

Ecstasies of the (Un)Loved

The Lesbian Utopianism of Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child*

become real; follower become leader; Mouse turned sorcerer
—Merle Woo, “Yellow Woman Speaks”

I had thought this place I inhabit would house me forever, but the
surface of my body aches for something which cannot be found here.
How can it ache for what it has never known?
—Hiromi Goto, *The Kappa Child*

“What happened during the eclipse? Everything impossible”: Dreaming Utopia

During her plenary address “Narrative of the Invisible” at the University of British Columbia’s “Queerly Canadian: Changing Narratives” Conference, poet-novelist Nicole Brossard called for “a new menu of sexual practices.” It would celebrate the lesbian body as inspiration for “spending entire days dreaming of utopia.” She also meditated on how “homos” are often the subject of ridicule while “queers” are construed as unique and mysterious. This binary remains unstable given that the terms are often used interchangeably, pejoratively (even within the LGBT community), and without much meaningful qualification. The nexus of the “invisible” in the talk’s title with the “unknowable” or “unaccountable” associated with queerness is particularly relevant to Hiromi Goto’s *The Kappa Child*.¹ This is a transnational novel characterized by two journeys: one that stretches toward a cosmos of previously de-sexualized mythic experience, and another that trudges through the all-too-terrestrial world of domestic violence in immigrant families.

Readers may initially view the major motifs in the text—planetary alignments and galactic collisions—as either steeped in scientific abstraction or faddish New Age occultism. In Goto’s work, however, the speaking subject is concrete, a specific kind of woman-lover constructed with both symbolic potency and queer audacity. Unnamed in the text, she is a Japanese Canadian immigrant and an adult daughter raised in a family whose ratio of men to

women is 1:5. Although the majority, the females were belittled and often physically abused during a hellish childhood on the Alberta prairies. As the text opens, the narrator depicts herself as a “short ugly Asian with a bad attitude” (84). If Brossard’s vision is peopled by invisible dreamers seeking a lesbian utopia, Goto’s narrator—perhaps unbeknownst to her—is one such seeker. She spends her days in luxurious sleepwear, even donning these typically nocturnal (and hardly work-ready) clothes as she collects abandoned shopping carts in Calgary’s downtown core and its rural environs. Once, meandering through suburban Nose Hill Park, she imagines “tiny hands undressing [her]” and smiles at this frenzy of imagined touch (219). She dreams, “I am sleeping on the moon and I’m surprised, filled with wonder, at how warm the body of the moon is, when she looked so cool” (220). Her epiphany comes when she realizes an ontological mirroring between her and the Japanese water sprite known as the kappa: “I dip fingers in a pool wet with possibilities and something touches me back. I don’t know if it is some green, mischievous creature, or just my nightly reflection” (222).

In this reflection, she has touched herself through an/Other; the inner and outer spaces coalesce. The touch is tender, subtly auto-erotic, supernatural, and most important, reciprocal. It is a celebratory moment for someone so used to being alone—indeed, in her own universe. If we recognize the morphological similarity between the kappa and pop-culture aliens, we realize the narrator has been “alienated” all her life. “The split and contradictory self,” explains Donna Haraway in “Situated Knowledges,” is “the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history” (183). This observation gains more traction as we move toward an inclusive feminist epistemology of alternative worlds: “Splitting’ in this context should be about heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously salient and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists. This geometry pertains within and among subjects. Subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision” (Haraway, “Situated” 183). Cruising between vision to re-vision, this essay examines how Asian Canadian lesbians can help map new frontiers of utopian desire by personalizing myth and creating diverse, non-conformist spaces for self-love and same-sex desire. Much of the momentum for the former comes from the Asian immigration experience: kappa stories were first carried to these shores by Japanese immigrants, including the narrator’s Japanese parents. Another form of less positive cultural baggage is an obligatory deference to parental—especially patriarchal—authority out of

fear rather than respect and autonomous choice. A deficit of self-love may result from placing filial imperatives (often a strong part of traditional Asian-diasporic households) above personal fulfillment. I situate *The Kappa Child* in the matrix of domestic abuse, recognizing as part of this violence the alienating attitudes of some immigrant parents towards having a “homo” in the family and, by extension, in the community at large.

