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"All I ever wanted was to keep them safe"

Geographies of Care in Comparative Canadian Fiction

In the recent documentary *L'amour au temps du numérique*,[1] one of the participants expresses the following opinion about dating: "Le premier qui s'attache, il a perdu,"[2] suggesting that what threatens the relationship is, quite paradoxically, the attachment to the other and the potentiality of dependence. Besides shedding light on the impacts of technology and social networks on young adults' search for love, this documentary questions, through the voices of six participants, a particular manifestation of the liberal subject: "a conception of the person as independent, rational, and capable of self-sufficiency. And it holds to a conception of society as an association of such independent equals" (Kittay 258). To think attachment as failure, to devalue caring and emotional bonds, and to deny the positive qualities of dependence and vulnerability are strategies that uncover a moral subtext in the documentary: while interviewer and director Sophie Lambert does not judge the participants and rather seeks to understand their choices, she weaves a narrative that problematizes their conception of relationality and sheds light on socio-spatial practices (interactions across the dating scene, home space, and virtual space) that render vulnerability and emotional harm invisible.

While this brief analysis of Lambert's documentary serves as an introduction to the presence and value of a discourse that disrupts liberal ideals of independence, autonomy, and self-reliance, my main intentions are to infuse this discourse—care ethics—in comparative Canadian literature, and to augment its theoretical contribution by placing it in dialogue with space theory. I bring together care ethics and spatial discourse to better

understand and analyze the fictionalized experiences of female characters who struggle to make sense of their home and, accordingly, of their place in the world. To re/value dependence and vulnerability as well as to render gestures of care and attachment visible are two objectives of the ethics of care that provide rich ground for a new approach to comparative literature.

A growing number of feminist theorists, ethicists, and philosophers have called attention to practices and attitudes that have been historically devalued and traditionally associated with the female: nurturance, responsibility, attentiveness, and preservation. These four notions fall under the scope of care ethics, a field of research that since the late 1980s, has challenged traditional claims to rationality and male privilege. Applied and developed in disciplines such as psychology, medicine, philosophy, and, more recently, geography, it opposes and challenges the idea that humans are independent subjects and suggests that relationality, rather than rationality and independence, constitutes subjectivity.

Care ethics provides a critical perspective that uncovers in Lambert's documentary the marginalization and fragmentation of care in Western society differently than in conventional and stereotypical spheres associated with women and domesticity. Moreover, I argue that this perspective illuminates other forms of storytelling in which care is embedded within strategies of survival, such as in the novels *Le ciel de Bay City* (2008), by Catherine Mavrikakis, and *The Birth House* (2006), by Ami McKay. But the two novels are very different. Set in a small American town, the story of *Le ciel de Bay City* takes place in the second half of the twentieth century and centres on the protagonist's strategies for coping with the past, represented by the ghosts of her grandparents who were victims of the Holocaust. From childhood to adulthood, this female character develops strategies to avoid the intergenerational transmission of trauma. In *The Birth House*, the main character struggles to find balance between long-established traditions, social transformation, modern science, as well as her own beliefs, seeking ways to respect her traditional healing practices in a changing world. Moreover, the arrival of a doctor in her village and the social pressure to marry confront her with public and private systems of male dominance. In spite of their differences, both novels recognize the importance and the ambivalence of care and how it articulates relational, ambivalent, and porous lived spaces. They draw attention to alternative living practices and to what Sarah Whatmore calls "new possibilities for conviviality" (146), allowing for a better understanding of the socio-emotional, spatial, and political

problems of responding to suffering, to non-paradigmatic attachments, and to the dilemma of reconciling the demands of others and of the self in socio-spatial contexts that require new categories for thinking about the experience of being in the world.

