed her to “make [her] way in the wider world.”

**Media, Mediation, and Genre: From *Sweetness in the Belly* to *Burmese Lessons***

Although the novel’s authorizing narratives frame it as a gateway into an exotic culture, its constant shuttling between Harar and London and its intertextual incorporation of a complex representational history refuse such a straightforward reading. Gibb seems particularly interested in refuting the stereotypical images of a foreign place with which the implied readership might disciplines of ethical thinking—were considered essential to the processes of sociopolitical control by the guardians of the same tradition” (3).
be familiar, hence the deliberate exclusion of the seven years between 1974 and 1981, marked by the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie I on one end and the worst years of the famine on the other (De Waal 3-4). This unnarrated period also includes the “Red Terror,” a “massive campaign of killing, detention and torture, and intimidation” (12) that killed “well in excess of 10,000” Ethiopians—though Amnesty International estimates up to 500,000 (“US admits” n. pag.)—and has been described as “one of the most systematic uses of mass murder by the state ever witnessed in Africa” (De Waal 101). Throughout the novel Lilly reports the majority of the traumatic events associated with this period from a position of relative remove, on behalf of others. Characters like Amina and her husband Yusuf provide “a first-hand account of the violence [Lilly had] only gleaned” from “reports by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch,” which is offered to readers through Lilly’s mediation (21). All the Ethiopians in her building gather “to watch in horror as a parade of bodies on the verge of crumbling into dust crawled across the screen. We were sickened with ourselves for being riveted by the spectacle of this death march” (29). Lilly is a spectator, a confidante, a gatherer of information that she then reports back in the form of a story about a community, a “we” united by a suffering that she experiences only vicariously, and that readers experience at a double remove.

What impact does this obvious mediation have on the reader’s experience of Sweetness in the Belly? It serves, I believe, to decentre the traumatic events of the Civil War and the famine, the images of Ethiopia propagated by news media in which subtlety and cultural nuance are not a forte. By eliding the years of her own displacement and describing the suffering of others only as second-hand experiences, Lilly’s story places issues like cultural identity and belonging, rather than more familiar tropes of distant suffering, in the foreground. Within Sweetness in the Belly news media is implicitly contrasted with literature as two modes of disseminating information
about foreign places. News media is associated with moments of spectactularized political crisis, recalling questions of the efficacy of different media approaches to representing distant suffering (see Ong). It is through Harar’s only television that Lilly and Aziz witness the first footage of the famine, devastating images made visible internationally “thanks to a British journalist” (366). They watch “a parade of skeletons wobble[] across the screen,” see “footage of the army gunning down starving civilians in honour of the emperor’s birthday,” and feel stirrings of the inevitable political change that accompanies such powerful revelations (365). In the next chapter, however, as the narrative shifts back to London, Lilly and Yusuf note that Ethiopia has disappeared entirely from the news and from the imagination of the West: “we have to accept that the country does not exist in the European imagination as anything but a starving, impoverished nation with just about the highest rates of infant mortality, the lowest average life expectancy and the lowest rates of literacy in the world. As a story of famine and refugees” (379-80). News media is responsible, their conversation suggests, for propagating an image of Ethiopia as a story of crisis and statistics; it communicates in extremes, and in the absence of an image as powerful as skeletons wobbling across the screen Ethiopia disappears from its radar.

Literature is implicitly less suited to the immediate dissemination of powerful images, but it is more malleable and, requiring critical reading and ongoing interpretation, better prepares subjects to “make [their] way in … a world upside down, a world through a looking glass, a world gone mad. A world like the one we live in” (248). The centrality of literature, especially the critical practices of reading and interpretation, is apparent in descriptions of Lilly’s cultural maneuvering. Being accepted into a new culture is like having “history … rewritten to include you. A fiction develops, a story that weaves you into the social fabric” (126); negotiating that culture involves “read[ing] the manual” and “becom[ing] literate” enough to recognize “the
contradictions, the subtext, the spaces in between” (227); and becoming a critical subject entails “interpreting as you see fit,” which is “[m]uch harder … because then you have no assurance you are doing right” (314). By refusing to engage with the traumatic extremes that characterize media depictions of Ethiopia, *Sweetness in the Belly* advocates for a different approach to reading foreign cultures, one that does not entail an “immersion into the lives of people for whom war, poverty, marginalization and exile are the commonplace trials” (back cover copy) so much as a lesson in interpreting “the contradictions, the subtext, the spaces in between” (227).

The novel thus implicitly advocates for literature as the primary means of forging border-crossing affiliations with distant others.

The incorporation of literary, ethnographic, and news media intertexts into *Sweetness in the Belly* poses an alternative view of the representation of foreign cultures to that presented in authorizing narratives like the “ethiopian photo album.” The latter constructs the white author-function in terms of the ability to offer an authoritative representation of the foreign, while undermining this authority through its emphasis on a resistant other that reinforces the association of white femininity with innocence and distance from power. The former uses Lilly’s liminality, as well as the incorporation of colonial intertexts, to complicate the very possibility of representational innocence. Grekul’s claim that Lilly ultimately “fail[s] to sustain a ‘resistant’ stance to discourses of colonialism and imperialism” (2), and that the novel thus “illustrates the deeply-entrenched nature of colonial discourses” (2) particularly “in the context of a realist narrative” (20), betrays an urge to declare texts successful or unsuccessful, innocent or guilty.

---

31 Gibb’s insistence that culture is something that is written and read suggests an indebtedness to well-known debates within academic anthropology, the discipline in which she was trained, particularly the “Writing Culture critiques of the 1980s” that “offered a revealing critical examination of the textual production of authoritative knowledge about others and cultures” (Marcus, “Affinities” 83).
Read in conjunction, novel and authorizing narrative evoke the complexity of complicity as the enfolding of narratives within multiple simultaneous discourses. In refusing forms of textual innocence, *Sweetness in the Belly* ultimately moves away from the “purist form of oppositionality” that Jennifer Hasty associates with anthropology as the “raison d’être of the discipline” (135), opening out the possibility of theorizing complicity beyond the binary of innocence and guilt.

As Karen Connelly’s *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story* (2010) demonstrates, however, a fixation on the problem of complicity can itself become a form of privilege that recentres the anxieties of the white subject at the expense of the other. I turn to *Burmese Lessons* after *Sweetness in the Belly* because it expands upon the question of representing another culture with which Gibb’s novel clearly grapples. Of particular interest is the shift in genre: *Burmese Lessons* is a non-fiction memoir and thus has a different relation to representation itself. The “contractual function” of the author’s name, Genette confirms, is “much greater” in “referential writing” than in fiction, as “the credibility of the testimony, or of its transmission, rests largely on the identity of the witness or the person reporting it” (41). Written five years after the publication of the novel (*The Lizard Cage* [2005]) the inspiration for which it recounts, *Burmese Lessons* is in many ways a book about writing, and about the anxieties and exigencies of the white outsider representing a place in which she is affectively invested without ever being able to, or wanting to, claim the position of the cultural insider. Like *Sweetness in the Belly* it reflects deliberately and extensively on the problems of representation and complicity, particularly through the intertextual incorporation of other generic approaches to representing the foreign, approaches against which the protagonist Karen contrasts herself. Perhaps most urgently, however, it asks about the ethics and politics of the outsider’s affective relation to a foreign place. Where
*Sweetness in the Belly* complicates this relation by shifting the narrative to London and thus emphasizing Lilly’s cultural liminality, *Burmese Lessons* critiques the figure of the white Western expert in a variety of ways, including Connelly’s deliberate introduction of a space between authorial signature and narrating protagonist; her engagement with the “expert”32 gaze via her position within a group of white outsiders invested in the fate of Burma; her self-reflexive incorporation of other media into the narrative as a means of decentring the self as producer of knowledge; and her self-effacing embrace of a touristic identity as a means of destabilizing the authority that adheres in her whiteness and Western citizenship.

**Journalists, Writers, and Being an “Expert”**

*Burmese Lessons* is based on the years that Connelly spent living in Thailand, taking two trips into Burma, visiting refugee camps along the border, and becoming involved with a Burmese dissident. The memoir charts both the love affair and the experiences that led to the composition of *The Lizard Cage*, which tells the story of imprisoned Burmese artists and dissidents. In part, the memoir can be read as a lengthy and belated authorizing narrative for the novel, particularly through its frequent, even obsessive, recounting of Burmese characters calling on Karen to “write the book” that will tell the world about what is going on in Burma (19, 77, 98-99, 221, 328, etc.). At the same time, Connelly’s reputation as an expert on Burma, via the publication of *The Lizard Cage* and *The Border Surrounds Us*, as well as her various public appearances to discuss the crisis in Burma, asserts her authority in relation to the country and its political crisis.

32 Karen, the narrator-protagonist, refers to the other politicized white foreigners on the Thai-Burma border—particularly activists, NGO workers, and journalists—as “experts” characterized by their “encyclopedic knowledge of Burma” and sense of neocolonial entitlement to the plight of the Burmese (52-54).
The Vintage Canada paperback edition opens with review excerpts describing Connelly as “a gifted political activist struggling to transform” “a wounded country” (Maclean’s) and placing her work within the genealogy of “Latin American writers and poets like Pablo Neruda, who wrote so eloquently about the ills of their homelands” (Rabindranath Maharaj, The Globe and Mail). Immediately Connelly is positioned in terms of multiple simultaneous forms of representational authority. She is a political activist and a writer to whom Burma is attributed as an honorary homeland. As a memoir, Burmese Lessons relies less upon authorizing narratives that legitimate the text’s authenticity by establishing the author’s physical presence in the foreign locale, since referentiality and a presumed identity of author and narrator already constitute the genre’s horizon of expectations. As with Sweetness in the Belly, however, Burmese Lessons significantly complicates any claims the narrator might hold to representational authority, particularly through the ongoing foregrounding of Karen’s anxious sense of unfulfilled duty toward the Burmese people. The problem of paratextual complicity with discourses of white expertise is undermined by the memoir’s textual engagement with this very problem.

Whereas Gibb introduces various intertexts into her novel to situate it within a particular representational history and thus open a space between text and reality by drawing attention to the narrative’s deliberate representational choices, Connelly refutes the seeming transparency of the memoir genre by emphasizing textual instability in various ways, even as she deploys the memoir as a means to educate readers about the crisis in Burma. Burmese Lessons is in a difficult bind, as its legitimacy as a narrative of Burma relies upon the credibility and thus authority of the author-narrator while, at the same time, Connelly is constantly striving to refute the authority of the white gaze. The first instance of such a refutation takes place on the epigraph page, where Connelly cites Susan Griffin’s A Chorus of Stones:
Looking back on what has gone before, one cannot help but think that each event, each moment, could not have happened any other way. But this confuses an honest accounting of the past with another kind of denial. Each moment of life is filled with choices. Should I keep my hand moving over this page? Should I continue the narration as planned? As it has been written before? Or am I free to imagine? (n. pag.)

This epigraph opens up a space between Connelly as author and Karen as protagonist through the agency of choice. The past is not figured as a map of unchanging events and experiences but as a text that continues to be rewritten in the present moment of composition. The decision to write the past in whatever form becomes another kind of choice, akin to the choices made within “each moment of life,” thus raising the spectre of a “nonfiction narrative[’s] … ethical obligation to its referent” (Black 261n16). The use of questions instead of statements emphasizes this ethical obligation, suggesting not simply an experience of representational freedom unmoored from the events of the past but a crisis of choice: “Am I free?” rather than “I am free.” This epigraph also recalls the “contradiction” that lies at the “very centre” of autobiography as an “impossible” genre: “being within textuality it renders a singular authorial presence voiceless and speechless. … Arguably, as [Paul] de Man contends, the generic constraints of textuality (abstraction and distance) appear to be at odds with the experiential rationale of autobiography as tied to speech and a particular presence” (Gunew 364-65). The textualization of subjective experience faces a variety of crises, including the ethical dilemma of responsibility to the past versus the freedom to imagine differently. This epigraph can thus be read as an early attempt to counteract the work done by the coincidence of authorial signature and narrating protagonist, akin to Gibb’s attempts to circumvent some of the “realist generic markings” (Waring 461) so frequently associated with representations of cultural difference.
If the memoir attempts to destabilize the assumed referentiality of non-fiction, however, it also positions itself as a deliberately educational text, featuring various didactic passages clearly intended to inform an implied readership of outsiders about the history and politics of Burma. The pedagogical dimensions of the memoir frequently seem to be at odds with its anticolonial representational politics, a tension that is highlighted by Karen’s ambivalent attitude toward journalists and other white experts. On the one hand she expresses moments of being “plagued by a feeling of uselessness” in the face of accelerating student protests and wondering why she isn’t a journalist “telling the world what I’ve seen” (111-12). But that fantasy of usefulness is, she makes clear, a profoundly privileged one. In the midst of a violent protest, two forces counteract her instinctive desire to flee. One is “the arrogance of the white brain, believing it is safe inside its still-colonial skull” (127). The other is the desire to help: “I want my being here to be useful. Oh my God, I have hero delusions! I want my very presence to make some difference. How very white of me” (136). Karen alludes here to a specific understanding of white humanitarian intervention, in which a racialized logic allows the white subject to indulge in a form of “race pleasure” (Razack, *Dark Threats* 9) while also “us[ing] [the] suffering [of others] to reconstitute ourselves as white knights” (166). There are two passages in particular that highlight Karen’s sense of complicity with the position of the white expert, her attempts to distance herself from this complicity, and her anxiety that complicity with the experts may be the only way she can meaningfully respond to her sense of implication in the lives of the Burmese people. Both passages emphasize the political power inherent in the white authorial gaze and gesture toward the impossible desire for a form of writing free from the violence of colonial knowledge-production.
In a short chapter entitled “the expert insomniac” (49-54) the distance between the writer and the colonially complicit white expert is first expanded and subsequently collapsed. At this point in the memoir Karen is visiting Burma, in part as a representative of PEN Canada, to write about imprisoned Burmese writers. The chapter opens with a brief section written in the third person, narrating Karen’s insomnia in Rangoon. Unable to sleep, she goes through scraps of paper on which she has recorded the contact information of people she has met: “As bits of paper slide out of a manila envelope, their momentum unstoppable, so the woman slides into the worlds they signify, human beings with breath and desire, plans, irreplaceable hands and faces. Each individual. Just so. Unlike any other” (49). This is a distinctly writerly evocation of alterity, heeding both the irreducible specificity of the individual and the writer’s desire to enter into this specificity. The brief switch from first person to third person suggests the writer’s awareness of the space between representing and represented subject, as well as the distance between the Karen who is an artist and the Karen who is a traveller living with journalists in Burma. The latter Karen found her writerly perspective undervalued: “I was always reaching for the detail, or the individual, or the subjective truth contained in the particular moment. That’s how poets talk, and women; among hard-nosed journalists of either sex, my approach was embarrassing. They knew everything. They spoke in broad strokes, with assurance and conviction” (52). Like Gibb, Connelly differentiates between news media and literature, in this case associating the former with the brash assurance of the expert, as well as a certain masculine assertiveness, and the latter with a care for the “irreplaceable” individual that is explicitly feminine and thus implicitly nurturing. If the writer is invested in the individual, while the journalist and other white experts

33 While Karen frequently associates “taking care” (329) with a particulary maternal form of nurture, she also extends it beyond gender specificity: “To take care is the essential human act. … [N]urture is the crucial template of all human life” (382).
“dazzle[] [her] with their encyclopedic knowledge of Burma and ‘the region,’ their many stories, their wealth of experience” (52-53), the writer nonetheless relies upon that knowledge to help her negotiate the terrain of an unfamiliar place. Karen hesitates at the edge of critique, troubled by the aggressive and appropriative attitude of the experts while keenly aware of her own inexperience and the potential damage she might do as a foreigner gathering information in an oppressed country.

Nevertheless, she does slide into explicit critique on the topic of white privilege. She notes that around the dinner table, “though the talk was often about those with brown faces, and though we were eating and drinking and living in a land of brown faces, there was rarely a brown face among us”; she is uncomfortable that “the only brown person in the house for days on end is the one who cleans the toilets”; and she recoils at the disdain these white experts show for the Thais (“why don’t they learn better English?”) in comparison to “the Burmese dissidents, who are the subjects of white concern and deference and genuine admiration” (53). The link drawn within one page between the aggressively knowledgeable white experts and the absence of brown faces suggests the colonial continuities of contemporary development work (Heron 7, 22).

In contrast, Karen herself, with her care for the individual, befriends the Thai maid, accompanying her to the temple and market and speaking Thai with her “until the language reasserted itself in my mind and my mouth” (53).34 The distinction between writers and journalists becomes a politicized and moralized one in which the white expert gaze reduces all “brown faces” to their admirable political cause, or lack thereof, while the writer’s attention to detail leads her to treat all people with respect and dignity rather than as representatives of a particular cause. Once again the introduction of a representational foil pushes the writer

---

34 Connelly’s first book, Touch the Dragon (1992), is a memoir of the year she spent as a teenager living in Thailand, during which time she became fluent in Thai.
dangerously close to asserting the possibility of a textual innocence that is complicit with the construction of white femininity in terms of goodness, a sort of complicity with the fantasy of non-complicity.

Karen tempers this fantasy immediately, however, through another shift in pronouns, this time from first-person singular to first-person plural and back:

I should know that the Westerner is allowed to make such distinctions between one Asian race and another. The Westerner knows. We are entitled to knowledge, among other things. That is what makes us experts. Everything becomes territory to us, everything becomes ours. Is the tendency to colonize genetic? Even the political struggle of a small country can become our colony.

Thus, I become suspicious of myself. What am I doing here? Really? (54)

In this passage Karen shifts from a critique of “the Westerner” that seems to include the white experts but not herself to an inclusion of herself in that category that renders her own innocence impossible. The link between the white expert gaze, knowledge production about the foreign other, and colonialism is made explicit in this passage, as is the link between foreign aid and colonial expansion. Further, the ambivalence of third-person plural as discussed above potentially implicates certain readers within the category of “the Westerner.” In fact, the ambivalence of the pronoun in this context alludes to the potentially differential location of readers, subverting the hegemonic assumption that all readers are necessarily Westerners at the same time that it critiques the colonial mentality behind such an assumption. This pronominal shift is more than a token gesture of self-inclusion, as it is followed by a self-questioning that casts the writer’s work in dubious terms. This self-effacing doubt becomes a narrative trope as the memoir proceeds, interrupting and rejecting the narrator’s claims to innocence or goodness.
Much later in the narrative, as she ponders the ways in which she will improve herself instead of fixating upon her lover’s illness, Karen makes plans to “go to the local temple and meditate” but then interrupts her own narration with an exclamation of mockery: “Oh, I am so good!” (409). Fully aware of her own ongoing complicity with colonial subject positions, Karen anticipates and attempts to preempt critique.

Such a preemptive move suggests the cultural capital that may accrue with self-reflexivity, what Huggan refers to as “post-touristic knowingness” (*Extreme* 31). Huggan suggests that “moralizing self-consciousness” may have become “part of a system in which complicity itself circulates as a valuable commodity” (31). This argument highlights the potential stickiness of complicity, particularly in a self-conscious memoir that foregrounds the narrator’s own self-positioning as a white outsider. Judith Butler, taking up Susan Sontag’s critique of affect, suggests the interrelation of the problems of representation and complicity:

[Sontag] acknowledges that she has in the past turned against the photograph with moralistic denunciation precisely because it enrages without directing the rage, and so excites our moral sentiments at the same time as it confirms our political paralysis. And even this frustration frustrates her, since it seems a guilty and narcissistic preoccupation with what one can do as a first-world intellectual, and so fails again to attend to the suffering of others. (*Frames* 99)

Preoccupation with “first-world” privilege and the problem of viewing the suffering of others becomes, frustratingly indeed, a further sign of privilege; privilege cannot undo itself through self-reflection or critique because any fixation of the critical gaze back on the self continues to foreground the condition of the self over that of the other. Feeling guilty about her plans to return

---

35 I am recalling here Ahmed’s argument that “we can get stuck” in the position of self-reflexive complicity (“Phenomenology” 150).
to Greece in order to focus on her novel, Karen appeals to her lover, Maung, who “chuckles and says, ‘Don’t worry! It’s all right for you to go. You are a global person.’ Translation: Other white people deal with their white guilt and they manage just fine” (430). Indulging in guilt or attempting to construct a white self free from complicity becomes just another form of white privilege when reflected through the eyes of her Burmese lover.

The second passage that highlights the problem of complicity in the context of speaking of or for others also centres upon a clash between Karen and one of those Western experts whose aggressive deployment of superior knowledge so frequently places her in a defensive position. In another short chapter entitled “the activist and the enemy” (150-55) Karen has a run-in with Marla, a “tough-talking American activist and journalist” (150). “‘The thing is, you were indiscreet,’” the chapter begins. Karen has returned to Bangkok and is being chastised for her behaviour in Burma, specifically for not switching guest houses after she appeared at protests in Rangoon. The accusation that she wasn’t “‘taking the danger seriously’” and risked “‘endanger[ing] Burmese people’” (151) is reinforced by Marla’s claims to superior knowledge. She knows that the owners of the guest house where Karen was staying were extorted by the Military Intelligence (MI) because they were “[p]ersonal friends” (152) and found out through a “‘contact’” whose name she will not share: “I think you already know more than you should,” she tells Karen (153). The sense that knowledge is earned by the ability to use it carefully and advisedly places Karen and Marla within a hierarchy of knowledge acquisition and deployment in which Marla, as a journalist, takes precedence over the writer whose use of knowledge is taken to be irresponsible and even selfish: “‘Not everything, not every experience, is for the artist’s palette. You are not allowed to use everything’” (153). The model of artistic use of information put forward by the journalist in this scene is one of indulgence; art is for art’s sake,
or for the artist’s sake, while journalism has a higher calling. The insistence that one mode of representation is more ethical and responsible than another mirrors to some degree *Sweetness in the Belly*’s critique of both journalism and ethnography, but in this case it has been turned against the author and thus against *Burmese Lessons* itself. Is the memoir, with its interweaving of Karen’s personal narrative and the story of oppression in Burma, a politically irresponsible use of the knowledge Karen gained from a network of contacts who often endangered themselves simply by speaking to her?

Writing about Connelly’s first memoir, *Touch the Dragon*, Denise Adele Heaps critiques Connelly’s lack of awareness “of the politics of her privileged, safe location compared to the location of Thai women,” which should have led her to protect the identities of those she wrote about (86). Drawing on the work of Linda Alcoff, Adrienne Rich, and Caren Kaplan, Heaps discusses the importance of a “transnational feminist politics of location” in which white feminists not only “explore the meaning of whiteness, [and] recognize the privileged location from which they speak,” but also investigate their own desire for intimacy with the other (85), an investigation that includes an understanding of how the white feminist’s investment in the wellbeing of marginalized others might render those others more rather than less vulnerable. In *Burmese Lessons* Connelly dramatizes that lesson, but in a way that posits neither Karen nor Marla’s position as one of ethical superiority.

What follows complicates Marla’s high ground and Karen’s inexperience. Desperate to make amends, Karen finds another woman going to Rangoon and “ask[s] her if she’ll take US$200 to the guest house” to “cover the money they lost through the MI extortion” (154). This fumbling attempt to atone for her mistakes is followed by a footnote: “In 2001, on a return trip to Burma, I found out directly from the guest house owner that he hadn’t been extorted by the MI
after my stay. He kept some of the money I’d sent and donated the rest of it to charity” (154). Connelly breaks the memoir’s narrative continuity and opens a space between the protagonist Karen and a more experienced and knowledgeable authorial voice that can contextualize the narrative from a position beyond it. The footnote engages the critique voiced by Marla by troubling the construction of marginalized others as inherently vulnerable. That the guest house owner donated Karen’s money—which was “a significant sum of money for [her] and a large one for a Burmese family” (154)—suggests a subject refusing the position of a helpless other who is endangered, and subsequently needs to be saved, by privileged foreigners. The decision to position this addendum in a footnote rather than incorporating it into the main narrative gives it a more pointedly destabilizing force, forcing readers to pause and process an alternative interpretation of the scene they are reading.

The footnote also positions Marla’s critique as another form of the expert sense of entitlement and territoriality by suggesting that the story about extortion was fabricated. This suggestion is reinforced when Karen contacts another white expert, a “Kiwi filmmaker” named Charlie who “is famous in Burmese circles for her films about the revolutionary student-led army, the SLORC’s campaign against ethnic people, the tragedy of the child soldiers who work on both sides of the civil war” (154), thus an expert with considerable cultural capital in terms of her participation in the Burmese struggle. Charlie responds to Karen’s ethical dilemma from a position of jaded wisdom: “‘We whiteys are very territorial. You’d better get used to it. It’s a touchy thing, because we know the Burmese struggle isn’t our own, but for those of us who’ve been part of it for a long time, it feels like it is. So people are very protective’” (155). This interaction signals Karen’s inclusion into the community of “whiteys” invested in the “Burmese struggle,” hence her need to “get used to it.” It is after this that Karen meets Maung, the Burmese
dissident with whom she has the affair that becomes the narrative focus of the memoir, an affair that will fully implicate her in the Burmese struggle with the affective investment that Charlie suggests.

But while Karen is in some ways initiated into the community of white experts, she remains decidedly marginal to it. As the memoir proceeds, her unique positioning as a writer continues to be a point of emphasis as well as an important dynamic of her self-positioning as a liminal figure. Among the dissidents and other Burmese people she is a clear outsider who is granted limited and contingent access to their communities exclusively because of her identity as a writer. Her outsider status (her whiteness, her Canadianness) provides her with an audience for her book that Burmese writers lack, and for this reason she is granted an insider’s view into the country and its people. In one of many examples, Karen meets a Burmese-Karen dissident, Tennyson, who shifts from nonchalant curiosity about a white woman in a border town to a vested interest in helping her learn more when he finds out that she is a writer intending to write “a book about Burma.” “I will take you wherever you need to go,” Tennyson insists. “Show you things” (272). Karen thus gains access to two refugee camps, and the ability to have conversations with the people she meets there, under the auspices of one of their community members. It is access with a clear condition, however: she must use her position of privilege to reach a broad readership, to aid in the Burmese cause.

Karen’s liminality is apparent in her recurrent emphasis on conversation as a non-violent form of knowledge-production. Notwithstanding Connelly’s effort to open a representational distance between authorial signature and narrating protagonist, Burmese Lessons as, at least in part, an explicitly political text must establish its referentiality in order to function as an

---

36 The coincidence of similarity between the protagonist’s first name and the name of a minority ethnic group targeted by the Burmese military is a source of frequent amusement in the memoir.
authentic representation of the Burmese political crisis. It does so both paratextually, as I demonstrate above, and textually, through the emphasis on oral accounts as well as the memoir’s complex relationship to photography as a form of representation. Despite *Burmese Lessons*’ implicit rejection of photography in favour of oral testimony, both photography and orality function as supplements to the memoir, bolstering its legitimacy while also decentring the white expert’s claims to representational authority. The tension between the written word and the photographic image quickly becomes a point of contention between Karen and Tennyson. While visiting a refugee camp, Karen witnesses the death of a young child; afterward, Tennyson insists that she should be photographing the suffering she sees. When she protests that she is a writer, not a photographer, he is disappointed: “In the propaganda fields of the world,” Karen recognizes, “the image is all-powerful” (292). Later, however, Tennyson forgives her, not because he believes her writing will be valuable but because he has lost faith in the “all-powerful” image: “It doesn’t matter. About the photographs. We have too many photographs already” (294). Tennyson’s claim that there are “too many photographs” circulating of what Karen experienced both invokes debates over the political efficacy of the image and places an ethical demand upon the book itself to do something that these proliferating, failed photographs cannot do.