While inverting popular depictions of extraterrestrials in “Alien Texts, Alien Seductions: The Context of Colour Full Writing,” Goto herself offers a perspective on “alienated” sexuality in a systemically oppressive society. Acknowledging that “[t]here are many ways in which ‘aliens’ are constructed,” she criticizes how “[t]he prurient horror of an apparently ‘ungendered’ being betrays a homophobic subtext that speaks volumes of a society that continues to assert heterosexist patriarchal primacy” (267). Dana Y. Takagi broaches this concern on a disciplinary front, speaking of the disapproving academic “family” that chooses denial or silence: “That the topic of *homo*-sexuality in Asian American studies is often treated in whispers, if mentioned at all, should be some indication of trouble” (357). Takagi polarizes Asian North American and gay identities as “separate places—emotionally, physically, intellectually. We sustain the separation of these worlds with our folk knowledge about the family-centeredness and suprahomophobic beliefs of ethnic communities. And we frequently take great care to keep those worlds distant from each other” (356). Similarly, Helen Zia recalls being pressed to clarify her sexuality, especially after her Asian American activist peers announced, “Homosexuality is not part of our community.” She admits having repudiated her lesbianism out of fear of rejection, an abiding concern that still tortures closeted Asian Canadians with intense acuity: “My Chinese upbringing taught me to value my family above all. Suddenly my extended family, my community, was threatening to disown me. Was I a lesbian? I answered, ‘No, I’m not’” (229). Filmmaker Richard Fung reiterates the pain of anticipating rejection or conditional acceptance: “As is the case for many other people of colour and especially immigrants, our families and our ethnic communities are a rare source of affirmation in a racist society. In coming out, we risk (or feel that we risk) losing this support” (340).

To counteract these forces that seek to destroy the lesbian subject’s agency and humanity, symbolic social death is required: first, of the attitude that makes her cast herself as aberrant, grotesque, and alien; second, of the disapproving, homophobic family which exists less in the novel literally than as a conceptual corollary of the narrator’s physically and emotionally abusive home. One

mechanism that would reassert the subject's sense of pride and self-respect would be what Goto defines as "Colour Full writing . . . a site of strength, possibility, and change" ("Alien Texts" 266). The writer argues that human aliens are plentiful in sites where systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia keep them "in their place" (i.e. "Loveable E.T. not only has to phone home but must go home, for the alien's own good" [264]). Colour Full writing is a way of asserting that they are here, queer, and "home to stay" (266). Borrowed from fellow Asian Canadian writer Larissa Lai, this expressive strategy is premised on placing one's own world at the center and then "imagin[ing] and creat[ing] new worlds that may not otherwise be written or welcomed" (266). This tactic is especially vital for Asian Canadians who are told through media representations that they are not only different and comparatively ugly (because of their features, especially eye shape), but also perpetual foreigners, sojourners, and non-English speakers. *Queer* Asian Canadians, particularly lesbians, have to worry about layered alienations: racism, sexism, homophobia, and generationally or ethnically polarized groups. While some Asian female bodies may be valorized through the lens of heterosexual erotic fantasy, outside of that, many become *personae non-gratae*. Rainbows—colourful signifiers of diversity, pride, promise, and reconciliation—have increased symbolic potency for LGBT Canadians of colour. Because they emerge after the rain, banishing drought (another leitmotif in *The Kappa Child*), rainbows suggest how a lesbian utopia requires the irrigation of self-love; these would be mental landscapes "wet with possibilities," a community of empowered women who love each other without fear from within and without. Such factors would create the optimal environment for transformation of the diminished self into a self-certain, mature lesbian subject.

The Sea Inside: A Search for Salvation

Through recourse to Japanese folklore, namely the (sexual) intervention of the kappa and its myth-to-flesh transformation, Goto's novel interrogates the complex interiority—and inferiority complex—of the lesbian narrator. Something as seemingly prosaic as finding love becomes a utopian dream. With an attitude problem that continually forecloses the possibility of a rewarding relationship, she meditates darkly, "There are no love stories waiting for me and I'm not up to invention" (11). Much of this self-bashing arises from her childhood trauma. She grumbles about being "an ugly, pregnant Asian born into a family not of [her] choosing" (14) and sarcastically discounts suicide as a viable option for improving her muddled life: "I can make a tragedy out

of my personal life without having to die” (14). The mere mention of killing herself indicates that she has considered it; it is an act which places in stark relief both the severity of the purported abuse and the lack of support offered by her family, struggling themselves as immigrant farmers on the often inhospitable landscape of the prairies. Her unhappy childhood persists even after it has been abandoned for the seeming independence of adulthood.

After flirting impulsively with Genevieve, a white retail clerk who works at a sleepwear boutique, the narrator scurries off in excited agitation, denouncing herself as a “dork” and a “geek” prior to gorging neurotically on cookies (52). Although she sublimates her nascent desire into lavish spending at the store, she confesses feeling “horribly self-conscious” as “a short and dumpy Asian with bad teeth, daikon legs, stocky feet. A neckless wonder with cone-shaped pseudo breasts” (122). The early part of the text is littered with these disparaging descriptions, all of which underscore how she does not *fit*, just like the regular clothes she discards for the fancy pyjamas. She criticizes herself not for the same-sex attraction but her failure to conform to a wider spectrum of expectations, namely beauty ideals, and wears bulky sleepwear to be “saved from [her] body” (122). Ironically, doing so attracts rather than deflects attention, her sartorial mask becoming a costume and a uniform of sorts. She fails to realize that it is precisely her idiosyncrasies that make her unique and worthy of love.