In *Le ciel de Bay City* and *The Birth House*, body, memory, and healing spaces work together in the texts and unfold geographies of care that show how spatiality and relationality are interrelated and co-constitutive. How the novels use relational and spatial imagery illustrates the work of care in geo-emotional dynamics and experiences of lived space beyond the traditional conflation of home and house. I borrow and adapt the concept of geographies of care from a branch of human geography interested in the connections between geographies and emotions, and that configures the geographical experience—as well as geographical methodology—as a spatialized network of socio-emotional and healing practices.[3]

Relationality: Care, Space, and Ethics

While there are many publications on the ethics of/in literature that focus on what Tobin Siebers describes as "the means by which literary criticism affects the relation between literature and human life" and that look into "the impact of theoretical choice on the relation between literature and the lives of human beings" (2), a very small number of researchers in literature use care ethics and feminist care ethics in their work. And if there is growing interest in France and in Canada, as illustrated by an international academic conference organized at the Université de Montréal and recent publications,[4] much remains to be done in terms of understanding the impact and function of care practices and attitudes in literary and artistic contexts. It is important to note that the care theory developed from Martin Heidegger's *Sorge* stems from a usually male-oriented, universal Western theory of knowledge that historically has rarely acknowledged gender biases, and has often failed to recognize what contemporary feminist care theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto, and Sandra Laugier have brought to attention as core elements of care ethics: the voice of the invisible, of the silenced, of the other which is not male, not white, and not privileged.

Indeed, several feminist theorists of care and feminist philosophers have identified epistemological points of tension by showing how dominant patriarchal and philosophical ideological paradigms have, as Genevieve Lloyd argues, "historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and that femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of

exclusion" (x). What Kerstin W. Shands and Iris Marion Young do for space theory, contemporary female care theorists do in their work in reaction to dominant philosophical, ethical, and political discourses that are predominantly characterized by a "terminology of . . . rights and duties" and by "cognitive attitudes . . . usually associated with distance and impartiality, and with the ability to transcend the individual point of view in order to reach a 'general viewpoint'" (Sevenhuijsen 5). While they do not invalidate the contribution of male philosophers, feminist care ethicists and space theorists question a persistent tendency to use the white, privileged male as a normative category.

My literary theorization of geographies of care stresses the significance of ethical socio-spatialization in the stories under consideration, especially in contexts of precariousness. I address the interconnections between spaces and beyond what Jon Murdoch describes as "the way humans are embedded within spatialized materialities" (2). Accordingly, paying attention to the complex emotional and ethical dynamics between series of places and relations sheds a different light on the complicated interconnections between human life, vulnerability, space, and literature. It also seems important to stress that the director of *L'amour au temps du numérique* and the authors of the texts of fiction that I analyze, do not inscribe their work in care ethics or draw on particularly explicit feminist theory to tell their stories. Rather, I use a feminist care ethics framework to read those stories, to bring attention to the fundamental relationality represented in the texts. This relationality is key for understanding different components of intersubjective experience such as spatiality and location, and for developing a relational comprehension of the subject as situated, complex, non-unitary, yet unique.

I suggest that care ethics provides a critical framework for bridging relationality and the moral intricacies of lived space. It also offers a perspective for focusing on how fictionalized subjects are able to re/define and make their living spaces more complex through and because of care practices and attitudes, providing new insight about socio-spatial experiences and a new vocabulary for naming and configuring the particularities of belonging. And as I am interested in the co-constitutive and relational dynamics between space and processes of subjectivation in the texts I am analyzing and beyond, and less interested in revisiting the narratives in terms of private/public dichotomies, I combine care ethics with space theory and concentrate on the fundamental relationship between self and other by addressing the spatiality of responsibility, vulnerability, humanity, and proximity. These relational dynamics are instrumental both

for care ethics and geography in developing their respective views of the social and of feminist issues in their fields, which in part explains why many feminist geographers "have sought to investigate the complex spatialities of caring, bringing the social spaces of care, and particularly of care work, under renewed scrutiny" (McEwan and Goodman 103). Care ethics thus illuminates complex spatialities; and geography, with spatial concepts based on the notion of relationality, proposes useful avenues for thinking the questions of power that affect human interconnectivities.