This rejection of photographs in terms of their association with propaganda stems both from the banality of visual representations of suffering in the modern era and from the photograph as a potentially objectifying and racializing medium. Sontag summarizes both sides of this debate in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. As regards the former, she takes issue with the argument that “our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images” (108-09),
associating the notion of empathy fatigue with the privileged position of spectatorship, or “the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world” (110). While she asserts that photographs maintain a meaningful relation to “real suffering” (110), and thus a capacity to move viewers, she also outlines some of the more troubling genealogies of representations of violence, including the link between the proliferation of images of “grievously injured bodies … from Asia or Africa” in contemporary journalistic practices and “the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings”: “The exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees” (72). The relation between viewing and being viewed is a hierarchical one that reinstates colonial and racialized power dynamics in which the white gaze is fixed upon, and fixes, non-white bodies. Karen’s discomfort with the role of the white photographer suggests her awareness of this representational history, and her desire to refuse the colonial practice of spectacularizing the suffering of racialized bodies.

The construction of the other as an object rather than subject of representation is countered, in the memoir, by a valorization of the oral testimony as a means of reaffirming the subjectivity and agency of the interlocutor. The others in Burmese Lessons both see and speak, refusing to be reduced to objects of the gaze or the representational authority of white Western experts. Karen explicitly roots her writing practice in a valuation of oral testimony:

The most useful thing I do around here is interview people about their experiences in Burma and on the border. Even that is beginning to feel more useful than actually writing a book.
The people I interview want to talk, even if they don’t want to talk about everything. By listening carefully, by asking questions, I become a mirror that reflects their lives back to them. … To tell his or her own history is one way for a human being to reclaim legitimacy. The power of story gives both ways, to the teller and to the listener. It is literally life-affirming. (237)

The outsider as mirror is implicitly contrasted to the white expert “sp[eaking] in broad strokes, with assurance and conviction” (52). The model of relation to her interlocutors is self-decentering without being self-effacing; both the teller and the listener are affirmed. The relationship established works neither to maintain the hegemonic power of the colonial self nor to fully efface the self in deference to the other. The latter stance, while seemingly more resistant to white hegemonic knowledge-production, constructs the other “as transparent and self-knowing” and, through arguing that the other can speak for herself accurately and authoritatively, “assumes the oppressed can transparently represent their own true interests” (Alcoff, “Problem” 22).³⁷ Karen’s valuation of conversation here privileges “the oppressed’s speech … on the grounds of the very act of speaking itself,” an act that “constitutes a subject that challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, an opposition that is key in the reproduction of imperialist modes of discourse” (23). The memoir’s emphasis on oral testimony, then, attempts to destabilize the privilege of the white expert without reproducing the oppressed other as a site of fetishized authenticity.

Engaging in conversation with people is not simply extolled as an alternative to expert knowledge production, however; it is also described as “more useful than actually writing a

³⁷ This idealization of the discourse of the other as a site of authenticity and transparency participates in what Rey Chow calls the “prevalent idealism in relation to otherness” in which “the other” is imagined as “beyond the contradictions that constitute our own historical place” (xx).
book.” Karen suggests here the anxiety of producing any representation of Burma at all, an anxiety that is closely linked to her heightened self-consciousness as a privileged white subject. Karen’s ambivalence about whether and how to best serve the people of Burma and their cause is a recurring trope in the novel. One moment she refuses to take a photograph, a refusal that, along with her shame at taking pictures of children in the burnt remains of a refugee camp (277), implies the rejection of photography itself; at another, she questions writing altogether, preferring instead the “life-affirming” model of dialogue; but at other times she implies that her act of witnessing would be more meaningful if she were one of those journalists of whom she is elsewhere so critical. “Does it matter that I saw what I saw?” she wonders after witnessing a protest: “I have no newspaper to write for, no report to make to anyone who cares” (124). *Burmese Lessons* is thus filled with the traces of alternate forms of representation that are by turns validated and critiqued, including writing itself.

The result is a generically fluid text that shifts between memoir, political history, philosophical treatise on the problem of evil, and narrative of witness. *Burmese Lessons* implies throughout that the book Karen will write to “‘tell the world what is happening in Burma’” (98) is *The Lizard Cage*, a novel that she has described elsewhere as paradigmatically Burmese, since “metaphorically, the story of modern Burma is one of incarceration” (“In the Skin” 59). The status of *Burmese Lessons*, then, is ambivalent. It does, indeed, tell the world about Burma, but it does so through a combination of personal narratives and expository passages embedded within, as the subtitle explicitly states, a “love story.” The object of that love, however, is not as clear as the familiarity of the generic marker might suggest. While Karen’s intense affair with Maung, which implicates her so deeply in the world of Burmese dissidents, certainly dominates much of the narrative, it takes a backseat to Burma itself, and to Karen’s experience of falling in love with
a place and its people. She wonders if she is simply using Maung, since her “emotions for him are tangled up with [her] thoughts and feelings about his country. … Am I just a parasite, falling in love with this man because he brings me closer to his country?” (209). The anxieties of the self and its relation to the foreign place, the desire to find a non-hegemonic mode of representation and engagement, the concern that no such mode exists free of the complicity of the white outsider, come together in the final scene that I will consider, an encounter between Karen and another young, white, beautiful female artist.

Falling early in the memoir, this passage depicts Karen grappling with her relationship to Burma, attempting to differentiate herself from another artist who identifies herself as “‘an idealist, like you’” (42). The two engage in a conversation that summarizes many of the memoir’s anxieties. At first the artist seems to parrot the familiar rhetoric of the ignorant outsider, wondering if it is “‘really possible to be hungry in the tropics,’” referring to high infant morality rates as “‘a natural form of birth control,’” suggesting that the people cannot be that oppressed because they are “‘always smiling,’” and arguing that a “‘rapid transition [to democracy] could destabilize everything’” (43). When Karen finally offers a protest—that “‘Burma is hardly stable’”—the artist replies “condescendingly”: “‘Journalists exaggerate the situation’” (43). While Karen takes issue with the colonial power dynamics of journalists in Burma, this artist’s rejection of journalism stems not from a critique of power but from an attitude of jaded knowledgability justified by her cultural capital as a world-traveller: “It’s absolute hell up in the North, where there are no tourists,” she tells Karen. “I wanted to go up there to prove I could, though it’s very isolated. It’s hard work, trying to get to places they won’t let you go to, and the locals mob you, and there are no other white people. But I kept calm the whole time” (44). This image of self-possession, in addition to claims to unique access to
isolated locales and superior knowledge, suggests a deeply narcissistic outsider for whom foreign places function as a mirror for her own self-construction rather than, as in Karen’s description of interviews quoted above, vice versa.

This narcissistic approach to Burma is paired with a hugely inflated understanding of the possible efficacy of the foreigner’s presence and a paradoxically apolitical attitude toward art. The conversation takes an “alarming” turn when the artist demands, “What are you trying to do for the Burmese people?” (43). When Karen responds that she is doing “Nothing” but “Talking. And listening,” the artist is surprised: “Aren’t you trying to accomplish the freedom of these people?” (43). At the same time, she wonders if Karen won’t “‘contaminate [her] writing if [she] become[s] political’” because “‘[a]rt in the service of politics can only be propaganda’” (44). The Spanish artist, in fact, seems to serve as a mouthpiece for a self-image that Karen is deliberately rejecting at this early stage in her narrative. The former claims her representational authority on the basis of touristic consumption; the latter garners hers from “‘talking to Burmese people. Students, doctors, artists, women in the market’” (43). In contrast to the artist’s “presumptuous” image of the outsider capable of “accomplish[ing] the freedom” of Burma, Karen adopts a humble posture, describing herself as simply “‘hanging around’” and “‘writing about what I see here’” (44). And where the artist rejects politically informed writing as “propaganda,” Karen articulates an alternative that describes her own work’s aspiration, and aligns it with the work of Burmese artists: “If an artist creates a work that defies oppression and violence, or offers an alternative view of history—like Ma Thida’s short stories—is that propaganda?” (44). Invested in dialogue, humble in terms of her ability to effect change, politically invested without concocting fantasies of herself as saving the Burmese people, the self constructed through this exchange is one that will dominate the rest of the memoir. And while, in
this conversation, she seems to distance herself from the figure of the tourist as embodied by the
Spanish artist, part of the representational humility of the memoir involves a self-effacing
embrace of a touristic identity, at least initially.

*Burmesse Lessons* in fact foregrounds the tropes of tourism and its relation to
consumption, both through Karen’s contingent association with a touristic identity and through
her repeated anxiety that her love for Burma is “just another form of gluttony” (174). This
anxiety presents tourism as another possible approach to knowing and representing the foreign,
added to the approaches, such as ethnography and journalism, explored in this chapter. To the
problems of engaging with the colonial inheritance of knowledge-production, and attempting to
evade this history without then indulging in a fantasy of the white woman as distanced from
power, tourism adds the problem of how the foreign is rendered consumable through its
textualization. From the question of representation, then, I turn to the question of consumption.
Chapter Three

Consuming the Other: Burmese Lessons and The Beauty of Humanity Movement

“Philosophy *qua* ontology is the reduction of the other to the Same, where the other is assimilated like so much food or drink — ‘O digestive philosophy!’ as Sartre exclaimed…”

(Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction* 6)

Tourism, Implication, and Eating (With) Strangers

If the problem of representing the other is a fraught one with critical roots in Orientalism and the discursive force of knowledge production, consuming the other introduces more overtly the link between representation and commodification, particularly in the context of globalization’s acceleration of the tourism industry. Rendering the other consumable, whether in the form of a tourist attraction or a middlebrow novel, is presented as a form of violence in Karen Connelly’s memoir *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story* (2010) and Camilla Gibb’s novel *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* (2010). Both books explicitly thematize the function of the tourist industry in South East Asia, an area in which tourism often accounts for a high percentage of the countries’ economies. In *Burmese Lessons*, consumption is critiqued as an inauthentic relation between the white tourist and the foreign culture. At the same time, however, it can serve as a starting point, a gateway to a deeper communal investment through which the tourist can become implicated and ultimately transformed, not consuming but consumed. In *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*, on the other hand, consumption is not a means to an ethical end but the novel’s primary focus, becoming a far more ambivalent and complex mode of relating to the world of cultures and things marked as foreign.
The two books’ markedly different treatment of consumption and commodification can be understood in part through their different representational strategies, particularly in terms of focalization. *Burmese Lessons*, as a memoir, focalizes exclusively through the figure of Karen, a white woman and outsider to the culture being described. While consumption can be offered as a starting point, it ultimately must be rejected if the narrating protagonist is to be redeemed ethically and politically from the position of the fetishizing tourist. *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*, on the other hand, focalizes through three Vietnamese characters who are themselves the objects, purveyors, or facilitators of cultural consumption. The complicity of these characters with consumption therefore signifies differently: they cannot be vilified for, as an example, giving war-themed tours that trade in the American obsession with the Vietnamese-American War, or promoting a local art scene that offers up tourist-friendly images of Vietnam as a place out of time that are largely purchased by a non-Vietnamese market, since the tourism and art industries provide vital sources of revenue for local artists and youth. Gibb’s decision to focalize her most recent novel through Vietnamese characters, while potentially available to accusations of cultural appropriation, also opens the novel to a more nuanced treatment of consumption and commodification as it relates to the representation and circulation of a foreign culture.

I concluded the last chapter with a discussion of a scene in *Burmese Lessons* in which Karen, the narrating protagonist, encounters another traveller in Burma, a Spanish artist who serves as a foil for Karen’s own approach to travel and artistic representation. While, in recounting their discussion, Karen takes pains to differentiate herself from the other woman, much of the anxiety evoked in this scene stems from Karen’s fraught identification with the figure of the white woman tourist. Tourism functions in the memoir as a sign of the most superficial and thus least valuable relation of the outsider to a foreign place, particularly when
contrasted with the other options present in the memoir: the activists, NGO workers, and journalists who Karen refers to as “experts” characterized by both their appropriative attitude toward Burma and their practical usefulness; and the affectively invested but anxiety-ridden writer (Karen herself) who, in conversation with the Spanish artist, describes what she is doing as simply “‘Talking. And listening’” (43). Tourists, in contrast, do nothing for the country they visit. They are at best the “chalky smattering of other white people” that Karen sees “in the distance” as she tours the temples and Buddhas of Pagan, and at worst the motivation for the military government to forcibly remove the villagers of Pagan in order to produce a money-making attraction: “The military government, expecting swarms of us to visit, wanted these ancient sites to be authentically empty and tidy for our appraising eyes” (26). At the same time tourism circulates in the memoir, at least initially, as the inevitable relation of all white people to places like Burma, insofar as it suggests a level of mobility that decreases the possibilities of real investment in the foreign culture: “We come and go, the tourists and the intrepid travellers (who differ mostly in luggage), the well-wishers and the do-gooders. I have come and I will go, taking away stories and photographs of these places. The people who live here remain” (27-28). If the tourist, as I argued in the previous chapter, treats the foreign place as a mirror for her own desires, then she is capable of remaining unmarked by her experiences of travel. The question Karen demands, however, is whether it is possible to “contain[]” one’s experience of the foreign, to “turn[] away from unexpected events and depart[] unscathed” (174). Her conclusion, in which she is most distinctly scathed by her relationship to Burma, ultimately depicts the touristic relation to the foreign place as untenable and unethical.

Burmese Lessons charts Karen’s progression from a tourist who consumes the sheer exotic difference of the foreign place, through her experience of implication via eating with
others (emphasizing this quality of being *with*), to a condition of deep implication that the memoir figures in terms of a subject consumed *by* her experience of the foreign, rather than consuming it. Along the way the implied reader is invited to follow a similar journey from touristic fascination into complicity: the memoir figures reading as a form of consumption that, like eating with others, generates its own complex enfoldments. This parallel progression of narrator and reader, however, depends upon a sustained link among tourism, eating, and reading as three kinds of consumption that each holds the potential for a more affective and transformative kind of implication.

This link is drawn in the memoir’s first chapter, “the dinner party,” which recounts Karen’s first encounter with a community of Burmese writers and intellectuals over a lavish meal. They talk of Tolstoy, Kundera, Faulkner, and Márquez over “prawns, a broccoli-like green stir-fried with garlic and ginger, and spicy eggplant” (13). The pleasures of eating and reading dominate this scene, and both are described as forms of appetite: “The hunger for books is greater than the hunger for food, though there is no doubt that the conversation is enhanced by the meal” (13). Through these linked but differentiated forms of consumption, cultural and linguistic gaps are bridged. Indeed, satisfying these various appetites leads to the generation of joyous community: “Good travel is like good reading: you go inside a new world and cannot resist it. This will implicate me, I think, chop-sticking a load of delicious oily noodles into my mouth. I love eating with strangers. Nothing but sex brings people together so quickly” (11). The equation I am arguing for is explicit in this passage: travel is like reading is like eating, and each activity implicates the outsider in a new world, be it a foreign country or a new community.

Consumption is not simplistically celebrated in the memoir, however. Karen later confronts her own appetite for the authentically foreign, describing it as a desire to voraciously
consume linguistic and, by extension, cultural difference: “Burmese would be my sixth language if I ever learn to speak it properly. Isn’t that just another form of gluttony—wanting to take it all in, have it, know it?” (174). The choice of the word “gluttony” is central to my reading here. Karen speaks of her desire to “have” as much of the world as possible not in terms of domination, the colonial power-knowledge suggested in the desire to “know it” all, but in terms of an insatiable appetite. Her gluttony, she worries, might end up depleting her experiences of meaningfulness: “To love widely is not to love deeply” (175). In this passage Karen voices the anxieties of the modern touristic subject, voraciously consuming foreign cultures in search of an authenticity she imagines to be lacking in her own, while she risks emptying those cultures of the very authenticity she seeks in them. This is the paradox of tourism as described by John Goss: the manufacture of the foreign as the site of cultural authenticity is based on a “master narrative of modernity that tells of progress at the price of the loss of authenticity under generalized conditions of … the progressive commodification of ‘everything’” (328). The tourist, seeking “authenticity in the world of the Other as compensation for its perceived lack in modern everyday life,” becomes “complicit[]” in this wide-scale commodification, “effectively undermin[ing] the very possibility of the authenticity of objects and ways of life that they purvey” (Goss 330). Authenticity, then, is a form of desire projected from the self onto the other in search of recompense for the “economization of culture … frequently considered to be one of the salient features of late-capitalist modernity” (Huggan, Extreme 13). Can Karen’s “gluttony” for the world be compared to this touristic quest for authenticity within the foreign?

Karen, as a tourist in Pagan, is certainly aware of the politics of what Urry calls the “tourist gaze” (172). Visiting the stupas, pagodas, and temples, she is swept into the language of touristic fetishization: “The beauty is mythical, mesmerizing; from elsewhere, I thought, then
corrected myself. The plain of temples was just there, as undeniable as the driver’s light brown shirt, his work-thick hands. It is I who come from elsewhere” (22). She is keenly aware, during her time in Pagan, of how her presence has not only shifted but in some ways also generated the landscape that she is perceiving as mystical, exotic, foreign. From the literal generation of that landscape through the government’s violent relocation of villagers to its semiotic generation through a vocabulary of touristic seeing that she deploys but also resists, the inability of the tourist to gain access to the authenticity that she desires so keenly is a recurring trope in the early pages of the memoir. Key to this desire is the association of the tourist site with cultural difference—the “elsewhere” that Karen describes. Most scholars of tourism are in accord when it comes to associating the tourist’s desire with the consumption of cultural difference. Huggan describes tourism as “cultural authenticity … refashioned for quick sale” (Extreme 13), while Nezar AlSayyad takes this argument further, contending not simply that cultural difference and authenticity have become commodified through their absorption into global commodity culture, but that tourism as commodity culture constructs the authentic in order to consume it: “The new norm appears to be the outright manufacture of heritage” combined with a touristic gaze that “transforms the material reality of the built environment into a cultural imaginary” (3-4).

Tourism does not simply take a pre-existing culture and “refashion” it for consumption, but produces the culture to be consumed, both literally in terms of the physical manufacture of authentic spaces (as seen in the emptying out of Pagan) and semiotically in terms of the ways that tourism filters cultures through pre-existing narratives and artificial expectations.

But Karen’s consumption does not register simply as a form of shame-inducing complicity with the touristic fetishization of the foreign. Her “gluttony” for the world must be read against the joyfully implicating force of eating with others. The paradox lies in the
contradiction between consumption as a desire for mastery and as an activity that, particularly
when shared, can build affectively bonded communities. During the dinner party, the model of
interaction is conversational, egalitarian, and spontaneous; when Karen expresses her anxieties
over her gluttony, on the other hand, she suggests that consumption is (at least potentially)
dominating, acquisitive, and selfish. The use of the language of consumption in both passages
undermines the construction of consumption as unethical in and of itself, echoing Huggan’s
insistence on the “range of available options for both producers and consumers of culturally
‘othered’ goods”—or cultural difference itself—including options that “engender new social
relations that operate in anti-imperialist interests” (*Postcolonial* 12). Consumption is not, he
argues, “a necessary evil,” nor is “the global marketing of cultural difference” necessarily “a
latter-day vision of imperialist plunder” (12). Huggan has his own examples of alternative
models of production and consumption, but my discussion will focus on how Karen becomes
implicated in Burmese culture and politics through the acts of eating, travelling, and reading.

All of these acts take the isolated travelling subject and enfold her into new and complex
relations to others, thus generating new communities and, as a result, new obligations. While
consumption constantly bears the shadow of gluttony, and thus suggestions of privilege, the
memoir frequently links consumption to communality, while emphasizing its transformative
potential. This potential is epitomised in scenes of sharing food, which are consistently linked to
sharing stories and, for Karen, learning more about Burma. After describing the interviews that
she finds “literally life-affirming,” which I discussed in the previous chapter, Karen emphasizes
a new feeling of “closeness to someone who, an hour or two before, was a stranger” (237). This
closeness makes it hard to leave after the interviews: “Usually I end up staying at the house or
apartment for an hour or two after, talking with the larger group of people, drinking tea, chatting.
… Often the group will end up eating together” (238). When she describes herself as “becom[ing] a mirror that reflects their lives back to them” (237), she simultaneously decen tres the writerly self and enters that self into an intimate relation to the others with whom she speaks. Within this community, the sharing of food is a sign of belonging rooted in “metta,” the Buddhist term for “loving-kindness” (237-38). The mundane activity of consumption—Karen buys her contribution to these communal meals from “[t]he ubiquitous food vendors of Bangkok” (238)—is both a counterbalance to and an extension of the “anxious tenderness” she feels for those who “entrust[] [her] with their story” (237). This is a form of consumption antithetical to the touristic desire to “contain[]” the experience of the foreign and “depart[] unscathed” (174). It is instead consumption as an external sign of a deep and worried sense of implication.

Becoming implicated is not the same as being scathed, but the two are, the memoir suggests, connected. As she becomes increasingly implicated in the cause of the Burmese people, through travelling and conversing and eating with them, Karen becomes not only scathed but deeply wounded and ultimately transformed. After contracting malaria while visiting a border community with Maung, Karen emerges a transformed self, no longer characterized by her near-gluttony for life. Where she was once an enthusiastic consumer, she has become consumed:

What is inside me? A fracture, from my left shoulder across my chest. Invisible traces of Burma and the border. Parasites the doctors cannot see.

Is this not what I wanted, what I have always craved—to be transformed? The change I sought when I first went to Burma is complete. It is an irrevocable alteration: the fever has seared something into me, burned something out. She is gone, the one who could go forth so easily, so readily, wishing to enter another world and opening herself to it completely, like a door or a flower. (422)
If the touristic experience involves emerging unscathed, then Karen has radically departed from the position of the tourist. The irony, she suggests, is that the tourist enters the foreign place with fantasies of cultural immersion and transformation, but if she gets what she wants, she ceases to be the one who desired that immersive transformation in the first place. If tourism suggests a “longing for the possibility of exchange between the material and spiritual worlds” (Goss 334) that is haunted by its own impossibility, then Karen has demonstrated what happens when that longing is made possible. That other who entered into a new culture like entering a good book, treating it like a door that can be passed through, is gone, replaced by a wounded and fractured self; the fantasy of authentic experience upon which both eating and reading were modelled at the beginning of the memoir—"you go inside a new world and cannot resist it’’ (11)—has also been reversed, such that the new world has gone inside her and “burned something out” (422). Now instead of being the one who joyfully eats with others, Karen has become both consumed and uninterested in consumption: “since the anti-malarial drugs—no, since the jungle—I’m rarely interested in food. Not eating is a novel experience. Life becomes sparer and sharper, somehow … detached. I carry it around in my mouth like a bone” (430-31). This image of the whittling down of a life to its sparsest parts recalls (in terms of publication history) or predicts (in the temporality of the memoir) the deliberate self-starvation of Teza, the protagonist of *The Lizard Cage*, a novel that is utterly divorced from the sensual pleasures of consumption that occupy much of *Burmese Lessons*.

The relation of self to otherness privileged in *Burmese Lessons* is ultimately one of becoming other—if not becoming the other one is seeking to describe, then at least becoming other to oneself.\(^{38}\) In a 2000 article describing the composition of *The Lizard Cage*, Connelly

\(^{38}\) *The Lizard Cage*’s engagement with becoming other will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 5.
emphasizes the transformation she experienced in Thailand and Burma. She “bec[a]me a new person,” was “adopted everywhere, and fed often”; she “experienced wounding and became a witness to and a recorder of the wounding of others” (“In the Skin” 58). The transformation of the self required to write the book that she believes she is obliged to write is “profoundly painful, often harrowing,” but in a way that cannot be avoided: “the pain of writing the book is integral to its realness” (59). *Burmese Lessons*, then, can be read as a Künstlerroman for *The Lizard Cage*, describing the artist’s transformation into one who is capable of writing the novel. It is important for my argument, however, that while this transformation results in a self that is consumed, invaded by the parasite that is the sheer woundedness of Burma, it begins from a position of enthusiastic and naïve consumption, via tourism and eating, both of which are explicitly paralleled with reading, especially reading about a foreign culture. The effect of such a connection is not only to chart the transformation of the writer but also to invite an altered relation of reader to text, particularly of a reader positioned similarly to the young Karen, feeling herself drawn into a new world that she cannot resist.

*Burmese Lessons* thus offers the possibility of touristic reading that can become an implicated and ultimately transformative relation to a text. My reading of the memoir in terms of a particular implied readership draws on Waring’s description of “market readers—tourists, book browsers in the neo-imperialist marketplace” (464), which implies a parallel between the touristic desire to consume other cultures as a sign of authenticity and the related desire to consume texts that purport to offer access to that same cultural authenticity. Ahmed marks a similar connection between the tourist-reader, which she calls *the body-at-home* (Strange 115), the object that “is consumed as that which contains the ‘truth’ of the strange or exotic” (114-15), and particular practices of reading: “This book, this commodity object, that moves across the
world, is that which makes us face each other, but a facing in which I consume you. Am I eating you up?” (152). The textual encounter with cultural difference is marked by a commodifying relation wherein the text itself stands in for a consumable sign of the exotic. Karen, however, suggests that reading, travelling, and eating are all ambivalent practices, teetering between gluttony, community, and injury. She thus invites readers to think of the ways in which they are implicated through the process of reading about “a new world” that they “cannot resist” (11).

The trope of consumption shares the double-sidedness of complicity as a concept, suggesting at once a form of wrongdoing—the reduction of alterity to a consumable commodity—and physical, communal, and affective interrelations that generate care between Western readers and distant others. *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* similarly puts consumption and care into conversation, but it does so through the relationships of three Vietnamese characters whose own complicity in the commodification of their culture complicates any straightforward rejection of consumption as inauthentic or appropriative.

**Competing Discourses of Representation in *The Beauty of Humanity Movement***

*The Beauty of Humanity Movement* is a novel about representation (art and tourism) and consumption (reading and eating). It is a novel concerned with the commodification of cultural goods, the increasing market saturation of everyday life, and the forms of consumption that build rather than alienate communities, set within the emergent globality of contemporary Hanoi. It is also a novel that has been clearly framed as, in one reviewer’s words, “book-club friendly” (Roy n. pag.), meaning, in that context, universalizable and full of themes that appeal to middlebrow readers “such as lost love, forgotten memories, changing values, displacement, and family.” Gibb has said that the novel was substantially altered due to publishers’ pressure to make it more
accessible to a book-club readership: “I had an editorial meeting with a US editor who said ‘You need a way in,’ and I said, ‘Well, I want it to be a man.’ … But the editor said, ‘Who belongs to book clubs? Women between the ages of thirty and fifty-five; it has to be a woman’” (Gibb, “‘Throw’” 269). It is, then, a book that foregrounds the commodification and globalization of art, particularly through the tourism industry, while remaining itself complicit with the touristic representation of Vietnam as a place that can be consumed by a middlebrow readership.

