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Discomforted Readers and the Cultural Politics of Genre in Lawrence Hill's *The Illegal*

Introduction

Since 2015, Canada's practice of "refugee welcome" has been increasingly visible in both global and national politics. Internationally Canada is seen as a beacon of light for refugee claimants in an otherwise hostile environment, and the widely publicized resettlement of over 25,000 Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2017 received significant attention. Building on that success, in 2020 the government announced it will target the highest levels of immigration in the nation's history, including up to 180,000 refugees and protected persons over the next three years ("Notice"). For many years, state humanitarianism has been "the mirror in which the nation seeks a reflection of its beneficence" (Dauvergne 4), and since the 1960s refugee resettlement is the primary marker of its success as a humanitarian nation (Madokoro 149). Yet recent high-profile cases related to migrant detention or deportation (e.g., those of Abdilahi Elmi or Ebrahim Toure) reflect a different image. In these and other cases, the language of illegality or criminality has been used to limit and even undermine the practice of refugee welcome. Significantly, the outliers to popularized humanitarian representations of migrants from the Middle East (e.g., Syrian refugee crisis) or Asia (e.g., Vietnam boat people), have been illegalized young Black men. Scholars in diverse disciplines have documented Canada's history of xenophobia, its strategically selective refugee reception (Walia), its export of the border ("Problems"), its use of detention, and the violence of its peacekeeping missions in East Africa

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(Razak). Determining what role Canada desires and/or plays on the world stage is hotly contested with high stakes. The debate takes place amid global politics that are currently characterized by protectionist policies, an eroding commitment to asylum rights, and restrictive border policies in response to COVID-19.

Such realities lend urgency to the scholarship of cultural refugee studies, which in part seeks to understand the relationship of refugee literature to contested imaginaries of the refugee figure, illegality, and the nation as global citizen. This article examines the case study of Lawrence Hill's novel *The Illegal* (2015) to understand that relationship and the book's intervention. My analysis highlights the gap between a generic reading of the book as political thriller and its reception as a Canadian humanitarian text and asks what scholars of refugee literature in Canada can learn from this gap.

The Illegal tells the story of an illegalized migrant who, at the book's climax, receives refugee status in an imaginary nation-state with clear resemblances to Canada. It was published shortly before Justin Trudeau's Liberal party won Canada's federal election on an ambitious refugee settlement platform. Furthermore, it was released one week after the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned while seeking asylum, circulated on social media alongside claims that his Canadian aunt had attempted to sponsor his family but had been denied. The novel therefore arrived in a moment of widespread political discomfort, when news of asylum seekers trying to reach Europe dominated the media and debates about Canada's global responsibilities were live.

Accessible and timely, *The Illegal* was poised for commercial success. The novel won the Governor General's History Award for Popular Media and was named book of the year by the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC). Amnesty International Book Club chose the book to commemorate International Refugee Day, and the novel's film rights were sold to Conquering Lion Pictures before publication. When it won CBC's *Canada Reads* in 2016, humanitarian and Olympic runner Clara Hughes defended it by bringing together the nationalist concerns of *Canada Reads* with her own humanitarian interests. Notably, this was the eighth time in as many years that a book about refugee experiences had been featured in the annual debate about what book all Canadians should read.

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My curiosity about *The Illegal*'s reception surfaced when I observed celebrity debaters express hesitation when the literary value of the novel was raised, sharing uncomfortable laughter with the audience about their disorientation. Articulations of discomfort are also found in reviews and two "shared reading events"—described by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo as "book reading pursued and promoted as a social practice through the vehicle of reading events that operate on a citywide, regional, or national scale" (3). I use the term "discomforted readers" to describe a pattern produced by a range of self-conscious and embodied hesitations and ask where readers' resistance originates. Based on empirical research, Fuller and Sedo argue that "[g]enre fiction generally does not work well in [mass reading events]" because it is "viewed as being too formulaic and repetitive" and so is perceived as a less useful "tool for learning" than literary fiction (105). Yet, they cite studies showing that "'the mystery, suspense, detective, spy, adventure genre' is the most popular genre for Canadian readers."[1] In other words, popular genres are widely influential as public pedagogy in Canada, even though in celebrations of Canadian literature they are less recognized than literary fiction for their educational use. What is lost when the public pedagogy of books such as *The Illegal* is overlooked? This article highlights the critical value of popular fiction by considering the generative contribution of *The Illegal* to complex conversations about Canada's global identity regarding forced migration.