Le ciel de Bay City

In *Le ciel de Bay City*, Catherine Mavrikakis tells the story of Amy through her movements across different frontiers. Between America and Europe, life and death, self-care and a sense of responsibility towards her family, and between the shiny plastic of a small metal house and its dirty basement where secrets are kept, Amy is trying to make sense of the different forms of death that inscribe her life. She struggles to understand the behaviours of her mother Denise and aunt Babette, who have left Europe and moved to Bay City to escape the traumatic memory of the Holocaust. Among these behaviours are the indifference and inhospitality shown toward her by her mother: "Ma mère ne va pas me voir et ne tient pas à venir me chercher. . . . À ce moment-là, les travaux du *basement* occupent toute la maisonnée. Personne n'a vraiment le temps de s'occuper d'une enfant qui, de toute façon, depuis sa venue au monde, n'est qu'une source d'ennuis"[5] (Mavrikakis 13). The relatively ordinary life of Amy, who is isolated and feels rejected, changes drastically when her aunt asks her to help clean the house. In the basement, Amy makes a strange discovery: she finds the ghostly bodies of her grandparents (who disappeared in Poland during the Second World War) in a large, dirty cupboard. Rather than questioning their presence, Amy is immediately sensitive to their well-being. She does what she can to protect them while trying to come to terms with their deathly existence, expressing both a feeling of responsibility for her deceased family members as well as a feeling of despair over being confronted with "l'abjection de la vie"[6] (44). Amy, paying attention to these ghosts who accompany her and who sleep with her, finds that she has "un don de guérisseur des corps et des âmes"[7] (19) that encourages her to develop caring strategies to help both her living and dead family members come to terms with History.

The storage box, isolated from the rest of the basement, is where Babette has hidden her ghostly parents, who exemplify the taboo past related to the

Holocaust that Babette and Denise cannot jettison despite systematically cleaning the house and filling it with plastic furniture and objects to conceal traces of their past in Europe. This part of the basement is both where these dead bodies are kept hidden as well as where the family finds protection during storms. In this part of the house, memory is disavowed and protection is found. The basement is part of a geo-emotional and ethical weaving: while Amy's family tries to free itself from traumas associated with the Shoah and to find a better life in America, the basement is also where the ghostly bodies are kept as an indelible mark of that past, an inevitable haunting that creates a tension between forgetting and protecting the past. The family is thus incapable of healing despite their efforts, and Amy both suffers the consequences of their choices as well as feels responsible for everyone. Her mother's lack of care and Amy's own feeling of placelessness in Bay City participate in her ambivalent feelings and in her decisions following the discovery of the ghosts in the basement. The storage box is therefore a paradoxical space that illustrates the difficult negotiations between life and death and complicates Amy's obligation to care. She understands her mother and aunt's desire to forget, and yet she feels a responsibility to liberate the ghosts that are locked in the basement. Indeed, Amy understands that the ghosts' physical presence is proof of the unforgettable past and that "les morts continuent leur existence"[8] (52). Her decision to burn down the house is a violent and unsuccessful attempt to resolve this conflict, making clear that the haunted living spaces affect her ability to care.

The text, in the form of a long monologue during which Amy revisits past events and encounters, is built around Amy's inability to liberate her family from the deaths of Auschwitz and to ignore the presence of the ghosts. The first part of the story centers on her feelings of entrapment and loss, leading to a radical act—arson—that she hoped would free her family from the heaviness of the sky, which serves as a metaphor for the guilt, responsibility, and History that prevent the family from moving forward despite living in a new place, on a new continent. Amy survives the fire and is found, traumatized, in the backyard. The fire claimed the house, killing all family members. Amy takes responsibility for the deaths of the family members, suggesting she wished to liberate them from the burden they had been carrying since the Holocaust: "Il me faut du courage pour accomplir la fin de notre destin et délivrer tous les miens du poids du temps"[9] (247).

The fire problematizes Amy's care towards her family, suggesting that one's ability to care also comes with risky power. The murder of the family

