

# Necropolitical Assemblages and Cross- Border Ethics in Hiromi Goto's *Darkest Light*

The assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a "sympathy." It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.

—Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*

As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency.

—Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*

As time, as space, seemed to stretch, elastic and ungoverned, uncertainty gnawed inside Gee's chest. . . . A shift . . . perception slipping, between physical and emotional . . .

—Hiromi Goto, *Darkest Light*

The so-called war on terror, which has become one of the many perverse outcomes of 9/11, has not only reified geopolitical frontiers in the form of intensified border security worldwide, but has also generated new biopolitical borders in the form of a tightened governance of migrant populations and their bodies (Kuntsman and Miyake). Racialized populations, more pervasively after September 11, are systematically delayed and sometimes detained by border patrols that subject their bodies to various surveillance mechanisms under the name of security and protection. As social anthropologist and gender theorist Henrietta L. Moore aptly puts it, "Technologies of security and surveillance record bodily affects, and deploy neural imaging, iris recognition and a host of other techniques designed to distinguish those who are acceptable from those who are not—a biopolitics of racism that goes well beneath the skin" (173). These *necropolitical assemblages*, as I call them, have shattered our ethical approximation to the

world, particularly in this climate of global crisis. The term “necropolitics,” as Achille Mbembe contends, signals how the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides in the power to dictate *who* may live and who must die (11). Recent interventions in the contested field of queer studies, however, stress that today’s social fabric is characterized not only by who might live or die, but also by *the conditions* in which populations live or die (Puar). Within the necropolitical realm, I would add that death is often capitalized as a productive source of capitalist intervention. In an attempt to interrogate and counteract these new forms of necropower, many contemporary voices in the humanities and social sciences are opening up spaces of socio-political critique that gesture instead towards designing new ontologies and new affective routes to reshape self-other relations by finding novel commonalities and shared materialities (Braidotti; Moore).

Within the field of contemporary TransCanLit, feminist and queer writers such as Dionne Brand, Hiromi Goto, and Larissa Lai, among others, are assembling an alternative literary archive where material and symbolic borders are problematized with ethical repercussions (Brydon; Kamboureli and Miki). Borrowing Sneja Gunew’s words, these authors are charting “a course through the minefields of our transnational existence, illustrating new and flexible subjectivities that are surely our best chance for ethical and proximate survival amidst unequal global mobilities” (43). For the last two decades, Hiromi Goto’s oeuvre has shared the preoccupation expressed by contemporary cultural and political theorists about how systems of power operate on the bodies of certain vulnerable populations through violence, torture, and other necropolitical assemblages, particularly in their current manifestations as processes of uneven globalization, incarceration, institutional racism, and surveillance technologies.<sup>1</sup> Goto’s speculative worlds, however, not only invite readers to think critically about the ethical implications behind those necropolitical impulses described above, but also to creatively envision alternative forms of relationality and affect. Drawing on Deleuzian-inflected theories of assemblage, together with recent interventions in the field of affect studies, this article examines Goto’s novel *Darkest Light* (2012) in terms of what I refer to as a multitude of *necropolitical assemblages*. Depicted as deviant and monstrous, the human and non-human beings portrayed in the novel are often deprived of political rights and thus forced to live and die in the social, economic, and cultural borderlands of our public world. The dispersion of temporal, spatial, and other material borders in *Darkest Light*, however, signals how these vulnerable populations, despite being stripped of

biopolitical currency, are capable of activating change. In this essay, I argue that Goto's novel proposes a *cross-border ethic* as a strategy to counteract those necropolitical assemblages that govern contemporary societies, while simultaneously advocating for alternative logics of embodiment, affect, and ethical intervention.