Being unfit, not fitting in, and not being fit enough are ontological positions that prove a lack of self-esteem that is consistent with many young minority women’s experiences, especially lesbians of colour. Explains Ann Yuri Uyeda from the 1989 Asian Pacific Lesbian Network Retreat, “All too often, we have felt isolated from others because of our ethnicity and then later on because of our sexualities. No matter where we were—with our family, friends, other Asian Americans, the queer community, or the straight white world—we always had to choose what we were: we were either Asian American or we were queer, but never (seemingly) would the two meet in the same breath” (117). The narrator, female yet unfeminine (therefore, in some ways, beyond gender or even gender-less, recalling Goto’s aforementioned alien allusion), sighs about the whole unsatisfying reality of her body: “Clothing does not fit me. . . . It was excruciating torture when what clothes I’d finally found started threading into tatters. I held out as long as I could until the state of my unravelling would lead to public nudity” (51). This image conjures up a spectacle, but not the liberating Otherness of drag show or pride parade: it is humiliating exposure, a stripping away rather than a controlled or playful disrobing. She is, literally, falling apart. In many ways,

she epitomizes Brossard's maligned "homo": a Wildean disgrace made out of a sensitive and private individual. By the end of the text, the narrator decides not to forego her unconventional wardrobe, admitting, "I'm a basic pajama person" (250) and embracing this quirkiness as a mark of her *positive* rather than destructive difference. Donning sleepwear during the day, by this token, is more than a choice of clothes; it exposes an increasingly self-certain queer subject who apparels herself for pleasure and personal expression rather than strangling herself in tight clothes and the social arena—a heterosexist, racist society—that they obliquely represent.

Mythic Process: Two Models of Lesbian Subjectivity

In "The Politics of Separatism and Lesbian Utopian Fiction," Sonya Andermahr argues that "Imaginative extrapolation, by virtue of being oppositional or because it envisions an alternative, serves to denaturalise the status quo and to interrogate the nature of the 'real'" (144). She cites Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* as positing that the modern fantastic flanks the real as "a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other. . . . [that] aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient" (Andermahr 144).¹ What these critics define as the "real" has a paradigmatic relationship to what might be considered the "norm," namely the supremacy of heterosexuality, the conception and raising of children through nuclear families, and the celebration of women in accordance with oppressively narrow parameters of beauty and worth. Much stock, for instance, is placed on being white, straight, thin, and middle-class, none of which describes Goto's protagonist. It is because of this perceived failure that lesbian utopias must rectify what is "oppressive and insufficient." Such disparities underscore *The Kappa Child's* agenda to effect social change, particularly in critiquing Asian immigrant attitudes toward unrestrained patriarchy, domestic violence, and by association, homophobia in these more traditional homes. This space of awareness can reconfigure attitudes that affect how LGBT children of immigrants (second-generation Asian Canadians and beyond) are identified and understood.

Andermahr outlines two discursive models for lesbian-centered subjectivity: the utopian and the political. The former focuses on community-building and solidarity between women who love women. It espouses the vision of a Lesbian Nation, an unencumbered space of safety and affirmation while stressing the need for personal journeying and sustained feminist activism that begins within (136-7). This position espouses same-sex love as a legitimate, positive, and inclusive identity. Alternatively, the political model

is more combative, demanding a staunch, demonstrable commitment to overthrowing male supremacy (137). In many ways, society (mis)construes the political model as more radical, the kind that would advocate male-female separation as the only way of achieving equality.² Perhaps society's comfort with relegating a complex paradigm to a theoretical extreme reflects the sad reality that to many, feminism still equals "man-hating." While both the utopian and political models are useful, each has limitations and should be understood as complementary rather than competitive. *The Kappa Child* gravitates closer to the utopian model because of its focus on the *emotional* needs of individual lesbians rather than insisting on the primacy of group-centered social, economic, or legal coalition-building (Andermahr 137).

For example, in the interior monologues of the kappa child that punctuate the narrator's story, we are offered a gynocentric vision from a parallel universe: the Other is again within the self, this time literally. The creature is a hybrid oddity conceived through the narrator's mythic tryst with a kappa (the "Stranger") on an abandoned airstrip. Surrounded by 6000 "egg sisters" in a space "lovely and rich," the child describes a "perpetual sense of potential, vibrant and miraculous" as it explores the sensuously oneiric, quasi-marine womb-world (18). This paradisiacal imagery, a Lesbian Nation *in utero*, contrasts the dystopian suggestion that kappa are creatures that devolved into humans by succumbing to despair and dryness. In many ways, the idea of kappa self-contempt is reminiscent of self-hating minorities, yet with kappa, the real future lies in reclaiming the past. As the kappa child explains, "[W]hen kappa eyes succumb to pain, when kappa parents turn aside their kappa children, when kappa deny water, they rip the tender skin from between their fingers and toes. They turn their eyes away from all things kappa. They become humans" (176). Having deformed ourselves through false consciousness (e.g. a withholding of parental love, a repudiation of natural desires, deliberate self-mutilation), we must return to myth and hope for salvation. The narrator reasons, "The cusp of a new century, *hope*, such a small word in the face of global disintegration, I turned to the solar bodies with clenched teeth and fists" (81). Later, she meanders through a dark city centre and reiterates her belief that "maybe when humans are gone, our myths will come alive, wander over the remnants of our uncivilization. Kappa, water dragons, yama-uba, oni. Selkie, golem, lorelei, xuan wu. The creatures we carry will be born from our demise and the world will *dream a new existence*" (223; emphasis added).