When I describe it as a touristic book I gesture not only to the explicit thematization of tourism in the novel, but also toward the authorizing narratives that have shaped the novel in terms of touristic experience. Here is how Gibb describes the inspiration for the novel, in the reading guide developed for BookClubs.ca (a Random House website): “I was at the height of my frustration with [the writing of another novel] when I happened to go on holiday to Vietnam, a place I had wanted to visit for years. Vietnam was a revelation to me, completely unexpected … and it threw any preconceived notions I had about the place out the window” (Gibb, “The Beauty” n. pag.). During this holiday Gibb met a young tour guide named Phuong who “gave me permission to ask anything and, being a writer, and an anthropologist in a former life, I asked a lot.” This is the authorizing narrative upon which the novel is built and through which it has circulated to a Western readership: the story of a tourist confronted with a culture that exceeds her expectations, but who—by virtue of her authority as an anthropologist and author—takes control by turning this experience into a novel and offering it up in the form of a realist narrative. In the wake of Sweetness in the Belly’s success, Gibb now circulates as an author with a particular capacity to represent foreign places; the Globe and Mail review of the novel, for example, begins by mentioning Gibb’s “education as a social anthropologist” and insists that she “has done her research into the political upheavals and customs of the Vietnamese” (Fertile n.
This paratextual framing of the novel as at once touristic and authoritative places the implied reader in the position of a textual tourist encountering a particularly vivid travel guide. The *New York Times* review, for example, says that the novel “should be essential reading for anyone mulling a visit to Hanoi, whose profusion of motorbike traffic and culinary aromas issues from these pages with graphic verisimilitude” (Stuart n. pag.). The novel’s status as veridical discourse, authorized by Gibb’s credentials, allows this reviewer to collapse fiction into travel guide, such that the act of reading the novel can prepare a reader for, or even replace, a trip to Hanoi. Waring’s notion of the tourist-reader is almost literalized in the reception of the novel, particularly alongside narratives of the tourist-author.

Tourism and the production of Gibb as a middlebrow intellectual are implicitly related in the novel’s authorizing narratives and paratextual framing. Combined, they suggest the generation of a particularly consumable image of Vietnam. Indeed, despite there being a lot going on in the novel beyond soup-making, *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* has consistently circulated, for a Canadian readership, under the sign of the edible: phở. A *National Post* feature on the novel includes a large photograph of Gibb posing at Mi Mi’s Phở House in Toronto, visually placing the authorial body in proximity to the culture that her novel purports to represent while also shaping that culture in terms of consumability (Laidlaw n. pag.). In John Barber’s *Globe and Mail* interview with Gibb, she links her desire to write about Vietnam with her “appetite”: “I want to sink my teeth into a bigger world” (n. pag.). Her blog is similarly dominated, between 2008 and 2010, by photographs of and personal narratives about phở. While the novel centres on Vietnam’s famous soup, it offers a complex reconsideration of consumption, representation, and tourism. If *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*’s emphasis on “lost love” and “family” makes it “book-club friendly,” its concern with competing discourses of cultural
representation and commodification make it an ideal text through which to interrogate the problematic of consuming difference.

The female character whom Gibb allegedly added to satisfy her American publisher is Maggie, a thirty-something diasporic Vietnamese art curator who was raised primarily in Minneapolis but has returned to Hanoi to find traces of her father, who died in a re-education camp after the American War. Maggie bears some striking similarities to Sweetness in the Belly’s Lilly, being a character who straddles the divide between insider and outsider.\(^{39}\) She looks like a local but when she opens her mouth to speak she is labelled “Việt Kiều,” foreign Vietnamese (97). In the midst of an argument, her friend Tú accuses her (though only in his mind) of “encouraging and indulging [certain] artists in their crude misrepresentations of the country… He expects more of someone of Vietnamese heritage, but that is the deceptive lie of her face” (164). If Maggie’s face is at moments described as a lie, however, her strangeness is generally perceived as more fascinating than deceptive from the perspective of the novel’s male characters, including Tú:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tú does not have a lot of experience with Việt Kiều, at least not of the up-close-and-personal variety. Until very recently the Việt Kiều were not much welcome. This one has a nice slim body and a musical sway to her hips, though she’s tall for a Vietnamese woman. It must be all that milk in the American diet. This would also explain her perfect teeth. Milk and hamburgers. (62)}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{39}\) There are a few scenes wherein the parallels between Lilly and Maggie become quite explicit, particularly when Maggie sits in her apartment eating “a burger and fries,” an act that, “in the heart of Hanoi[,] might seem like a contradiction, but it’s the type of contradiction Maggie lives every day. She \textit{is} that contradiction” (279). Compare this to the scene in which Lilly describes herself as “a white Muslim woman who grew up in Africa making macaroni cheese for [two Ethiopian children] in London”; for the children in question, she insists, “none of these things is a contradiction” (165).
The image of Maggie as both Vietnamese and not-Vietnamese persists throughout the novel, and once again makes her function as an ideal entry point for readers who are unfamiliar with the culture being represented. This is certainly her suggested role in Gibb’s anecdote about being required to add her in. Maggie is unfamiliar with Hanoi, and her introduction to it via Tư as tour guide doubles as an introduction for tourist-readers.

Maggie has been hired by the Metropole hotel to curate its collection of Vietnamese art, and she in turn hires Tư as a tour guide, not for herself but for other hotel guests interested in the contemporary Hanoi art scene (93). Multiple forms of exchange characterize the relationship that ensues. Maggie introduces Tư to the world of contemporary Vietnamese art while Tư offers Maggie a local’s perspective on the city of her birth, in which she has remained very much an outsider since her return. In the process he incorporates her into his own somewhat unconventional family unit, until by the end of the novel she has become decidedly integrated into Hanoi culture, riding on Tư’s father’s Honda Dream II “like a Vietnamese lady with her jacket on backward and a mask over her mouth. She seems more and more Vietnamese each time Tư sees her” (228). In some senses, then, Maggie’s journey from outsider to insider mirrors the authorizing narrative promoted through book-club guides and book reviews, in which a female outsider (Gibb/Maggie), with claims to her own forms of institutionalized cultural authority

---

40 Tư’s ongoing eroticization of Maggie (see also page 146) is not simply a result of his youth (he is 22), but also of her association with the exotic appeal of American culture. In this sense it parallels references to Maggie’s failed relationship with a white American named Daniel, who she finds out had a father who “had served in Vietnam … but in some ways never returned” (123). This epiphany signals the end of the relationship because Maggie recognizes “that Daniel’s attraction to her was obviously so much more complicated than she had ever known and in some ways had nothing to do with her”; this recognition subsequently “cast doubt on all her relationships, forcing her to wonder what she represented to other people” (123). For both Daniel and Tư, Maggie’s body becomes a representation of cultural difference, signifying differently in the different countries. In this sense the novel’s concerns about representation and commodification are extended onto the body itself.
(writing/art curation), is initiated into Hanoi culture by a helpful tour guide with whom she becomes good friends, and through whom she eventually gains the authority of an insider. And where Gibb’s young tour guide friend tempted her with the story of an itinerant phở-maker who she never did locate (Laidlaw n. pag.), Maggie not only meets but also becomes close friends with a famous phở-maker, Old Man Hưng, the character who largely drives the action of the novel.

This parallel between Maggie and Gibb, however, is in part undermined by the novel’s capacity for shifting focalization and the resultant structure: it opens from the perspective of Hưng pushing his wooden cart through the streets of Hanoi. Maggie is first introduced from his perspective as a pair of “delicate hands” that belong to “a woman who has, improbably, never engaged in manual labour” (9), a description that figures her as an unfamiliar and unlikely other rather than vice versa. More importantly, the entire representational structure of the touristic novel, offered up to a readership of cultural outsiders to be consumed “as that which contains the ‘truth’ of the strange or exotic” (Ahmed, Strange 114-15), is productively foregrounded, if never quite undone, through the three focalizing characters’ competing discourses of how Hanoi can and should be represented, as seen through textual debates about literature, art, and tourism itself.

Before engaging with these different discourses, however, I will offer a little more plot summary to ground my readings. As will become apparent, *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* is a novel that engages various central debates through the competing perspectives of representative characters, the relation between whom must be understood for these debates to have relevance. The novel is focalized, by turns, through the perspectives of Maggie, Tư, and Hưng. Hưng is an octogenarian whose flashbacks provide an avenue into the history of Vietnam from 1922 to present, leading from his birth in a small rural village, through his move to Hanoi
to apprentice at his uncle’s phở shop, to his inheritance of the phở shop and its transformation into a hub of political activism in the wake of the 1954 partitioning of Vietnam. During this period Hùng becomes close to a radical poet named Đạo, and to Đạo’s young son Bình (Tư’s father); when, in 1956, Đạo’s publications are banned and he is sent to a re-education camp, Hùng becomes the keeper of the poet’s words and honorary father to his son (and thus Tư’s honorary grandfather). In the present day of the novel Hùng is living in a shanty town, where he has lived since his phở shop was requisitioned in 1959, and, although Bình and Tư consider him to be family, he refuses to leave the shanty town where he has formed a close community bonded together by his cooking: “Hùng is the heart of this small community on the banks of a polluted pond; he is good to these poor people, keeping them fed and entertained” (75). The publications entrusted to him by Đạo have been lost, as have Hùng’s once-perfect memories of the poems contained in them; he remains, however, the patriarch of Tư’s family, and the relationship between the two men is both deeply affectionate and at times touched by cross-generational humour. When American-obsessed Tư, wanting to do something kind for the aging Hùng, buys him a new pair of knock-off sneakers, Hùng places them on his altar beside the sacred image of Đạo along with his daily offering of rice: “I wouldn’t want to dirty them” (160).

Closely related to the mysterious loss of Đạo’s poems are the lost drawings of Lý Văn Hai, Maggie’s father, who, she knows, was also involved with the radical intellectuals of the 1950s. This knowledge leads her to track down Hùng where he is selling phở in a half-constructed pool, and where she meets Tư and becomes entwined in the family’s fate in various ways. The novel centres on the mystery of Lý Văn Hai’s lost drawings and Đạo’s lost poems, though it also follows the family’s desire to open for Hùng his own phở shop and Tư’s troubling introduction to the contemporary art scene of Hanoi. This art scene both brings Maggie and Tư
together and risks ending their friendship prematurely when their opinions on the politics and ethics of representation differ drastically.

The Beauty of Humanity Movement’s deliberate engagement with the history of Western representations of Vietnamese culture is emphasized both textually and paratextually. In the author interview included in the BookClubs.ca guide Gibb says that “[t]he vast majority of Western fiction and non-fiction on the subject of Vietnam is about the war and so I avoided the vast majority of Western fiction and non-fiction on the subject of Vietnam. I wanted to tell a different story” (Gibb, “The Beauty” n. pag.). As Sweetness in the Belly avoids the years between 1974 and 1981, so The Beauty of Humanity Movement lightly skims the years between 1964, when the supposed attack on two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin caused the United States to deploy troops to Vietnam, and 1975, when North Vietnam captured Saigon and ended the war. This avoidance suggests the repudiation of a trope in contemporary travel writing, which Huggan argues “operates under the sign of the disaster” (Extreme 6), with global capitalism being at the root of “a hyper-commodified ‘tourism of history’ that kitschifies atrocities past and present, shamelessly capitalizing on the memory of the dead” (8). Huggan interprets this “kitschification” of disaster as a hideous but inevitable extension of the operations of tourism and global capitalism. Victor Alneng draws a similar link between war and tourism, arguing that the “commodification of the Vietnam War” is “spurred by phantasms of Vietnam as a war” (461, my emphasis). If, as Alneng argues, “Vietnam is War,” then by extension “all visitors are war-tourists, like it or not” (485)—and all touristic Vietnam novels become war novels. It is this representational inheritance that The Beauty of Humanity Movement strives to reject, arguing for a Vietnam that goes far beyond the American-produced “phantasms” of the War.
Tu, who “was born just before the government’s desperately needed economic reforms of 1986, when the market was liberalized in order to alleviate starvation” (5), demonstrates a surprising comfort with the commodification of the war. His imagined monologue toward guilt-ridden tourists, who “have every intention of going straight back to the U.S. to lobby the government to compensate the victims of Agent Orange” and want to know what else they can do to help, is a case in point: “Did you shoot a Viet Cong rifle at the Củ Chi tunnels? Play with the AK-47s the communists used against you? Sample the manioc the soldiers lived on throughout the war? Crawl into a tunnel that was widened to accommodate the very non-Vietnamese width of your behind? Excellent” (173). Tu’s willingness to sell Americans their own desire for a commodified war experience in exchange for the health of his country’s economy is only one side of the novel’s desire “to tell a different story.” The novel also deploys the figure of the “war tour” as a clear critique of the Western—especially American—treatment of Vietnam as a mirror. Commenting to Maggie about Americans’ obsession with the war, Tu complains that, for tourists, “it is all about them, not really about Vietnam at all … Even among those who say they are here to learn about the country, me still seems to be their favourite word” (190). Tu’s complaint recalls Alneng’s argument that, for Western tourists, Vietnam is not a “real” place but a mirror for Western desire in which “Our gazes fail to reach beyond Ourselves” (482). When Maggie agrees that “it is all about them … It’s the business of tourism,” Tu wonders if he has “been naive in thinking his job has something to do with introducing people to Vietnam”:

[H]ow can they possibly see anything beyond stereotypes when the tourism industry gives them war tours and movie tours and romance of Indochina tours, and a hotel like the Metropole drives them about town in a ’53 Citroën, perhaps taking them to a gallery
where they can purchase a souvenir in the form of a three-thousand-dollar painting of a lady in an áo dài riding a bicycle alongside a lazy river? (190)

This passage echoes the critique that scholars have levelled against tourism as the commodification of cultural difference in the interest of Western subjects whose search for authenticity elsewhere can only mirror their own desires back to them. The Hanoi that Tứ shows to tourists is a simulacrum representing its own history as representation.

Caught in this simulacrum, Tứ finds himself being treated as an extension of American desire. One war vet, who has insisted on being taken to a temple, wants to write Tứ’s name on a prayer card: “I’d like to pray we can forgive each other” (174). For this tourist, Tứ becomes a metonym for an entire culture’s history, as well as a useful vehicle for the foreigner’s desire to overcome a troubled past. What is particularly relevant in this scene, however, is the power hierarchy generated between Tứ and the tourist via the industry of tourism: the tourist has paid for Tứ’s services, and Tứ has been taught that sensitivity is one of the most important commodities he can provide: “Tact and sensitivity in the face of the foreigner’s emotions, he reminds himself—rule #10” (175). Thus Tứ’s conclusion that “he cannot give Mr. Brentwood what he wants” (175) signals a moment when Tứ’s identity as a corporate representative of the commodification of Hanoi for foreign consumption is disrupted by his sense of himself as a specific individual beyond the global circulation of Vietnam as a sign. As Alneng points out, “When a country is a war that is a phantasm, its people get relegated from humanness to Otherness, one step from nothingness” (480). Tứ refuses this nothingness, both for himself and for his country as a whole.

In objecting to how his country, along with his own identity, is generated as a phantasmic representation via globalized art and tourism, Tứ is critiquing the frames through which Vietnam
has become knowable to a predominantly white, Western audience. Tư’s ongoing concern about what foreigners see when they look at Vietnam suggests how the commodification of culture frames it in ways that render it consumable. “Tourism,” Alneng argues, “does not begin with the act of touring, but with the construction of a world picture that renders the world ‘tourable’” (485). Similarly, “war does not begin with the act of killing, but with the construction of a peacetime world picture through which some people(s) are demarcated as ‘killable’” (486).

Butler extends Alneng’s argument, suggesting that a similar logic applies to subjectivity itself. Life, she argues, is produced through “the operations of power,” particularly “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable)” (1). The normative modes of viewing difference that allow for others to be perceived as “injurable” or “killable,” as other enough to not constitute grievable lives, cannot be separated from the touristic deployment of frames through which cultural difference and cultural others are constituted as consumable.

This critique, while gently deployed through the novel’s reliance on character dialogue and Tư’s always-hesitant perspective, is nonetheless devastating as a critique of Western representations of Vietnam. Butler insists that there is no representation without framing. While these “categories, conventions, and norms” (5) are “iterable” and must “break from themselves in order to install themselves” (12), such breaking does not eliminate the framing altogether or offer some sort of unmediated access to a “material reality” (29). What the iterability of the frame suggests is simply that, as the frames break and reinstall themselves, “other possibilities for apprehension emerge” (12). Bearing in mind Butler’s emphasis on the various “implicit frames of recognizability” (36), I wonder how The Beauty of Humanity Movement’s deployment of different character perspectives to dramatize debates over representation and consumption
might operate not to do away with framing altogether, but to draw attention to the operations of
different norms within different representational regimes.

Two of these primary debates occur between Hùng and Đạo, on the subject of the politics
of representational authenticity, and Maggie and Tự, on contemporary art and censorship. The
narrative’s movement back and forth between these debates suggests that their concerns are
interwoven. The first offers the novel’s clearest defence of verisimilitude via a series of
flashbacks to the late 1950s. Đạo asks Hùng to provide him with some dialogue for a play he’s
writing about the oppression of peasants by the Party: “I just need a few lines. Something that
sounds natural. Realistic” (127). Hùng is horrified, both by Đạo’s ignorance and “to be treated
as Đạo’s token friend from the country” (128). What Đạo does not realize is that Hùng has just
returned from a visit to the village of his birth where he witnessed the devastation of the Party
first-hand. When Đạo asks him to speak of it, to “tell us what you have seen with your own
eyes,” Hùng finds he “could not speak of the horror he had just witnessed,” believing that
“words could never capture the devastation” and that “a knife through the stomach would more
effectively communicate the pain than anything one could produce with a pen” (128). If Hùng’s
reaction in this scene seems to refuse the possibility of representing extremes of human
suffering, or perhaps to confirm the critique of art that “enrages without directing the rage”
(Butler, Frames 99), that impression is undermined in two ways: the novel has in fact already
represented what Hùng deems unrepresentable (110-16), and after this dispute Đạo himself
journeys to the country in order to, as Đạo’s wife Amie says, “finally see the devastation for
himself. To be able to write of it” (140). Hearing from Amie that Đạo has made this journey,
and that the political literature emerging from it has resulted in his imprisonment, Hùng forgives
his absent friend: “Hùng suddenly felt Đạo’s presence, as if they stood side by side bearing
witness to the carnage of his village. Đạo now understood … But they had missed the opportunity for this conversation, the moment where Đạo might have said, *Now I understand with my heart*, and Hùng might have said, *Forgiven*” (140). Conversation is the venue through which the debate begins, and imagined conversation is the means through which it is resolved. That this resolution only becomes possible through a shared incident reinforces the affirmation of writing rooted in personal experience. At the same time, however, Hùng’s imagined reconciliation with his friend points toward the productive power of the imagination itself, a counter-discourse that potentially undermines the valorization of realism.

The poem that Đạo writes based on his personal experience of the countryside is presented as his masterpiece: “He had gone well beyond theory and found the stinging heart. Đạo had atoned through poetry, spanning the differences between their worlds, capturing the tragedy of the countryside so viscerally that Hùng could taste blood on his tongue” (162). This passage portrays the poet as having a special capacity to transform experience into language in a way that moves beyond the tokenism that so affronted Hùng. This kind of writing, rooted in the real act of “bearing witness,” has a unique capacity to forge connections as well as to foment political unrest. The temporary rejection of affect is hastily recovered by the deeply affective and visceral evocation of the poem as “blood on his tongue.” Were this scene read as an artist’s statement, it might suggest a validation of *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* through its grounding in lived experience—except that Gibb visited Hanoi for only two weeks, never saw the devastation wreaked by the Party on rural villages in the 1950s, and thus implicitly endorses the possibility of imagining oneself into the lives and histories of others. Most importantly, the novel frames this defense of a realism based on bearing witness within another debate between Tư and Maggie in which censorship is refuted and freedom of expression, no matter the form it takes, affirmed.
The chapters in which Hưng recalls this debate with Đạo are interwoven with the chapters in which Maggie takes Tur on a series of visits to art galleries, culminating in Tur’s decision to end his and Maggie’s business arrangement. In the first gallery they visit, the paintings “look like postcards to Tur” (99), art produced by Hanoians for touristic foreigners who want to consume only familiar representations of the exotic: “More of the same. Girls in white áo dài returning home from school. Woman in rice paddy. Sunrise over Halong Bay. Lady with lotus flower, boat on Perfume River, different lady with Lotus flower” (100). While Maggie is interested in theorizing the paintings’ “almost conspicuous avoidance of history,” Tur is simply offended at seeing his country reflected back to him through the tourist gaze: “He worries that if this is all foreigners see, lazy rivers and poor people ploughing fields by hand, they will think Vietnam a backward country,” and he correctly identifies that “these are not for a Vietnamese home” (Maggie tells him: “Ninety-eight per cent of the contemporary art produced here leaves the country”) (100). He is also deeply suspicious of the economics of this industry, the commodification of Vietnam by Vietnamese artists for the sake of foreigners at prices that no Vietnamese person could ever afford (101). The conjunction in this passage of tourism, the global circulation of artistic representations of Vietnam, and suspicion of networks of commodification and consumption is typical of the novel’s self-reflexive deployment of intertexts that foreground the representational problems of the novel itself.

The second gallery is not so much offensive as it is off-puttingly capitalistic. The artist has set up a studio in which young apprentices complete his cookie-cutter paintings; he aggressively displays a catalogue of paintings available for sale—“Shipping to the U.S. only $150” (120)—and proudly points out a painting in the “Bill Clinton style” (121). The overt capitalism of this studio’s atmosphere embarrasses Tur: the artist is “[n]o better than a beggar
harassing a tourist in the street” (121). This world of paintings produced explicitly to pander to foreign tastes, circulated shamelessly under the sign of the commodity, offends Tự because he expects art to have a more authentic relation to culture. Whereas authenticity is frequently associated, by tourism scholars, with the tourist’s fetishization of the foreign site, here that dynamic is reversed, such that Tự perceives the art as simulacrum where it should have a more essential relationship to his culture as he understands it. What that relation ought to be is seemingly answered in the subsequent chapter, when Hùng rejects Đạo’s inauthentic representation of the countryside and insists that Đạo needs to see the devastation for himself. Through linking the defense of authenticity to Tự’s rather than a tourist’s perspective, and validating authenticity through Hùng’s support of verisimilitude, the novel seems to confirm the possibility of representation based in an authentic experience and understanding of culture.

Such a reading is almost confirmed by the subsequent chapter, “Shit on a Canvas,” in which Maggie and Tự visit an artist whose art Tự describes as “‘Disgusting and useless’” (148): “A series of paintings hang on the wall, all repulsive nudes with inflamed mouths and genitalia, one of them delivering a pig out of his anus. There are serpentine men poking each other with their penises through what looks to be an American flag” (146-47). The artist, Mindanao, prides himself on the fact that “the Party regularly closes down his shows”: “‘I refuse to produce this benign nationalistic art the Party still encourages … All those soft pictures of girls in áo đàí, rice paddies, water buffalo and the like. It’s just crap’” (147). Despite the fact that Mindanao gives voice to Tự’s own critique of touristic representations of Vietnam, this graphic political art does not seem any better to Tự: “Nationalistic art or pornography—are these really the only two artistic choices? One portrays the country as backward; the other portrays the country as perverted” (148). These poles of representation constitute two foreign fantasies of Vietnam: as an
idealized exotic space of cultural authenticity that lies outside the corrosive influence of modernity, or as a site of complete sexual amorality where the darkest desires can be satisfied. What Từ sees, and objects to, is his country being reflected back at him from a foreign perspective, for the consumption of foreigners. Normally an advocate of Americanization and the free market, Từ finds himself rejecting the U.S. as “a world without morals and dignity,” a world of “indecency” by which he feels tainted via his association with Maggie and the tourism industry (149). Vietnam has been reduced to another American commodity, like hamburgers and Nike sneakers, suitable for mass and thoughtless consumption, and where Từ normally believes that the best thing tourists can do to compensate for America’s historic atrocities against Vietnam is to “[s]pend [their] money” indulging in the manufactured simulacrum of Vietnamese history offered on war tours (173), the art that Maggie shows him shakes this faith in the good of the market. It seems there are some things, for Từ, that should not be consumed.

The boundaries of what should and should not be absorbed into the logic of the market are shifting and contentious, however. Từ can certainly be interpreted as complicit with the commodification of Vietnam’s past via his encouragement of war tourism, though always in the interest of the country’s present and future economic development. If Americans want to consume phantasms of Vietnamese history—their memories of the war or fantasies of an ahistorical Orient—Từ speaks for a generation that yearns to leave this past behind: “If the Vietnamese … didn’t get over the war … where would they be today? In the South they’d be speaking Khmer; in the North they’d be speaking Mandarin” (190). The ability to hold onto something unique that Từ identifies as Vietnamese culture is contingent on a refusal to fetishize history: “Why don’t any of those contemporary artists paint this?” he wonders, observing “Kilometres of construction. Apartment blocks rising from rice paddies. Buildings emerging
from swamps” (191). Because Tú seemingly rejects history for the sake of a lived present, he is more comfortable with the commodification of a history that he wants his culture to move beyond than he is with the representation of that culture as located in the past.

The conversations between Tú and Maggie only complicate Tú’s already shifting and equivocal perspective—particularly because Maggie reminds Tú not only of the consumers to whom these representations circulate but also of the cultural context out of which they emerge. When Tú asks Maggie if she thinks that tourists “‘want to see the real Vietnam,’” she gives an ambivalent response: “‘But what’s the real Vietnam, Tú? This is a country that erases its own history’” (190). That erasure of history, like censorship, stems from the Party’s attempt to rewrite the past of Vietnam, deleting those episodes that give it an unsavoury flavour, a practice conspicuously similar to the post-card art’s “‘timeless and romantic fantasy of Vietnam. No unpleasantness. No war’” (165). Viewing this art from the outsider’s perspective, Maggie sees it as a reflection of a culture shaped by censorship and political oppression. The sanitized image of Vietnam reflected in the touristic art Tú rejects is not only what tourists want to consume, but also what the Party wants to produce—and thus what many Vietnamese artists must become complicit with if they are to making a living. Recognizing the link between government censorship and the production of commodified images of Vietnam, Maggie counters Tú’s objection to the art he has seen: “‘It’s an issue of freedom of expression … The artists and writers who used to frequent Old Man Hùng’s restaurant? They were shut down because the Party didn’t like what they had to say. You can’t really defend them without extending the right to someone like Mindanao, whatever you might think of his work’” (166). As a liminally positioned figure, Maggie frequently functions as a mediator between seemingly opposed perspectives. She tries to convince Tú to recognize freedom of expression as a cultural good and
self-interest as a potentially positive force: “it can be used to improve the lives of others—that’s true in the best cases of capitalism” (251). If it seems at some moments that Tư is convinced by Maggie’s arguments, at others he remains firmly opposed to the commodification of what in his mind should be inalienable. When he learns that the elderly coffeeshop-owner Mr. Võ has sold his collection of Vietnamese art to a group of Vietnamese-American businessmen, Tư interprets this as a betrayal: “doesn’t he realize he has just given their history away? What if it all ends up in foreign hands, lost to Vietnam forever?” (208). The resolution of this crisis, to which I will return, only further complicates the novel’s engagement with the commodification of history. The oscillating spectrum of what constitutes a commodity, an inalienable cultural good, or a community-building gift, is key to the novel’s complication of the problem of consumption.