Because of its publication year, overlapping genres, and curious reception, *The Illegal* opens up a valuable conversation about the relationship between refugee cultural production and public debates about state humanitarianism. As I will show, Hill's mixing of popular culture genres, including speculative, satirical, and political thriller conventions, with the serious social theme of forced displacement and a main character coded Black and African, produces an appropriation and reworking of the cultural figure of the refugee in Canadian literary cultures. I trace the book's ambivalence towards state humanitarianism by exploring how traditional literary elements playfully satirize contemporary global community as a hostile environment.[2] Tellingly, the book's treatment of state humanitarianism has not featured in public conversations about its intervention; neither has its genre or questions of racialization. In fact, it is celebrated on various platforms as Canadian

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humanitarian fiction and framed using the very discourses it critiques: nationalism and humanitarianism. The nature of this interpretive gap, as well as the reasons why this gap has formed, propel the following analysis.

I begin by locating my discussion within scholarship on Canadian refugee literature. Next, I offer a generic interpretation of *The Illegal* against which its reception can be read. Specifically, I argue that Hill's unusual choice of popular genres displaces humanitarian practices that focus on individual refugee suffering, illuminating instead a hostile global community and holding in tension Canada's contested role within that community. Finally, I produce a crosscutting analysis of the book's reception by examining *Goodreads* reviews, newspaper reviews, the 2016 *Canada Reads*, and Amnesty International Book Club materials. Surfacing in celebrations and critiques alike, readers' discomfort often links to the book's unusual pairing of theme and genre. It may be that *The Illegal* produces resistance because its genre throws into question the terms of humanitarian reading practices that make refugee suffering a socially acceptable literary commodity.

Refugee Writing in Canada

Written largely in literary rather than popular genres, Canadian refugee fiction from the last two decades has been described by reviewers in strikingly similar ways. Critically acclaimed publications have tended to write stories of displacement lyrically, elusively, the narrations poetically resistant to touching the wounds of refugee trauma with rough prose, leaving space for the unknown.[3] Reviews and critical readings of Kim Thúy's *Ru* (2009)—arguably the best-known Canadian refugee narrative—illustrate this point, as they frequently praise its "haunting and incantatory writing style . . . [and] poetical cadence" (Syms) and the way it "bears witness" to "ghostly fragments" (Kurmann and Do 219-20).[4] Vinh Nguyen's careful reading of the intersubjectivity at work in *Ru* reclaims the agency of its "forgetting," reading the "elliptical spaces" in the novel as erasure that deliberately mimics "everyday storytelling and memory" (26). Canadian scholarship on refugee literature consistently articulates the possibilities of these narratives by referencing "productive failures and silences" (MacGregor), "the anti-confessional impulse in recent refugee writing" (Dawson), deliberate illegibility, and refusal. This analytical pattern raises a question about

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whether absence has become a marker—as both style and theme—for Canadian refugee literature to be considered worthy of critical reflection.

The recurrent focus on refusal in refugee narratives is posited as an interruption to what Smaro Kamboureli has named the "humanitarian pact," where reader and author exchange compassion via an (erased) suffering subject, that is the refugee character ("Writing" 98). Critiquing the "ideology of intimacy" in humanitarian reading practices, Kamboureli weaves together the analysis of several Canadian literary scholars to suggest: "Ultimately, the foreign is as much about distance as it is about proximity or kinship" ("Writing" 96). In other words, refusal, distance, and illegibility in refugee literature produce a necessary interruption to humanitarian cultures. I will return to the term "humanitarianism" in the last section of this article, but for now I define humanitarianism along with Kamboureli as "a belief in universal human rights and the moral imperative to respond . . . in the name of human compassion, dignity, and responsibility" (110). Critical humanitarian scholarship has thoroughly investigated the issues underlying this virtuous discourse. For example, Lilie Chouliaraki critiques humanitarian narratives for relying on "grand emotions about suffering" to produce pity, echoing Hannah Arendt's observation that such narratives displace "the long-term concern with establishing structures of justice with the urgent concern for doing something for those who suffer" (108). Education scholar Michalinos Zembylas argues that "the assumption that empathy enables transformative affective connections can (re)produce dominant hierarchies and exclusions," in part because "empathy is conceptualized primarily as a capacity of the privileged" (411). Zembylas unpacks how "affective appropriations of noble values such as empathy" risk reproducing hierarchies, even within critical pedagogy (417). So, how does the *potential* for refugee literary fiction to interrupt the humanitarian pact relate to its popular reception? Does it succeed or does literary style become a new i ndex of access to interiority and trauma? Kamboureli notes that while "humanitarian narratives can take different forms . . . they invite us to see them as a distinct category" (122). She attributes this to "their abiding concern with exposing humanitarian issues and stirring the reader into political and ethical action." It seems that the potential of textual refusal to distance readers and reclaim refugee subjectivity is lost when readers

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approach literary genres as generic invitations to witness suffering. The problem of the interchangeability of humanitarian literatures prompts Kamboureli to propose a rhizomatic analysis, which maps narratives in relation to one another to see connections and gaps.