Marketed as a young adult novel, *Darkest Light* sets off with a similar premise to that posed in its companion piece, *Half World* (2010). For a long time, there were three Realms that functioned in equilibrium, sustaining balance for all living beings: the Realm of Flesh, the Realm of Half World, and the Realm of Spirit. After death, creatures would awake in Half World only to relive their greatest trauma. Once fear and pain were transcended, beings would be ready to momentarily become spirit, untroubled by material cares, until once again, they had to return to the Realm of Flesh. Without a clear reason, this time of wholeness was interrupted and the three Realms were severed from each other. As a result of being endlessly forced to experience extreme forms of physical and emotional suffering, the creatures that were trapped in Half World became monstrous figures. The Realm of Half World is therefore an affective space where the boundaries between life and death blur, giving way to deviant bodies that are intriguingly capable of both philanthropic actions and ethically questionable acts, such as cannibalism and mutilation. Terror, fear, and pain circulate in this necropolitical space, shaping the public and personal relations between its inhabitants. When the three Realms were united, the wholeness was sustained by the interconnections between the different parts of the system. As such, the three Realms worked as an ethico-affective assemblage. In his new approach to social ontology, philosopher Manuel De Landa explains how the main theoretical alternative to organic totalities is what Gilles Deleuze calls assemblages, which are understood as historically specific “wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*” (10). These assemblages have material and expressive components, together with territorializing and deterritorializing axes. De Landa insists that assemblages are characterized by a mixed heterogeneity that allows the parts that contain them to be autonomous: “Relations of exteriority also imply that the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute a whole” (11). And yet, the autonomy of the parts does not exclude the multiple interactions or “intra-actions” with the whole. In other words, wholes are more than the sum of their parts. Significantly, when the three separate Realms in the novel became radically independent, they immediately lost

connection with the whole. It is in this moment of broken connectivity that the assemblage of *Half World* collapses. De Landa explains how

the postulation of a world as a seamless web of reciprocal action, or as an integrated totality of functional interdependencies, or as a block of unlimited universal interconnections, has traditionally been made in opposition to linear causality as the glue holding together a mechanical world. (19)

And in this world characterized by assemblages of reciprocity, chance and risk play a crucial role. *Darkest Light* cogently illustrates how Goto engages with the need to explore the unpredictability of today's unevenly globalized world, particularly in the characterization of the main (anti)-hero and the portrayal of non-normative bodies, affects, and temporalities.

Goto's earlier novel, *Half World*, portrays a teenage girl called Melanie who goes through a series of tribulations to save her mother's life and reunite the three Realms. Melanie fights the despotic tyrant Mr. Glueskin, a monstrous creature who rules Half World, and who, unexpectedly, has a body that is able to reproduce. Taking Mr. Glueskin's baby with her, "a Half World infant born to Life" (4), Melanie succeeds in her task and returns to the Realm of Flesh alive. *Darkest Light* is set some years later. The baby is now a problematic sixteen-year old called Gee, who lives with old Ms. Wei, the lesbian librarian who has a crucial role in Goto's *Half World*. Reserved and odd, Gee was unofficially adopted by Melanie and Ms. Wei, now referred to as Big Sister and popo/grandmother respectively. Echoing the character of Miranda in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002),<sup>2</sup> Gee's body repulses people as if it gave off "a kind of smell" (19) that keeps him isolated from the community, thus crippling his identity and initially preventing him from establishing any sustainable affective relationship: "With his irises as dark as his pupils, almost everyone's reaction to them lingered somewhere between fear and disgust. What with his pale, pale skin and his dark eyes, he knew he repelled people somehow. And this knowledge had formed him, too" (18). Not only does his body become a source of abjection, but also his very existence seems to be saturated by the circulation of negative affect: "A wave of guilt lapped at Gee's consciousness. Was it his fault that they were so isolated? Was it his fault that his popo didn't have a girlfriend? That Older Sister never came home?" (31). These "darker feelings," as he calls them, are located at the core of his subjective and bodily experience, while simultaneously affecting his encounters with others. Gee develops a relationship with Cracker, a troublesome self-identified queer Neo-Goth teenage girl who suffers from a heart problem, which

brings the representation of disability into the narrative. Cracker's potential vulnerability thus further associates her with Gee in that their bodies are depicted as non-normative in related ways. A defender of queer justice, as she explains, Cracker feels some familiarity with Gee that prompts her to help and accompany him in his quest back to the necropolitical space of Half World. In his journey, Gee also encounters an enormous cat that has loyally been popo's guardian and life companion. The cat's task is now to aid Gee in his search by leading him into the truth of his origins in Half World: "The past will always try to catch up with you, no matter how far you flee. You cannot run away from yourself. . . . The past is inside you already" (105). Gee will then need to come to terms with the fact that trauma, pain, and suffering are not only feelings that reside inside him, but also forms of affect that circulate and shape the spaces he occupies.