members suggests ambivalence in Amy's caring gestures: is she attempting to liberate them or to liberate herself from the burden of the Holocaust and from the haunted house? It is difficult to argue that the murder is a form of care, but because she uses words that convey relief and belonging, like "délivrance" and "tous les miens," it seems possible to read the murder scene as a radical, desperate attempt to heal the family. Accordingly, the narrative connects Amy's everyday struggle with the distant family members who died in the concentration camps in a set of caring, guilty, ambivalent relational negotiations that affect and are affected by different spaces. Amy's practices and attitudes of care towards her family, along with her destructive tendencies, inscribe and participate in the construction of spaces where the living and the dead coexist, forging geographies of care characterized by ambivalence and struggle but that nevertheless encourage her, albeit with difficulty, to live: "Il faut quand même croire à la vie et lui donner une quelconque importance"[10] (35). By giving importance to that which her mother and aunt have tried to keep hidden, Amy turns to a modality of care or, rather, a caring and careful expression of intersubjectivity despite her ambivalence. Indeed, she keeps questioning the value of life, its capacity to overcome the purple sky as it is coloured by the ashes of the dead and is metaphorically heavy with guilt. Reading Amy's spatialized caregiving renders visible new survival strategies and narrative techniques that allow thinking about the narrative differently. Such strategies draw attention to the tensed, interdependent relationships central to the novel instead of concentrating on Amy's individual trajectory. The language of care is thus illuminated through the workings of memory and the porous frontiers between life and death. It is also closely connected to the writing of space, imagining and complicating the configurations of habitability.

In addition, the metal house is referred to both as "home" and as "prison de tôle,"[11] which expresses the socio-spatial tensions that shape Amy's experience. Suicidal, with very little faith in life despite being a survivor, she wanders: "Si je n'ai pas de place dans ce monde, je n'en ai pas plus dans l'au-delà"[12] (35). Between Europe and America, between those who died in the camps and the survivors, between Amy and her mother, and between Amy and her daughter, Heaven, geo-emotional ties are made and unmade. Amy remains stranded between life and death, between togetherness and isolation. These ties find anchors in the superficiality of materiality, in the past, and in the bodies that constitute the geographies of care, symbolically illustrating how space and self are interrelated and how relationships are

marked by interdependency. Amy expresses different forms of care: she feels responsible, she pays attention to her family, to history, as well as to the secrets of the house. She also shows responsiveness towards the ghosts and their wellbeing by negotiating their place in the present and in the two houses. Combined with a reflection on living spaces and the experience of being-at-home, her caring gestures confirm that space, as Massey remarks, is "constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny" (9).

Like the basement, the sky is another ambivalent space where past and present collide. Whereas for her mother and aunt the sky symbolizes an inescapable past, for Amy, who becomes a pilot, the immensity of the sky provides a space of escape where a mix of pollution and gasoline blinds the odours associated with the past: "Sur le tarmac, je suis transportée par les relents qui s'exhalent des avions et des camions-citernes. . . . J'aime conduire les avions dans le ciel et si celui-ci n'était pas contaminé par la pollution, il sentirait trop le passé rance, infect"[13] (Mavrikakis 259). But she soon realizes that the comfort she finds in the sky does not compare to the healing space represented by her relationship with her daughter. It is indeed through this mother-daughter relationship that Amy finds solace, as it was when her own mother and aunt revitalized their lives by coming to the United States and starting their families: "donn[é] vie à des petits américains tout neufs qui leur feraient oublier les rages et les colères de l'Europe guerrière"[14] (11). Amy searches for a place where her identity as daughter and mother will reconcile, carrying with her a historical responsibility that is not entirely hers. Careful to protect her daughter against "l'horreur insondable du monde"[15] and surprised to find reconciliation "avec l'existence et ses cieux livides, dépouillés"[16] (262) in this bright relationship with her daughter Heaven, Amy learns to coexist with the dead and with the history they share. The sense of escape she experiences when she flies is replaced by her desire to protect her daughter from the purple darkness of the sky: "J'ai vite opté pour des vols courts, des voyages éclair, une carrière sans éclat pour habiter les nuits de mon enfant chérie"[17] (283-84). At the end of the story, in their new house in Rio Rancho that she thought was free from the past and liberated from the presence of the ghosts, Amy discovers that Heaven does not need the protective walls she built around her, and that she is comfortable with these ghosts. She finds Heaven asleep in the converted basement where she had asked Amy to build her bedroom despite Amy's fears associated with the dark space.