Reading *The Illegal* in relation to scholarship on Canadian refugee fiction provides a first clue for why readers may be discomforted and for how it contributes to that conversation. *The Illegal* is neither humanitarian nor literary; neither earnest invitation nor critical refusal.[5] Described on its back cover as a satirical political thriller and infused with humorous melodrama, Hill's novel presents an unusual aesthetic representation of refugee life: a playful critique of state humanitarianism in a popular culture genre. Katja Sarkowsky is one of very few scholars to publish on this book to date. In a chapter on citizenship in Anglophone Canadian fiction, Sarkowsky finds value in *The Illegal*'s representation of the racialization of citizenship and of the way "notions of the normative citizen" turn citizenship into "a repressive instrument" (199). However, she questions the book's ability to offer fresh reflections on refugee representation precisely because of its thematic complexities, genre, and plot resolution (198). As I will show, "unrealistic" resolution is a common critique in online reviews of Hill's novel as well. Critiques like this raise a curious set of questions: Why might a book billed as a satirical political thriller be appraised according to realist conventions? Why did readers expect to feel they were reading about real people? Why does a happy ending feel wrong for refugee fiction? Under what circumstances does speculative fiction become a disappointment for being speculative fiction?

To address these questions, we must move beyond theorizing the aesthetic intervention of a text in political context, to consider how a book's intervention is received. Scholarship on Canadian reading cultures provides helpful tools for moving in this direction. For example, Fuller and Sedo's research on the reading industry traces the way reading has continued to be perceived as "socially transformative and civilizing" even as books are popularized and mediated by digital platforms and mass reading events such as *Canada Reads* or national book clubs (19). Less interested in any given book's intended literary intervention, Fuller and Sedo's work tracks the "ideological

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investments" that readers give to reading as "a social and moral good" (146). Fuller and Sedo's "bottom-up critique" and Kamboureli's "top-down approach" to understanding the significance of Canadian literature (Zanchi 570) are brought together in our present discussion of *The Illegal*: the next two sections weave together a generic close reading of the book's aesthetic intervention with assessment of the book's reception.

Genre in *The Illegal*

As popular genre fiction, *The Illegal* casts a broad invitation for readers to inhabit the imaginary world of Keita Ali. Keita (meaning "gift" in Swahili) finds himself stateless between two corrupt, colluding states. He runs marathons to earn ransom money for his sister, Charity, who has been imprisoned for the dissidence of their recently murdered journalist father. In the imaginary nation of Freedom State that Keita navigates, belonging is precarious, and institutions that steward law, education, health, borders, and business all co-operate to optimize profits from refugees. Citizenship, wealth, and whiteness coincide so often that one is frequently mistaken for another. Freedom State can be interpreted as a composite of refugee-receiving nations but bears a strong resemblance to Canada. Its reputation for fairness is belied by its colonial history, deportation of temporary workers, selective refugee reception, and export of the border. Tim Hortons makes several appearances and white women carry bear spray to protect themselves. The characterization of Lula DiStefano, humanitarian Queen of AfricTown (based on Africville, a Black Canadian community demolished in the 1960s) is central in unmasking state humanitarianism as illegality and racist corruption. The book's popular form is an unusual contribution to Canadian literary culture, which more commonly narrates Asian or Middle Eastern refugee experience as literary fiction or memoir. The following sections consider the political thriller conventions in *The Illegal* to show how its clear delineation of good and evil, its unwitting hero, its lack of reflective prose, its use of chance encounters to propel the plot forward, and its climactic scene satirize the interlocking discourses of humanitarianism and nationalism, effectively revising the cultural figure of the refugee and discomforting readers.

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As Political Thriller

The Illegal makes use of conventions from several overlapping popular genres, including satire, speculative fiction, and, most notably, the political thriller. It illustrates the mutability of genre, depending on the writing situation. The personal situation that produced this multi-genre book was described by Lawrence Hill in a virtual classroom visit as anxiety about the direction of global asylum practices and a desire to explore that fear in an imaginary, playful space. The political thriller genre is well-suited for that purpose, emerging as a subgenre of thriller films during the Cold War to provide space to explore generalized fear about being vulnerable to unknown powers. Pablo Castrillo and Pablo Echart's narrative analysis of the American political thriller finds that it gives precedence "to the visceral over the sensitive," as threatened protagonists navigate a "world threatening to collapse into chaos" but ultimately restored to order (112). Inherent to the idea of a political thriller is the role of politics as "the criminal source of conflict that creates the dramatic premise" (113). As political thriller, *The Illegal* taps into a tradition of entertainment as a visceral exploration of vulnerability.