The portrayal of Half World as a wasteland of death and destruction brings the concept of necropolitical assemblage to the forefront of the analysis. As Deleuze and Guattari claim:

On a first, horizontal axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand it is a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, and intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand, it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then, on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both *territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away. (88)

Constantly immersed in the sound of bombing, the space depicted in *Darkest Light* is constantly deterritorialized and reterritorialized by the reiteration of death and the repetition of negative affects such as suffering and trauma: "Sometimes explosions shook the air. . . . The air was heavy with the reek of raw sewage, decaying meat and smoky fires, a distant droning and roaring like an enormous factory. . . . As time, as space, seemed to stretch, elastic and ungoverned, uncertainty gnawed inside Gee's chest" (214-15). The portrayal of Half World as a space of death evokes images of current war zones across the globe, where chaos prevails and humanity is scarce. Significantly, matter, space, and time become elastic parts of this assemblage of necropolitical flows that lack government, resulting in multiple forms of disorientation in the novel: maps are useless in this "illogical" and "irrational" space, as Gee calls it, given that none of them offer the same directions. Each creature has designed its own map according to its own experiences and, as a result, all maps are different. Consequently, this unknown territorial assemblage cannot be mapped, since it is constantly

subjected to processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. One of the first things that Gee and Cracker notice when they enter this new world is that normative spatial structures are systematically resisted: “He took one more step down to join her, yet when the ball of his foot touched the rock surface, he had the oddest sensation that he’d just climbed upward. He wobbled with confusion” (139). Echoing M. C. Escher’s graphic work *Relativity* (1953), normal laws of gravity do not seem to apply in this landscape, thus exacerbating Gee’s and Cracker’s bodily and spatial disorientation. Known for his depiction of impossible objects such as the Penrose triangle, Escher’s work offers some intriguing connections with Goto’s portrayal of impossible subjects and impossible materialities. Beyond mathematics and scientific interpretations, what an impossible object creates, at a basic level, are feelings of ambiguity and incredulity in the beholder. When the impossible becomes visible then a feeling of disorientation follows, affecting systems of knowledge and values. Cracker and Gee are systematically perplexed at the population inhabiting Half World; impossible creatures with monstrous bodies and yet, human behaviours.

Following De Landa’s insights, assemblages have an expressive segment impregnated by bodies, actions, and affects that are intertwined, always in constant relation and reaction to one another. Arguably, Goto addresses the ethical implications of this porosity and malleability of corporeal and affective boundaries in the novel, particularly in the depiction of human and non-human bodies as complex cross-border assemblages. After an initial prologue, *Darkest Light* introduces two inhabitants of Half World: Ilanna, half human female and half eel, and Karu, half human male and half bird. Hungry, these monstrous characters wander the dark streets of this destroyed territory, searching for food and engaging in conversation about the troubles of their times: “The edges of her Half World *wavered*. A flicker between solid and immaterial. Ilanna shuddered. Clenched her will, seized it, and her world held solid once more. Her cycle was calling her back” (7). Feeling desperate without her mentor and lover, the gruesome Mr. Glueskin, Ilanna senses change in the horizon; she feels the arrival of her beloved messiah. This kind of intuitive knowledge subtly associates her with Gee, which complicates the classification of Goto’s novel in Manichean terms, thus blurring the boundaries between good and evil. Interestingly, the complex embodiment of these creatures also problematizes the borders of corporeality with a number of ethical repercussions. In the collection of essays *Thinking through the Skin* (2001), contributors from different

disciplinary backgrounds look at how skin is lived both as a boundary and a point of connection. As editors Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey claim in the introductory chapter,

These diverse approaches to thinking about the skin as a boundary-object, and as the site of exposure or connectedness, invite the reader to consider how the borders between bodies are unstable and how such borders are already crossed by differences that refuse to be contained on the “inside” or the “outside” of bodies. (2)