Few of the aforementioned mythical beasts come from a Western context, and none directly from a North American base. This transnational,

multicultural vision—clearly Canadian—suggests that although the text is situated in Alberta, its scope transcends borders. The utopian model's focus on journeying does not coincide with the political model's tendency to discount myth as "inimical to political praxis" (Andermahr 139). Yet myth neither confuses nor dilutes the political message so much as renders it in a form that is more abstract and memorable: a challenge to be met. The anxiety that myth provokes may result in part from issues of imaginative accessibility; not everyone, for instance, knows what a kappa is, or why the beak-faced, green-skinned, bowl-headed monster has any relevance to a millennial moment on the Western prairies. Overall, both the utopian and political models can theorize positive change, giving context to personal struggle and adding depth, breadth, and nuance either within the individual lesbian's consciousness or amongst those of a larger group. After all, lesbian utopianism in *The Kappa Child* stretches far beyond an ideal freedom from any number of publicly codified, privately scrutinized, or institutionally policed encounters between same-sex individuals; it encompasses an amorphous, de-centralized, powerfully cosmic consciousness, one that believes there is a lot we do not know "out there." Such renewed awareness of our profound ignorance as a species (a "universe/all" knowledge deficit) requires a greater openness to alternative dimensions, perspectives, and life-worlds. This ideal flexibility also applies on the human level, specifically in regard to LGBT people, immigrants, women of colour, and others charged with being "aliens," interlopers, undesirable, and doomed. The fin-de-siècle English writer Edward Carpenter suggested in "The Intermediate Sex" that homosexuals were part of the future, not degenerate and moribund. He estimated, "At the present time certain new types of human kind may be emerging, which will have an important part to play in the societies of the future—even though for the moment their appearance is attended by a good deal of confusion and misapprehension" (186). Like Goto's, his utopian rhetoric is pluralistic ("new types") and ("societies of the future"), anticipating a global sea-change.

Cosmic Corporeality: Claiming a New Sexual Space

The kappa child is an embryonic mystery, an "abnormal" pregnancy" (Goto 12) borne by an Asian Canadian who feels the most joy, support, and fulfillment in the company of other women. Yet the word "lesbian" is never used in the text; this may be a way of normalizing the identity, as if mentioning two women in a romantic relationship was nothing spectacularly different from the pairing of a man and a woman; or, it may be a means of shedding

past assumptions and asking for new terminologies to depict the multiple manifestations of women's desire. The kappa child partakes in a semiotic of queerness because it cannot be adequately explained, and copulating with it begs description. "But it wasn't exactly sexual intercourse" argues the narrator as she recalls her arousal while watching the "slender green creature," clad in a Chinese wedding-dress, disrobing in front of her (104). In typically femme posturing, the kappa Stranger enjoys "rolllllling" stockings seductively down her hairless legs (122). Here, their interpersonal juncture (human with more-than-human, known with unknown) epitomizes the utopian model more than the political model. There is neither a "war of the worlds" encounter between human and alien nor any abduction effort fuelled by a plan for terrestrial colonization. Instead, this pair wrestles and grunts in the honesty of nakedness, perhaps even a parody of intercourse itself as a clichéd "battle of the sexes" ("we kiai, loud enough to shatter trees, kiai" [124]). This moment of first contact, while combative, appropriates the language of human seduction and splices it together with the exhilaration of new sexual frontiers. The phrase "the earth moved," while most identifiable as a literary allusion (to Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), is now a platitude describing incredible heterosexual sex.³ In this kappa-human coupling, a whole array of celestial bodies shifts and aligns, not clashing as they might if this were a cataclysmic, abhorrent act. The climax is appropriately cosmic:

I thought she came. Came in waves of pleasure. Hearts pounding. The celestial bodies slow moving across the fabric-space of time. Arms clasped around each other, still. . . . I couldn't say where the stars lay. They glittered and spun, constellations chasing planets toward the horizon. Time spiralled and inflated, how could I know? A moon rising to seek the darkness, the earth just a mote in the breath of the universe. I wanted to laugh, to weep, to keep this moment forever. (124)

This scene reminds us of how small humans are when juxtaposed with massive bodies in space. We also recall two earlier episodes when the narrator's family first settled in the "dry, dry prairies" (126). This new location is a stark contrast to the moist, verdant fields of British Columbia. The father, Hideo, insists on growing Japanese rice, a rather outlandish idea given the arid climate. When Slither, the oldest child, laughs at his choice, she is locked outside, "howling in the dust heat tornado" (113). The narrator, with her own suggestion of wild rice, finds herself banished for impudence. Both are forced to weather "the storm of [the] father's anger" together (114). The only comfort they derive—especially the narrator from her "beautiful" sister—is playing a game of touching tongues. They are left "[g]iggling, giggling with joy" (114).