Political thrillers entertain through suspense and intense clarity, entering the world of powerful corruption that exists underneath the lives of ordinary people. They "thrive on the melodrama of global political struggle, especially the subterranean world of espionage, assassination, and dirty tricks" and "purposely lack all moral shading" (Dickstein 89). In *The Illegal* this renders the nation-state subterranean, racist securitization a dirty trick, and banal violence as global struggle. The plot subverts the image of benevolent humanitarian nations, populating them with greedy scoundrels, vicious covert operatives, and devious conspiracies. For every political dissident that is returned to Zantoroland, Freedom State may turn back a certain number of boats carrying asylum seekers. The trade is made—refugee lives for refugee lives—and the profits are pocketed by a handful of greedy people. The Minister of Immigration, Rocco Calder, attempts to build a neutral political career and ignore controversy but his office becomes the site of the novel's violent climax. More gently but still critically, Hill takes on humanitarianism's attempts to make up for the violence that its partner in crime, the state, is committing. For instance, Lula, who runs charitable initiatives for undocumented people, ends up sacrificing the life of Yvette,

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a young sex worker in her employment, to save her own humanitarian empire. Disingenuous attempts at neutrality end up corrupted by power and greed, and characters rise and fall with the evil to which they attach themselves. It would seem *The Illegal* is less helpfully framed by "the plight of refugees" than it is by the dramatic violence of a global hostile environment. Hill's subject choice explores the capabilities of this popular genre to satirize both utopian and dystopian narratives of the humanitarian nation as global citizen.

Unwitting Hero

The characterization of Keita as a marathon runner and ordinary protagonist rewrites the humanitarian trope of the "extraordinary refugee," the literary trope of the "traumatized refugee," and the negative media portrayal of refugees as "illegals." Commonly, political thrillers centre on an ordinary protagonist who becomes the unwitting key for unravelling corruption, accidentally scaling up in social influence from the individual to the global (Willems 78). At the centre of corruption, Keita focuses on winning races and remains unaware of the suspense he creates by not responding to crucial emails and phone calls. He ignores the plot that revolves around him yet contributes to its resolution. Hill describes this characterization as an explicit choice: "I didn't want to have a really colourful survivor of genocide and have him cross the seas, and be all lively like most protagonists have to be" ("On Refugees" 14). As the climactic scene ends, Keita tells Candace he did not win his race. His casual phrase "[s]econd [is] good enough" replaces corrupt self-interest with disinterested ordinariness (*The Illegal* 376). Here, the narrative subverts refugee exceptionalism, giving Keita unlikely mobility and agency alongside unremarkable achievements.

The trope of the "traumatized refugee" who can be healed by telling their story is also revised insofar as Keita's characterization lacks self-reflection or complex emotions about suffering. When Keita's traumatic past appears, he often uses it as motivation for action. For instance, while racing he remembers a nightmare about his father's torture, but the narrator's internal focalization reveals only Keita's determination to win the race. He thinks, "he would rather die of a heart attack than not spend every ounce of energy winning this race for [ransom money for his sister]" (368). Rather than soothing suffering with

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personal testimony, Keita rewrites refugee trauma as incentive towards systemic change and represents the Black refugee figure as elite athlete, not suffering spectacle. In fact, Keita is entirely absent from the final chapter, having received his happy ending during the penultimate chapter before.

Finally, this novel repositions "the illegal" as refused gift, not social burden. Guided by his responsibilities and determination to survive, Keita becomes a global kinkeeper. Running allows Keita to "run into" people with varying levels of precarity. They become his chance web of relations. Humanitarian amelioration of suffering becomes irrelevant as it is replaced by webs of makeshift kin formed through happenstance and civil disobedience in the shadow of the nation. Each person's serendipitous encounter with Keita grows into loyal bonds of kinship as they recognize their shared precarity and need of one another for survival. Ivernia Beech, an elderly white woman, is one example. When Ivernia has a car accident, Keita, a complete stranger, shows up and rests his "fingertips on her shoulder . . . 'Everything is going to be okay,'" he tells the frightened woman (81). In political thrillers, chance encounters "may strike readers as too conveniently serviceable to the narrative, [but] perform an important referential function" (Davies 130). They authenticate the hero's resourcefulness and "situate the narrative of the thriller in a wider ideological space," where "character-types and their positions within the textual hierarchy are changing continually in small but significant ways" (130-31). Keita's chance encounters provide him with the opportunity to adjust the social hierarchy: he fulfills the needs of citizens. The unlikelihood of precarious subjects garnering political power through chance encounters in the real world turns the novel into a satirical treatment of the systems that migrants navigate. Keita's pragmatic, reciprocal kindness challenges representations of refugees as social burdens, as witnesses to trauma, and as extraordinarily resilient.