Seeing that Heaven is comfortable in the basement liberates Amy of a certain responsibility towards her: "petite, elle allait souvent se cacher 'en bas' et me forçait à la chercher durant des heures d'effroi"[18] (288). The presence of the dead as well as the places built and transformed in reaction to these ghosts participate in Amy's process of identity construction. The care practices—the protection of Heaven, Amy's attention for the dead, the ambivalent hospitality of basements, the unavoidable sense of responsibility—illustrate care as a necessary mediation between self and other, self and places. Care complicates, in its failures and successes, Amy's narrative in which she revisits the past that led to Rio Rancho. It allows her, as she moves in space, flying planes across the purple sky, to figure out new ways of coping with the past in the present.

The Birth House

Reading with an ethics of care framework also brings new attention to how Ami McKay, in *The Birth House*, dramatizes the burden of responsibility and the struggles that come with caring and with needing care, by way of the particular geographies shaped through and affected by this dialectic. The novel fictionalizes the interactions of family members in the rural community of Scots Bay, Nova Scotia, at the turn of the twentieth century. It explores the resistance of female subjects to patriarchal and medical control over their bodies and choices, as modern science and medicine clash with healing and birthing traditions. The narrator, Dora Rare, "the only daughter in five generations of Rares" (McKay 5), tells the story of how she became the community healer, taking the place of Marie Babineau, known as Miss B. An Acadia-born midwife and healer, Miss B. left Scots Bay following the opening of the Canning maternity home, operated by Doctor Thomas, a figure who represents modern medicine and "new obstetrical techniques" (31). Feeling betrayed and useless under the pressure of Doctor Thomas' language of law and culture of fear, Miss B. passes on her knowledge to Dora: "Dora, take the prayers, the secrets. If you don't, they'll be lost, and I'll never have a moment's peace on the other side. . . . The women here, . . . They'll need you" (71). Dora struggles to make a choice between continuing the legacy of Miss B. and obeying her abusive husband, Archer Bigelow, who demands she quit "the baby business" (174) to take care of him and to be a proper housewife: "Come on, Dorrie, how about I take you to bed and you act like a proper wife" (173). The novel not only depicts the lives of women under domestic and medical abuse; it also uses a language of care and spatial

imagery to dramatize how women create safe spaces for themselves in the form of solidarity and spatial appropriation. The strategies of mutual support and of embodied space, along with practices and attitudes of care such as hospitality, responsibility, and healing, reveal geographies of care that allow for alternatives to the living spaces limited by economic, patriarchal, and political forces.

In *The Birth House*, the female characters, similar to those in *Le ciel de Bay City*, do not simply display stereotypical gestures of care or show an idealized female power that leads to resistance tactics and alternative spaces free of difficulties. These characters problematize and denaturalize imposed spaces and roles by creating and transforming new spaces into geographies of care. Bodies, solidarity, healing, and memory operate in the texts to portray the intersubjective nature of the characters' movements and locations, and to stress the agency of marginalized characters that are not always able to transgress socio-spatial boundaries. Amy and Dora share the weight of memory on their shoulders as well as the weights of living spaces: Amy with the metal sheet house that can't protect from the haunting of the ghosts, and Dora with Miss B.'s house filled with potions, herbs, and artefacts. Both protagonists seek liberation from a house where they struggle to affirm their identity because of their duty to their family. One of the ways to escape is, for Amy, to burn her family's house down, whereas Dora only imagines setting Miss B.'s on fire. While Amy finds comfort in Rio Rancho and reconciles with the basement in her new, but still haunted, house, Dora shapes hers—initially built as a wedding gift—in accordance with her own system of beliefs: "All I ever wanted was to keep them safe" (prologue in *The Birth House* x). Both texts rely on the relationality of characters: they imagine the difficult balance between dependence and independence, between a predominant, moral and emotional sense of responsibility to care and a social pressure that encourages little involvement in others' lives, autonomy, and self-reliance.