While harmless, the game points to two females, thrown out of doors, abject and unwanted by family; this is easily the position of gay teens exiled for speaking their truth. Only here, they would be “sisters” metaphorically rather than genealogically. This pseudo-kissing game is guilelessly homoerotic, a queerly symbolic collusion of individuals set apart for “disobedience” when in actuality, no crime was committed. Aware of their father’s punitive character, the children later overhear their parents having sex. The sounds illustrate the dynamics of the parents’ conjugal relationship, an extension of the parental-filial relationship in its violence: “Slap! Slap! Smack of flesh on flesh. Thud, smack, slap, thud. Smack, slap, smack, slap, the bed thudding, thumping, creak, squeak— . . .” (79). These auditory images could easily apply to a scene of battery, in the bedroom or elsewhere, and the daughters silently reproach their mother for engaging with “the enemy” (230). The contrast of cacophonous brutality with the fluid eroticism of the kappa “sex” is both telling and profound.

“Sex” with the kappa Stranger exemplifies revolutionary social potential by underscoring the importance of sexual diversity. To encounter a phrase like “Sex, of course, is not the only way to find yourself pregnant” (Goto 80) is de-centering for those accustomed to easy social scripts about how babies are made. The cucumber-craving kappa child is implanted through air, a strange sort of post-penetrative, quasi-immaculate conception with no males required. By that token, Hideo’s attempts to fertilize the land fail because “He had no idea how to grow anything at all” (126). While he may be a kind of “sperminator” type, producing four children through a grunting economy of hard work and rigid patriarchal authority, he also stunts their growth, “his fingers squeezed into knuckles” (72). We learn that Genevieve, conversely, is studying to be a masseuse, someone specializing in the healing potential of gentle, regenerative touch. The promise of the pyjama shop encounter, alongside the airstrip tryst, reverses the narrator’s assumption that “Love doesn’t figure in [the narrator’s] life, never did” (268). When she describes a variation of oral sex—“Stranger nimbly clambered over my exhausted body and nudged between my legs. Blissfully, I let them part. Mouth. Wetness. Cool as a dappled pond in a grove of trees. The Stranger blew” (124)—the scene recalls the time when she re-entered the sleepwear store. Here, too, there is an otherworldly encounter, but this time integrating culturally significant allusions to the queer kitsch of *The Wizard of Oz* and Botticelli’s iconic *The Birth of Venus*. Slipping on an outfit, she finds herself immersed in comfort, these clothes “shimmering in [her] hands like water” (53). Genevieve arrives, half-Dorothy, half-Glinda: “Red shoes stepped up and a woman crouched in

a cloud of sweet air” (53). The narrator enthuses that in the rich cloud of this (potential lover’s) breath, “some magic” neutralizes all of her own self-hatred: “Unselfconscious, I stepped from the protection of the cubicle and stood proudly under the glare of the spotlights, in front of three hinged mirrors and three mermaids.” She exhales, “I was found” (53-4).

Alien Nation: The Real War of the Worlds

When the narrator was younger, Okasan affectionately called her a “strange child” (44); now an adult, her sister PG jokingly labels her a “freak of nature” (211). She is aware of being an alien presence to others, just as the kappa child is an alien presence to—and within—her. Jenny Wolmark remarks that the term “alien” is resoundingly negative; built upon Manichean oppositions like civilized/savage and friend/foe, it “reinforce[s] relations of dominance and subordination” visible in the archetype of the Western white male who perpetually saves the world from foreign invasion and conquest (2).⁴ While acknowledging this context, including the alien colonization trope, Goto’s novel deviates from expectations. The alien straddles internal and external worlds. When the narrator’s emotionally stunted sister, nicknamed Mice but usually called “*Bagatare!*” (stupid idiot) by their father, discerns the pregnancy by peering into her older sibling’s face, the younger woman jumps back as if she has seen a “monster” (92). Aside from her own identification as monstrous, the narrator admits her discomfort at “knowing there’s someone in my body, this otherness, that’s what really gets to me” (92). Medical testing offers psychosomatic readings to dismiss the literal presence of any pod or foetus, probably because it was not conceived in a typical (that is, heterosexual, terrestrial) fashion. The narrator comments sardonically, “Over six months and no outward sign, no one asking if I’m in the family way with that tone of universal admiration. Pregnant in a way no one will ever notice” (12). Her feeling of being slighted is expected given that pregnancy and motherhood are usually feted as signs of a woman’s fertility and maturity. They are often construed as signs (albeit fallible) of her heterosexuality and partnered state. Single mothers like Bernie, the Korean Canadian grocer who becomes the narrator’s love-interest, still do not receive the same respect received by their married peers; the same goes for lesbian parents. That is why Bernie depends on the powerful backing of her family (here, the Amazonian Yoon sisters) and her elderly child-rearing father, a distinct contrast to Hideo who discounts his wife Okasan’s words as “foolish kitchen talk” and disperses his children with cuffs and shouts (113).