Climax and Closure

Many reviewers of the book mention the unreality of its ending. *The Illegal* certainly provides the exciting climax and resolution of a political thriller. But its restoration of order is not straightforward or earnest. The climactic scene, which brings all the key players into one room to unravel the political intrigue of the plot, is a disturbingly funny scene. It functions critically in the plot to expose

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political hypocrisy, but its cinematic, action-packed climax is uncomfortably cathartic. Short, choppy sentences and quick repartee underscore the focus on action rather than reflection. One intense paragraph narrates in the barest of styles: "Hamm charged. Saunders took aim. Hamm dived . . . Blood flew everywhere" (373). As one might expect, this scene offers little in the way of reflective prose or complex characterization, and the dialogue verbs reveal very little emotion. Across seven pages, "said" appears over fifty times. The variations are "gasped" and "shouted," which describe two rare lines from Keita, who sits observing the violence unfold. His only inner thoughts are brief considerations of action, such as, could he survive jumping out the window?

Ultimately, what saves the day is a combination of violence growing so large it unearths itself and happenstance kin protecting one another. Faced with the decision of whether to free two detainees, the Minister hesitates. "'Yes, *now*,' Keita shouted. 'Minister! You can save their lives.' 'Do it!' Candace said. 'You're the minister of immigration, and this asshole'—she pointed at the prime minister—'is going down. Make the call!'" (375-76). After 370 pages of anxiety about political corruption and hidden violence, the scene offers humorous relief. Racialized immigrants yell "Do it!" at the white politician, and he obeys. Reading closure in political thrillers as the re-establishment of order to assuage generalized fear, we see a divergence from Kamboureli's observations about humanitarian literary tropes, which "tell a story that resists narrative closure" ("Writing" 117). Readers of humanitarian literature "are not merely expected to imagine a survivor's plight or how a refugee has become a rescued subject; they are also encouraged to further inform or educate themselves, donate funds, or help the narrative's particular humanitarian cause otherwise" (117). A literary refugee narrative left open-ended with the intent of refusal, may be interpreted through humanitarian reading practices as space for the reader's contribution to an ongoing global crisis. *The Illegal*'s climax is discomforting in part because it breaks from the conventions that condition reading publics to expect an invitation to provide closure for characters through their own actions.

Readers have criticized the climax for resolving too neatly, but in the novel's denouement, gaps in the closure *are* discovered—just not the expected gaps. Despite Keita's refugee status, his sister's release, and the political demise of corrupt officials, Viola Hill, the news reporter, "wasn't entirely satisfied"

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(380). The ending offers her—and the reader—space to reflect on that dissatisfaction. Returning to the problem of state humanitarianism, the novel finishes with Viola's interview of Lula, humanitarian queen and the former lover of the prime minister. Viola's description of Lula in the final interview is of a woman who "looked like she owned the world" (383). When asked about her complicity in the murder of Yvette, Lula turns away and looks out the window, deliberately shifting the focus. "I did that," she offers as an answer, pointing to the two hundred water taps and one thousand new portable toilets and describing her hot lunch program and employment of marginalized people (385). For that, she says, she deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. Explaining her partnership with the state, Lula says to Viola, "Go ahead . . . Tell the world. But just make sure you put in about the water taps, the lunch program and the sewers. Make sure you tell the whole story" (386). "The whole story," we are led to infer, is that humanitarian action may require the illegal sacrifice of a few for the survival of many.

A paragraph break leaves the reader wondering what story Viola will tell. "Three weeks later," we read, "Viola published an article" that was "tight and nuanced" (386-87). But Viola's article exposes Lula's vulnerability, that is her undocumented legal status. The final lines of the novel inform the reader that Lula disappears and is never found. Viola's ambitions for justice bring the novel to a morally ambivalent close, producing an ending that is neither open-ended nor happily-ever-after, but rather "tight and nuanced." The disappearance of Lula underscores that there is nothing for the reader to do. Most characters have already received their happy ending, and Lula's absence refuses readers the opportunity to pass judgment on her. Furthermore, for current readers, the story's setting in the near "future" of 2018 speeds up the passing of its speculative future into a missed opportunity. What remains is the awkward inadequacy of a citizen reading refugee fiction for entertainment, the enjoyment of a refugee fantasy without the possibility of recreating such fantastic closure in real life, reading without even the hint of a noble affective encounter.

The Illegal in Shared Reading Events

In light of the novel's generic identity as a political thriller, its celebrated status in nationalist and humanitarian organisations is curious. Though

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offering a critical depiction of state humanitarianism, *The Illegal* has been interpreted as an inspiration for Canadian humanitarianism. In the following section, I turn to public interpretations in online reviews as well as two shared reading events hosted by institutions with nationalist and humanitarian mandates to ask what we may learn from this gap. Are the interventions of the novel that I have outlined legible within the parameters of these remediations?