**Gifts, Goods, Commodities, and Phở**

Glen Willmott, drawing on Lewis Hyde’s well-known thesis that “modern arts are involved in both gift and commodity economies,” argues for a reconfiguration of the relation between gifts and commodities by refuting Hyde’s binary, in which “the gift is irrational, libidinal, and unrestrained, while the commodity is calculated, reasoned, and controlled” (229-30). Willmott avoids either the romanticization of “non-capitalistic heritages” (14) or the simplistic vilification of capitalism, instead arguing that contemporary “Market” economies, through which alienable commodities circulate, always contain “genuine and ineradicable traces” of “House” economies (21), in which the exchange of gifts is a primary means of building and sustaining community (22). Willmott cites anthropologist Chris Gregory in order to differentiate among commodities, gifts, and goods: “If *commodities* are those values that arise as things pass from House to Market, then *gifts* are those values that pass between Houses and *goods* the inalienable keepsakes that are
stored within a single House” (qtd. 16). Objects in *The Beauty of Humanity Movement*, including poems and paintings, oscillate between good, gift, and commodity, as evinced both by debates over what should and should not be alienable and by the narrative’s reliance on the movement of the objects themselves.

The object that best encapsulates the novel’s ambivalent treatment of consumption and the oscillation of commodities, gifts, and goods is Old Man Hùng’s phở, which opens, closes, and anchors the narrative. Phở functions as cultural good, remaining inalienably associated with a traditional and valued notion of Vietnamese culture; community-forming gift, generating bonds between otherwise alienated subjects; and explicit commodity, serving as Hùng’s means of earning a living and forcing him into interaction with Hanoi’s new market economy. The novel’s opening scene encapsulates this convergence of the soup’s meanings. The circulation of his phở as a commodity is emphasized from the opening sentences: “Old Man Hùng makes the best phở in the city and has done so for decades. Where he once had a shop, though, he no longer does, because the rents are exorbitant, both the hard rents and the soft—the bribes a proprietor must pay to the police in this new era of freedom” (1). Immediately the phở becomes a commodity being literally wheeled through the landscape of globalized Hanoi, through its factory grounds and construction sites, both evading and operating within the new market economy. Threading through this corrupt free market, however, is a community united explicitly by the phở itself, his “loyal” and “dependent” customers who know how to find him every day through word of mouth: “When he is forced to move on, word will travel from the herb seller, or the noodle maker, or the man delivering newspapers, to the shopkeepers along Hàng Bông Road who make sure to pass the information on to his customers” (1-2). But the phở itself is also figured as a cultural good, primarily through an emphasis on tradition, permanence, and nostalgia: “Hùng
sees himself as a guardian of purity, eschewing bean sprouts and excessive green garnish in accordance with northern tradition. They may well have opened their doors to the world, but that does not mean they must pollute their bowls” (5). The contrast between purity and pollution in this description clearly links the soup to a concept of culture that remains steadfast in the face of the influx of globalization, a concept of culture as “enclosed difference” (Marcus, “Uses” 117) that is proposed and undermined at the same time, particularly through a brief didactic passage on the provenance of “phở bạc—the phở of Hanoi”: “The history of Vietnam lies in this bowl, for it is in Hanoi, the Vietnamese heart, that phở was born, a combination of the rice noodles that predominated after a thousand years of Chinese occupation and the taste for beef the Vietnamese acquired under the French” (4). This symbol of cultural purity is also a symbol of cultural hybridity, for culture can be global and local, traditional and colonial, just as phở itself can be good, gift, and commodity.

Through these various associations, phở functions as a connection between the three protagonists and their disparate histories and desires. First, as a good, phở becomes the link through which Maggie is able to reclaim her own Vietnamese heritage by discovering her father’s place in the radical artist communities of the 1950s. When Hưng first recalls that he did meet Maggie’s father, it is in the midst of contemplating the duties that remain before his life is finished:

But there are things Hưng must impart before he allows the spirits to take him on that journey. At a minimum he has a recipe to pass on. “The taste of home” is how an artist had once, long ago, described his phở.

My God, thinks Hưng. That someone. His hungry eyes hovering above a bowl. The man had been travelling; he had come by ship from America and his legs were still
wobbly. He was carrying his belongings in a sack and he said he hadn’t had a bowl of phở in years. (40)

In this single passage phở becomes the heritage that he will pass on through his adopted family line; a symbol of home, suggesting at once the comfort of the domestic sphere and the familiarity of one’s own nation to a returning traveller; and a prompt for the memory that will return to Maggie the identity of her father and thus her own place in the history of Hanoi. While Hùng temporarily remembers Maggie’s father’s identity, an ill-timed fall in the street chases it from his head until, toward the end of the novel, he is finally reminded of his own relationship to Maggie’s father by an old friend from whom he has been alienated for many years. Hùng’s original estrangement and consequent reunion with this woman, Lan, and therefore his ability to recover Maggie’s father’s history, hinges upon the second function of Hùng’s phở: as a gift.

When he is forced to relocate to a shantytown, almost five decades before the present-day of the novel, Hùng uses his “cook’s imagination” (32) to make sure the people are fed, a gift of food that is returned: “People thanked him for the feast with small gifts the next day” and in turn “he felt moved to thank his new friends and neighbours for their gifts” by “repeat[ing] the feast the following month” (33). The gifts that Hùng is given in exchange for his cooking literally become his home: “a piece of rusted tin, a single palm frond, a stalk of bamboo, an old newspaper, a broken pane of glass—one by one the pieces to build his shack came together” (33). More importantly for Hùng, however, the exchange of gifts is what forges and then cements his emerging household with Lan, the beautiful young girl with whom he is falling in love. She is his primary motivation to continue the feasts, and it is her thinness that makes him realize that “[h]e needed to find his way back to making phở” (70). Hùng wanders the streets bartering his phở with the “few entrepreneurial souls like himself [who] had something to sell”
(71), and returns to “share these things with the girl. Present them as small gifts” (72). Lan, in turn, “tried to reciprocate where she could” (72). This exchange of gifts between the two of them—sustained on the one hand through the cultural good of phở and on the other through phở’s circulation in what remains of a market economy—becomes the foundation of their romantic entanglement. Conversely, it is through the inappropriate transformation of a good-made-gift into a commodity that this relationship is, at least temporarily, severed.

Hưng begins to share Đạo’s poems with Lan. In Hưng’s friendship with Đạo, forged in the years when Hưng ran his own phở shop, the exchange of both phở and literature was described in terms of an exchange of gifts and a satisfaction of appetites:

One morning, Đạo handed Hưng a package. “I brought you these,” he said. “I noticed you have quite an appetite for reading.”

“You are too kind,” said Hưng, all but silenced by the gesture. He had never been the recipient of a gift in his life. (50)

Đạo even compares Hưng’s phở to his own poetry, both representing “‘[t]he balance of yin and yang’” (49). Later, when Đạo gifts Hưng with a copy of *Fine Works of Spring*, a publication put together by Đạo and the other political artists, Hưng is “humbled by the honour, but with honour comes responsibility” (67). The giving of the gift incorporates him into a community with Đạo, one that persists after Đạo’s death and that Hưng honours through the careful protection of the poems and their painstaking memorization. Later, when he seeks to bind Lan to himself as he was bound to Đạo, he does so through the sharing of Đạo’s poems.

The description of this poem-sharing is both erotic and suffused with the language of the appetites. Lan “took it all in and appeared to want more” (68). She demonstrates a fine “sensory appreciation” for the poems: “when she heard a lemon described she could taste a lemon” (68).
He is driven to try making phở again when he realizes he has been “feeding her only poetry” (70), but she maintains her “insatiable appetite” for the poetry, “begging him for more” (161), pushing him to read poems he hadn’t dared read before, including Đạo’s account of the devastation of the countryside that causes Hùng to “taste blood on his tongue” (162). When he asks Lan if his mouth is bleeding she replies, “‘There is no blood. But, Hùng, … I can taste it too’” (162). Đạo and Lan’s sharing of the poems models a form of exchange and consumption that is neither alienating nor objectifying, but that cements bonds between subjects and implicates them in one another’s lives through the shared act of reading-as-consumption. What Lan does with the poems, then, is a complete betrayal: of the household they have formed together, of Hùng’s responsibility to Đạo’s memory, of the concept of a gift economy itself. She sells them to the “man who sells firewood” (240) and in exchange buys “sky-blue silk embroidered with gold thread” to make herself an áo dài (239). When Hùng realizes that Lan has “taken the words of these men, taken all that was left of them and sold them to a stranger… And then clothed herself in silk” (240) he rejects her completely, and proceeds to ignore her for over forty years. Her attempt to undo the damage of commodification by reincorporating the wrongfully acquired silk back into her and Hùng’s gift economy is a failure; she makes the silk into “four plump, sky-blue silk pillows stuffed with duck down” but Hùng “could not even acknowledge the pillows, leaving them to weather on his threshold, bleached by the sun, drenched by the rain until they were mildewed beyond recovery” (240). The description of these objects that have failed to find their place within any meaningful economy is important. Tainted by the corruption of the market, they cannot become gifts; they are left on the threshold of the house economy until they are destroyed, objects that belong to no symbolic system at all.
But the enormity of Lan’s betrayal should by no means be interpreted as a rejection of the market *tout court*. Rather, what she did—or at least, what Hùng perceived her to do—was reverse the proper relation between the different economies. The market, like self-interest, has its own benefits; as Maggie points out, “It can lift a whole country out of the mud,” as with the free market in Vietnam (251). Hùng’s commitment to continue selling his phở is just as much a matter of making a livelihood as it is of generating a community and sustaining a cultural tradition. The tourist industry is acceptable as long as it is invigorating the economy that will keep Vietnamese culture alive. Potentially offensive images of Vietnam must be allowed to circulate because freedom of expression is a more important cultural good, fought for by great men like Đạo, than is the global dissemination of a particular image of the country. The conjunction of good, gift, and commodity, as well as the story lines involving Maggie’s search for her father, Tư’s grappling with his relation to the market, and Hùng’s determination to continue selling phở despite his increasing physical infirmity, coalesce in the complex conclusion of the novel.

In short: Maggie has discovered that Mr. Võ is selling his entire collection of Vietnamese art to a group of Vietnamese American businessmen, a collection that includes the only extant drawings by her father. At the same time, Hùng has fallen and seriously injured his leg, rendering him incapable of pushing his phở cart around the city and thus of making his living. Binh and Tư conspire both to raise the money to open Hùng his own phở shop and to reclaim Maggie’s father’s paintings by selling a Bùi Xuân Phái drawing that has been in the family for three generations, a household good that has been “guarded and protected” by the family (277). The narrative emphatically frames this drawing as a good, particularly by emphasizing how it has accrued value through its failure to circulate. Seeing it for the first time, Maggie “uses words
like *provenance* and *pedigree*. She talks about the purity of the drawing’s lineage, having had only one owner all these years, and the fact that it was passed from Phái himself to Tur’s grandfather Đạo, directly from one artist to another. She praises its condition as pristine and unadulterated. Pure” (277-78). The plan works perfectly. Maggie is reunited with her father’s drawings, and they raise $10,000 to open Hùng’s shop. When they present the money to Hùng they refuse to frame it in terms of a market transaction: “‘It doesn’t matter where [the money] comes from,’ Bình says. ‘It matters that it comes as a gift. It matters that you accept it as a gift’” (284). The drawing, once a gift between two artists, then a household good, then a commodity, has become a gift again, a gift that unites a family through the very act of opening an explicitly modern phở shop that links the past and present, serving Hùng’s unadulterated recipe while storing produce in a fridge “gleaming [with] newness” (293). Imagining the moment when she will present Hùng with “her father’s framed picture” at “the grand opening of his new shop,” Maggie offers a phrase that summarizes the novel’s attempts to negotiate between past and present, old and new, gift and commodity, memory and forgetting: “The past will be revealed and given a place to hang in the present” (292).

The complex interweaving of house and market economies challenges any simple celebrations or vilifications of art, tourism, literature, and other representations of cultural difference. *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* consistently resists declarations of guilt or innocence, preferring to emphasize the complexities of alternative modernities and to explore the inevitability of complicity, in this case complicity with the market’s desire to commodify everything. By refusing an approach that would cast aspersions on the consumption of cultural difference, Gibb both foregrounds the representational problematic of her own novel as a work of tourist-fiction, and offers the novel, and its tourist-readers, a potential way out of this
representational bind. If *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* risks offering up a particularly consumable version of Vietnamese culture, it does so by way of undermining the simplistic devaluation of consumption. Eating can be the keystone of deeply felt community, just as tourism can be the starting point of an intimate and affective relationship to a foreign place. The reading of a tourist-novel can perhaps generate its own kind of ethical relationship to cultural difference.

**Tourism and the Middlebrow**

The rejection of tourism as an inauthentic and commodifying relation to cultural difference is not unrelated to the dismissal of literature that circulates as “book-club friendly,” and both of these rejections are fraught in their own right. Consumption, for some critics, is associated with an interest in “that which is different, but assimilable”—or digestible (Ahmed, *Strange* 117). And to digest something, as Ahmed implies, is to both violate it and fix it as the essence of difference. There seems to be no room here for an ethical kind of consumption, a critical stance that leads logically toward the rejection of both tourism and middlebrow reading practices as the consumption of that which should not be consumed. As my readings of *Burmese Lessons* and *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* demonstrate, however, both books attempt to relocate consumption as a potential starting point for relationships that cross cultural borders. As such they are both complicit with the redemption of commodification as an opportunity for Western subjects to gain greater access to the foreign as a site of authenticity, and poised to highlight complicity’s other dimension as the generation of affective relations that can challenge the framing of distant others as ungrievable or killable. In doing so they highlight Klein’s definition of the middlebrow as a representational mode that, in its fascination with the foreign, values not
coercion but exchange: “intellectual exchanges of conversation, economic exchanges of shopping, emotional exchanges of love, physical exchanges of tourism and immigration” (13). These hybrid and variable forms of exchange, operating on the level of emotions and commodities, bodies and knowledges, produce a relational model of subjectivity less concerned with accruing cultural capital than with forging transnational affiliations.

Tourism and middlebrow literature have in common a particular perceived relation between commodification and an implicitly valued good—culture on the one hand, literature on the other—and both have historically been produced as others to a more culturally prestigious mode of relating to those goods. Denise Adele Heaps, in her study of Canadian women’s travel writing, argues that the dichotomy between travel and tourism—put forward by critics who have declared “real” travel (read: rooted in romanticized notions of the foreign and authenticity) to be dead, replaced by “the gauche proletarian moment of tourism”—is classist, sexist, racist, and imperialist, idealizing a particular moment of privileged upper-class masculine white mobility and the narratives it produced (7). While globalization and the rapid rise of tourism as a global industry have of course changed the nature of travel, she strongly resists the implicit link of democratization (and feminization) with degradation. At the same time, however, Heaps insists that “real” travel and “real” cultural difference still exist under a “thin veneer” of “superficial Americanization,” revealing a pervasive desire to link travel with some form of authentic difference (10). Similarly, Beth Driscoll points out that the denigration of middlebrow reading in terms of its “adulteration and dissemination of elite culture” is related to “contempt for women’s reading” (110-11). Both tourism and middlebrow, then, are terms that cast aspersion upon the feminization and commodification of particular cultural practices; they are also terms complicated by a desire to encounter difference and by a relation toward culture that persists in
locating authenticity within particular objects or places, a relation of consumption. This leaves a critic of middlebrow representations of foreign places in an awkward position, because to criticize the politics of making the foreign accessible, or consumable, drifts easily into a critique of particular (gendered) reading practices that reinforces problematic hierarchies of taste and the cultural capital that accrues in consuming the right things in the right ways.

The Beauty of Humanity Movement, however, implicitly refuses the devaluation of consumption as a politically and ethically invalid relation to the foreign and representations of it. Highly political literature, like Đạo’s poetry, is afforded the sensuous appeal of food. At other moments, eating is positioned as an act of resistance, whether it is the image of Hùng’s customers gathering in an empty swimming pool to buy his phở or of Đạo himself fantasizing about eating the ticket he has been written “for operating a business without a licence”: “Hùng is tempted to screw the yellow paper up into a ball and swallow it. To delight in shitting it out the other end” (250). To consume, in this novel, is sensual, visceral, embodied, kinetic, transformative, and often messy—whether the thing being consumed is a culture, a pamphlet of radical poetry, or a bowl of soup. Deeply complicit though it might be with “the progressive commodification of ‘everything’” (Goss 328), consumption offers the potential for a level of engagement beyond the simply appropriative or exploitative. What makes The Beauty of Humanity Movement an interesting novel is how it challenges readers to rethink consumption beyond the pejorative and into its ethical possibilities. Compared to Burmese Lessons, it presents a less decisive critique of consumption because of the different ways that the books’ genres and focalizing narrators enter these books into relations of complicity with the commodification of the foreign. Whereas The Beauty of Humanity Movement focalizes through the perspectives of Vietnamese characters who are themselves strategically complicit with the commodification of
their own culture via the tourist or art industries, thus undermining the commodification of culture as imposed by outsiders, *Burmese Lessons* presents cultural consumption as a starting point for the white protagonist who must, like the implied reader, move through her touristic relation to the foreign to realize one of greater affective and thus ethical implication.

Both books ultimately imagine the possibilities of generating new relationships through consumption, relationships in which readers are invited to participate through the consumption of the books themselves. They thus engage the question of how literature opens up possibilities for forming networks of transnational affiliation rooted in problematic practices of cultural consumption, and as such pose their own ethical conundrums of how best to bridge distance through representation. The question of what constitutes ethical behaviour, especially in the face of witnessing atrocity, runs through both books, inviting the question of whether a “book-club friendly” novel or memoir might also serve to bear witness to the suffering of others—or if instead, as the debates outlined in the introduction suggest, textual ethics are the proper field of “more sophisticated novels” (Black 70-71) and middlebrow or sentimental narratives can only tell of “the pleasures of transforming strangers into friends” (Klein 2). As my reading of Kim Echlin’s *The Disappeared* will suggest, the emphasis on relationships forged through exchange and across cultural borders does open up space for a particular kind of vicarious witnessing with its own complexities and complicities.
Chapter Four

Bearing Witness to the Other: The Disappeared

“[T]he failure to imagine out of which history as holocaust proceeds stems, precisely, from the witnesses’ failure to imagine their own implication and their own inclusion in the condemnation … The specific task of the literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in one’s own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement.”

(Felman, “Camus’” 108)

“desire as an antidote to despair”

The Disappeared is the story of Anne, a white anglophone Montrealer, and her decades-spanning love affair with a Cambodian man named Serey. Anne and Serey meet in Montreal in the 1970s, where Serey has been functionally exiled by the closing of Cambodia’s borders by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. When the borders re-open in 1979, he returns, and Anne hears nothing from him for eleven years until, catching a glimpse of someone who she thinks is him on a televised genocide memorial, she goes to Phnom Penh to find him. Their love affair is renewed in a city still reeling from the devastation of the genocide, and while their romance remains intense it is undermined by the secrets that Serey has begun to keep—both those experiences he does not believe he can share with Anne and the political involvements that he fears might endanger her. The novel constitutes not only Anne’s account of her loss, but also an extended address to the missing lover himself. Writing in the second person, Anne speaks her loss to the very object of that loss. She speaks him back into existence, using her agency as a writer to counteract the devastating impact of his death and her inability to claim his body for a proper burial.
With its focus on the political forces that determine which subjects are and are not grievable, *The Disappeared* is a distinctly Antigonian narrative. Along with an echoing faith in the work of justice-seeking tribunals, which are implicitly paralleled with the work of excavating mass graves through the metaphor of digging up the past as a means of healing the present, this Antigonian strain provides the structural logic for the novel’s various implicit claims. The imperative for Anne to tell her story or be destroyed, and the standing in of her personal trauma for the complexity of a whole political event, come together via the implied universality of the human claim to bury one’s beloved dead: “We see women standing on the edges of graves. We hear the dignified plea, Can no one find me even a bone to bury?” (220). Anne’s story has, in fact, been read as a fictionalized replacement for a tribunal. Frank Moher begins his *National Post* review with a description of the long-awaited UN-assisted genocide tribunals, their delays and corruption and failure to provide the “satisfaction” that “the world” implicitly deserves, tying the novel to this historical moment and to the failure of a tribunal to respond to traumatized world citizens (n. pag.). The novel is a vehicle of justice for Moher, in which Anne as desiring subject embodies a force working against despair, a force “[w]e may need” if we are failed by the forces of international justice or, in Moher’s words, “karma.” Thus *The Disappeared* is for “us,” “the world,” and is meant to provide “us” with emotional catharsis in the face of political and ethical failure. The suffering represented in the novel is not really about the Cambodian people or about Anne; it is about the reader, traumatized by the failure of corrupt world

41 In a recent interview Echlin confirmed the centrality of *Antigone* to the novel, particularly during the confrontation between Anne and Ma Rith, a Khmer official: “They discuss the responsibility of the individual to personal conscience, to the burying of their loved ones, to the conflict between individual conscience and the stability of the state. Anne is willing to take that Antigone argument to its final conclusion because she believes in her ultimate responsibility to her individual story and to Serey, not to the stability of the Khmer state” (“‘We are’” 146).
governments to maintain the ethical standards that “we” hold dear. In Razack’s words about the Rwandan genocide, we “are supposed to feel the horror of a moment in history when a genocide unfolded and the West did nothing to stop it. We are supposed to never forget, and to never let it happen again” (“Stealing” 375).

_The Disappeared_ is thus more about the relationship between Western witnesses and the suffering of distant others. It explores the possibilities of radical transnational kinships, the possibilities and limitations of generating affect from afar, and what frames determined the grievability or ungrievability of strangers. Operating in the mode of a sentimental love story, the novel privileges the relationships formed across divides, whether through Anne’s insistence that she is Serey’s wife (despite her lack of legal status), or her friend Will Maracle, a Mohawk Forensic specialist who has dedicated himself to exhuming mass graves in order to reclaim the grievability of those whose very existence was denied by the Khmer Rouge regime. Through Anne, readers are invited to participate in radical border-crossing kinships and encouraged to ask why, unlike Anne, they do not react to the site of a televised genocide memorial with real relationship-forming action. It is thus through the figure of the white woman that Cambodian suffering can be articulated and perhaps re-framed, a representational situation that suggests that narratives of witness might depend upon their complicity with the political production of disparate grievability even as they seek to challenge it.

**Reading and/as Vicarious Witnessing**

In the midst of the novel, after Anne has arrived in Phnom Penh but before she has located Serey, there is a short chapter that seems to be addressed directly to the implied reader. While the entire novel is written in the second person as an address from Anne to Serey, in this particular section
the instability of the second person—its capacity to address at once the lover and the reader—is
exploited to render the text a clear call for empathetic identification. “Imagine a street,” it begins;
“imagine waking up one morning and teenaged voices outside shouting, Comrades, it is Year
Zero” (69). Anne continues:

   Imagine going out into the streets and watching a man ask why he must leave his home
   and a teenager lifting his gun and shooting him.

   Think of the old mother who cannot walk. … Think of people trying to push hospital
   beds along the road. (69)

This passage constitutes not a request but an imperative to vicariously bear witness to Year Zero,
directed toward Anne, Serey, and the implied readers—an imperative that also demands an
ethical response to the Cambodian genocide rooted in the imaginative act.

   It is unclear, however, if imagination can transform into a call for action. The chapter
   ends with a series of questions: “How did this happen? People fell asleep and when they woke up
   nothing was the same. Would a person risk helping a neighbor if a nervous, shouting teenager
   were pointing a gun?” (70). The desire to understand and the question of the extent of our ethical
   responsibility to one another come together to imply that engaging with this traumatic past, no
   matter how distantly, is itself an ethical act akin to helping one’s neighbor. In this chapter, then,
it seems that reading itself, with its emphasis on empathy and imagination, constitutes its own
response to the imperative of witnessing. At the same time, however, the novel emphasizes the
necessity of *telling* in a way that challenges witnessing alone as an adequate response to the
suffering of others. The tension between witnessing and telling is only one of the ambivalences
that run through the novel as it negotiates “[t]he specific task of the literary testimony” (Felman,
“Camus’” 108).
In Chapter 3 I argued that Gibb’s *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* resists the sentimental power that accrues through “the experience of witnessing figures in pain” (Black 79) by refusing to represent actual moments of violence. In so doing, Gibb demonstrates a clear stance on the potential of scenes of violence to “immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity” and “reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering” (Hartman 3). *The Disappeared*, on the other hand, articulates a notion of transnational ethical responsibility premised on the vicarious witnessing of the violent history in which the story is located. Through the deliberate deployment of violence as a means to hail readers as witnesses, the novel questions the ethics of representing the racialized body in pain. As Saidiya V. Hartman points out in her discussion of the deployment of violence in slave narratives, issues of “the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4) arise whenever the subjection of subalterns is put to use politically, even as a call to end the violence being depicted.

This potential slippage between witness and spectator is mirrored in the authorizing narratives that circulate around *The Disappeared*, which are repetitive enough to suggest anxiety that the novel might be misinterpreted. Whereas, in the case of Gibb’s “ethiopian photo album,” a good number of readers would be unaware of that text and its influence upon potential readings of *Sweetness in the Belly*, the narrative of witness upon which the positioning of *The Disappeared* as a novel of witness relies is unavoidable. In addition to appearing as a video on the publisher’s website (see Chapter 1), it dominates the *Penguin Readers Guide* and appears three times in the novel itself: as dedication, narrative event, and acknowledgement. In the author interview included in the guide, Echlin describes the pivotal encounter as follows: “I met a woman in a market who told me the story of losing her entire family, and when I responded, ‘Can I help? What can I do?,’ she answered, ‘Nothing. I just want you to know.’ Vann Nath said
‘Tell others,’ and my experience in Cambodia was that many people wanted the truth to be told” (Penguin 240). The dedication, “For the woman in the market” (n. pag.), situates her novel as a direct response to this moment of being witnessed to; in exchange for that story, she dedicates the novel to the unnamed woman. And that woman, who as a figure frames the circulation of the novel, also frames the text as both opening dedication and the final lines of the acknowledgements: “And thank you to a woman whose name I never learned. In a Phnom Penh market you broke silence and asked me to remember with you” (235). The novel is thus written with the woman, for the woman, and, as the reappearance of the same incident within the narrative itself demonstrates, about the woman.

This iteration of the same encounter indicates that simply hearing the woman’s story is not an adequate response, despite the woman’s claim that she only wants her witness “to know.” Anne pushes beyond this request, learning the woman’s name and history, and developing a relationship with her over time. She encounters the woman, Chan, not in the market but near the doorway of Serey’s childhood home, and asks her where the family has gone. After insisting that nobody in that family has come by in many years, Chan brings up her own disappeared loved ones:

She looked down the street of ghosts and said, I lost my whole family during Pol Pot.

I did not know what to say. A baby cried inside, behind the shutters. I asked, What can I do?

She answered, I only want you to know.

I will come back and see you, Yay. When I find him I will tell him I met you. (55)

The relationship that emerges between these women constitutes Anne’s response to the call to witness. For Anne, just knowing does not suffice: she does as she promises and, once reunited
with Serey, tells him that she met Chan (79). She also continues to visit the old woman as part of the “easy rhythm” of her time in Phnom Penh (86). Thus, at the narrative level, the novel intimates that bearing witness—however vicariously, as Anne does not actually see Chan’s loss—demands, as a response, not simply knowing but acting. In Anne’s case, this entails acting by forging a relationship with, rather than simply pitying, the wounded other. At the same time the novel implies that bearing witness produces as a benefit new border-crossing relationships, thus opening a gap between witness and spectator. Instrumentalizing witnessing as a means for the Western subject to imaginatively participate in relationships with distant others, on the other hand, risks collapsing that gap.