Divided into three parts, Dora's story begins with her relationship with Miss B. and her struggle to find a balance between her teenage interest in midwifery and the social exclusion that comes with the task. The second part begins after Miss B. vanishes from Scots Bay on the day of Dora's wedding, at the end of which Dora has to deliver a baby by herself for the first time. This section centres on Dora's difficult marriage with Archer, her disappointment with not conceiving a child, and her feelings of solitude and frustration, which climax in her attacking Doctor Thomas after he tries to intimidate her in public:

> He smiled, talking through his teeth. "Maybe it's time that a hysterical, reckless woman who encourages women to deceive their husbands should be everyone's business." . . . He stroked my cheek with his hand. "You look a little feverish. Isn't Mr. Bigelow seeing to your well-being? Isn't he working at giving you the child you've been wanting? I could speak to him about that, Mrs. Bigelow. I could tell him what you require. I could tell anyone, really." (233)

Dora's physical attack on Doctor Thomas is represented by a newspaper clipping inserted in the text, giving the narrative a historical aspect that authenticates the representations of women's resistance to modern medicine's controlling of their bodies and choices. The third part of the novel narrates the power of patriarchal law over women. Dora has to leave Scots Bay after helping a woman get an abortion. This woman is later killed by her husband, who tries to frame Dora for the murder: "Down the line women began to whisper, some wondering if someone should go and fetch my father or one of the other men down at the wharf. Others started to wonder if maybe Brady Ketch was right and if something hadn't better be done" (291). Dora finally returns and gets support from the women to clear her name: "Bertine and Sadie delivered letters to local women, asking for their support at a Mother's May Day march in Canning. Precious and Mabel have sewn a large banner for the women to carry, and I have agreed to speak (to anyone who'll listen). . . . I'm tired of being afraid" (361). She lives alone in her house, welcoming women "who have stayed . . . a day, a week and even a month or more" (366). Dora is also in a loving and peaceful relationship with Hart Bigelow, the brother of her deceased husband whom she refuses to marry and to live with: "Always my lover, never my husband. He still asks for my hand from time to time, never complains when I say I prefer it this way" (367). Dora's unconventional living choices open boundaries of domesticity and traditional living spaces. She favours interdependent relationships with women, spaces of solidarity and care with Miss B. and the women of Scots Bay. These relational interactions also serve to appropriate home space and female body.

Dora's caring practices and her careful spatial and moral resistance to the powerful, hegemonic, and patriarchal forces of both community and medicine problematize the spatiality of Scots Bay. For example, the maternity clinic is not easily accessible for women, thus symbolizing the risk women take to comply with hegemonic forces. Further, several female characters are not allowed by their husbands to recover fully after giving birth, which illustrates how their bodies are endangered in both public and private spaces. They also complicate the interrelated, taken-for-granted gendered

relations of power. The textual elements of care (language, practices, and gestures that uncover responsibility, hospitality, and interdependence) work with the spatial imagery, exemplifying how geographies of care provide "the opportunity to experience space less habitually and to rethink societal norms of spatial occupation that deal unethically with difference" (McCann 507). I appropriate Rachel McCann's argument that an architect's spatial creativity consists of "an intercorporeal and intersubjective act" to read Dora and Amy's spatial inventiveness as a strategy that "refigures sedimented spatial and social habits" (497). I rely on McCann's discussion of ethics and spatial inventiveness to suggest that the text, similar to architectural design, "challenge[s] existing norms of inhabitation and provide[s] a model for uncovering and remaking hidden societal structures that confine our potential for growth and perpetuate unequal systems of power" (514).

In addition, Dora's correspondence with friends in Scots Bay is used in the text, like the newspaper clippings, to foster the interconnections between Dora's living spaces and relationships. The articulation of many points of view build the narrative around Dora's determination to preserve her relationships with the women of Scots Bay as well as with her child. The letters provide spatialized expressions of her care for the women as Dora offers to transform her house into a hospital. In one of those letters, the character writes: "As you may already know, influenza is making its way through Boston . . . if you could see how many shrouded bodies are brought out of houses each day, you would understand. If someone comes down with it in the Bay, open my place as a sick house" (McKay 327). Dora's offer foreshadows her return to Scots Bay and the transformation of her house from a private place of confinement associated with her abusive marriage into a birth house. The care-giving facility corresponds well with Dora's personality and once again resonates with the opening lines of the prologue: "My house stands at the edge of the earth. Together, the house and I have held strong against the churning tides of Fundy. Two sisters, stubborn in our bones" (vii). If the conflation of house and woman has often served to essentialize the role of female subjects, the subversive narrative strategy of transforming Dora's house from a conventionally domestic configuration into a care-giving facility disrupts such metaphor and opens boundaries, both spatially and relationally; it makes place for geographies of care that denaturalize women's servitude to men and resist their historical lack of control over their bodies, shedding light on women's intersubjective agency and spaces of solidarity.