The narrator's alienation only deepens when she goes to consult her doctor and realizes more disconnections between herself and the society that either ignores or pathologizes her: "Funny thing. People willing to overlook an ugly patient in pajamas in a doctor's office. Because, obviously, she's sick" (100). "Sick" here refers less to a physical than a psychological malady, a handy means of invalidating the unruly, unlovely, and the queer. Similarly, Mice's earlier fright at some unnamed monstrosity might refer as much to the narrator as to the secret entity growing within her belly. The narrator's individuality (including her sexuality, ostensibly part of her "sickness" according to well-worn anti-gay rhetoric) have been suppressed all her life; she was "doing time" with her family (226). This prison metaphor implies hard labour, corporal punishment, and emotional incarceration; in such a place, dreaming utopia would come naturally. The surreal kappa sex—or in the narrator's words, "I-don't-know-what" (124)—and its millennial timing represent a merging of incongruous beings, a "mythic process" initiated by merging the mundane with the ecstatic unknown (250). The utopian dream thus flickers into being like light across the water.

Goto imparted in an interview with the *Globe and Mail* that the gist of the text is "the wave of possibilities the kappa symbolize[s], a sense of not knowing if you can ever trust it" (Bouchard). She explains that these creatures can both hurt and heal, sharing secrets like the art of bone-setting and how to relieve droughts, but also acting maliciously, for example, by sucking entrails out of human anuses (Bouchard). The author freely admits the similarities between these traditional myths and Western extra-terrestrials: "There are parallels: stories about people vanishing into fairy rings are very similar to stories about people being abducted by aliens, right down to the idea of missing chunks of time" (Bouchard). In *The Kappa Child*, however, the alien *is* the queer self, is *inside* that self, and slides from being the uncomfortable and even grotesque to the acceptable and entirely plausible. How else does the narrator correspondingly shift from condemning her "short neck . . . [and] huge, flat face" (187) to praising a neck "long enough to kiss" and a "lovely, curved skull" (248-9)? The kappa's interventions into her life open her eyes to the "mirrored infinity of all [her] selves" (249). Gestation gives rise to her new self-concept rather than any literal offspring. She comments that every event in her post-tryst life has pushed her to "normalize the incredible" (218), with the kappa child exemplifying "[e]verything impossible" (274). This depolarization process underscores the utopian agenda; just as Goto's narrator has "become tolerant of incredible stories" (116), her own example asks us to become more tolerant of those whose stories are lost, neglected, or muffled among us.

“Home”-ophobia: Domestic Violence, Dystopian Space

Feminist of colour bell hooks has stressed the need for “clear and meaningful alternative analyses which relate to people’s lives,” especially in regard to minority sexualities. Groups of women that feel excluded from the white bourgeois mainstream will find their niche “only if they first create, via critiques, an awareness of the factors that alienate them” (hooks 138). Major criticism of *The Kappa Child* has tended not to concentrate on domestic abuse or the hermeneutics of lesbian sexuality, but has instead dissected tropes of eating and gender indeterminism as they relate to oppressive patriarchy.⁵ Too much reticence exists about domestic abuse in Asian immigrant families, likely because of prevailing stereotypes: the sexist, overbearing husband-father paired with the submissive, downtrodden wife-mother. It may be unpopular to belabour these constructions, especially when Asian-descent males have been portrayed by Western media as somewhere between effeminate geeks and kung fu fighters. Nonetheless, such individuals—as with any race—do exist, and their complicity in the open secret of domestic violence requires continued examination and feminist critique. In Goto’s text, the above description of the skewed conjugal dynamic portrays Hideo and Okasan accurately. Discussing this unhappy environment underscores the importance of re-reading texts to empower minority women, especially lesbians. Only by doing so will readers be able to “envision and create a counter-hegemony” against violence in all of its forms and then “share the work of making a liberatory ideology and a liberatory movement” globally as well as locally (hooks 145). Homophobia within the family, I suggest, is domestic abuse at its most emotionally damaging, an extension of the terror, shame, and self-effacement that arise through physical battery. When attacked by intolerant or overly controlling intimates, especially one’s parents, dreaming utopia into reality becomes even more imperative.

For native-born Asian Canadians and their more recent immigrant counterparts, speaking out against homophobia and domestic abuse tends to be frustrated by the threat of familial and community ostracism. This is not an exclusively Asian diasporic concern, but it does coincide with the fears of many image-conscious immigrant families. There is a powerfully nuanced connection in *The Kappa Child* between domestic abuse and the silences—whether through deliberate avoidance or passive ignorance—about gay and lesbian children. Not all Asian Canadian families are like the narrator’s, of course. Yet as Asian American critics like Ben R. Tong have observed, there can be a marked tension between earning the respect of others and attending

to the specific needs of the family: “Children of the new generation were taught ‘the gracious heritage’ of ‘filial piety,’ thus stifling the possibility of bringing serious and critical question to bear on their own oppressed condition” (52). Speaking from the vantage point of a ten-year-old, Goto’s narrator explains why her mother could not leave the abusive household: “[S]he couldn’t save herself, let alone her children, and that was that. Going to white outsiders wasn’t an option for an Asian immigrant family like us. If you ditched the family, there was absolutely nothing left” (199). Both the physical abuse in the text and the emotional abuse incurred by homophobia are family secrets, largely construed by the older generations as sources of shame. The goal of “saving face” and avoiding a loss of status are central deterrents to honest disclosure about sexual identity.