Reading Reviews

Two extremes can be found in online reviews of *The Illegal*. While glowing reviews about the novel's humanitarian subject skip over its genre, negative reactions to the novel's craft deplore its lack of realism. "I'm sooo disappointed!" writes one characteristic *Goodreads* reviewer. "The story is so relevant . . . I can't quite put my finger on what I didn't like . . . I never once felt like I was actually in a real country, reading about real people. And the ending . . . just wrapped up a bit too neatly" (Colleen). Early newspaper reviewers similarly describe the book as "urgently topical" but also as squandering opportunities to provide "intimate access to a character's sensibility" and "a setting that one recognizes as real and historically complex" (Birrell; Peterman; Cole). Positive reviews rarely reference *The Illegal*'s genre, but they frequently describe the novel in ways that try to re-establish the nobility of Kamboureli's "humanitarian pact." Descriptors such as "timely" and "relevant" show up repeatedly, linking the book to current events and reader compassion, rather than literary craft. As one *Goodreads* reviewer describes it, Hill's book is "full of heart," and "it will definitely give you even more perspective on the international news of late" (Chelsey). Implicit in these responses are the beliefs that the frame of "real life" can help readers to ascertain whether fiction is being responsible to refugees and that a book's ability to conjure a common humanity serves as proof of its literary value.

Monica Ali's *New York Times* review offers a clear articulation of the relationship between literary and humanitarian readings, with its argument that the novel is a "two-dimensional set" for a morally complex issue. About crude violence in the prologue, Ali writes, "This is the novel in a nutshell. It doesn't get any subtler than that." Ali is hoping for literary subtlety, but she is

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also reading for humanitarian themes. According to Ali, a major problem with the book is its "bloodless summary" that "fails to make the countries come alive." She describes the reader as "grind[ing] her teeth as Hill grinds out the facts," a narrative approach that painfully keeps her from "experiencing the fear of the young boy." "One reads on," Ali continues, "in the hope of gleaning some fresh insight either into the plights of migrants, or the fears of those rail against them" but this knowledge is not forthcoming. Ali does not offer reflections on the meaning of her reading experience, but similar expressions of frustration are repeated in television, radio, and social media reviews and discussions of Hill's novel.

Both "negative" and "positive" experiences of reading Hill's novel contain a kernel of the same problematic. That is, while readers come to the book to read about refugee experience, the relatively empty signifier of a strategically boring main character and a thrilling climax with unrealistic closure—recurring flashpoints—suggest that the novel is narrating global intrigue and structural power, not human plight. In short, these generic features suggest that the novel is in fact not about refugees, though the prospect of reading about refugees is what has gathered readers. To return to the language of our earlier discussion, *The Illegal*'s genre produces resistance because it throws into question the terms of both literary and humanitarian reading practices, which might make refugee suffering a socially acceptable commodity in Canadian reading cultures.

Nationalism: *Canada Reads*

This article's attempt to understand reader reception must also account for the institutions disseminating and remediating literature. So I turn now to consider two shared reading events. One of the places *The Illegal* has been celebrated as a book about Canada's identity is the 2016 *Canada Reads* competition. After four days of debate by a panel of famous Canadians over what book all Canadians should read, one champion book is crowned the winner. Follow-up online events with panelists extend public interest, turning winning books "into bestsellers" (Day 4). Scholars have noted *Canada Reads*' production of cultural nationalism through reading. Laura Moss argues that the program makes novels into "pawns in a game. With the watered-down aestheticism of the readings, most often it has been

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the politics of the novels that is lost in the commentary on the texts" (8). Summarizing extant criticisms, Zanchi writes wryly, "To be fair, the ideological implications of and political motives behind a state funded and nationwide book program are not particularly subtle" (565). Instead, Zanchi highlights *Canada Reads* pedagogical role, suggesting that it "facilitates public mindedness and nurtures a social consciousness by cultivating public spirit through books-talk." Zanchi's approach builds on the work of Fuller and Rak, who describe "the ideological work" of *Canada Reads* as demonstrating "that reading and sharing books by Canadians are inherently transformative and nationally reparative acts" (26). A satirical political thriller about refugees fits this social situation uncomfortably.

During the 2016 competition, when the novel's commercial form is mentioned, it becomes a source of discomfort. Celebrities are debating what book Canadians need to learn from but are dealing with a book that reads like entertainment and thus is not expected to educate.[6] For instance, on Day Two Adam Copeland suggests *The Illegal* feels like a 90s Will Smith action movie ("Canada Reads" Day Two). The audience laughs and the panelists hear the comment as a critique. Later Copeland revises his comment, trying to convince fellow panelists, he "didn't mean it as a [derogatory thing]. I truly think that's its strength" ("Canada Reads" Finale 36:50). That same day Vinay Virmani, another participant, says that what he likes most about *The Illegal* is that it is entertaining and enjoyable. The host laughs and reads the subtext by saying, "he said with a little hesitation" (35:40). Occasionally, Clara Hughes, who champions Hill's book, breaks out of her role as contestant to narrate the debate itself, arguing for compassion and embodying the role of humanitarianism as a moral arbiter in Canadian disagreements around national identity. Fellow contestant Bruce Poon Tip calls her the "Canadian Bambi"—vulnerable and unassailably good—and expresses reluctance to disagree with her.