Geographies of Care

As with the function of the houses, the American suburb, and the sky in *Le ciel de Bay City*, the representations of living spaces in *The Birth House* reflect the central conflicts Dora experiences: the difficult negotiation between her desires and needs and the expectations of her husband and family, and the confrontation of traditional practices and midwifery with the medicalization of women's bodies and sexuality. Dora resists both forms of patriarchal authority, keeping her role as healer and midwife of Scots Bay and refusing to marry. Both strategies help her to remain independent and to build healing spaces for women, bringing to attention a social tendency to isolate women in the private sphere and to be suspicious if they remain unmarried. Conventional social norms favour universal principles of well-being drawn on an ideology of "the 'autonomous self-made man'" that women such as Dora and Miss B. should not challenge (Lawson 5). *The Birth House* testifies to how traditional configurations of care "threaten to reinforce gender roles that align women with the family, with service and subordination" (DeFalco, "Moral Obligation" 240). More importantly, it complicates, like *Le ciel de Bay City*, this fragmented, patriarchal vision of care by stressing the fundamental relationality, interdependence, and vulnerability of human life.

Interactions between the language of care, hegemonic patriarchal discourse, and spatial imagery in both texts foster an understanding of more inclusive and intersubjective processes of identity formation. Reading these interactions as geographies of care stresses how the dominant and the dominated coexist, how "space is the ongoing possibility of a different habitation" (Grosz 9) and a relational construct shaped by the social. This social is characterized by care practices and attitudes of care. It is not solely shaped by a language of justice, by the medicalization of women's bodies, and by patriarchal, naturalized notions of human experience. The apparent selflessness of both Amy and Dora takes on a different, more complex, intersubjective shape, one that expresses their fundamental human condition of vulnerability. Accordingly, the living spaces are also used for healing, for fostering a sense of togetherness through memory in the present, and as spaces of solidarity—similar to that which is facilitated in Amy and Heaven's basement at Rio Rancho and in Dora's birth house.

I draw on Seyla Benhabib's theorization of "response-ability" to suggest that the reactions of the protagonists reveal "both responsibility and risk," an "uneven care" that can at times burden Amy and Dora but also a care that

goes against the social expectations they must negotiate. Benhabib argues that this "response-ability" resists the persistence "of a discourse which bans the female from history to the realm of nature, from the light of the public to the interior of the household, from the civilizing effect of culture to the repetitious burden of nurture and reproduction" (409). These imagined human lives, what Benhabib refers to as "concrete others" in her useful configuration of a more inclusive and representative moral domain, illustrate the moral categories of responsibility, bonding, and sharing (411), and moral feelings of love, care, sympathy, and solidarity. Benhabib's analysis brings to attention how these are modalities of resistance to a language of justice and of individuality that correspond to "moral categories of right, obligation and entitlement" (411). Her theorization facilitates my reading of these modalities that are represented by the female characters' struggle to render visible the unseen, the unthought in their respective contexts (416). While feminist issues are more explicit in McKay's novel, Mavrikakis' text nevertheless testifies, with its central female characters and intergenerational house, to the political and moral intricacies of what Benhabib notes has historically been conceptualized as "atemporal" and "obscure": the realm of the household, nurturance, and emotions (410). The metal house lit on fire and the confining house turned birth house participate in this refusal of female characters to comply with social, spatial, and gendered expectations. The spatiality of their caring practices and attitudes disrupts privatized, silenced moral categories that value the needs of the other as constitutive of the self's vulnerable relationality. A comparative analysis of these two contemporary novels finds its coherence in the representations of spaces, events, and encounters associated with a particular geography of caring relations.