A key context for the novel’s emphasis on simply knowing as a form of bearing witness stems from past and present public ignorance about the Cambodian genocide. The novel is both paratextually and intertextually located within an explicit genealogy of literature-of-witness. One of the two epigraphs that frame the opening dedication comes from a 1993 article in *The New Internationalist* by John Pilger, Australian activist and documentary-maker, whose 1979 film *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia* was a major force in making the West aware of the genocide:

*Year Zero was the dawn of an age in which, in extremis,*

*there would be*

*no families, no sentiment, no expression of love or grief,*

*no medicines, no hospitals,*

*no schools, no books, no learning,*

*no holidays, no music:*

*only work and death.*
The article from which this quotation is drawn is an indictment of international complicity in the Cambodian genocide and the ongoing political power of the Khmer Rouge. Pilger explains that Pol Pot’s takeover, as well as the ongoing power of the Khmer Rouge in the wake of Phnom Penh’s fall to the Vietnamese army in January 1979, owes much to the U.S. and China’s support for the Khmer Rouge, who continued to occupy Cambodia’s UN seat until 1993. Cambodia became a pawn in the global struggle between the U.S. and China on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and Vietnam on the other. While an estimated one-fifth of the population of Cambodia died under the regime, the U.S. and China helped to smuggle arms to the Khmer Rouge. Pilger calls for individual governments to oppose the UN’s “new world order” agenda, which can do nothing but “impose the will of the great powers,” and for “unilateral action to end the silence” that surrounds the genocide. The use of an epigraph from this article implicitly connects the novel to a history of political consciousness-raising and active intervention. The extraction of the quotation from its original context, however, alongside its reformatting as verse rather than prose, points toward the aestheticization of politics at work throughout the novel. Isolated from its original context, the quotation becomes a lyrical evocation of the chaos of Year Zero isolated from the explicit call for political action, and accusation of complicity, that constitutes the bulk of Pilger’s article and his self-positioning as a witness.

The second epigraph, following the dedication, also refers to the aesthetic rather than political role of witnessing. It is a quotation from Cambodian artist and activist Vann Nath, a prominent figure whose A Cambodian Prison Portrait is the only memoir of a survivor of S-21 or Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge prison in Phnom Penh that is now a genocide museum (and that also features in the novel). The two-word epigraph—“Tell others”—points to the artistic imperative to communicate atrocities as widely as possible, and once again places the novel
within a genealogy of literature-as-witnessing. This epigraph is one of the more explicit examples of how the novel hails readers as witnesses. In the case of the Nath epigraph, the implied readership is situated as both the ones who must tell and the “others” being told by the author who has implicitly followed this imperative. The epigraph suggests the ambivalence of witnessing as an activity. What does it entail: simply seeing, or necessarily speaking of or on behalf of a particular crisis or trauma? Is witnessing passive spectatorship or active intervention? And what forms might such interventions take? While the imperative to “tell” demands activity, readers are also invited to witness simply by being told. By receiving knowledge, readers assuage the bad conscience created by the demand for ethical action. Reading implicitly becomes equivalent to acting, being told equivalent to telling. The production of reading as an adequate political response thus positions readers beyond implication insofar as the action demanded by witnessing is vicariously satisfied by the act of reading itself.

There is a tension, as I read it, between the force of the epigraphs and the reiterated story of the woman in the market. The story calls for an ethics of witnessing that generates a responsibility in the listener, demanding a telling or re-telling articulated as a form of ethical action. The epigraphs, however, offer the possibility of a witnessing that itself satisfies one’s ethical responsibility to the other. This tension is present in the critical literature on witnessing. My own epigraph from Shoshana Felman implies that reading as an act of imaginative and embodied implication, a belated recognition of complicity, has an inherent ethical value. Razack, on the other hand, emphasizes the potential of the white reader/viewer’s recognition of complicity to produce new memorializations of atrocities “that take us closer to outrage and to action” rather than to the complacent self-satisfactions of empathy (“Stealing” 376). Part of the “crisis of witnessing,” Brenda Carr Vellino points out, is the problem of action and
accountability, of what holds the witness accountable to the wounded other (315). She concludes that literary forms of witness, by “construct[ing] textual encounters with the other,” are able to “make claims for social justice” and thus “call the reader to response-ability in a parallel way to Levinas’s face of the other” (316). If a textual encounter can constitute a form of witness that emphasizes complicity, then Razack and Vellino both argue that this complicity can only be satisfied by a turn to social justice that lies beyond the textual encounter itself. Similarly, while Butler’s recent work emphasizes the politics and ethics of particular modes of viewing and interpretation (as I will expand below), she holds out a degree of hope for the possible transformation of viewing into political action (Frames 99-100). The question is whether a shift in perspective engendered by a particular reading experience can constitute a form of ethical action—or, at the very least, ethical transformation.

Such a question might be addressed through attention to how reading is situated within the novel itself. The parallels between writing and telling on the one hand and reading and being told on the other imply that, if Anne is bearing witness to Serey’s life through writing, then the reader is made a witness to that witnessing through the act of reading. Writing becomes a way both to unburden her own pain and to undo the violence that has been enacted on Serey through his disappearance. Anne writes that “Despair is an unwitnessed life” (218), and later claims she has “lived in intimacy with the violence of the untold life” (224). The “life” that is associated with both despair and violence—and that demands witnessing, or telling, as an antidote to those forces of destruction—signifies in multiple ways. It is the life of Serey, who the Cambodian government attempted to erase in the interest of state security. It is the life of all Cambodians

42 Vellino’s use of the term “response-ability” is drawn from Felman’s work, and suggests an extension of the Levinasian definition of ethics as responsibility to the other into a demand for action, or a response beyond the recognition of the face-to-face.
who were similarly erased. But it is also the life of Anne herself, in the form of a past that she
must paradoxically unearth in order to put her losses to rest. Reading is invoked as the
witnessing that might rid this life of despair, and as a response to the violence of erasure.

Contrasted to the despair and violence of a life unwitnessed is Anne’s obsession with
witnessing in the sense of seeing with her own eyes, and the intrinsic connection of seeing and
telling as two sides of the imperative to bear witness. When she is still a young woman living in
Montreal with her Cambodian lover, Anne struggles to understand the reality of the ongoing
genocide. Geographical distance, despite emotional proximity, renders her indifferent. Anne is
catched off guard by Serey’s anger when he confronts her with her indifference: “Do you think of
what is happening there?” he demands (42). Despite her insistence that she does, he challenges
her ability to understand what she has not experienced, her very capacity for empathy—and
Serey is right at this point. Anne is a teenager in love; she cares only because he does, and even
then she resents the awareness that comes with this relationship, wishing he did not make her
“see so sharply” (43). Once she has joined Serey in Phnom Penh, however, Anne becomes
obsessed with seeing what he has seen. When she asks him to take her to Choeung Ek, the killing
fields, she defends this desire in terms of the desire to witness—“I want to see for myself. … I
want to know what you know”—but Serey rejects this claim: “No need to see. You already
know” (87). Serey’s repeated insistence that there is no “use” in Anne’s visiting the major sites
and memorials of the genocide recalls Razack’s discussion of “useless knowledge” and her
critique of the pleasures the white subject experiences looking at the suffering of racialized
bodies (“Stealing” 389). Because of the racial logic and white privilege at work in the pleasures
of looking, Razack argues, it is vital “not to sentimentalize suffering, not to use other people’s
pain and suffering to say or believe something about ourselves, not, in sum, to take any pleasure
from it, especially—to use the late Susan Sontag’s phrase—‘the pleasure of flinching’” (389).

Certainly Anne recognizes that her foreignness in relation to Cambodia is part of the reason for Serey’s refusal. She worries that Serey is hiding things from her—including his work in opposition politics—because this foreignness places her “outside the wall” (120). In other moments she is invited to think critically about her own position as an outsider. Her friend Will asks her to “Imagine what it feels like to come from a place where the tourist attractions are cases of skulls,” and when she insists that these memorials are “a call for justice,” Will says “That’s foreign talk” (104), implicitly placing her in the position of the tourist ogling a case of skulls rather than a cultural insider who can understand the function of these memorials.43 Structurally, however, the novel ultimately reinforces Anne’s belief that love can overcome cultural and racial difference, that remembering and telling the truth are fundamentally ethical acts, and that bearing witness will bring her closer to Serey. Indeed, it becomes the only thing that can keep his memory from disappearing altogether.

This effect is reinforced by the narrative’s seeming faith in the transformative potential of bearing witness. In an early passage, while Anne is still searching Phnom Penh for Serey, she meets Will Maracle at the Foreign Correspondents Club and gets into a conversation about the problem of knowing. Will is involved in the opening of old graves—an activity that, throughout the novel, is deployed as a metaphor for exposing buried traumas. Anne asks him, “Once we know, what do we do?” and Will’s response is an explicit advocation for the act of witnessing: “Maybe the only hope is that our humanity might kick into a higher gear, that the more we admit

43 This exchange is a loaded one, suggesting critiques of “thanatourism” and “dark tourism” (Huggan, *Extreme* 10) as well as recent arguments about the Western logics of justice and reconciliation at work in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal which, overseen by the UN, has been critiqued as the imposition of a foreign model that conflicts with Buddhist approaches to trauma and memory (see Troeung).
to seeing, the more we will believe we are not that different from each other” (68). For Anne, witnessing is both transformative and profoundly wounding. As Butler points out, to recognize a previously unrecognized other “is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other” (Precarious 44). Anne wishes to transform into someone who can understand what Serey has experienced, someone who can see beyond the blinders of her own privilege, but that transformation has unexpected consequences. She becomes, in essence, someone who cannot stop seeing. Watching a Yike performance with a group of friends, Anne finds her spectatorship fractured by memories of witnessing: “I watched the performer standing alone singing his anguish to the sky, and these memories are threaded through with the eyes of Tuol Sleng, with images of babies torn from their mothers by soldiers, of babies tossed and shot in the air. I wondered what had become of me that I could not stop seeing such things” (142). From the desire to see comes the impossibility of not seeing, a shift in perspective that informs Anne’s increasingly Antigonian position within the novel in terms of her insistence on contesting the political production of recognizability and grievability.

Differential Grievability and the Unburied Dead

If The Disappeared is directed toward an implied reader who is supposed to bear vicarious witness to the genocide and be transformed by this act, then it depends upon the capacity of said reader to perceive the lives within the novel as worth grieving. In the wake of Serey’s disappearance, Anne searches Phnom Penh with increasing desperation and inattention to her own safety, demanding information about her lover’s whereabouts. Searching the riverbanks for his body, she comes across another young man’s corpse, bloated from the water, and her friend Will insists that she doesn’t “need to see this”: 
Why don’t I need to see, Will? I see dead bodies on the front pages of newspapers every day. Television is full of dead bodies. But I am not supposed to look at one man lying in front of me, left because the ones who love him are afraid to claim him, because they do not know where he is. Because the government leaves bodies like little notes written in red. Tell me, Will, why should I not look? (158)

Anne’s insistence on seeing extends, in this passage, into a critique of forms of visual consumption that objectify the other, that frame subjects such that they cannot really be seen. It also implicates this framing in the very violence through which the life before her has been lost. The corpse either cannot be seen at all or can be seen only when framed by media that evacuate it of its significance. To look away, Anne implies, is to consent to the forms of violence that have reduced this corpse to the unseen and the unseeable. Her insistence on rending him seeable extends into her emphasis on the figure not as one of global media’s anonymous “dead bodies” but “one man” with a history, with “ones who love him,” whose identity has been erased by the same violence that led to his death. Where Will functions as the novel’s figure of the “expert” who examines corpses with clinical remove, Anne’s affective response to the body before her insists on registering the violence of his death as exceptional rather than exemplary.44 Will’s expert status is repeatedly evoked in the novel, and treated with an ambivalence similar to Karen’s simultaneous respect for and discomfort with the experts working on the Thai-Burma border in Burmese Lessons. Will is represented as an agent for justice in Cambodia through his work “open[ing] massacre sites, releas[ing] the bones” (65), but a side effect of the expert gaze is

44 Simon Springer differentiates between exceptional and exemplary violence, arguing that exceptional violence “forces those who bear witness to its implications to recognise its malevolence precisely because of the sheer shock and horror that is unleashed,” yet precisely as an exception it “always exists in a co-constitutive relationship with exemplary violence, or that violence which forms the rule” (136-37).
an inability or refusal to recognize the corpse as a subject; Anne’s affective response, on the other hand, becomes the motivating drive behind her capacity to resist the coercive force of the state and declare Serey a grievable subject. Two primary things are at stake here: modes of apprehension (connected to modes of telling) and the differential recognizability of lives (connected to their grievability).

Modes of apprehension and recognizability come together in Butler’s recent work on precarity, grievability, and the discursive frames through which life itself is produced as an effect of power. As in *The Disappeared*, Butler uses the trope of burial to engage with the question of who can be publicly mourned through the figure of Antigone, who publicly defied the edict of her uncle and sovereign in order to bury her brother. Butler’s interest in the political production of grievability can be traced through various recent works in which she examines the “operation of political power that forecloses what forms of kinship will be intelligible” (*Antigone’s* 29). The foreclosure of certain kinships extends to the production of grievability, which is connected to buriability; Butler thus demands a reconsideration of the connection between the violence through which certain lives are declared ungrievable and the violence through which those lives were lost (*Precarious* 36). Marking a life as buriable depends on that life being grievable—and thus on it being recognizable as a life in the first place. Recognizability, she asserts, “precedes recognition” (*Frames* 5) in the sense that the very possibility of recognition as an ethical and political gesture is determined by the normative frames that produce a life as recognizable (4-5). Apprehension, defined as “a form of knowing,” “is bound up with sensing and perceiving” but is not necessarily conceptual (5); a subject might be apprehended without being recognized, but more importantly, “[w]e can apprehend … that something is not recognized by recognition” (5). Butler thus complicates an ethics of recognition that would see the subject as emerging
independently from the frames that govern recognizability. Rather, “[w]hen those frames that govern the relative and differential recognizability of lives come apart—as part of the very mechanism of their circulation—it becomes possible to apprehend something about what or who is living but has not been generally ‘recognized’ as a life” (12). Butler productively differentiates between apprehension and recognition, while emphasizing that both “interpretation” and “the communicability of affect” (67) are structured by the framing of particular images. Anne’s outrage, and her insistence on looking as a refusal of the forces that would demand she turn away, constitutes a call to interrogate the frames through which images enter “into larger circuits of communicability … precisely because the effective regulation of affect, outrage, and ethical response is at stake” (78).

Butler’s work provides a critical framework that brings together the Antigone myth, the ethics of transnational witnessing, and the discursive production of some lives as more livable, and thus grievable, than others. Alongside the tribunal-oriented logic of the social good of personal testimony, it also highlights what is perhaps The Disappeared’s most problematic feature: the fact that the grievability of Cambodian subjects is made possible explicitly through the witness narrative of a white Canadian woman. Before addressing this concern, however, I am interested in further exploring the link between recognizability and representability, or how the imperative to see becomes, in The Disappeared, intrinsically connected to the imperative to tell.

Antigone and the Imperative to Tell

The imperative to tell, evident in the epigraphs’ allusions to Vann Nath and John Pilger, becomes a structuring principle of the novel through the link formed between telling one’s story and, paradoxically, both burying and unearthing the dead. Antigonian images of bones, burial, and
disinterment reverberate throughout the novel in ways that evoke human precariousness and precarity. To throw a skull into a mass grave or let it sink anonymously to the bottom of a river constructs the life that once occupied that skull as “not grievable” and thus “not quite a life”; insofar as it is politically excluded from the category of grievable lives, “[i]t is already the unburied, if not the unburiable” (Butler, Precarious 34). Public mourning, on the other hand, constitutes the buried as a subject, a potentially politically charged act. In Anne’s intensely personal narrative, telling the story of Serey functions as both a replacement for the act of burial that he was denied and a metaphorical unearthing of her own trauma that reveals a history that many would rather keep hidden. Will uses the language of bones and burial to plead with Anne to bear witness to her own life, and to her losses: “Will said, Do you know that when an infection gets bad enough even bone starts to disintegrate. … For love’s sake, tell before there is nothing left” (223).

The link formed between the ethical imperative to “tell others,” the right to bury one’s dead, and the act of unearthing hidden or buried crimes is particularly clear in the passages set in Ang Tasom, where Anne is searching for Serey’s body in the wake of his disappearance from a

45 Butler differentiates between precarity and precariousness: while the latter is simply the condition of being alive and thus vulnerable to death, the former is defined as politically produced differential exposure to threat and violence (Frames 25). Precarity implies at once the shared condition of precariousness and the frames that obscure the radical potential of this shared condition, that make some lives perceivable as precarious and others not.

46 The refusal of the West to acknowledge “foreign” crises like the Cambodian genocide is signified by the silences that greet Anne upon her return to Montreal in the wake of Serey’s death. When she tries to tell her father what has happened to her, he says, “Rest now. You can tell me everything later,” but Anne interprets this deferral as a refusal: “What he meant was, Do not tell me more” (216). She makes it clear that she reads his response as a sign Western compassion fatigue for the suffering of the racialized other: “He was afraid of my foreignness” (216).
public rally in Phnom Penh. In these scenes, in a series of overt allusions to the Antigone story, she doggedly pursues her desire to find Serey’s body despite threats to her physical safety. Serey’s body has become, after his death, a symbolic object and a locus of dissent. For Anne, her right to bury Serey precedes and trumps state law. For the state—personified in the figure of Ma Rith, the district chief of police—Serey’s body is a symbol of instability and the animosities of the past that must be discarded. Both want Serey buried; their dispute is thus centred on the meaning of that burial and of the body itself. Ma Rith’s refusal of Anne’s right to Serey’s body operates via several discourses—state security, foreignness, and the illegitimacy of her relationship—all pointing toward the political foreclosure of acceptable forms of kinship. Ma Rith speaks in the language of power, coercive and exclusionary. “You have been in this country for only a short time,” he tells Anne. “You cannot create trouble here” (191). When she argues, demanding her right to Serey’s body, he turns bureaucracy against her: “Of course there are procedures … if it happened that someone wishes to claim disputed remains, this person would have to make a tribunal with the Ja Veï Srok in Ang Tasom. … In your case a tribunal will not be permitted because there is nothing to find” (192). The power in this exchange is purely verbal, “bullying,” as Anne puts it. The sense of order evoked explicitly pushes both Anne and Serey beyond the bounds of recognizability. She does not have the right to pursue Serey’s remains, and Serey himself is rhetorically excluded from the possibility of existence. Ma Rith repeats the phrase “there is nothing to find” twice (192-93), and the closest he comes to acknowledging Serey’s existence is in the hypothetical: “Let us say there was an accident and the one you are looking for is dead. Since there would be nothing you could do, it would be better to go back to Phnom Penh” (192). Spoken out of existence by the figure of authority, Serey is the ungrievable, one of those “lives that are not quite lives” (Butler, Frames 31).
The violence underlying Ma Rith’s authority is revealed when Anne refuses to comply with his instructions and persists in seeking out Serey’s body. After being imprisoned and denied sleep and water for several nights, she is brought back before him, “a body made vulnerable” and “available to wound” (204). In this second confrontation the violence of Ma Rith’s language is heightened. He declares her a “foreigner” (206) and denies her kinship with Serey, both through their lack of state-sanctioned marriage and through the death of her unborn child:

I said in a voice no longer strong, He is my husband. Together we conceived a child.

What child? You have no child.

He did not wish to talk about babies and marriage and grew cruel … I paused to still my shaking voice, said, I had breakbone fever and I crossed the river too soon and my baby died. It was a girl.

He said mockingly, Do you think we do not know who you are? We know everything. … You are not married. You are like any beer girl. (206-07)

Ma Rith’s cruelty, exercised via the verbal erasure of Anne’s lost child and the reshaping of her relationship as one of prostitution rather than love, undermines the position—constituted by her kinship with Serey—from which Anne articulates her resistance to state power. This scene’s impact recalls the novel’s engagement with discourses of sentimentality, in which “the violation of … affective bonds … represents the greatest trauma” (Klein 14). Physically vulnerable, denied the legitimacy of her grief alongside the very grievability of her dead, Anne is herself rendered an unrecognizable and spectral subject, her unrecognizability confirmed by her expulsion from the country.

Anne’s relation to authority is ambivalent in these scenes, recalling Butler’s argument that Antigone cannot be read as a figure of pure resistance. Antigone’s refusal to heed Creon’s
authority constitutes an “appropriation of the authoritative voice of the one she resists, an appropriation that has within it traces of a simultaneous refusal and assimilation of that very authority” \((\text{Antigone’s 11})\). As a figure that refuses the state’s power over the laws of kinship, Antigone stands outside of and challenges the reach of authority, but as one who insists on her own right to grieve her beloved, and publicly refutes any authority that would deny this right, she “appropriates the stance and idiom of the one she opposes” \((23)\). Anne similarly complicates any simple distinctions between recognizable and unrecognizable lives, between power and powerlessness. She speaks overtly and repeatedly in a discourse that claims the right to grieve her beloved dead as the primary law, regardless of the claims of the state. In her final confrontation with Ma Rith, she speaks in Antigonian proclamations: “I only want to perform rites for him, cremate him, ask the monks to say prayers for him. It is normal to bury the dead” \((205)\). “There is a law older than the laws of man,” she continues. “Divine law says: Every stranger is holy. What divine law have I broken?” \((208)\). Anne claims a sovereign authority in her insistence on a different set of laws that produce alternate parameters for recognizability. Her sovereignty is amplified by her status as a wealthy white foreigner. Seeking Serey in Phnom Penh and later Ang Tasom, she repeats the refrain: “I have money. Where is he?” \((160-61)\). Her ability to refute the state’s right to dictate who she can and cannot grieve is contingent upon this wealth and the power attached to it. Similarly, the fact that she is expelled rather than “disappeared” herself is implicitly linked to her foreignness, which is a source of both power and exclusion.

Her ability to resist Ma Rith’s authority, then, is figured as both a resistance to and an exertion of power. Anne’s most marked use of authority is her control of the narrative; she claims both her own right to speak and the right to declare Serey’s life as one worthy of grief.
She unearths his memory despite the Cambodian state’s desire to keep it buried, and gives it the mourning ritual that she needs. To do so is to risk being silenced and to claim the authority of a voice that will not be silenced. Arrested on the shore of the river where she has at last located Serey’s skull, she is derided by the soldiers: “They said to me, Woman, you are worthless. You understand nothing. You are nothing. Your desire is nothing” (202). Paradoxically, it is precisely as a vulnerable white woman occupying the “racialized space”47 of an anonymous Cambodian prison that Anne is rendered the very figure of recognizability whose grief can function as a call for the reader to witness to, and care about, an event that is seemingly beyond the limits of a Western reader’s affective “response-ability.” Through the intensity of her own affective response to Serey’s loss, then, Anne shifts the frames of grievability to foreground the loss of Cambodian lives and implicates readers in new transnational affiliations. But her ability to enact such a shift is contingent upon her own predetermined status as a recognizable and grievable subject.

Empathy and the Embodied Witness

The logic of universality and transcendence, particularly via the evocation of empathy, is crucial to the operations of The Disappeared as a novel of witness. This must be the case, if Anne’s particular loss is to stand in for the much vaster losses of the genocide itself, and if her bearing witness to her own and Serey’s life is to function as an ethical call to witness in general. Perhaps the clearest trope of universality in the novel, linked to the divine laws Anne invokes in her

47 I allude here to Najmi and Sirkanth’s White Women in Racialized Spaces, which examines literary and historical examples of white women moving through spaces characterized by “racialized Otherness” (20). While the book focuses on how these spaces become racialized through the presence of the white woman, the readings themselves demonstrate the relational dynamic of racialization—that is, how the white woman is racialized in turn.
confrontation with Ma Rith, is bones. From the beginning of the novel, the skull becomes an image of humanity reduced to its simplest, and most essential, feature. The first time Anne and Serey meet he touches her head: “I felt the warm pressure of your palm against my skull” (5). In their last moment of contact, the relationship that has been built up across the novel is pared back again to the intimacy of that touch: “On the filthy bank of the canal in the dark-eyed night I sat in the mud to cradle your skull forever” (199). The language of both intense desire and intense grief with which the skull imagery is associated evokes a form of attachment that transcends boundaries of race and culture. In love with Serey in Montreal, Anne claims that she “never felt any forbiddenness of race or language or law. Everything was animal sensation and music” (20). Imprisoned for refusing to stop seeking out Serey’s skull, she has transcended the laws of the living: “Now I belonged to the wild world of the dead” (202). Although this capacity of both love and grief to transcend difference is far from absolute—the cultural and political borders between Anne and Serey remain obstacles—transcendence constitutes the ideal against which the necessities of politics are contrasted.

The repeated use of the skull as a symbol in *The Disappeared* indicates the novel’s reliance upon sentimental modes of relating to distant others. As Klein points out, the sentimental is “a universalizing mode that imagines the possibility of transcending particularity by recognizing a common and shared humanity” (14), which is precisely how the skull signifies in the novel. If the skull can be read in terms of Western reader/witness’ desire for “emotionally rich relationships” (8) with distant others, however, it also suggests the complicity of sentimental representation with the reduction of the other to an object of pity. The skull has become, in recent years, the primary visual symbol through which the Cambodian genocide is communicated to tourists and distant viewers of news and documentaries. According to a 2003
National Geographic article, the killing fields, with their iconic displays of human skulls, have become a primary tourist attraction in Cambodia: these “grisly memories translate into income” (Istvan n. pag.). With tourism becoming an increasingly central component of the Cambodian economy, locals have learned to profit from foreigners’ fascination with the genocide by providing semi-autobiographical educational tours or begging around major memorial sites (Istvan). Bringing together the commodification of suffering, transnational witnessing, and pedagogy, the skull cannot stand in exclusively for human transcendence. By framing it in terms of transcendence, then, the novel foregrounds how reliant sentimental fantasies of universality are on the fetishization of bodies in pain, and calls into question the possibility of Anne’s story, like the skull, becoming a symbol for the genocide.

That Anne’s particular experiences, and her affective response to them, are meant to be read in part as a wider call to readerly response-ability is evident in various ways throughout the narrative. In addition to the implicating second-person address, the novel draws intertextually on the language of witness to link narrative events with transnational ethical responsibility. As Anne and her companions travel to Ang Tasom in search of Serey’s body, her mind turns to the problem of distant suffering:

Why do some people live a comfortable life and others live one that is horror-filled?
What part of ourselves do we shave off so we can keep on eating while others starve? If women, children, and old people were being murdered a hundred miles from here, would we not run to help? Why do we stop this decision of the heart when the distance is three thousand miles instead of a hundred? (172)
This passage, as the acknowledgements mention (234), draws on the work of Raphael Lemkin, the man who invented the word “genocide.” Through this evocation of Lemkin, the novel situates the Cambodian genocide in terms of a post-WWII call for an ethics that crosses national and cultural boundaries. The novel is asking why responsibility and empathy stop at national boundaries—and, because Anne’s “here” invokes the space of Canada from which she is writing, this passage once again implicates a particular readership while nesting that implication in Anne’s personal crisis.