Reading the skin as *bodyscape* certainly resonates in Goto's *Darkest Light*, particularly in the portrayal of Ilanna's body as a body that leaks: “The wet fabric of her dress clung to her icy flesh, seawater streaming down her body, leaving a wet trail behind her. Perpetually” (7). Note how the materiality of the clothes fuses with her half-animal half-human skin, systematically dissolving body boundaries. As a result, Karu seems to be hesitant about Ilanna's physical body and behaviour; he remains close to her and yet, his body reacts to the stickiness of the eels: “Karu shuddered. Ilanna could see the human skin on his arms pimpling with revulsion and longing” (9). In line with Ahmed and Stacey's insights, Karu's simultaneous abjection and desire points to the paradoxical ways in which affect circulates between human and non-human subjects. By stressing the porosity of the boundaries of corporeality and affect, *Darkest Light* begins to formulate a cross-border ethic that interrogates how bodies shape and are shaped by other bodies, while simultaneously being involved, and at times complicit, in the circulation of affective economies of oppression and dominance. The eels in Ilanna's body, for instance, are a threatening presence not only to Karu but to Ilanna herself; if they do not get fed regularly, she risks being consumed by them. At the same time, Ilanna engages in cannibalism, to Karu's disgust, not just to satiate her needs but to feed her eels and, more importantly, because she was told by Mr. Glueskin that eating other Half World creatures extended your own cycle: “What does it matter anyway, bird, beast or human. Once eaten, they all return to the start of their Half World trauma once more” (14). Her justification is based on the fact that these beings are already dead so, in a way, she is not actually killing them. I would argue that the narrative is here indirectly asking readers to think carefully about the ethical implications of our actions while avoiding an anthropocentric view of the affective relations between human and non-human populations. Moreover, the novel resists offering a simplistic moral lesson by further complicating Ilanna's characterization: she is not just a perpetrator but also a victim, in this case, of the actions of a man. In a horrific act of betrayal, her

lover had murdered her by throwing her into the sea, where other creatures feasted on her body:

The eels reached her first, to tear the flesh from her arms, to eat her tongue. . . . She had woken in the Half World sea, even the stripped bones of her arms gone, and in their place two large eels attached to her shoulders. Where she once had a tongue, a small eel was fixed on the root. She had still been tied to the anchor. There Ilanna remained, eaten half alive, eternally, by flounders, skates, eels and octopi. . . . She cycled through betrayal and death, betrayal and death, until she knew nothing else. (8)

The brutal dismemberment of Ilanna's body, and her subsequent suffering, place her in a position of vulnerability and precariousness, which further prompts readers to consider the porosity of bodily and affective borders, together with the socio-political and ethical implications of this permeability for human and non-human populations.

Ilanna's ethical ambivalence is subtly shared by Gee. Initially depicted as a reserved teenager who loves and helps his grandmother in their little store, he nonetheless hides an unidentified emotion that breeds inside him:

When he was very little he didn't know what the feeling was called, but he always knew it was there, and sometimes it would flare up with the darkest light, so much so that he'd be filled with trembling. He never knew if this trembling was fear or excitement. He did not want to look at it so very closely. (17)

Note that trembling seems to be a physical reaction to the affective response of both fear and excitement. And yet, the boundaries between the bodily and the affective reactions are blurred with regards to the impossible causality between them, as affect theorists claim. Brian Massumi, for instance, explains how "Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the *affective fact* of the matter" (54). Significantly, Gee's body anticipates a future threat that does not come from elsewhere but from within. Gee's narrative journey then, in similar ways to Sayuri's in Hiromi Goto's *The Water of Possibility* (2002), not only involves the crossing of a series of geographical boundaries, but also the interrogation of several corporeal, ethical, and affective borders. Gee's body challenges normative conceptualizations of embodiment in that it is composed of both organic and other kinds of materialities. Craving to be normal, he initially resists the unknown possibilities that his own body seems to offer. In an early episode in the novel, Gee's body begins to act with an extreme form of agency that is stronger than his will. Instead of avoiding trouble, as his grandmother had raised him, Gee's body takes over: "Minute cracks, spreading outward, finally



weakening, a howling rage bursting through the seams. Roiling, swelling with sickening stench, sour, mildewed and noxious” (68). Notice how his bodily response is also an affective one, where rage materializes through the very porosity of his corporeality. Suddenly, his body radically transforms:

The skin from Gee’s palm had spread, webbed, stretching thin between his fingers, white and elastic. Fingers, palm, elongated and pliant, his hand covered the boy’s entire face, wrapping around half his skull to tenderly cover both ears. Gee could feel the loose skin flap in and out of the boy’s open mouth as he desperately sucked for air. (69)

With grotesque spectacularity, the materiality of Gee’s body acquires an extreme form of power that can potentially kill him. As described earlier with regards to Ilanna’s body, Goto depicts certain forms of corporeality that threaten to destroy their own material bodies.