In *The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Island Lesbian and Bisexual Women*, mixed-race writer Darlena Bird Jimenes explains that in her family, sexuality was never directly discussed nor was she ever formally asked about it (135). She shrugs this reticence off with, “I was always a ‘different’ kid in every respect anyway” (135). Although she sounds confident and centered now, we may recall how the mixed-race character Gerald, the narrator’s childhood friend, felt uncomfortable about his differences. Half Japanese and half First Nations, he grew up a misfit, with “red, red lips” (189), “beautiful eyes” (200), and a gentleness that was almost surreal compared to Hideo’s aggressive and destructive masculinity. Although it is not explicit, Gerald may also be gay, divulging to the grown-up narrator that his move to metropolitan Vancouver allowed him choices he never had in a small town, including autonomy, an accepting community, and access to lovers (240). In childhood, the narrator calls him a “sissy-boy” and a “pansy” in a climactic fit of cruelty spurred by a fresh beating from her father (201). His mother, the Nisei (second-generation Japanese) neighbour Janice, relates that he was emotionally scarred for five years following the incident. Only when the narrator belatedly apologizes is she able to mourn the loss of their camaraderie and the potential ally she could have had in him on her quest for self-acceptance. She also awakens to her ironical complicity in the abuse of others, a fact that brings her closer to her father, an undesired complement to their physical similarities.

Alice Hom’s “In the Mind of An/Other” explains how Asian Pacific American (APA) lesbians have to contend with a “natural self-contempt” that stems from multiple sources: a lack of familial support, the dominant culture’s racism, an alienating lesbian community that fails to offer equal

validation for lesbians of colour, and a hostile APA sub-group that seeks to deny the very existence of gay people amongst them (274-75). Kitty Tsui's poem "A Chinese Banquet *for* the one who was not invited" depicts a mother, "her voice beaded with sarcasm" (17), who realizes that her lesbian daughter will not be getting married and no longer inquires about it. When the daughter attempts to share news about her partner, the mother "will not listen, / she shakes her head" (31-32). Ann Uyeda summarizes the position of Asian North American lesbians:

Our Asian and American heritages encourage us to be invisible, unspoken, non-identified. Our families demand us to conform to their expectations and fears. And, as well-raised Asian daughter and women, we are often both afraid and ashamed of the conflicts we experience from these contradictions and our sexualities; consequently, we do not talk about the resulting trauma we suffer. (118)

Hom's paradigm of self-hatred is amply illustrated by the narrator's aforementioned self-bashing. She never had the support system of women and fellow lesbians that might have nurtured stronger self-esteem. Okasan informs her that had the family stayed in their native Osaka, the narrator would be "happily married with two kids" and the younger siblings would never have been born (13). Clearly, there is room for supportive dialogue between gay and straight women, but immersed in her own personal turmoil, Okasan remains much in the dark about her daughter's sexuality. The latter envies Genevieve for having a bisexual grandmother: "My mother probably didn't even know what it meant!" she sputters (82). This comment is ironic given that Okasan eventually leaves Hideo to embark on an extended road trip with Gerald's mother, a "tiny, brown woman" with a "deep and raspy" voice (162). The nature of Okasan and Janice's friendship, whether it is a sisterly intimacy or lesbian bonding, remains ambiguous, but the fact that one is immigrant and the other Nisei suggests the possibility of divergent experiences coalescing into affection and reconciliation. The narrator's myopia and destructive egocentrism prevent her from seeing Okasan as anything other than a female victim or a spineless accessory to patriarchal power. Goto enunciates the need for knowledge and understanding on the part of both children *and* their parents when it comes to accepting the unexpected valences and manifold consequences of female desire.

"The creature inside me curls around my heart": Still Dreaming Utopia

In many ways, the narrator's job as a collector of abandoned shopping carts enacts her own struggle to be "found," just as she imagined when she