In other moments Anne makes a concerted effort to empathetically imagine herself into the position of others whose experiences she did not share, and whose lives she cannot know. Trying to grasp the scope of the deaths in Cambodia, she translates them into the terms of her own life: “I imagined the school yard near my father’s house. I tried to imagine a thousand bodies there, or seventy thousand. I tried to imagine being left for dead in a mass grave under my father’s body, or Berthe’s” (106). Anne’s self-positioning as a witness involves not only an ethical challenge to the norms of perceptibility and grievability, but also an insertion of the self into the position of the other in order to identify with that other—most overtly, though not exclusively, Serey. This is the form of vicarious witnessing evoked in her repeated calls to “imagine,” based on the logic that it is possible to imaginatively enter into the suffering of the other. Hartman points out the problematic history of white empathy, arguing that anti-slavery discourse historically functioned by placing the white subject in the position of the suffering black body, an empathetic identification that, by “making the other’s suffering one’s own,”

48 In recent years, Lemkin has been increasingly recognized for his seminal work on the nature of genocide, written (though largely unpublished) in the 1940s in the wake of the Holocaust. Stephen L. Jacobs points out that, “[g]iven the genocidal tragedies of Bosnia (1992-1995), Rwanda (1994), [and] Darfur (2003-present) … Lemkin and his writings have become somewhat au courant” and central to the “emerging field of genocide studies” (n. pag.).
ultimately elides that suffering through “the other’s obliteration” (19). Anne’s recurrent attempts to imagine herself into Serey’s experiences, alongside her call for the reader to participate in a similar kind of border-crossing empathy, invokes a racialized form of empathy that imagines the other’s pain at the cost of the other’s agency.

This belief in empathy as an affective means of crossing borders continues to circulate as a primary justification for the value of literature. Addressing the capacity of realist novels to transport readers convincingly into alternative worlds, Martha Nussbaum argues that empathy is central to the ethical function of literature, addressing an “implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters” (7). Her emphasis on the capacity of fiction to let readers learn, identify, and empathize across cultural difference elides a whole lineage of colonial knowledge production, in which the capacity to know and understand belongs implicitly to the white, Western subject. Nussbaum’s claims about the pedagogical and ethical function of realist fiction thus risk erasing difference and reinstalling the hegemony of the Western subject. Drawing on colonial histories of knowledge production, Doris Sommer interrogates the ethics of imaginative border crossing: “Well-meaning readers who hope to overcome limits through empathy and learning aren’t harmless when they violate difference” (205).

Certainly a pedagogy rooted in the importance of empathetic imagination is central to how The Disappeared is both written and framed. The discussion section of the Penguin Reading Guide, for example, overtly brings together the affective and the pedagogical: “How were you affected by reading about the genocide in Cambodia? Did you already know about Pol Pot and
the Khmer Rouge, or did the story help to educate you about what happened there?” (247). Being
affected and being educated become, if not synonymous, then logically intertwined; learning
about others, this question suggests, translates fluidly into caring about them. This is the logic at
work, Carolyn Pedwell argues, in the promotion of empathy as “an affective skill or capacity
with market value” in the context of transnational development work (164). Learning about the
other, via an imagined or perceived proximity, is increasingly promoted as a primary way to care
about the other; a pedagogy based in proximity thus overcomes “the complex problem of ‘the
distant other’” (164). At the same time, she warns that the promotion of empathy as an affect
with transnational political reach risks both “obscuring [privileged subjects’] complicity in the
wider relations of power in which marginalisation, oppression and suffering occur” (167) and
“fix[ing]” the “poor ‘third world’ ‘other’” as “the object of empathy” (172). Literature, as “a
technology of access” to other lives and realities (172), is understood to enable ways of not only
“learning and knowing” (170) but also, and more importantly, “feeling truth” (171). The
Disappeared hails its readers not only as witnesses but as empathetic subjects, called on to feel
their way into the truth of the Cambodian genocide, to participate in the relationships that the
novel forges. That it does so by focalizing through the overwhelmingly empathetic white subject
reinforces Pedwell’s warning that a focus on empathy potentially “functions less to produce
more intersubjective relations and ways of knowing, than it does to augment the moral and
affective capacities” of the privileged subject (172). It is certainly possible, then, to read the
novel as complicit with the hegemony of the dominant subject, reflecting back to an implied
readership of Canadians an image of themselves as empathetic, engaged, and educated about the
lives of others.
At the same time, Pedwell offers a reminder that empathy, ineluctably complicit though it may be with “neoliberal modes of governmentality” (174), is nonetheless “not a direct or straightforward process—it is uneven, mediated and shot through with incommensurabilities” (175) and functions “not as [an] affective lens[] on ‘truth’ or ‘reality,’ but rather as one important (embodied) circuit through which power is felt, imagined, mediated, negotiated and/or contested” (176). Indeed, in her constant struggle to understand what Serey has experienced Anne both strives for the knowledge that comes via empathy and underlines where that knowledge falls short; it is important to note that she tries to imagine the mass graves and wants to know what Serey knows (106-08). When Serey disappears from Phnom Penh it is into a world that Anne does not understand and with motives that she never fully grasps: “You should have known. I loved your eyes in the mornings. When you left me that morning you said, See you later. Why were you there?” (156). The spare, non-continuous language of this passage brings together knowledge, desire, intimacy, and ignorance, setting them against one another without reconciling their contradictions. The structuring of Anne’s relationship to Cambodia through her relationship with Serey does not become equivalent to full knowledge or possession of her lover or his country. Certainly there are moments when the individual trauma of the white protagonist becomes conflated with the national trauma of the Cambodian genocide, particularly when Anne insists on her right to tell:

People say, It is their country, let them tell it.

You are my country. (203)

Although Anne’s desire to speak on behalf of Cambodia implies that affect can transcend cultural difference, she is not a transcendent subject, the disembodied white witness with whom Razack takes issue (“Stealing” 383). She is, rather, an embodied and desiring subject, for whom
empathy serves as a means through which power, as Pedwell points out, can be negotiated and contested.

Anne’s embodied and desiring subjectivity can be productively linked to her gender (for Razack, after all, the paradigmatic witness is male). As Ahmed points out, feminism as a philosophy focuses on bodies as untranscendable and differentiated, on “the irreducibility of difference, and the worldliness of being” (Strange 41). The novel thus recalls Najmi and Srikanth’s characterization of white women as occupying an “in-between status” between the transcendent universality of whiteness and the embodied immanence of the female body that “theoretically should give to white women the resources and the sensibilities to become a significant mediating force in bringing together the center and the periphery” (14). The Disappeared offers an image of white femininity negotiating its relationship to power, oscillating between the privileged but ignorant position of the foreigners “with their pasty skin and their money and their partial understandings” (155) and the powerless but resistant position of a woman grieving her beloved: “To bury the dead is right. I did not care what they did to me” (202). Empathy thus functions as a key site of complicity; while it continues to be deployed as a trope of the compassionate cosmopolitan subject, it is irreducible to its own instrumentalizations, maintaining traces of the incommensurability of embodied knowledges and desires.

A primary site of Anne’s ambivalence—as a figure of power or resistance to power, of transcendence or embodied implication—is the novel’s treatment of her body. She evokes the history of white female vulnerability and its connection to colonialism, slavery, and the oppression of the racialized other (Najmi and Srikanth 16-17). The image of Anne lying in a Cambodian prison cell, “a woman reduced to a T-shirt and bra, underwear and cotton pants and pain and thirst” (204), evokes a white female subject constituted by a history of encounters that
determine what we already know about her (Ahmed, Strange 155). In this case, the white woman is always already physically vulnerable to the racialized other.49 This vulnerability is intensified by the narrative emphasis on her reproductive body, insofar as her pregnancy ends with a traumatic miscarriage. The miscarriage, however, both constructs Anne as a body vulnerable in particularly gendered ways, and—much like her obsession with witnessing—productively destabilizes her former subjectivity:

I pushed and pushed again and I was lost in pain and trying to escape drowning in your eyes and after they cut the cord I had to push again to get rid of the afterbirth but this word is wrong because it was after death. They wiped her off and gave her to you to hold. … I saw you hand her to the nurse and turn back to the mess on the delivery bed, blood, shit, amniotic fluid, me. (150)

This is a turning point in the narrative. Before the miscarriage, Anne is the compassionate witness, in love with Serey and therefore inspired to learn more about Cambodia insofar as it might provide her greater insight into her lover, but still available to critique for her participation in the touristic fetishization of the genocide and her tendency to fix Cambodians as objects of her empathetic imagination. After the miscarriage, she becomes an Antigonian figure, refusing law and order to declare her right to mourn her beloved, curbing the reach of power via her own desiring body. Serey disappears at a political rally while she is still recovering in the hospital, and the fanaticism with which she pursues him, based on the intensity of her love, is heightened

49 Heron describes the “lingering trope of rape”—based on “the supposedly unrestrained and unrestrainable sexuality of the racialized Other”—as the source of “an enduring if unspoken threat to white womanhood in the countries of the South” (36). This trope, still present in contemporary discourse on white women travelling, is a colonial continuity: “Although the perception of (sexualized) threat to white womanhood in the colonies was more contrived than real, it was enabled by the creation in nineteenth-century discourse of a racially erotic, primitive, colonized Other” (32).
by her loss of the baby that would have manifested her kinship with him. The description of the miscarriage as crossing the boundary between birth and death anticipates the novel’s focus on burial, but more notable is the abject language of this passage, which seems to track Anne’s loss of a stable and coherent subject position. She is “lost in pain” and “drowning in [Serey’s] eyes,” finally describing herself as part of “the mess on the delivery bed, blood, shit, amniotic fluid, me.” Blood, shit, bodily fluids, and the corpse of the baby conjure up the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). It is thus pertinent that, after this moment, Anne will shift from a romantic belief in the transcendence of borders via empathy to a subversive undermining of borders through her devotion to the rites of the dead.

Anne’s embodied femininity is what places her in the Antigonian position of refusing the patriarchal authority of the state; her gendered desire motivates her insistent and subversive grieving of Serey, the figure of ungrievability. While, as an aspiring ethical subject, Anne is associated with care for the other, as a body she is characterized primarily in terms of a desiring sexuality. Her capacity to see Serey as a subject beyond his racialized identity in Montreal is rooted in “animal sensation” (20), and even after his disappearance, her body fails to register her emotional loss: “In bed that night I woke from another restless sleep, my clitoris erect, my labia filled and swollen. … In the desolate darkness my animal nature begged and I thought, So part of me is still alive but I cannot be alive if you are dead. I lay alone and let my body have its way” (163). The body, in this passage, is not vulnerable and “available to wound” but stubbornly attached to life, charged with desires and animosity toward death. The transformative possibilities of grief, epitomized in the Antigone myth, exist only because of the transformative
potential of desire: Anne’s grief is a flipside of her desire. As a result, her ability to interrogate the norms of grievability is deeply complicit with her vulnerable white femininity.

I will end this chapter with a final argument about the ambivalence of *The Disappeared* between a radical call for the grievability of lives that have previously been framed as ungrievable and the framing of this call itself within a narrative characterized by a variety of potentially problematic tropes, including the power of empathy, the transcendence of love, and the vulnerability of the white female subject. Anne, like Antigone, contests the state’s ability to determine legitimate forms of kinship, but she does so on different grounds. As Butler points out, Antigone’s capacity to challenge the state is contingent upon her violation of the incest taboo, which is uniquely situated as the pre-social law that “establish[es] certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones” (Butler, Antigone’s 70). In contrast, Anne elevates heterosexual love, in which the proper relation of kinship and gender is concretized, to the ground of a transnational ethics. Without denying the racial and cultural (not to mention linguistic) differences between Serey and Anne, I aver that the radical potential of the Antigone story to expand the borders of the legitimately human is undermined, in *The Disappeared*, by the proclaimed universality of *eros* as the most fundamental border-crossing bond between subjects. That the novel is linking the ethics of bearing witness to the universality of love pictured as heterosexual and reproductive is particularly clear in the scene in which Anne becomes pregnant: “In the darkness alone together, we said that we would care for each other until death. There was no one to witness to us and so we were witnessed only by the nameless missing and by the

50 In a scene that transpires early in Anne and Serey’s relationship, he sings her a Khmer riddle while playing the chapei: “I pretended to understand but I was on the untranslatable edge” (37). Later, Anne learns Khmer explicitly as a means of bridging the divide between them, a self-transformation that the novel situates, via the Book of Ruth, as a gesture of selfless love: “And your people shall be my people and your God, my God” (72).
generations to come. And this was the night our baby was conceived, a soul leaving the dry sky of the ancestors to live anew in bones and flesh” (94). In this scene the marriage rite transforms seamlessly into the creation of the child, and merges with the ethics of bearing witness via the ambivalent meaning of witnessing in its legal and ethical implications. The language of this passage universalizes and depoliticizes the act of bearing witness, uprooting Anne and Serey’s story from the material histories of the site they occupy (a poor fishing village) while also embedding their love in Serey’s culture through oblique references to “the nameless missing” and “the ancestors.” The passage thus functions to legitimate Anne’s ability to speak on behalf of Cambodia itself through a doubly signifying act of witnessing, concretized by her pregnancy. Anne’s ability to challenge the norms of kinship, along with her ethical commitment to tell the untold story of Cambodia, is linked to marriage and heterosexual reproductivity in a way that undermines the subversive potential of the Antigonian myth as outlined by Butler.

The Disappeared is characterized by multiple ambivalences, shifting between the genres of testimony and love story, and between understandings of witness as an impetus for political action or a mode of reading. The intertwining of heterosexual love story and genocide testimony is key both to the novel’s explicit positioning and to its productive complication of the question of complicity. Anne is a situated and embodied witness whose deep implication in the fate of the Cambodian people is tied directly to her heterosexual romance, and whose capacity to challenge the frames of recognizability is contingent upon her own status as a subject who is already recognizable on the terms of the implied readership. Anne’s whiteness, her femininity, and her Canadianness combine to render her not only a subject who can be recognized by a book-club

---

Echlin has spoken in various contexts about the similarities between the language of testimony used in contexts such as truth commissions, and the language of eros used in ancient love poetry, arguing that “our deepest, most intense experiences belong to a place that language can hardly reach” (Penguin 242).
readership who might perceive Anne as a reflection of themselves (as paratexts like the Penguin Readers Guide suggest), but also more generally a figure whose vulnerability and grievability is an a priori of the novel’s function as testimony. Hailing readers-cum-witnesses who will identify with her narrative perspective, Anne gradually becomes a figure associated with the kind of precarity not generally associated with white Western subjects, such that she can come to stand in for the precarity of all Cambodians. I argued above that there is an intrinsic connection, within the novel, between seeing and telling as two sides of the imperative to bear witness. As Anne transforms into someone who cannot help but see the horrors around her, her affective response to the suffering of others seeks to generate a similar response in those whom the text is addressing. The question remains, however, whether Anne’s position as the witness through whom readers learn about the genocide constitutes a shift in frames of recognizability that demands a radically transnational witness ethics, or if it instead trades in the familiar grievability of the protagonist herself without challenging the link between white femininity, vulnerability, and empathy.

The novel operates not despite these complicityes but through them. The merging of love story and witness narrative reshapes the second-person address into an implication of the reader in what she is reading, while Anne’s losses of child and lover propel her into a position of politically subversive grief. And while the novel frequently deploys the affective register of transcendence and empathy through the depiction of a shared or universalized human precariousness, it does so in a way that is attentive to the embodied particularities of subjects. Ultimately, the novel’s focalization through the figure of the white Canadian woman brings with it a series of complicityes that trouble a straightforward reading of The Disappeared as a witness narrative. The Antigonian model is a distinctly Western one, and its universalization in the novel
risks obscuring cultural difference in the effort to transcend cultural borders. More than anything else, Anne’s narrative honours her own need to come to terms with her personal loss, and as such is rooted in her own cultural context; to imagine that she can speak unequivocally for any other, even Serey, is to enact a form of representational violence that erases difference. Those complicities would be radically different, though no less present, were the novel focalized through a Cambodian character—and it is precisely this question of focalization, and the ethics of becoming other, with which the next chapter engages.
Chapter Five

Becoming Other: *The Lizard Cage* and *The Border Surrounds Us*

“Not only do … fantasies of becoming involve releasing the Western subject from responsibility for the past, but they also confirm his agency, his ability to be transformed by the proximity of strangers, and to render his transformation a gift to those strangers through which he alone can become.”

(Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 125)

The “Event Without Witness” and the Ethics of the Inside

In “In the Skin of the Other,” an article published in the midst of *The Lizard Cage*’s eight-year composition, Karen Connelly addresses the anxieties and responsibilities evoked by writing her novel. The article begins with an account of Burma’s recent political history—protests and police brutality, military violence against ethnic minorities, the mass closure of universities to prevent student uprisings, and the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi—before transitioning into Connelly’s reflections on the ungraspability, for a Western public, of living in such a place:

“Ironically, our incredible wealth of freedom makes it more, not less difficult, for us to imagine what it is really like for people who live and struggle in countries like Burma” (57). This failure of imagination implies a failure of responsibility, a failure to adopt an ethical stance in relation to the other: “If we are to have a profound and truthful experience of place, the mind must be open, must be vulnerable, must be spacious enough to accommodate a violent invasion of the other” (57). Connelly’s language in these passages emphasizes the immense difficulty of imagining oneself into a space of radical unfreedom, and the ethical responsibility that attends such an act of imagination because of that difficulty, not despite it. At the same time, Connelly reverses that movement from the outside (a space of comfort and ignorance) to the inside (a space of suffering
and voicelessness) to figure the witnessing self as open to and invaded by “the often exciting but usually painful onslaught of the other” (57). This spatial metaphor of the inside and the outside is central to the representational strategies at work in Connelly’s multi-generic struggles to come to terms with what she witnessed in Burma. Read against one another, the poetry collection The Border Surrounds Us (2000) and the novel The Lizard Cage (2005) suggest a movement from the outside—a perspective from which the lives of Burmese subjects remain incomprehensible—into what Shoshana Felman calls “the frightening inside of Otherness” (“The Return” 234) represented predominantly through the image of the prison.

When Felman deploys her spatial metaphor to understand artistic representations of the Holocaust, she opens a space through which to understand the inside and outside as both literal and symbolic spaces. She describes the Holocaust as “an event without witness” that, through the incommensurability of different acts of seeing—those of the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders—“dissolves the possibility of any community of witnessing” (“The Return” 211). In order to explain this fundamental incommensurability, she deploys the spatial metaphor of the inside and the outside, drawing on the image of the gas chamber as an inside that “has no voice” and therefore cannot be the origin of testimony (231). If it is “impossible to testify from the inside” (231), however, the outside is an equally untenable position: “there is a radical, unbreachable and horrifying difference between the two sides of the wall” that separates these “incomparable and utterly irreconcilable” positions (236). The radical unbreachability of the wall between inside and outside is answered by an image of the artist as messenger who moves between inside and outside, as the one who can “literally move the viewers and … actually reach the addressee,” who can represent the “abyssal lostness of the inside, without being either crushed by the abyss or overwhelmed by the pathos, without losing the outside” (238-39).
Felman’s argument draws upon conditions of witnessing specific to the Holocaust: the voicelessness of the inside bears a particular and literal significance when read in reference to extermination camps, as does the urgency of the artist’s second-order witnessing. But the spatial metaphor of the inside and outside, separated by a wall that is at once unbreachable and strangely porous, is also fundamental to Connelly’s work and its authorizing narratives. The unspeakability of the inside signifies on various levels, from the censorship and imprisonment of Burmese writers by the military dictatorship to the failure of a Western readership to respond to the crises of subjects who are not already rendered recognizable (see Chapter 4), to the literary ethical problem of emphasis on the unknowability of the other.

Connelly situates her response to the incomprehensibility of the inside as a deliberate exercise in self-transformation: “I set out to become ‘the other’ with quiet fervency” (“In the Skin” 58). This attempt at self-transformation yielded a variety of results: an empathetic realization “that almost everyone was profoundly wounded”; a “long education of trying to be other, and, in all those foreign places, of being the other”; and most importantly for Connelly’s article, a recognition of her own implication in the Burmese struggle, an implication that can only be answered by writing the stories that she has heard (58). That process of writing is described as yet another crossing of borders:

I wrote in tears every day, distraught and sickened by the process of internalization that would make Tey Za and his prison experiences authentic in writing. One must feel what one writes. I have known that since I began writing. But it is another thing entirely, a terrible, necessary act to enter the darkest places in the human world and to stay there for long periods of time, to commit to living there spiritually and mentally… (59)
She must enter into the terror of the inside, but that inside also enters her. The responsible writing subject, as described by Connelly, becomes the other both by entering into the other’s prison and by being entered by that imprisoned other. While the article also goes to some lengths to justify the novel’s border-crossing strategies by insisting that the novel was both requested and explicitly sanctioned by the people she met in Burma (an authorizing narrative that is repeated in *Burmese Lessons*), it is the painful process of self-transformation that defines the novel’s composition: “The book is coming. It is coming slowly and with great labour out of the prison of my own mind and spirit” (60). Insofar as this article offers up an ethics of writing the prison, it does so by figuring the writer as herself imprisoned and prison-like, voluntarily bound into the dark places with which her writing engages.

Throughout this article another implication is clear: that the journeys of the author must be followed by a comparable journey on the part of the reader. Connelly has entered into the perspective of a Burmese political prisoner in order to make that perspective comprehensible for a Western readership who, she suggests, is too free to imagine this experience of imprisonment; her ability to enter that perspective is contingent upon information shared with her by Burmese subjects in the hope that “‘her book becomes a big bestseller’” (60). She speaks for the voiceless inside of the prison with the intention of being heard by an outside, of stirring that outside.

Dorothy J. Hale, in her recent work on “new ethical literary theory” (“Fiction” 189), argues for a “new ethical account of novel reading” distinguished by its “conceptualization of the reading subject as engaging in self-restriction as an act of free will” (190). Her discussion of an ethical reading practice in terms of “voluntary self-binding” (195) is remarkably consistent with the reading act that Connelly evokes; both emphasize a reader position characterized by freedom and the ethical impetus to voluntarily submit to an experience of binding in order to enter into a non-
hegemonic relationship with the other. Both also understand this readerly self-binding as a potential “pre-condition for positive social change” (189). Throughout the article it is clear that Connelly is calling for a heightened degree of care for the suffering of distant others on the part of Western readers.

This care, however, is a far cry from what Suzanne Keen calls “the contemporary truism that novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world” (xv), a view that Keen describes as “attractive and consoling” (vii). Connelly’s description of ethical engagement with the other is far from consoling; it is a disturbing and violent “invasion” that threatens the coherence of the authorial and, implicitly, reading subject. This rooting of ethics in self-abnegation, even self-destruction, is reflected in The Lizard Cage’s protagonist, Teza, a young man seven years into a twenty-year sentence of solitary confinement for writing political protest songs. As the novel progresses, Teza shifts from a political subject fighting to survive, eating the lizards that hunt bugs in his cell and resisting the coercive force of the jailers whenever he can, to a monk-like figure, fasting and meditating through the pain of his broken body and the futility of anger against his captors. As Teza gradually gives up killing lizards, hating his jailers, and eventually eating altogether, he understands these sacrifices in terms of the Buddhist principle of metta, meaning “love and benevolence” (63), especially the capacity “to love the enemy” (64). Teza’s love for the enemy, in the context of the prison, is far from the “attractive” ideal of transnational empathy and cosmopolitan citizenship. It is represented as an intense struggle against a variety of desires, both physical and emotional. The representation of ethical experience in terms of both self-destruction and voluntary self-restriction reverberates through The Lizard Cage and Burmese Lessons, particularly in the description of Karen’s traumatic transformation discussed in Chapter 2.
Neither *The Lizard Cage* nor its authorizing narratives, however, holds up self-abnegation as an ethical ideal in itself. “In the Skin of the Other” instrumentalizes Connelly’s experience of self-binding as a necessary means to fulfill her duty as a witness, to communicate what she has seen to those who did not share her experience. Similarly, the structure of the novel suggests that what is most important is not what happens in the prison but what gets out of the prison, or the “cage,” as it is called throughout the novel. To repeat Felman’s words, the point is to represent the “abyssal lostness of the inside … without losing the outside” (“The Return” 239). This desire of those on the outside to know what is happening on the inside and the desire of those on the inside to get something to the outside structures *The Lizard Cage*. Only one person makes this crucial journey in the novel: a twelve-year-old boy who has spent most of his young life inside the cage. He brings with him a damaged accounting ledger containing a long poem written by Teza. Teza is as desperate to secure this boy’s escape from the prison as those on the outside, particularly his dissident younger brother living on the Thai-Burma border, are to get word from him.

The outside is not positioned exclusively as the climactic conclusion of the novel, but also frames its introduction: the young boy, Zaw Gyi (whose name is only revealed in the novel’s penultimate chapter), has just entered a monastery school, where he exhibits a strange attachment to the “filthy blanket” (1) he brought with him. A few months after his arrival, two military intelligence agents come looking for him, in response to which the boy is sent away “to a small monastery in Pegu, then to a much larger one near Inle Lake and a different place after that, farther and farther north, eluding a force he equated with the men in the cage who had hurt him” (4). Before readers have even been introduced to the inside of the cage or the viciousness of the men who control it, that space is evoked through Zaw Gyi’s flight toward the border. The
boy’s journey ends when he crosses the border into Thailand, where he is adopted by a Burmese dissident whose name, Aung Min, makes him “burst into tears” (6). The climax of this unlabelled prologue brings together Aung Min (Teza’s younger brother), Zaw Gyi (who Teza has nicknamed “little brother” or Nyi Lay), and the “stained ledger” that the boy has been hiding in his blanket:

Then the boy turned another page, and the words began.

The handwriting was as familiar as the voice Aung Min often listened to on a dusty cassette player. (10)

Zaw Gyi has brought that imprisoned voice—sentenced to solitary confinement specifically because of its political power—out of the cage and into the world beyond the Burmese border. In order to read the words inscribed in the ledger, readers must follow Zaw Gyi and his ledger backwards, tracing the path from Thailand across the border into Burma, a journey that Connelly implicitly associates with entering the prison when she argues that, “metaphorically, the story of modern Burma is one of incarceration” (“In the Skin” 59).

Read alongside one another, “In the Skin of the Other” and The Lizard Cage stage an argument for the political and ethical necessity of knowing the other. This knowledge is made possible through an act of becoming, in which a privileged Western self can imaginatively step inside of the perspective of a culturally distinct other. In her articulation of the ethical problematic behind such an understanding of reading, Doris Sommer draws on a similar language of border-crossing, arguing that “[t]he slap of refusal from unyielding books can slow readers down, detain them at the boundary between contact and conquest” (202). Sommer advocates for fiction that draws attention to its own constructedness via “tropes of obstruction” or “obstacles” that force readers “to notice the boundaries, perhaps to stumble, and then to step
more carefully” (209). The language of boundaries and obstacles echoes the language of borders and walls, insides and outsides, but warns that readers cannot and should not make the mistake of imagining that these barriers are easily crossed. Equating this understanding of reading-as-border-crossing with the colonial tendencies of universalism, Sommer articulates an objection reminiscent of the critiques of empathy discussed in the last chapter; the ethical relationship is not chosen or entered into freely, she insists: “one is turned, hailed, interpellated by a command to attention … Ethics means demoting the self to serve the Other, to be the hostage object of the Other subject” (207). The language of captivity refuses empathy’s construction of the other as knowable, insisting instead that the ground of ethics—and thus, arguably, of subjectivity itself—is the subject’s interpellation into a responsibility that she does not choose. In contrast to Hale’s emphasis on voluntary self-binding, Sommer more explicitly refutes the autonomy of the Western reader through a model of ethical reading based on the involuntary binding of the hostage and a preference for literature that facilitates such a readerly experience. In light of this conflict between Sommer and Hale’s understanding of what constitutes an ethical reading act, then, *The Lizard Cage*—along with its cluster of authorizing narratives and its marked differences from *The Border Surrounds Us*—raises the question of whether this prison narrative simply extends the Western subject’s unlimited mobility or offers a possible antidote through a model of becoming as a voluntary sacrifice of freedom.