The embodied hesitations of these panelists match reviewers' discomfort with a refugee novel as entertaining mainstream fiction in a conversation about how books shape collective identity. Together they point to the persistence of humanitarian reading cultures in limiting the political interventions of Canadian refugee fiction. Hughes' defence of *The Illegal* reveals an earnest belief in reading as educational social practice and

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admirable commitment to human rights. It also erases genre as an interpretive clue to what social consciousness the book advocates. Hughes reiterates Canada's "need" as a multicultural nation to welcome refugees and then moves quickly to the novel's power in "showing us how far empathy can go—a helping hand, a smile . . . it brings us to a state of empathy" ("Canada Reads" Finale 40:10). She offers *The Illegal* as a way of helping "us imagine the plight of millions of displaced people" ("Canada Reads" Day One 12:10) and urges Canadians to give "voices to the faceless" (37:00). In her defence of the narrative's value to an aspirational vision of Canada, Hughes produces a mash-up of familiar metaphors reflecting state humanitarianism (the nation's need to welcome, and the voiceless needing a face, the humanization of migrants). The implications of the novel's aesthetics are of less interest to her. The gap between *The Illegal*'s political intervention and its reception is produced as Canadians disown the thrill of refugee fiction as entertainment and reclaim it for inspirational education. This gap results in a missed opportunity for the novel to revise the cultural figure of the refugee in a particular moment of shared reading and to reorient readers toward refugee fiction as political intervention rather than humanitarian ethnography. More pointedly, those who read this refugee narrative after seeing it pressed through the meat grinder of aspirational national significance must now work even harder to reconstruct and inhabit the book's world on its own terms.

Hughes' remarks confirm the power of humanitarianism in pacifying anxiety about Canada's identity; her slippage regarding what or who needs humanizing inadvertently voices the specific significance of refugee narratives within national literary culture as recuperative for citizen readers.[7] *Canada Reads*' predilection for debates about refugee literature correlates to Canada's need for refugees as markers of state humanitarianism's goodness. Refugee literature is used, regardless of genre, to revise a racist history of asylum seeker rejection into a hagiography of global humanitarianism. The embodied hesitations signal discomfort with this humanitarian reading pact, and they are prompted by the discomfort of a celebrated Canadian author turning to a popular genre to satirically explore Canada's role in a global crisis. This brings us to another shared reading event, Amnesty International's annual Book Club (AIBC).

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Humanitarianism: Amnesty International Book Club

Although mentioned four times in *The Illegal*, Amnesty International's only role in the novel is to host a website that lists the dead and to monitor a hotline that does not, in the end, save lives. Still, in 2016 AIBC chose *The Illegal* for its book club event. Established in 2014, the AIBC uses shared reading to educate citizens on global issues. Their purpose is threefold: promoting "excellent literature," "great discussion," and opportunities for human rights "action" ("Join"). AIBC's mandate points to the symbolic capital of reading literature, the social good of shared reading, and the traditions of the humanitarian reading industry. Specifically, their humanitarian mandate evaluates humanitarian narratives according to how they inspire viewers to act together to alleviate suffering. The three elements of AIBC's discussion guide reflect its threefold mandate: a description of the book, discussion questions, and suggested actions. Together they produce the interpretive gap this article has been exploring.

AIBC's discussion guide to *The Illegal* begins by referencing the Syrian refugee crisis, presumably to bridge the citizen-reader's general interest in refugees with this particular story. In a surprising rhetorical turn, it then overlays Hill's story with the rhetoric of news media on Syrian refugees: "For the past six months we've heard almost daily reports of the Syrian refugee crisis: gripping accounts of human tragedy, shocking reports of human cruelty, and hopeful tales of human compassion" ("Amnesty" 2). Eliding the boundary between reality and fiction altogether, the guide continues in the following manner:

> The reader immediately tumbles into *the crisis as it is being lived by Keita Ali,* one of the millions fleeing persecution by their country. Swept up in the fear and instability of his life on the run, we learn gradually of the grave human rights violations that spurred his flight. At the same time, we are touched by the dignity and ingenuity with which this man approaches his ordeal. (emphasis added)

The description demonstrates the interchangeability of refugee narratives: interlaced with struggling dignity and selfless compassion, we first encounter tragedy, then cruelty, and finally hope. By applying a humanitarian formula for narrating Syrian Convention refugees to the description of an experimentally playful novel about a non-status African migrant on a fictionalized continent, the guide provides an example of the humanitarian

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pact as institutional strategy. Individual trauma and ingenuity is generated to mobilize shared emotions toward action.