The monstrous bodies depicted in *Darkest Light* spread, expand, and contort in unexpected ways and as such, they cannot be contained, controlled, or managed. In this way, I claim, they become assemblages of queer trans-corporeality.<sup>3</sup> Intriguingly, when Ilanna crosses the gate into the Realm of Flesh searching for Gee, one of her eels betrays the other one by offering it as a toll. The eel’s mutilated body still functions despite having removed one of its pseudo prosthetic-organic limbs. Trying to escape, Gee and Cracker then have to pay the toll as well, in this case, to enter Half World. To their surprise, Gee does not hesitate and bites off his own finger:

His teeth should have met the resistance of bone. But they did not. They cut through his finger as if it were made of Plasticine. His mouth dropped open. The digit fell to his feet. Gee stared at his hand. No blood. No pain. His flesh was white all the way through—as though his matter was not flesh, was not human. (126-27)

Seconds later, his skin begins to stretch, replacing the missing finger with a new pinkie. Gee’s body not only cuts across the human vs. non-human divide, but it also crosses material and affective borders. Feeling no pain or other forms of physical suffering grants his body a power beyond the human. This uncontrollable force may lead to social good, but it can also potentially destroy the socio-material fabric of the world. In one instance, Gee uses the flexibility of his skin to save Cracker’s life. And yet, the flexibility of his flesh is later used in a more suspicious way when Gee decides to attach the eel that used to be part of Ilanna’s body into his own arm. This transfer of bodily parts is only possible because of their individual agency. In other words, as an assemblage, the whole does not determine the nature of the parts. The eel, however, cannot be trusted, so this new part of

the assemblage introduces a variable of risk. Since its previous owner is Gee's enemy, the motives of the eel remain unclear. There is the possibility that the eel might have reattached itself to Gee's body as a "surveillance assemblage" (Hier 400), keeping their bodies under control and thus potentially jeopardizing their safety.

Gee's body further challenges normative conceptualizations of corporeality and embodiment in that it is composed of both organic and other kinds of materialities. In a scene that unavoidably echoes Ridley Scott's sci-fi classic *Blade Runner* (1982), Gee is terrified when he realizes that it is beads of wax that drip down his face instead of "normal" tears, as he puts it. In Foucauldian fashion, Gee is reminded by figures like Cracker or the White Cat of the intricate relationship between power and knowledge, and the central position of the body in this intra-active nexus. Acquiring knowledge about his own body will help Gee choose between alternative ethical possibilities. Initially, Gee shows a utilitarian approach to friendship: "He needed people who would help him, not hold him back. What was the point of having a friend if she served no purpose?" (134). His loyalty towards Cracker, for instance, oscillates throughout the narrative. At times, she is perceived by Gee as a friend but as his body and desires change, she begins to be perceived as an object of consumption. Part of the transformation that Gee undergoes in his journey involves not only changes in his personality and ethical dilemmas, which are common traits in these kinds of rites of passage, but also an extreme alteration of his affective responses, relationality, and temporal frameworks.

In similar ways to bodies, chronological temporality is also dismantled in *Half World*: "[Gee] glanced at the walls for a clock. He had no idea how much time had passed. . . . Time seemed odd, stretching and contracting" (168-69). Time is here perceived as elastic, malleable, and porous, in contrast to the way it works in the Realm of Flesh. A preliminary idea of the past begins to vanish only to be substituted by a new memory of an alternative past time yet to know. The unknown becomes the familiar when Gee slowly begins to remember a different life, a former body, and a past identity as Mr. Glueskin. Tempted by the possibility of ownership, Gee now feels the need to search for the past in the hope of achieving social status and material gain. When they reach the Mirages Hotel, Gee is received as the prodigal son returning to his homeland. Served with reverence and fear by the members of the staff, Gee now feels a renewed sense of authority that he wants to savour. Interestingly, this new appetite for power is accompanied by a growth

in desire and a craving for pleasure. Ilanna celebrates Gee's new identity as Mr. Glueskin, so she addresses him as a saviour and a liberator:

You were the one who first woke from your Half World trance. When everyone else was still stuck in their stupor of suffering, you tore free from yours. You discovered that eating other sufferers extended your Half Life. . . . You set me free from *my* suffering. And that's why I'll love you forever. (162)

Ilanna's affection for Gee is highly sexualized and tied to the idea of eating other bodies. The boundaries between consumption and sex are thus here blurred; it is in fact through this affective economy that these characters are drawn together. Ilanna's queer trans-corporeality both attracts and repels Gee: "Something sharp stabbed through his jeans, abrading his skin. Gee glanced down. Ilanna's toenails were covered with barnacles. Was that a small oyster? He shuddered with revulsion. Longing" (164). Once again in the narrative, her medusa-like body not only stands as a source of abjection but also as a supply of pleasure and desire.<sup>4</sup>

Gee's very human materiality is questioned and transformed until he ultimately metamorphoses into a new corporeal being. What he describes as sick feelings begin to saturate his body from the moment he enters Half World. Oppressed by a combination of fear, anxiety, impatience, and anger, Gee struggles with his own subject position, with the kind of alliances he should make, and with the corporeal and affective materiality of his body. Entering the space of impossibility that is Half World also provokes dramatic changes in Gee's sensorial system, suddenly being overwhelmed by an insatiable appetite: an urge to eat other beings. In vampire-like fashion, Gee is drawn first to Cracker's blood. Though ultimately resisting his craving for human flesh, he succumbs to eating live rats as a source of strength: "A surge of energy rippled from his belly outward to all his extremities. Delicious shivers of power shot through his nerves, faster than electrons, finer than light. His very cells vibrated with the sensation, a harmonics beyond sound" (241). This ethically questionable act grants Gee satisfaction that is only ephemeral, leading to utter guilt and shame, and the self-questioning of his humanity. Echoing the moral dilemmas posed by post-apocalyptic narratives such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Gee/Mr. Glueskin is torn between restraining himself from engaging in cannibalism, or instead, succumbing to this predatory drive that would enhance his power. Cracker explains that to be conflicted is at the core of "the human *condition*" (213), so I would contend that Gee's moment of hesitancy is paradoxically what makes him human. What is most interesting, from the perspective of an

analysis of corporeality and embodiment in the novel, is the fact that Gee finds a strategy to help other creatures survive that involves a different kind of cannibalism. By feeding one of the creatures in Half World with parts of his own body, Gee subverts the idea of consumption, pointing to alternative ways of sustainability: “White chunks on the floor. His flesh. His glueflesh. . . . He snatched up a small chunk. It felt like firm tofu. . . . His skin crawled. Yet Gee held the flesh in front of Lila’s mouth, and prayed that she would eat” (237). The narrative thus suggests that one person’s waste can mean another person’s possibility of life, so it is in our own hands to decide how to shape the world we inhabit.

The conclusion of *Darkest Light* supports my analysis of the novel in terms of assemblage theory in that, as previously argued, each part needs to have sufficient independence to precisely secure the equilibrium of the whole. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Ilanna aims to dissolve the barriers between the Realms in order to secure the power of the creatures in Half World. This approach to territorial borderlessness is contested in the narrative in that Gee ultimately has the capacity to secure the stability of the three Realms precisely by ensuring that the boundaries between them are clearly delineated. As the cynic White Cat, who also accompanies Gee in his journey, puts it in the novel, “The universe does not place value upon the workings of individual components. The universe only seeks balance” (198). Ilanna’s idea, however, consists in letting Half World flood the boundaries to the other Realms so that all becomes subject to its dominance and power. In this sense, the novel offers a creative alternative to the glamour of easy globality and its fantasies of a borderless world by engaging instead with the imperative to be attentive to the ethical and the affective contingencies of border crossing. Goto is in a way fighting old struggles by using fantasy as a vehicle to ethically rethink the unequal distribution of resources under processes of late-capitalism, which jeopardizes the sustenance of egalitarian social and political realms. And yet, *Darkest Light* tackles these familiar wars with new strategies, such as the dismantling and rearticulation of a variety of literal and symbolic boundaries that cut across corporeal, biopolitical, and affective structures. By doing so, Goto is assembling a new cross-border ethic that suggests new forms of relationality and creates unexpected alliances, to borrow Deleuze’s term in the first epigraph to this essay, between material bodies, often reshaping the cultural and the sociopolitical fabric of our contemporary world. The ethical, as explained by Moore, must remain distinguishable from mere obedience and transgression, and this