This tension between mobility and restriction, which could also be theorized in terms of the knowability of the other, is played out in the novel’s authorizing narratives and in the disjunction between representational strategies in *The Border Surrounds Us* and *The Lizard Cage*. Connelly invokes this anxiety through repeated descriptions of the writerly act of becoming other as a form of violence wrought on the self, an “invasion” or “onslaught” through
which the self is profoundly damaged. *Burmese Lessons* uses similar language to chart Karen’s transformation into the person capable of writing the novel that her experiences demand she write:

*What is inside me? … Invisible traces of Burma and the border. Parasites the doctors cannot see.*

*Is this not what I wanted, what I have always craved—to be transformed? … She is gone, the one who could go forth so easily, so readily, wishing to enter another world and opening herself to it completely, like a door or a flower.* (422)

Border crossing—be it cultural, geopolitical, or representational—is divorced from notions of pleasure, exoticism, or the arrogance of universalism. It becomes instead a wound or an invasion, in which the writerly self is devoured from the inside out by the other. In Chapter 3 I pointed out that the authorial subject who emerges from this traumatic but longed-for experience of invasion is divorced from the pleasures of consumption that characterize much of the memoir’s earlier chapters. The “sparer and sharper” image of life that Karen gains from this experience (431) is reflected in the novel she produces from it, a novel in which food figures prominently but almost never as a sensual pleasure.

*After Teza’s jaw is shattered in a savage beating by sadistic Junior Jailer Handsome and he loses his* 

\[52 \] “Outside” is consistently capitalized throughout the novel, referring to an amorphous space beyond the walls of the “cage.” This terminology suggests that the experience of being imprisoned produces an absolute binary between inside and outside.
the ability to eat anything but thin prison gruel, however, he continues to value the precious food parcels because they come from his mother and bear traces of the outside: “No, he cannot eat, but her presence is a different kind of sustenance” (205). Counting out the items one by one, Teza reflects that “Outside the cage, the parcel means very little. … But in the cage, nothing that comes from home is inanimate” (206). Food crosses borders, often constituting prisoners’ only connection with the world beyond the prison walls. As Jan Alber points out, “it is a peculiarity of food that it cannot easily be classified as subject or object. The act of eating is the absorbing of an aspect of the external world into the interior world; food is an object which becomes a part of the subject. Hence, by eating prison food, prisoners always internalize something which is associated with the prison institution” (152). Similarly, by eating “Outside food,” prisoners maintain their connection to the world beyond the cage. Teza’s physical inability to eat the food sent by his mother leads directly into his decision to abstain from food altogether as he embarks first on a course of intensive meditation and, eventually, on a hunger strike. As he severs his links to the outside, he begins instead feeding his food parcels to Zaw Gyi, a gift that both unites the man and the boy and starts to make Zaw Gyi into a figure of the outside rather than a figure of the cage. Nourished as much by Teza’s love as by the peanuts and dried fish sent by Teza’s mother, the boy gains the strength to imagine a life beyond the walls that have circumscribed his existence for the past five years.

The novel’s conclusion, in which Teza begins a hunger strike and Zaw Gyi escapes from prison, is paralleled by Burmese Lessons’ conclusion, in which Karen loses interest in food and decides to leave Burma in order to fully commit herself to the writing of the novel. Read alongside one another, novel and memoir associate the outside with plenty and the inside with hunger, the outside with consumption and the inside with being consumed. They also
continuously complicate the binary of inside and outside, so that the inside might encompass the prison, the country of Burma as a whole, the condition of political oppression, and the condition of artistic imprisonment characterized by Karen’s commitment to write a novel that she describes as painful but necessary. The outside, on the other hand, suggests the world beyond the cage, the Thai-Burmese border, and the possibility of escaping ingrained cycles of violence and hatred, as well as the unknowable other beyond the borders of the self. The ambivalence of inside and outside is signified in *The Border Surrounds Us* by the trope of the border itself, which is real and metaphorical, internal and external, crossed and inhabited. This complication of the question of borders and accompanying destabilization of the binary of self and other does not, however, prevent *The Lizard Cage*, as an enactment of creatively becoming other, from being accompanied by anxieties about the representational violence of assuming the other’s voice.

That anxiety is apparent in Connelly’s insistence that she wrote the novel against her will and even against her better judgment, fuelled by a keen sense of responsibility and the overt imperatives of those she encountered in her travels. “In the Skin of the Other” offers such a justification. Her implicit answer to the questions “Who did I think I was?” and “What did I think I was doing?” (59) takes the form of further questions: “the one and key question Burmese people asked me was, ‘Will you write about this?’ … ‘Why don’t you write a book about that?’ ‘Will you write this story down?’” (58). *Burmese Lessons* is similarly preoccupied with the insistence that she “write about something that the tourists never see” (77). Thus the author of *The Lizard Cage* is one who has voluntarily bound herself out of a sense of ethical responsibility to the other—and, as Hale’s articulation of the novel as the central genre of the new ethical literary theory makes evident, Connelly’s sense that her responsibility could be satisfied in no other way than the writing of a *novel* is hardly incidental. One of the clearest arguments for what
the novel as a genre can do lies is the marked difference between how *The Lizard Cage* and *The Border Surrounds Us* represent the other; whereas the former undergoes a process of becoming other, the latter engages frequently with the problem of the other’s alterity.

**Others Without Borders**

*The Border Surrounds Us* is a collection of lyric poems about travel and how the poet moves through the world, about how the poetic persona is shaped by experiences of the foreign, and about the weight of responsibility that comes from occupying a place, no matter how transiently. Writing about her experience of Burma and her struggle to respond to it via literature, Connelly has described this responsibility as a cross between a gift and a burden:

> Once people had told me their prison stories, I felt enormously indebted to both the individual as witness and to the story itself. To be entrusted with a story is like being entrusted with a life. It is, literally, being entrusted with a portion of someone else’s life—a weighted gift. How do you carry it? That is a very complicated, politically and practically fraught, question, and part of my work is to just keep trying to respond. (“First and Last Country” 202)

Many of the poems in this collection respond to this crisis of witnessing, the question of how to turn an entrusted story into a poem. While the same authorizing narrative can be read against *Burmese Lessons* and *The Lizard Cage*, the poems offer the most overt struggles with the problem of attempting and failing to become other. The other is represented as “a tunnel / you and I will never enter” (39) or as a series of “worlds / she could not fathom, with freedom / wrapped around her like a cape / she could never pull off” (25). The poems frequently explore the porous boundaries between self and other, shifting semi-autobiographical poems into the
third person or using the ambivalence of enjambment to blur identities, but continually emphasize the alterity of the other.

“Guerrilla Soldier” is the poem that thematizes most overtly the poetic persona’s attempt to respond to the stories of others. The poem begins with a first-person voice that is intimately interiorized and embodied: “The scent of jasmine / was like fingers / touching my mouth” (38). As it progresses, this persona attempts to find common ground with the eponymous soldier through a shared observation of the beauty of the fireflies; his response challenges not only her attempt at empathy but also the notion of a universalist aesthetics in which it is rooted. For the soldier, the fireflies are not “beautiful”:

Fireflies make me think
of their white shirts.

The university boys so often
wore laundered white shirts.

Fourteen of my friends
died, drowned by soldiers
in the lake near the university.
Hundreds more were shot in the road
I walked to school on every day.
Do you understand?
……
I pay for my life each day,
again. No merit is enough.

The fireflies, their white shirts.

Do you understand?

That is why I came to the border.

My life is the memory

of the dead. (39-40)

The soldier’s understanding of the fireflies is both personally and culturally specific, rooted in histories that the persona neither shares nor can fully understand, as the repeated—and unanswered—question (“Do you understand?”) implies. Instead of attempting to enter into this perspective, to claim the understanding that is being questioned, the poem instead gives itself over to the voice of the soldier, so that it becomes his poem and his story, as temptingly allusive and frustratingly limited as any encounter with an other. The poem ends in the other’s voice rather than returning to the first-person speaker. These two final, terse lines in fact open up a gap between the soldier and the implied reader who is, alongside the poetic persona, addressed by the soldier’s questions and made to bear witness to his trauma. The border becomes a literal and metaphorical space, defined by its very distance from comprehensibility, just as the soldier himself is “the memory / of the dead.”

This interruption of the probing poetic voice takes different forms in other poems. “The Stormful Gardener,” for example, begins in the second person, addressing the gardener who moves fretfully through his garden: “You belong to that particular breed: / the stormful gardener. / The restless one, the man / who is never still / in his green kingdom” (35). The introduction of
the first-person, again suggesting the lyric “I” of the poet’s voice, is sudden and unforeshadowed: “I wonder about your dreams” (36). After a few stanzas of such wondering, though, the speaker interrupts herself: “I presume nothing, having / no rights among your dreams”; instead, “I watch you step lightly / over the grass, intent, / not smiling but happy, / happy enough” (36-37). The shift toward interrogating the interiority of the other is interrupted and reverts instead into observation, the supposition of “happy enough.” Like the soldier’s refusal of the poet’s shared aesthetics, the assertion of the poet’s lack of rights functions as a wall between self and other, like Sommer’s “slap of refusal” (202). This hesitation at the boundary between self and other does not protect the poet from implication or affective response, however. “What she carried”—which anticipates the conclusion of Burmese Lessons, in which Karen is sickened with malaria and connects the disease to the traumatic impact of what she experienced on the border—describes a poetic self burdened by the act of bearing witness:

You cannot carry this.

No, not that way, alone.

It is wrong to believe

you have the strength.

You do not.

You, too, are only a child.

You cannot carry this.

Yet you can hold it

for a few hours at a time.

For a day.
For two or three days
when you have known kindness.
You wash the crushed face.
The veil of flies rises.
With practice, you learn
to say *human*.

Now you will carry
part of it
forever. (52)

The unnamed “this” that the addressed subject—which ambivalently encompasses the reader, the poet, and anyone who has undergone the crisis of witnessing—carries is the act of recognition that is the root of ethical responsibility. The connection drawn between the onus of responsibility, recognizing the (“crushed”) face of the other, and being ontologically transformed by this recognition links the poem’s ethical stance to the understanding of ethics as trauma articulated by Simon Critchley.

Critchley emphasizes that the “Levinasian ethical subject,” for whom the originary encounter with the other constitutes a traumatic wound, is motivated by affect over thinking (*Ethics, Politics* 194). This subject, he continues, “is a traumatized self … But, this is a good thing. It is only because the subject is unconsciously constituted through the trauma of contact with the real that we might have the audacity to speak of goodness, transcendence, compassion, etc.; and moreover to speak of these terms in relation to the topology of desire and not simply in terms of some pious … wish-fulfilment” (195). This articulation of Levinasian subjectivity,
however, in which the other is a wound that constitutes the self as traumatized and thus ethical, has been critiqued as a formulation that reduces the other to a pathology of the self:

The trope of the wound, which stands for the splitting of the subject but also for the wounds the other is the result of, operates through affective channels that conceive the other only in terms of its pathology. As a result, excessive empathy is a catachrestic mode of affect, empathy itself becoming pathological—and not as a result of contagion because of its proximity to the other. (Kamboureli, “Limits” 952)

The excruciating, nigh-unbearable empathy exhibited toward the face of the other in “What she carried” suggests the slipperiness of an ethics based in the other as wound and the self as wounded, particularly in terms of its perpetuation of an unbridgeable divide between self and other that is as likely to discourage universalist reading practices as it is to discourage an affective engagement in the suffering of distant others.

The recurring image of the self as traumatized into responsibility by the act of witnessing is a leitmotif of Connelly’s work, particularly via the authorizing narratives that have shaped the reception of her books, as my reading of “In the Skin of the Other” suggests. But the creative act of becoming other associated with the composition of The Lizard Cage is different from the responsibility-generating face-to-face encounter with the other represented in many of the poems that make up The Border Surrounds Us. This difference consists in the shifting constructions of the other as a wall that is or is not penetrable. The soldier and the gardener discussed above are only two examples of others who can be encountered, cared for, responded to, but whom the poetic persona explicitly does not presume to understand or to become. The temptation of becoming other, of stepping through the symbolic or literal wall, is thematized explicitly in “Prison Entrance,” in which the metaphor of the prison as an “unseen” world “on the other side”
(25) anticipates the centrality of the prison metaphor to *The Lizard Cage*. At the beginning of the poem the subject situates herself as an outsider to the prison, which is a world “she could not fathom”; in the final two stanzas, however, she asserts the possibility of crossing from outside to inside:

> When the narrow path
darted into the night
like a grey lizard,
she rose, she went forward.
She could not resist it.

She walked
through the wall. (26)

Agency is fluid in these stanzas; she performs the clear action of verbs like “rose” and “went forward” and “walked,” but is also overpowered by a non-specific “it.” In the act of crossing over, too, the subject is not the sole actor. The path through the wall possesses its own agency, darting like a lizard, and possibly exerting the force that compels the subject. She is both the locus of agency and strangely overpowered by an unspecified force of alterity. She has the power to walk through walls but the inability to “resist it.”

In *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed critiques “becoming other as a fantasy that is increasingly offered to the Western subject,” arguing that this fantasy constitutes both the (white, Western) self and the (non-white, Southern) other in ways that ultimately reinstate rather than challenge entrenched cultural and racial hierarchies (119). Becoming other seems to “reconstitute rather than transgress the integrity of the Western subject” (119) by confirming this subject’s “agency,
his ability to be transformed by the proximity of strangers, *and to render his transformation a gift to those strangers through which he alone can become*” (125). In the process of becoming other only the self is transformed, while the other remains a static, fetishized object of Western fantasies. While “the dominant subject [has] the ability to move … ‘the stranger’ is assumed to be *knowable, seeable and hence be-able*” (133). It is noteworthy that, in order to describe this dynamic, Ahmed also draws on the metaphor of the prison: “Passing for the stranger turns the stranger’s flesh into a prison—it reduces the stranger to flesh that can only be inhabited as a temporary loss of freedom. The stranger becomes known as the prison of flesh through the fantasy that one can pass, that is, that *one can pass through the stranger’s body*” (132). This articulation of becoming other, contrasting the dominant subject’s ongoing agency with an objectified other, is inscribed in the final stanzas of “Prison Entrance,” in which the subject is seemingly overwhelmed by otherness even while her submission reaffirms her agency in relation to that otherness. It is important, however, that the poem ends rather than beginning with the act of border crossing. As I have argued is typical of the poems in *The Border Surrounds Us*, this poem stops short at attempting to imaginatively enter the perspective of the other, instead paying heed to the “stop signs” of alterity.

To learn what is on the other side of that prison wall, readers must turn to the novel that Connelly was composing when *The Border Surrounds Us* was published. In *The Lizard Cage* the narrating consciousness has already crossed the wall and become the other, as is perhaps rendered most clearly in the poem that Teza writes in the ledger smuggled to him by Zaw Gyi. Written in the voice of Teza addressing his brother Aung Min, this poem is both deeply personal and political, a testimony to the inside of the prison written for those on the outside. It echoes “Prison Entrance” in its use of the language of walls: “here where all the doors are closed / I
have learned to walk through brick walls” (360). But where the spatial metaphor of “Prison Entrance” represents the poet as standing on the outside of the prison and passing through the wall, *The Lizard Cage* reverses this spatial structure with a poem that originates inside the prison and attempts the urgent task of testimony: to translate for the world beyond its walls that “frightening inside of Otherness” (Felman, “The Return” 234).

Teza’s poetic testimony brings together shared family history and boyhood memories, politicized cries for memorialization and justice, and witnessing to the truths that Teza has learned from the prison itself. The importance of this document lies in the particular combination of these three representational modes. Its truth-effect is generated by the evocation of shared memories and reinforced by the danger of espousing illegal political views, while its primary ethical value comes from the specific lessons of the prison. It is a document that could only have come out of this terrible insideness, but that speaks directly to those on the outside. Teza insists that Aung Min “will understand / every message in this little parcel” (359), but by the time it is inscribed, at the end of the novel, the reader is familiar with the same memories of slingshots and mohinga and their mother’s orchids. The reader has similarly seen those details of insideness that Teza recounts for his brother, from the “wet trailings / of roaches after they drink my soup” (359) to “the white ghosts / of maggots on the edges of my pail” (361). When Teza insists that “here … / the borders dissolve” and “Here there is no separation” (362), the implied reader shares that position of “here,” and thus also shares the ability to cross between the brothers’ childhood and Teza’s present. The play between inside and outside in this passage builds upon and complicates the border metaphor in *The Border Surrounds Us* and invokes the fraught ethics and politics of becoming other. Rather than simply participating in a historically problematic representational
mode, however, *The Lizard Cage* complicates the act of becoming other or of imaginative border-crossing through the play of narrative focalization and shifting character perspectives.

**The Ethics of the Novel and the Power of the Gaze**

As the only novel Connelly has written thus far and the only text in her oeuvre from which the variably autobiographical “I” is absent, *The Lizard Cage* can be read as a literary exercise in which the self submits fully to the demands of the other—an exercise for which the novel as genre is ostensibly ideal. Hale articulates just such an understanding of the novel in her recent work on the literary turn to ethics, in which she argues that this turn is characterized by a series of discussions about the ethical value of literature that are more accurately “discussions about the ethical value of novels” (“Fiction” 189). The new ethicists that Hale discusses—including J. Hillis Miller, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak—locate the ethical value of the novel in the readerly act of “open[ing] oneself up to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical,” that is, making the decision to freely submit oneself to the alterity of the novel (189).

Critical emphasis on the novel stems from what Hale calls “characterological autonomy,” namely the sense that characters are fully formed others whose alterity expands beyond the scope of the reader’s gaze (“Aesthetics” 903). Her understanding of the novel as shaped by “the ethical value of voluntary self-binding” (“Fiction” 201) in relation to these textual others must be held in tension with an opposed view of the relation between novel-reading, subjectivity, and binding, articulated in D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*. Miller’s assertion that “the novel—as a set of representational techniques—systematically participate[s] in a general economy of policing power” (2) is based on his reading of realist representation as recreating the same form of panoptic scrutiny that characterizes Foucauldian power (21). Insofar as the novel possesses a
“panoptic vision,” it is “immun[e] from being seen in turn”: “There is no other perspective on the world than its own, because the world entirely coincides with that perspective” (24). The binding of the reader within the perspective of the novel does not, for Miller, constitute a voluntary ethical self-binding to the world of the other, so much as a sign of complicity with the “regime of the norm” (viii).

In their defence of the novel as the primary ethical genre, Hale and the new ethicists she discusses focus on the capacity of the novel to confront the reader with the limitations of this supposedly all-encompassing vision: “we are made to recognize our operative interpretative categories” and “the limits of our ways of knowing” (“Aesthetics” 901). If the novel offers the reader an opportunity “to experience the self as unfree, as in a constitutive relation with the other, who, in turn, binds him or her” (902), it does so through “the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling” (903). I am less interested in a decisive settling of this debate—whether the novel is complicit with or resistant to modern regimes of power/knowledge—than in examining the ways in which The Lizard Cage strategically deploys its complicity with the panoptic gaze of the police in order to open up an ethical space remarkably reminiscent of the voluntary experience of unfreedom that Hale describes. From this perspective, the setting of the novel in the jail renders it not just a metaphorical or metonymical account of the whole experience of political unfreedom in Burma, but also a clear instantiation of contemporary debates over the ethical affordances of the genre as well as, recalling Ahmed’s use of the prison metaphor, the ethical problem of becoming other.

Inside the unnamed prison of The Lizard Cage, which Connelly asserts is an amalgam of various real prisons (“In the Skin” 59), regimes of power and discipline prevail. The warders

---

53 The warders, or prison guards, are differentiated in the novel from the jailers, who are in positions of greater authority, and the Chief Warden, who runs the prison.
and jailers oversee every detail of the prisoners’ lives, even those aspects, like drug smuggling and black-market trades, that would seem to violate the law. This panoptic regime becomes apparent in the early parts of the narrative, in which Teza becomes unknowingly entangled in Handsome’s scheme to extend the sentences of all the cage’s political prisoners by allowing them to be smuggled writing materials and then catching them with this contraband. Teza’s fear when he finds the forbidden pen and paper hidden within his food parcel, and the terror that dogs him as he composes a letter to the outside, speaks to the repressiveness of the prison environment:

The thought of someone with power in the cage knowing about the plan makes him feel so vulnerable that he stares for long unbroken minutes at the teak door, straining to hear the sound of them coming.

He knows there is a web outside his cell, one he cannot see and can barely fathom, because he’s always lived in solitary. (131)

His own gaze restricted by the walls of his “teak coffin” (what he calls his cell), Teza is vulnerable, prey to those who orchestrate the prison’s various operations. But more importantly, after Teza has realized that the paper and pen are a trap, after he has torn up and swallowed the letter and thrown the pen through the tiny barred window in his cell, after he has been so savagely beaten by Handsome that he is taken out of solitary confinement and kept instead in the hospital cell where he first meets Zaw Gyi, the hunt for the pen remains a central driving force in the novel.

Handsome never does find the pen, and while he suspects the truth—that Zaw Gyi found it outside Teza’s window and has hidden it somewhere—he is never able to prove it. The triumph of Zaw Gyi and Teza, along with Senior Jailer Chit Naing, over Handsome and the
despicable Chief Warden, could be read as a circumvention of the cage’s absolute power; as D.A. Miller points out, however, “[w]henever the novel censures policing power, it has already reinvented it, in the very practice of novelistic representation” (20). In the case of The Lizard Cage, while the actual policing figures are denied knowledge of the pen’s location and its use in Teza’s final testimony that Zaw Gyi smuggles to the border, the panoptic gaze of the novel is always aware of the pen’s location, whether it is buried in the dirt under Zaw Gyi’s shack or secreted away in Chit Naing’s pocket, “the nib against his thumb” (419). The reader seems to occupy a double-edged position in relation to this novel, then, at once possessed of the power that comes with total narrative knowledge—a knowledge that exceeds that of any single character, particularly the jailers—and forced by that same perspective to occupy the oppressive interiority of the cage.

The gaze, in the novel, actually takes more various and complex forms than can be adequately encompassed in Miller’s “panoptic vision.” Narrated in a shifting third-person that only occasionally breaks into the omniscient—in passages that, as I will discuss below, in fact challenge rather than confirm the hegemony of readerly perspective—the novel moves through a variety of spheres, each constituting its own form of binding, resulting in a readerly experience that oscillates between freedom and restriction. The first part of the novel is most strongly indicative of this: for the first eight chapters the narrative focus is on Teza’s cell, and this claustrophobic focalization immediately roots the narrative in the experience of imprisonment, particularly through an emphasis on the restriction of the gaze. The problem of vision arises early and is given only slightly less emphasis than the problem of food. And if he is kept from starvation by food packets from his mother, his starvation of the gaze is answered by another, more proximate, relationship. The teak coffin has only one window, set high in the wall:
The Chief Warden thinks Teza cannot see out of this narrowest of windows. In a manner of speaking, he is correct. The vent is too high. Even when Teza jumps he sees nothing save another fraction of the very high outer wall and a corrugated tin overhang. But the spider sees. He crawls the outer wall, up and up. From the top, the spider witnesses the whole city, the gold stupas, the green trees, the streets, millions of men and women, the lakes Inya and Kandawgyi, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s famous house on University Avenue, and his mother’s two-story flat, surrounded by laundry and orchids. Daw Sanda loves her orchids dearly.

The spider perceives all this and more, much more: the sky with its white-backed, blue-bottomed clouds full of rain, the horizon curving like a belly. The spider sees.

And Teza watches the spider. (15)

Part of the violence of the cage is that it has reduced Teza to a pure object of the gaze who cannot, in his turn, see. The spider allows Teza to regain his subjectivity and his connection to the world beyond his cell and the prison walls. The densely textured subjectivity that the prison attempts, through its violence, to stamp out is evoked through the things that the spider witnesses, from Teza’s beloved mother to sites of political and religious import. The gaze he levels at the spider is a gaze of witnessing, a gaze that looks to, and through the eyes of, the other to gain a perspective on a world he cannot see himself. The narrative’s early emphasis on the spider as Teza’s proxy for seeing a world from which he is barred serves as a model of the reader’s gaze onto the interior of the cage. Teza watches the spider, and the spider bears witness to a world that he cannot see; such is the relationship of the reader to Teza in his confinement.

Teza’s relationship to the spider is about dependence as much as love, and after he has been moved from his cell to the hospital he grieves its loss (172). But his relationship of
witnessing with the spider is not his only response to his vulnerability and confinement, just as
the spider is not the only creature with which he shares his cell. His other primary tactic for
survival comes from claiming the invisibility of the hidden subject behind the gaze, the
invisibility that usually belongs to those beyond the door of the teak coffin. Simone Drichel
describes invisibility in terms of “turning the violent gaze around and claiming the ‘gun’ for
oneself, that is, … becoming complicit with the violations carried out by the gaze” (29). Thus to
be invisible is to claim the “gaze of the hunter” (23). Through the exercise of this violent gaze,
the subject gains “full epistemic control … thus sealing it off against an alterity (a real otherness)
that could shatter its grip on the world” (32). Teza relies upon the violence of the “gaze of the
hunter” in order to survive the violence of the cage: “as long as he can do this terrible thing, he
can survive the terrible things they do to him” (Lizard 27). Ironically, his participation in various
forms of violence is revealed as a form of symbolic imprisonment. At the novel’s beginning he
cannot bring himself to extend compassion to his jailers: “He tries, but he cannot. He cannot get
out of the cage. None of them can get out of the cage” (64). By the end, he links his decision to
go on a hunger strike explicitly to his relinquishing of this anger and violence; he insists that it is
not a sign of “giving up” but of “ending the war”: “‘I can’t hate them anymore. I don’t hate
them,’” he tells Chit Naing (349). While Teza articulates his journey in terms of complete
surrender to his own vulnerability, when the reader first encounters him he is in fact sustained by
the violence that he will eventually reject.

The primary form this violence takes is his hunting and eating of the lizards in his cell.
The hunt, he tells himself, keeps him alive, not only through the protein it adds to his diet but
also through the “anticipation and physical prowess involved in stalking” (24). The
transformation that takes place between these opening scenes and the novel’s conclusion is
elucidated by Levinas’s description of the gaze: “The sky calls for a gaze other than that of a vision that is already an aiming and proceeds from need and to the pursuit of things. It calls for eyes purified of covetousness, a gaze other than that of the hunter with all his ruse, awaiting the capture” (God 163). When Teza surveys the interior of his cell with “eyes [that] have learned the different colors of reptile and wall, lizard skin and skin of man” (Lizard 14) he engages in a differentiation that is implicitly violent, through eyes “which are bound to their innate covetousness … and which have the ruse of hunters” (Levinas, God 165-66). But he hunts the lizards precisely because he cannot see the sky; after he has been moved to a hospital cell with a window, his desire for food and for the hunt is replaced by the sky, which is “mercifully blue” (202) and “like food” for his eyes (172): “He wonders if somewhere in the world grows a fruit whose flesh is the same intense blue. Heaven fruit, it’s called” (215).