It is also worth noting the "gendered ascription of distinctive social roles" (Bowden 5) in both texts. Female characters "exemplify precisely the kinds of relations that are conventionally omitted from the canon of moral philosophy" (5) by bringing to attention ordinary and familiar practices of care that have historically been devalued, naturalized, and rendered invisible by patriarchal systems of power. It can be argued that Amy and Dora embody historically and culturally gendered roles: as mothers, they are initially relegated to the domestic environment, they nurture and protect their respective children, and they express stereotypical concerns for nurturing and for caregiving. In addition, mother-daughter relationships are marked by incompatible personalities and opposite desires. Amy struggles to understand her mother's behaviour and lack of emotion towards her, and

she goes out of her way to protect Heaven against the past, only to find out that Heaven is comfortable with the ghosts. Dora's relationship with her mother is also complicated by patriarchal standards and by the motherly figure of Miss B., who validates her sense of self rather than diminishing it or seeking to mould it into feminine ideals. But reading with an ethics of care illuminates how these mother and daughter figures use, politically and intimately, such strategies of protection, nurturing, and care, and how these characters serve to "emphasize the radical potential of values that attend to the concrete localized experience of home, and the existential meaning of being deprived of that experience" (Young 151). The characters of Amy and Dora reconfigure their subjectivity by appropriating and reclaiming their living spaces through these caring practices. Amy's "maison de tôle" as well as her new home in Rio Rancho, and Dora's birth house, are symbols of these women's intersubjective struggle. Despite evolving in mostly oppressive and damaging living spaces, they find comfort through their own making by acknowledging their interdependence, by listening to others, and by structuring alternative spaces with other characters who embody solidarity, recognition, and hospitality.

Accordingly, this comparative analysis stresses the differences and negotiations between care as a form of what Peta Bowden calls "coerced practice on which . . . survival depends" (8) and care as an intersubjective, fundamental process of being that draws on "a domain of practices characteristically associated with women" (16). I add that the discussion of two very different texts exposes how "ethically valuable forms of caring may be differentiated from those that entrench relations of oppression" (17), and avoids homogenizing, romanticizing, and naturalizing the representations of care practices and attitudes. My focus on what Bowden identifies as the "positive possibilities of women's involvement in practices of care" (18) within oppressive environments also serves to demonstrate, I hope, the agency and survival skills that are manifest in these representations of intersubjective and caring relationality. These novels show how the presence of care practices and attitudes of care inscribes socio-spatial transgression and moments of togetherness during struggle and adds to characters' wellbeing. Or, the opposite, with the absence of care we see the deterioration of the characters' wellness. The combination of literature, space, and care provides an original alternative for thinking "new forms of relationships and actions that enhance mutuality and well-being" (Lawson 2). Indeed, as Victoria Lawson remarks: "[c]are ethics suggests that we build spatially

extensive connections of interdependence and mutuality" (2). Combining care ethics and space theory to conceptualize geographies of care through comparative analysis is thus not about using the imaginary space to moralize characters or to promote a specific version of the good life. It is about the exploration of textual and narrative elements such as characters and places to better understand the responsibility that comes, either positively or negatively, with the fundamental relationality and vulnerability of human life.

NOTES

1 Aired November 30, 2015 on Télé-Québec and available online at http://www.telequebec.tv/documentaire/l-amour-au-temps-du-numerique/.
2 "The first to get attached loses," translation mine.
3 On geographies of care, see Massey; Milligan and Wiles; Milligan, Atkinson, Skinner and Wiles.
4 See Deschênes; DeFalco; Hétu.
5 "My mother does not come to see me and does not care to pick me up. . . . At that time, renovations in the basement take up the entire household. No one really has the time to take care of a child who, since she came into the world, has only been a source of trouble." All translations from the novel are mine.
6 "the abjection of life"
7 "a gift for healing bodies and souls"
8 "the dead lives on"
9 "I need courage to accomplish our destiny and deliver my people from the weight of time."
10 "You still need to have faith in life and give it some sort of importance."
11 "metal prison"
12 "If I don't have a place in this world, I have none in the afterlife."
13 "On the tarmac, I get carried away by the lingering smell of gas from the planes and tankers. . . . I love flying planes across the sky and if it were not contaminated by pollution, it would smell too much of the rancid, rank past."
14 "giving life to little new Americans who would help them forget the rage and the anger of Europe the warrior"
15 "the unfathomable horror of the world"
16 "with life and its livid and dispossessed skies"
17 "I soon opted for short flights, junkets, a plain career so that I could share the nights with my beloved child."
18 "little, she would hide downstairs and force me to look for her for hours, in terror"

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