is a lesson that the (anti-)hero learns in his journey: “In the cycling of the Realms, where everyone passed through Half World, there was no reward for being a good person. Mr. Glueskin had seen the truth of that in his passage through this Realm. There was no angelic chorus for behaving well. No reward for not inflicting hurt upon others” (271). Challenging religious value systems and indoctrination, the novel thus insists on avoiding a moralistic purpose. At the end of the narrative, Gee realizes that he needs to remain in Half World so as to ensure that the equilibrium between the Realms is maintained. Through Gee’s ethical actions, *Darkest Light* thus manages to challenge received conceptualizations of home and belonging in that these past sites of comfort are sacrificed for the possibility of change in an uncertain future yet to come.

In the lecture delivered at the 2013 Edward Said Memorial Conference, philosopher Étienne Balibar refers to the “institution of the border” in terms of uncertainty. I find this specification relevant to my conclusion in that Goto’s work problematizes borders not only as sites of artistic possibility, but also as contested and often institutionalized entities. Borders do share the uncertain quality that seems to characterize the first decade of the twenty-first century as articulated by a variety of critics and commentators. It seems, on the one hand, that the term “uncertain” has been co-opted by a variety of voices in the neoliberal financial and economic sectors as a strategic way to intensify regulatory measures, systems of control, and surveillance mechanisms that often involve the reification of hegemonic boundaries (Klein). In turn, the concepts of uncertainty and unpredictability have also been employed in the humanities and the social sciences as spaces of artistic creativity and ethical possibility (Moore). It is therefore of uttermost priority for the cultural and the literary critic today to think again about the border as a contested site where the corporeal, the biopolitical, and the affective realms of everyday life assemble. In the influential *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2012), political theorist Wendy Brown contends that we live in a time that features “capacities for destruction historically unparalleled in their combined potency, miniaturization, and mobility, from bodies wired for explosion to nearly invisible biochemical toxins” (20). These necropolitical impulses, nonetheless, as Goto’s work illustrates, can be questioned, and arguably dismantled, through poetic, aesthetic, and cultural practice. *Darkest Light* relocates materiality within and across corporeal and affective borders, thus raising intricate questions about the interconnections between fantasy, power, and ethics. In this process, the narrative reorients the readers’

attention away from normative temporal frameworks, hegemonic systems of value, and uneven circuits of economic exchange, gesturing instead towards alternative logics of embodiment, affect, and the ethical imagination.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the two anonymous readers in the journal for their really valuable feedback. Extended thanks to Professor Heather Zwicker, from the University of Alberta, and Professor Diana Brydon, director of the Centre for Globalization and Cultural Studies at the University of Manitoba, for their encouragement and support.

## NOTES

- 1 Through the integration of queer and race politics that so often characterizes her literary corpus, Hiromi Goto has certainly found a place within the contemporary Canadian literary scene, especially from the publication of her first award-winning novel *A Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994). While further addressing these concerns, I would argue that Goto's twenty-first century work focuses more directly on the intersection between the ethical and the biopolitical realms, particularly in the portrayal of the porosity of borders between bodies and spatio-temporal frameworks.
- 2 For an intriguing analysis of the role of smell in Larissa Lai's work, see Stephanie Oliver's article "Diffuse Connections: Smell and Diasporic Subjectivity in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*." *Canadian Literature* 208 (2011): 85-107. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this reference.
- 3 In her discussion on trans-corporeality, material feminist critic Stacy Alaimo stresses the need for a theoretical rearticulation of the contact zones between human corporeality and the more-than-human worlds so as to situate materiality at the centre of feminist analysis. As such, trans-corporeality becomes a theoretical site where corporeal approaches meet environmental methodologies in productive ways. See Alaimo's essay "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature" (2008) for further reference.
- 4 See Almeida (2009) and Latimer (2006) for a Kristevan approach to Hiromi Goto's portrayal of monstrosity and abjection in her work.

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