The shift in Teza’s gaze, from the gaze of the hunter to the non-grasping gaze evoked by the “untouchable” sky (Levinas, God 163), can be mapped against the opening up of the novel’s focalization beyond Teza himself, an expansion that increases and accelerates throughout the novel. First it follows Teza’s server Sein Yun out of the teak coffin into the rest of the cage (72); then it spreads into Teza’s friend Chit Naing, the only character who comes and goes from the prison (80); then it encompasses Handsome, who is given his own textual interiority for the first time immediately after viciously beating Teza (151); and finally, only after Teza has been moved out of the teak coffin, it introduces readers to the boy, Zaw Gyi (177), whose perspective will eventually lead readers out of the prison. The implication that Teza’s indulgence in violence, from the killing of the lizards to his hatred for Handsome, keeps him in the cage of the prison, and his renunciation of this violence is what frees him, is supported at the level of narrative perspective. Once Teza is freed from the teak coffin and begins to practice the eight precepts,
which include abstaining from both violence and food after noon, the narrative is similarly freed from its boundedness to his perspective and begins to shift from character to character with increasing rapidity until, at moments, it seems to break into omniscience.

In the first part of the novel, “The Songbird” (referring to Teza’s nickname as a writer of protest songs), Teza’s perspective is the primary focus in seventeen of the twenty-three chapters, a narrative dominance that is interrupted by two equally-spaced breaks into the perspectives of other characters—Sein Yun and Chit Naing (chapters 9-11), then Handsome, Sein Yun, and Chit Naing (chapters 21-23). The experience of solitary confinement is thus reflected at the level of narrative, the reader as much imprisoned in Teza’s head and the claustrophobic confines of his world as Teza himself is. The second part of the novel, “Free El Salvador,” is named for the t-shirt Zaw Gyi frequently wears, and also alludes to the shift in narrative impetus from Teza’s survival to Zaw Gyi’s escape (before he knows the boy’s name, Teza nicknames him “Sabado,” which is how he says “Salvador” through his accent and broken jaw [274]). This section begins similarly to the first: while the narrative shifts primarily between Teza and Zaw Gyi, it does so on a chapter-by-chapter basis, maintaining a sense of focalized interiority within each chapter. As Teza makes his decision to free the boy from the cage and then give up his own life, however, the narrative explodes outward to take in more and more characters, shifting perspectives within chapters and single conversations, spending less time with Teza himself, even following Chit Naing out of the prison on occasion, until, at moments, it breaks into a perspective that transcends any particular character.

These narrative breaks disturb the interiority of the focalizing characters in a way that disrupts the experience of binding Hale associates with novel-reading. In fact, it is more in accord with D.A. Miller’s articulation of novels as panoptic, a direction in which The Lizard
Cage as a whole seems to trend as it moves from the binding of the opening chapters into the increasing perspectival mobility of the novel’s second half. The difference between the critical perspectives of Hale and D.A. Miller, which is also central to the artistic project of The Lizard Cage, is based upon the politics and ethics of knowing the other. For Hale, novels exert their ethical authority through their capacity to bind readers within the perspective of an other who maintains an autonomy beyond readerly comprehension and authorial control and who therefore cannot ever be fully known (“Aesthetics” 903-04). While Hale sees the reader as bound into a position of epistemological submission, Miller emphasizes instead a form of epistemological restriction. For Miller, the novel deprives readers of an “outside position” and thus undermines the possibility of challenging the novel’s “panoptic vision” (24). Although Miller’s work focuses on Dickens and the Victorian novel, his argument that narrative literature is complicit with Foucauldian regimes of power/knowledge is upheld by criticism on literature in the 21st century. Jodi Melamed, for example, argues that literature in the contemporary world functions as “a privileged tool for information retrieval” (140) that is central to “the training of transnational professional-managerial classes as an element of the technologies of subjectivity” (141). Literature thus provides knowledge about others as a means to manage and discipline those others: the novel remains complicit with the prison.

In The Lizard Cage, however, as the power/knowledge of the prison is undermined both by the intensifying affective involvement of characters like Zaw Gyi and Chit Naing and by the failure of Handsome or the Chief Warden to retrieve the missing pen, the increasingly all-encompassing perspective of the novel is associated not with the panopticon but with a form of empathy associated explicitly with Teza’s Buddhist practices. The narrative’s expansion through various perspectives and eventual knotting together of those perspectives, as well as its breaks
into pseudo-omniscience, argue for an interconnectivity without universalism and an empathy without ownership that, I believe, are both complicit with and resistant to the particular generic affordances of the novel as discussed by critics like Hale and Miller.

The novel thematizes the ethical centrality of becoming other overtly, encouraging a reading of its increasingly mobile narrative focalization as continuous with Teza’s ethical journey. This journey is again structured by his shifting relationship to the lizards in his cell. Initially they are characterized primarily by their difference, a difference that implicitly renders them killable: “The singer feels the small reptilian heart beat lightly against his human skin” before he kills it (16). The disposability of the lizard-as-other begins to shift after Teza has a dream in which his grandfather presents him with a handful of bones and insists that “‘Every lizard is a small naked man’” (114). In another dream that image is literalized when “a lizard, the skin already eaten off” transforms into “a very small human fetus” (139). From a difference that makes it available to violence, to a similarity and vulnerability that makes that violence unacceptable, Teza’s shifting understanding of lizards is a microcosmic ethical lesson that is vital but incomplete. He cannot fully internalize the lesson until he has undergone the process of becoming other, the most intensive form of affective engagement imaginable in the novel. In this final dream, he “dreams of himself from the outside,” lying on the floor of a temple, although he “knows he is still Teza” (324). As the dream progresses, however, this knowledge is destabilized:

How small he is! (Who am I?) The mind laughs, delighted by the discovery: he is clinging to the shoulder of the statue that faces the northern archway. He is the smallest man, his tiny hands scaled and clawed and four. (Who is that other one below, sleeping on the temple floor, he who loved his name?)
There is (*I am*) a lizard on the shoulder of the Buddha … (325)

Throughout the dream, his identity becomes more amorphous, shifting and spreading; as the temple collapses he wonders, “Am I the temple,” and after it has fallen: “(What am I now, my face against the stone?) He is outside as well as inside, watching. … Where is the lizard? Where is the boy, the jailer? (Where am I?) What have we become? … *We are the same life and death, the same fear, one flesh, our blood indistinguishable among these ruins*” (326). This dream, particularly in relation to the dreams that precede it, can be read as an artist’s statement for *The Lizard Cage* as a whole, echoing as it does the novel’s treatment of narrative focalization and its implicit connection between those narrative strategies and an ethics based on shared vulnerability and becoming other. Teza undergoes the experience that the implied reader does, beginning from a position of viewing from the outside while identifying closely with one perspective, then beginning to switch between perspectives, until the rapidity and amorphousness of that switching becomes such that the perspective verges on the omniscient, “outside as well as inside,” that views what is happening from “above” but is also deeply implicated in what is occurring below.

I read the novel’s moments of narrative breakage as extensions of Teza’s dreaming mind, a non-grasping gaze that can look down on events from above without taking on the violent implications of Miller’s “panoptic vision” or the guilty voyeurism that often accompanies exploitative reading practices (Hale, “Aesthetics” 904-05). These breaks are associated, by turns, with reading, vulnerability, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the other, linking these three things together in an escalating continuum of ethical border-crossing. In the first and most pronounced break, Zaw Gyi is sitting in his shack imagining that he is reading: “The boy holds the book and believes it: *I am reading I am reading*” (262). Illiterate but seduced by the idea of books that “are
full of the world,” the boy is not reading but is fantasizing about what reading might involve, the ways in which books might bring the chaotic world together into a sort of coherent whole:

In the flaring, shifting light, the damp pages tell the story of the good nat and its tree beside the stream, where the big lizard lives who is green but also gray; and of the singer who cannot sing but prays; and of the boy who holds the book and reads what’s not yet written while the rain falls and the small lizard talks and the candle burns and burns, its flame reaching out, like each of them, like every one of us, for the invisible air. (262)

In this passage literature becomes the force that can contain the boy’s world and give it meaning, but it also explicitly connects this fictional world-within-a-world to an unattributed “us” that breaks the fictional plane of the novel and implicates the reader in the relationships being generated. This “us” is characterized by the same “reaching out” for meaning that is exemplified in the boy’s obsession with the written word; the implied reader is called upon to share this understanding of literature as a form of interconnection.

This sense of the narrative breaks as invoking and implicating the implied reader carries through in the next two examples, less overt but significant when read in tandem. The chapter immediately following this meditation on reading returns to the perspective of Handsome, a character whose sadistic cruelty has thus far remained unexplained. Hovering for a moment in its omniscience, the narrative moves from Zaw Gyi to Handsome in a way that connects them while challenging the vilification of the jailer: “The boy is not the only child in the cage. He’s just the only one who looks like a child. The rest of them are hiding, inside the bodies of men” (263). In this chapter Handsome is revealed to be vulnerable, wounded, and profoundly unstable; he is shown as a child “in shock, shaking violently, milk teeth clacking together” (264), and as a man who believes in “the beautiful shock of the violent, righteous act, how it has the power to stun
and silence” (265). When later, after Zaw Gyi is molested and nearly raped by the vicious prison cook, the boy is described in his grief, the description reverberates with this earlier description of Handsome: “There are words in every tongue for grief [sic] terror broken but none so eloquent, so precise as this, the sound of a child who cannot breathe for weeping. And there is no cowardice so profound as the adult’s who cannot bear to hear it” (379). In both of these scenes the narrative voice distances itself to articulate what, for these characters, is unspeakable, a pain that has either been profoundly internalized or expressed in a language that no one is willing to hear. The reader can “hear” this weeping and is challenged not to turn away from the painful responsibility that follows from the vulnerability of the other; this responsibility does not simply encompass Zaw Gyi, however, but extends to Handsome as well. When Teza extends his compassion to the boy as much as to his own jailers, he enacts what the novel advocates via its shifts in narrative perspective.

The final marked moment of narrative breakage I will discuss moves from interconnectedness (learned from reading) through implication (of shared vulnerability) into the decision to act. It occurs, appropriately, in the moment when Senior Chailer Chit Naing, Teza’s friend and secret ally, finally overcomes his fear of drawing attention to himself by intervening between Handsome and Zaw Gyi. Handsome has destroyed Zaw Gyi’s shack in search of the elusive pen and is threatening to interrogate the boy. For the first time, Chit Naing risks becoming an object of suspicion in order to publicly defend the vulnerable other:

Many months later, after his court-martial and interrogation, after the beatings, the kneeling in glass, after the vat of excrement where they leave him for an entire day and night, with maggots crawling into his nose and ears, burrowing at his closed mouth, into the corners of his eyes, he will be transferred to a prison in the north, where he will have
plenty of time to think. In his cell, pondering, remembering all that went before, he will recognize this as the defining moment in which he could have chosen between yes and no. (308)

This breakage is marked by a shift not in pronoun or perspective but in grammatical tense: it breaks out of the present-tense\(^{54}\) of the rest of the novel to look into a future that none of the characters could possibly know but to which the reader is privy, much like the location of the missing pen. The reader knows what the jailers and police and military intelligence will come to know; the reader is thus put in the position of power and knowledge, a position from which violence is easily exerted. It is important, therefore, that this passage emphasizes choice. In her work on empathy and the novel, Keen problematizes the simplistic link between reading, empathy, and altruistic action, pointing out that there is no reason to believe that an empathetic experience of reading actually translates into a meaningful shift in politics (107). And while *The Lizard Cage*, as a text, cannot itself contribute to this theoretical impasse, this passage does model the shift from empathy to action by implying a failure of the former in the absence of the latter. Each of the moments in which the narrative breaks out of single character focalization into a form of omniscience centres upon the individual’s capacity to care for the vulnerable other, whether that caring takes the form of imaginative identification in reading or of sacrificing one’s own life for the other. These moments of breakage thus constitute an implicit argument about the capacity of the novel to break readers out of the cage of self-concern and self-preservation into a state of radical interconnection with vulnerable and wounded others.

\(^{54}\) The only other exception to the novel’s use of the present-tense is the prologue, set beyond the prison walls, which is narrated in the past-tense despite occurring after the events of the novel.
The Novel, the Reader, and the Border

Much of my argument about the ethics of *The Lizard Cage*—in terms of responsibility before the vulnerability of the other, radical non-violence as a means of escaping the literal and metaphorical cage, and the inadequacy of compassion without action—relies upon the affordances of the novel, particularly the experience of restriction that results from narrative perspective and characterological autonomy. The reader, in encountering both the “social other” of characters and “the literary text as itself a life,” experiences “a felt encounter with alterity that is … outside systematic discipline” and thus leads to “a true experience of how possibility is produced in and through the operation of social constraint” (Hale, “Aesthetics” 902-03). Black extends this account of the particular affordances of the novel as genre to include its “greater levels of commercial consumption and circulation,” through which “novels often project an air of accessibility that enhances their ability to shape readers’ perceptions about social life” (9). It is in this capacity, as an accessible point of entry to the alterity of the other, that the novel as middlebrow institution interests me, particularly insofar as it “oscillat[es] between education and feeling” (92). This kind of novel is explicitly complicit with the production of knowledge about the other. With its overt interest in educating a Canadian readership about what is happening elsewhere in the world, *The Lizard Cage* invokes Melamed’s concerns about the connection between “literary training” and the “disciplinary and civilizing/disqualifying regimes that manage populations cut off from (or exploited within) circuits of global capitalism” (141). These questions of the ethics of genre, the pedagogical function of literature, and the complicity of middlebrow literature with neocolonial regimes of power/knowledge are pertinent to all of the books discussed in this dissertation. *The Lizard Cage*, however, through its intensive use of
character interiority, most clearly raises the question of how becoming other is practiced in, and read through, the novel.

Black focuses on border-crossing novels that model what she calls “a crowded self,” for whom “the borders of the self jostle against the edges of others, and this mediating position allows for the contours of each to become more porous and flexible” (47). While Black conceives of these novels as border-crossing, the image of ethical relation between self and other that she offers is not of becoming other or radically entering the perspective of the other, but of bumping up against borders and, in the process, perhaps rendering them more porous. Vulnerability is key in Black’s articulation, both the vulnerability of the other and the resulting vulnerability of the self. In novels where the stakes are particularly high, the crowded self must “give up more and more room to the needs of others” (136). Black’s image of increasing crowdedness and vulnerability is a helpful critical lens for understanding what is happening in The Lizard Cage, as the reader’s constrained encounter with particular others expands into a rapidly shifting and at times totally unmoored perspective. The reader is called upon to become an increasingly crowded self, to give up more space to the other, to “surrender to all kinds of voices … despite the dangers that such surrender may entail” (246). Black never claims that such a readerly experience lifts the reader above complicity with the potential objectification or fetishization of the other, but as I have already argued, the desire to escape from complicity altogether is paradoxical to the kind of urgent ethical agenda that shapes a novel like The Lizard Cage. Instead, the reader is both implicated in, and given the opportunity to reject, the “carceral restraints” (D.A. Miller x) of the novel, which reproduce the same constraints in society.

Both The Lizard Cage and The Border Surrounds Us thematize the ethical responsibility that emerges from an encounter with the vulnerability of the other. But whereas the latter
hesitates at the borders between self and other, the former constructs these borders as increasingly porous. In this respect its form matches its content: the characters’ journeys toward different forms of borderlessness are matched by the novel’s increasingly expanded perspective, through which the reader shifts from being imprisoned in Teza’s teak coffin to being liberated from the cage and from the self-binding of a single character’s perspective. These journeys include Teza’s radical compassion or metta, through which he imagines himself into the positions of the lizards and his own jailers; Zaw Gyi’s literal liberation from the cage through the actions of various prisoners and jailers; and Chit Naing’s gradual commitment to a political cause that will destroy him, motivated by his love for Teza and for Teza’s mother Sanda. In the end perhaps the most profound sacrifice is not Teza’s relinquishment of his hatred but his surrender of his own love for the boy, Zaw Gyi: “how this skinlessness hurts him, this loss of everything: bathing, clean water, the boy, shy and lively at once, talking about food now … The blade is the sound of the boy’s voice. It makes a deep wound because Teza knows he’ll never hear it again” (407). This relationship of deep love and non-possession, of a responsibility to the other so profound that it extends to the sacrificial wounding of the self, a love that binds the self in order to set the other free, is the paradigmatic image of ethics offered by the novel. The final escape of Zaw Gyi from the cage, marking the novel’s conclusion, suggests his figurative escape from the gaze of the reader and a final reminder of the limits of that gaze, which can go no further than the novel allows it. Teza’s loss of Zaw Gyi becomes the reader’s loss. If the reader as distant witness is invited to participate in the ethical relations generated by the novel, or to step into the perspectives of the characters in an act of becoming other that seems to invade the alterity of the other, the final outcome is not a fantasy of complete readerly mobility but an experience of loss, restriction, and implication.
Conclusion

From Readings to Readers

“Through this character’s eyes, we learn more about people in this African nation, struggling with day-to-day tasks amid political, economic, cultural and religious tensions—both in their native country and abroad as refugees.”
(Karen [Wichita, KS] on Sweetness in the Belly)

“I really liked this book and it taught me a lot about Burma/Myanmar. I really know very little about the political situation there.”
(Danika [Seattle, WA] on The Lizard Cage)

“Although Pol Pot and the Cambodian genocide are subjects of which I’ve heard, reading this book has inspired me to learn more about this time. It haunts me to think that this fictional account took place as I was born and grew up in my own safe, sheltered world.”
(Karen on The Disappeared)

Throughout this dissertation I have argued for an understanding of contemporary Canadian literature as a site through which Canadian readers can imagine their ways into affectively charged transnational relationships, learning about other cultures and addressing the problem of distant suffering while also fostering a sense of self as compassionate and cosmopolitan. This argument has been rooted primarily in close readings of how the texts themselves grapple with the problem of representing the lives and deaths of distant others, and a comparison of these representational strategies with the paratextual frames through which the texts circulate. These readings in turn produce their own productive tensions, primarily what I have glossed as the tension between veridical discourse and the textual resistance of the other, as well as the tension inherent in the multiple significations of complicity. As a concept, complicity productively alludes to the sense of contemporary subjects as enfolded within a global community that generates responsibility between geographically distant others while also undermining the belief
in the possibility of non-involvement in the suffering of others upon which the humanitarian model of intervention is premised. Complicity thus points to the difference between the circulation of sentimental literature via middlebrow institutions that Klein describes and the contemporary function of similar institutions. Whereas Klein recounts “the pleasures of transforming strangers into friends” (2), the work of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly betrays anxieties about the politics of representation, the production of foreign cultures as consumable tropes of cultural difference, and the ethical responsibility to bear witness to the suffering of the other, that refute such a seemingly innocuous description of border crossing.

I have referred throughout to implied readerships ranging from Waring’s “market readers—tourists, book browsers in the neo-imperialist marketplace” (464) to the deeply implicated reader described in Burmese Lessons who “go[es] inside a new world and cannot resist it” (11). This emphasis on the overdetermined ways in which reading communities are hailed or paratextually inscribed is key to my understanding of Canadian literature as a middlebrow institution that functions to teach Canadians about their place in the world. Recent literary scholarship has confirmed the importance of understanding how literature circulates and signifies. The Beyond the Book project’s work on “mass reading events” brings together literary and communication studies to examine “contemporary cultures of reading” both in terms of “the motivations, pleasures and activities of readers” and “the ideas about readers and reading promoted by institutions” (“About”). In “Mixing It Up,” project directors Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo call for “a nuanced account of contemporary shared reading as a situated social practice,” rooted in analyses of “the relations between different agents—readers, event organizers, institutions including libraries and schools, publishers, and the media” (234). A similar account of reader reviews, public and online events, and institutional treatments would
offer a much richer portrait of how Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly’s work engages with and complicates the problem of distant suffering. To elucidate the potential value of such an approach, I turn in this conclusion to Goodreads as one site among many through which real, rather than implied, reading communities might be encountered.

The epigraphs above draw from a small sampling of the reader reviews posted to Goodreads, an online social media site that encourages users to review and share favourite books, and a rich resource for mining reader responses to texts. Sweetness in the Belly has 400 user reviews, Burmese Lessons 45, The Beauty of Humanity Movement 256, The Disappeared 265, and The Lizard Cage 150. Combined, these reviews have the potential to provide a portrait of reading communities that cross national borders, and of how literature as a middlebrow institution is actually interpreted and transmitted by communities of readers. What becomes apparent in even a cursory scan of these reviews is the heterogeneity of reading communities. It is noteworthy, for example, that the three quotations above come from American Goodreads users, suggesting how online reading communities challenge academic categorizations of literature by nation. Also of interest is the discrepancy between implied and actual readerships. User “Destinia (Toronto, Canada),” for example, who identifies herself as a Muslim, expresses concern that other readers will take Sweetness in the Belly as a guide to Islam:

The Islam in her book is not the real Islamic teaching. It’s heavily mixed with cultural traditions, but still labeled ‘Islam’. I can imagine the readers say “Oh, now I know more about Islam” but are actually misled. True, it’s not Miss Gibbs responsibility [sic] (why would you learn about a religion from someone who is not a believer again?), but with all the precise details she showed of the traditions and habits, one might assume that she had
done a lot of research about Islam and that her portrayal of Islam is valid. So all those mistaken information has left me dissatisfied.

This reviewer both engages with the novel’s purported status as veridical discourse and disrupts its veracity with an alternative narrative of cultural identity, at once confirming these books’ circulation as a form of access to the truth about a foreign culture and undermining the legitimacy of any such claim.

Simply taking a closer look at Goodreads as a reading community exemplifies how the study of contemporary reading cultures complicates the concepts with which I have been grappling. As Lisa Nakamura points out in a recent article on “socially networked reading,” Goodreads is “exemplary” of the Web 2.0 model, at once “grandly imperial, inviting participants to comment, buy, blog, rank, and reply through a range of devices, networks, and services,” and “a tightly controlled visual regime” reminiscent of the sleek blandness of the box-store (239). As such, it is able to both “remediate earlier reading cultures where books were displayed in the home as signs of taste and status” (240) and tap into the “the new regime of controlled consumerism” under which readers-cum-users “are both collecting” a personalized bookshelf of literature “and being collected” as repositories of feeling and opinion (241). If globalization challenges the binaries of distance and proximity, sameness and difference, then networked reading practices challenge the binary of touristic literary consumption in which “we” consume representations of “them” insofar as readers are themselves consumed—by other readers and by the site itself. Similarly, the representational bind of Orientalism is problematized by the introduction of readers, like “Destinia (Toronto, Canada),” who affiliate themselves in different ways with the culture being represented, a problematization equally pertinent to the paradigm of becoming other. After all who, on a site of “over six million users” from across the world
(Nakamura 239), constitutes the other? To bear witness to the suffering of distant others via the socially networked documentation of one’s affective response is to perform witnessing as public identity formation. The public advertisement of reading preferences as a means of establishing cultural capital is certainly not new: it is part of the middlebrow’s emphasis on aspiration and self-improvement. But the form that this advertisement takes on Goodreads is a distinctly contemporary one, both globalized and highly individualized, promoting “cultures of sharing” (243) while endorsing a variety of reader responses, from “vernacular literary criticism” to “affective responses” (241).

A more robust methodological turn toward the reading communities that Goodreads exemplifies would pose a further challenge to the disjunction between middlebrow literature and the literary turn to ethics critiqued by Black. John Guillory offers such a critique through his differentiation between the practices of “professional reading” and “lay reading.” Each has its own “very particular features,” professional reading being a labour-intensive, “disciplinary,” and “vigilant” practice (31), while lay reading is “practiced at the site of leisure,” “motivated by the experience of pleasure,” and “largely … solitary” (32). Because these two practices of reading are, for Guillory, “incommensurab[le],” literary critics “resort to a political fantasy in order to describe [literary study’s] effects in the world as in any ascertainable way transformative” (33). While we cannot and should not expect lay reading to mirror professional reading, “it is also very unfortunate for our society that leisured reading so often falls to the level of immediate consumption” (33), a state of affairs that Guillory links directly to “the polarization of reading practices in our society” such that it is increasingly difficult to find a space for “intermediary practices of reading” (34). The various responses on display on Goodreads suggest just such an intermediary space. Users demonstrate a range of reading practices, from the straightforward
collection of titles on a virtual bookshelf to sustained critical engagement that resembles Guillory’s vigilant reading. The site also undermines his link between lay reading and solitude by placing readers within a vast and networked community, even enabling the location of “friends” through “tools that let users gauge taste compatibility with other users” (Nakamura 240). However “egocentric” these networks (240), they also provide the space for “[l]ively, provocative, and often surprisingly personal conversations” between users (241).

As a microcosm of contemporary reading practices, Goodreads offers a corrective to political fantasies of literature’s potential role in society. Instead it is a space in which the function of middlebrow reading as “a practice on the self” with “the potentiality for … ‘self-improvement’” (Guillory 39)—and as the forging of border-crossing relationships in which readers can participate (Klein 7)—is on display. Guillory’s definition of middlebrow reading as a pleasure-motivated “choice between goods” (41) is an appropriate but insufficient description of multifaceted contemporary reading communities. The members of these communities cannot be reduced to tropes such as the idle Western consumer, the cosmopolitan global citizen, the educated neoliberal elite, the sentimental woman reader, or the distant witness moved to intervention through the experience of reading or viewing the suffering of others. These communities instead illustrate the impossible bind of complicity. Readers are implicated in a globalized network that challenges the concept of the distant other. At the same time, my epigraphs suggest the durability of the discourses of distant suffering, through which the ethical and compassionate self is produced at the expense of the foreign other.

Perhaps most interestingly, the affective register of reader responses to the work of Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly—indeed, the very existence of a site like Goodreads—points toward the ongoing popularity of long-form prose narratives, despite various predictions that the era of
online networked reading communities would be accompanied by a shift toward non-linear and decentralized literature (Nakamura 242). This suggests that the inundation of information about distant others that critics like Ong link to “compassion fatigue” (2) does not, in fact, lessen interest in texts that represent foreign sites, nor does the marketing of these texts toward an implied Western readership dissuade readers from other cultural contexts. The desire for new forms of sentimental literature that offer an image of the “self-in-relation” by upholding the possibility of border-crossing bonds facilitated through relationships of exchange (Klein 14) seems to only be strengthened by an increasing sense of the globe as fundamentally interconnected and thus of the self as complicit in the happiness and suffering of others. Instead of turning away from middlebrow literature in favour of “more sophisticated novels” (Black 71), it behooves literary critics to attend to different modes and genres of representation that offer valuable alternate lenses onto the function of Canadian literature in the contemporary moment.
Works Cited


Coleman, Daniel. “From Canadian Trance to TransCanada: White Civility to Wry Civility in the CanLit Project.” Kamboureli and Miki 25-43.


---. “The First and Last Country: some notes on writing and living the foreign.” Kamboureli 198-204.


---. “‘We are the other, the other is us’”: Kim Echlin Interviewed by Smaro Kamboureli and Hannah McGregor.” *Kamboureli* 132-49.


---. “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.” Felman and Laub 204-84.


---. “‘Throw yourself into the deep end’: Camilla Gibb Interviewed by Smaro Kamboureli and Hannah McGregor.” Kamboureli 261-77.


---. “The Limits of the Ethical Turn: Troping towards the Other, Yann Martel, and *Self*." Goldman and Kyser 937-61.


Mahrouse, Gada. “Questioning Efforts That Seek to ‘Do Good’: Insights from Transnational Solidarity Activism and Socially Responsible Tourism.” Razack et al. 169-90.


Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism.


Thobani, Sunera. “White innocence, Western supremacy: The role of Western feminism in the ‘War on Terror.” Razack et al. 127-46.

---. “Gender and Empire: Veilomentaries and the War on Terror.” *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*. Eds. Paula Chakravartty and Yuezhi Zhao.


