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Queering bodies, queering boundaries: localizing identity in and of the Body in Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child*

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QUEERING BODIES, QUEERING BOUNDARIES:

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in Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child*

In any discussion of Canadian literature, a few preliminary ground rules, or boundaries if you will, must be established. The first of course being whether the term 'Canadian literature' includes texts written in languages other than English or if the term 'Can Lit' is being used to define mainstream English speaking literature and marginalizing works that do not fit within this framework. Having established whether the text in question is inside or outside predominantly accepted definitions of Canadian literature with reference to language, the question then becomes how to define Canadian? To envision such an attempt here is outside the scope of this paper, however, one example of a fictional attempt will be discussed: Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child*. This science fiction/magic realist/fantasy/feminist/bildungsroman is a fragmented text that demonstrates Goto's proficiency in queering bodies and barriers while fragmenting boundaries.

What could be more 'Canadian' than to queer boundaries when we live in a place where we can buy cereal in French and English in English speaking Canada, and then travel to French speaking Canada and meet Quebecers who form a 'nation "within a united Canada"' (Harper, 2006), whatever that means. Both Separatists and Federalists alike are still pondering Prime Minister Harper's attempt to engage in constructive debate about the rights and privileges of Quebec and those so Quebecly inclined. Of course given the technological age which has and will continue to rupture and recreate boundaries, read-

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ers of online news outlets were invited to vote on 'Your View: Should Quebec be recognized as a nation within a united Canada' (CBC, 2006). I am quite sure that many online and offline readers would have liked to vote on what exactly a nation within a united Canada means? Certainly this is a question of 'culture' or 'nurture', as 'nature' is pretty clear on being topographically united. The fact that questions of nation, nationhood, nation building and national unity are so prevalent as to permeate literature, news media, kitchen table discussions and House of Commons debates however, speaks to an increasing inability to define what 'Canada' is and means.

In an attempt to answer these kinds of questions about nationality, ethnicity, community and identity formation, Hiromi Goto directs readers to the body: the concrete lived experience of one unnamed narrator. In *The Kappa Child*, the unnamed narrator tells her own story of being impregnated with and by a mythical Japanese spirit called a kappa. This medically unrecognized pregnancy that occurred not by consummation with a male subject but rather a sumo wrestling match with a gender ambiguous kappa, helps the narrator accept and release her violent and traumatic past as she works towards self acceptance. To say that Goto is attempting to break down boundaries of nation is a limited statement at best as her work 'grapples with the problems of assimilation, difference, and belonging in the face of the seemingly monolithic idea of a "nation" that excludes minority groups' (Sasano, 2010: 1). The unnamed narrator is 'othered' in more ways than she would prefer to count as a lesbian, Japanese Canadian, gender ambiguous, lonely person who is pregnant with a fetus who wanders in and out of her womb (Goto, 2001: 108). The text she is narrating is also operating in a refusal to specify an allegiance to an English speaking Canadian 'nation' as Goto frequently refuses to translate for her readers. Passages such as "'Easter ni shut up yuwanaino", Okasan calls from the bathroom' (Goto, 2001: 21) in which Japanese and English combine and collide are common. Goto is at work in this text queering every possible boundary that exists from nation to ethnicity to gender to sex to sexuality

to pregnancy to hysteria to family to childhood and from childhood into a loosely defined adulthood.

Though the use of the term 'queer' is and will continue to be contentious, I use the term 'queering' here in an active, verb, and verbal sense to mean making strange, marking, creating or engendering difference. Of course I do align the term queer and its inclusivity with theoretical debates on the usefulness or uselessness of the term. Jay Prosser's reading of Judith Butler provides a poignant discussion of just how inclusive the term queer should be, and whether by continuing to expand the term, certain injustices are not committed (Prosser, 1998: 279)? For the purposes of this examination however, I will use the term queering more often than the noun queer to signal and signify active, shifting, moving, and collapsing boundaries. I am suggesting that Goto is making strange the idea of defining one self or one's self by arbitrary and shifting boundaries that have little to do with the lived experience with which any one person deals. Instead, Goto provides a model for the openness that comes with definition by the corporeal, an acknowledging of what is happening corporeally, bodily, on a daily basis as opposed to self definition by vague and abstract concepts like nation and sexuality. I argue instead for a queering of, a making strange, a fragmenting of boundaries in order to understand the queering of the body that occurs in this text. My goal is to identify the narrator as narrator, as story teller, by her own terms whether or not we as readers and scholars may be uncomfortable engaging in the narrator's self belittling at times. This narrator enacts and possesses a complex identity in that she has no control over what happens to her body, the driving motion of the text, until the end of the text when she literally begins to 'let go' (Goto, 2001: 270). By actively queering the body of the narrator, making different, altering, changing her experience of her corporeality, Goto is able to provide readers with a text in which boundaries are deemed unnecessary and fragmented identities breed self acceptance.