The guide also offers two sets of discussion questions to guide the shared reading process. One invites humanitarian reading practices and the other guides readers toward a literary analysis. The first set of questions depends on familiar binaries (citizen/refugee, gift/burden) that *The Illegal* dismantles. It asks readers to assess the level of foolishness in Keita's risk-taking and invites them to say whether they "agree that refugees have a right to seek asylum" (5). The second set of questions included in the discussion guide are written by author Tracey Lindberg and invite readers to explore the book's aesthetic intervention, for instance asking about the organizing metaphors of the book. In this way, AIBC caters to readers with either a literary or humanitarian interest in the book. Polling book clubs about which set of questions they used could clarify the preferred mode for humanitarian reading publics.

The discussion guide's call to action is yet another humanitarian appropriation of *The Illegal*. The last page of the guide features a DIY doorknob hanger in Amnesty International's yellow and black colours. "Cut this circle out," the instructions insist. "Put on your front door, your office door, anywhere!" ("Amnesty" 11). The energy of Hill's paradigm-shifting book dissipates as it is funnelled into a personal, symbolic action of charity—that of hanging the metaphorical words "My door is open for refugees" on an office doorknob (11).

A humanitarian reading of refugee literature invites non-refugee readers to ask what it is like to be a refugee and then, quickly after, to ask how they can help. Reading *The Illegal* as a political thriller, however, invites a different set of ethical questions from curious readers: Who or what is responsible for creating the systems of entrapment that migrants must navigate? What are the mechanisms and institutions that support that system? How do subversive collusions form in the midst of racist ethnonationalism? Where is the latitude for radical action within restrictive spaces? To whom am I responsible in a system that refuses me rights?

Conclusion

Shared reading events are culturally and socially formative gatherings where readers negotiate the political implications of narratives. Refugee literature features often in these spaces and is valued by Canadian literary

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cultures for its transformative potential. However, the interchangeability of refugee narratives presents a legibility issue for literary and "generic" refugee narratives alike. Each can challenge Canada's aspirations to a global humanitarian identity and also be reinscribed as humanitarian by readers' responses. In the case of *The Illegal*, remediations of the text frame the narrative as impetus for learning about and enacting Canadian humanitarianism, even as readers express discomfort about its literary value. I read that discomfort as an opportunity to reconsider the nobility of the humanitarian exchange between readers and refugee fiction. What I have tried to show with this case study of *The Illegal* is that a potentially productive discomfort is found precisely in the tension produced by reading refugee fiction as an entertaining commodity. *The Illegal* has not been sufficiently recognized for its critical contribution to cultural conversations, ironically because it discomforts readers who are seeking the more familiar discomfort of literary prose. For cultural refugee studies this may offer direction for future research: first, to attend to the reception of popular cultural forms; second, to consider how generic fiction supports humanitarian reading publics in unpacking the experience of consuming refugee cultural production and in fully facing the self-interest of humanitarian desire. My close reading of *The Illegal* highlights its nuanced critique of state humanitarianism vis-à-vis the illegalization of Black migrants, and its powerful reinvention of the cultural figure of the refugee by means of the popular genre of the political thriller. Taking these kinds of contributions seriously offer scholars in cultural refugee studies the opportunity to shape the powerful public pedagogy of popular refugee fiction in critical directions and to interrogate how literary hierarchies may function in harmony with humanitarian reading publics.

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NOTES

1 For the empirical studies upon which Fuller and Sedo draw for these claims, see Créatec, *Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure*.
2 The phrase "hostile environment" was famously used by Theresa May to describe the goals of her immigration policy in 2012. She said: "The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (Hill "Hostile Environment").
3 Consider the work of Dionne Brand, Madeleine Thien, Souvankham Thammavongsa, and Francisco-Fernando Granados, as well as Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared*, Kyo Maclear's *The Letter Opener*, Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*, and Michael Helm's *Cities of Refuge*. A notable exception is Randy Boyagoda's less critically acclaimed satire *Governor of the Northern Province*.
4 *Ru* won Canada's Governor General's Award, is published in twenty countries, and is used widely in English courses.
5 A significant number of *Canada Reads* books are memoir. Fuller and Rak assess memoir as having "discursive properties that direct reading away from considerations of literary merit and reader affect and toward ethical considerations about content and the author" (29).
6 Karen Steigman argues that political thrillers are written as if the writing "doesn't conceal anything," and so are read as entertainment and "not literary objects" (13).
7 Yến Lê Espiritu argues similarly regarding Vietnamese refugees in America. See Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study."

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