experienced her initial attraction to Genevieve and later to her best friend, the sharp-tongued Midori. When she apologizes for isolating herself from both women (who eventually become a couple), she pleads, "I've been sorting through my life. My baggage. It's been hard." Midori retorts, "How long?! When will you stop sorting through life and just bloody well act?!" (235). This bluntness, although somewhat parental in tone, propels the narrator to kiss her long-time crush on the mouth, "almost shudder[ing], with longing, loss" (235). As a shopping cart collector, the narrator is a kind of postmodern shepherdess who corrals "the abandoned, the lost, the vandalized" (138) into the safety of her milk truck. Whether found on top of a tree or roof or teetering off of a bridge, these seemingly negligible steel skeletons represent individuals who have been treated "in the most disrespectful ways" (139). Called trackers, the narrator and her coworkers are less like scrap-hunters than rescue workers attempting to retrieve those who have become invisible (recalling Brossard) or unwanted (recalling the aforementioned APA writers). She explains, "Some of the trackers drive their trucks, what have you, slowly up and down alleys, hanging out the window for that errant gleam of silver" (139). Although shopping carts do not mean much to the average consumer, "errant gleam of silver" speaks of a treasure that requires attention and care, a strong allusion to untapped human potential. The narrator details how she scours the downtown core, examining crowded alleys, looking past garbage and cardboard, and rooting through the "oddest of places" (139) in order to bring these runaway or abandoned items home. She treats them as if they were people, enacting a complex if joyously exaggerated choreography of retrieval and salvation. The process allegorizes LGBT young people who move from a position of being "home-less" (that is, lacking a sheltering, positive space of their own) to being "home." Unlike sci-fi aliens, they *come* home rather than go home.

By the end of the novel, planetary images, especially lunar cycles, parallel the emotional *synastry* (or in non-astrological terms, compatibility) of the protagonist and the community of women that now nourishes her. Among them are lesbian friends, potential lovers, her three emotionally recovering sisters, and mothering people (a porous category that includes some of the aforementioned individuals as well as feminist and/or feminine men). While the kappa child was conceived on an airport landing strip during the "last visible lunar eclipse of the twentieth century" (81), the text concludes with another lunar alignment: a conjunction. Under this positive light, the narrator, Genevieve, Bernie, and Midori (friends, lovers, or lovers-to-be) frolic in a scene

that celebrates both vitality, natural elements, and female fecundity: “We jump from the van and tear into the field. Moon to sea, sea to moon, earth to sky, earth to water. We leap, bound, in the sweetness, our laughter soaring, we leap skyward, leave perfect footprints in the rich mud. New green shoots of life twine at our feet, rising leafy in the warm night air” (275). The phrases “perfect footprints” and “new green shoots of life” signify the perfection—not so much social or physical but metaphysical and interpersonal—of the celebrants. As a stock feminine and utopian symbol, the moon speaks to us of something desirable and distant yet reachable; it is not unlike the liquid-dark eyes of the kappa Stranger, “filled with unbearable promise” (124).

In the address that concluded the Queerly Canadian Conference, Richard Cavell posited that immigration experiences create “queer dislocation” and prove that homosexuality functions transnationally, across borders, bodies, and matter—and across bodies that matter. As such, the vibrant hermeneutic potential of gay and lesbian difference can offer “new places and spaces” for negotiating twenty-first-century Canadian identity. Such observations strike at the core of what I read as *The Kappa Child*’s utopian and political mandates, which are to agitate for change in attitudes toward “different” children in the family and to envision easier lives for those encountering friction with abusive, less-than-accepting, or simply uninformed families. For Goto’s narrator, as for many young Asian Canadians, the home remains a particularly challenging space for negotiating acceptance of self. If no such space exists, alternatives must be sought, even at the expense of familial solidarity and much-revered traditions of filiality and obedience.

In Brossard’s early experimental novel *Le désert mauve* (*Mauve Desert*), referenced during her plenary session, we follow the young Mélanie traversing a desert through dusks, dawns, and feverish days in her mother’s white Meteor. In many ways, her journey resembles that of Goto’s narrator who also has her own white car (albeit the less romantic fourth-hand milk van), with which she explores new frontiers of language and love. Like Mélanie’s mother, Okasan explores close partnerships—and possibly love—with women, and readers accompany these characters into a utopian space of fluidity, continual movement, and often lyrical crests of same-sex desire. The narrator’s concluding vision in *The Kappa Child*—“And the water breaks free with the rain” (275)—offers rebirth and hope. Water breaking free—whether in the form of undammed rivers or drought-quenching showers—duly refers to the rupture of the amniotic sac during childbirth. It may also foreshadow older children breaking free into less encumbered spaces. Surrounded by

rain, a direct contrast to the dryness of the prairies that inhibited the growth of successful rice crops, the ultimate stance of these women argues that re-birth is not only possible, it is already in process.

NOTES

- 1 For a recent critical collection on queerness and science fiction, see Pearson et al. For the alien angle and alternative sexualities, see Pearson's "Alien Cryptographies" and review of Goto's text ("Saturating the Present"). As one anonymous reviewer at *Canadian Literature* suggests, although Goto's text won the 2000 James Tiptree, Jr. Award for innovative gender representations in sf, its adherence to the typical conventions of sf is debatable, since the award can also go to fantasy. Some critics may prefer this identification instead.
- 2 For examples of utopian sf that advocate, or at least experiment with lesbian or all-female societies, see Tiptree and Russ.
- 3 Cf. Samuel Delany's extensive meditations (from *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* to *About Writing*) on the language of sf, particularly with regard to how the genre, while highly allegorical, often literalizes what other genres render figuratively.
- 4 See Weinstock on the connection of extra-terrestrials and multicultural writing; see also Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.
- 5 See Harris; Latimer.

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