While many critics may agree that Goto is engaged in discourses that question boundaries and 'issues of marginalization' (Libin, 2001: 93), there is no consensus as to exactly how her

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texts 'should' be read. Scholars such as Mark Libin attempt to 'move closer to the marginalized space out of which Goto writes' with a view towards 'befriending' the 'racialized' text (Libin, 2001: 94). While a respectful attempt, the suggestion that Libin who situates himself as a privileged white male can move into a space out of which Goto writes fundamentally reinforces a kind of 'us' and 'them' rhetoric and further promotes a critical and cultural difference between 'whiteness' and 'non-whiteness'. Libin's work becomes, then, more about his position as reader than an analysis of Goto's text. He refocuses the attention to himself as critic instead of the unnamed narrator who cannot seamlessly move closer to the space Libin inhabits. A much more realistic description of the kinds of borders and barriers Goto is working 'without' and 'within' comes from Nancy Kang who reminds readers and critics alike that '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' (Kang, 2001: Ecstasies). Goto's unnamed narrator is one such persona non-grata. She operates outside of any easily identifiable position of privilege and would be hard pressed to view life in the way of a lesbian utopia Kang eventually suggests. While Kang and Libin's attempts to identify the narrator using terms that speak to nationality and sexuality, I argue that we as scholars need to respond to the unnamed narrator by queering the terms that are too often used to dictate identity. Unlike Libin who is writing about his own comfort level, I prefer to wonder and question with the narrator instead of simply identifying her as outside the margin and belonging to polarized groups.

One of the most interesting scenes in the text in which borders and boundaries are tackled head on occurs when the family is moving cross country. When the family stops at a motel, the narrator's father Hideo wants to pay for the room with a cheque and 'the motel man' (Goto, 2001: 70) asks for identification. Instead of producing identification,

Hideo questions why he cannot be trusted. The manager says that it is simply policy and that Hideo is 'not a local' (Goto, 2001: 70) which is seemingly not offensive. The offence comes when the ignorant motel man asks where the family will be putting down roots? When he confirms that what Hideo is pointing at is 'the old Rodney farm' the following exchange ensues with the motel man beginning:

"I hope you make a good go of the place. I always thought it was terrible what was done to you people."

Which ones? I thought. Which ones does he think we are?

"What did you say?" Dad took a quick step toward the gulping man.

Okasan raised one hand but it dropped heavily beside her body.

"No offense intended," Motel Man stammered. "I figured you folks to be Japanese."

"We are CANADIAN!" Dad roared.

"No need," Okasan nervously plucked Dad's sleeve. "No need to shout," she murmured.

Swinging arc of arm. Smack. A hand-shaped stain on my mother's cheek, the color of pain and humiliation" (Goto, 2001: 70).

In perhaps one of the best examples of ignorance and privilege, a motel man attempting to be neighborly and sympathetic proves his ignorance by reducing the identity(ies) of a family to their perceived race/ethnicity. The power 'balance' already obstructed by race which angers Hideo, is further imbalanced by his wife's attempts to calm the situation. The reader is left with an image of four young girls watching their mother get hit in front of a stranger. The rest of the scene, the exchange of money is not reported. Instead the line after humiliation speaks to the prairie dust and then moves inside to the hotel room. 'Thus, in true Canadian fashion, Goto's protagonist partially defines herself in relation to other cultural myths and identities; yet oddly enough, through the act of incorporating and simultaneously resisting these cultures, Hiromo Goto manages to construct a new western Canadian myth and a new western space in her fiction' (Beeler, 2008: 67). While Goto may be constructing a new myth of the prairies, the unnamed narrator has slim pickings for positive identification in this scene. "Canadian" is associated with a violent

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father attempting to align himself with a nice but ignorant man, and “Japanese” identity signified by the title Okasan, is aligned with calm passivity which results in victim status. The prairie of course continues to be the dry, barren dust contrasted with the lush wetness of kappa life and stories.

In this particular scene however, what is clearly evident is that the body, corporeality, skin, heavy hands beside bodies and arcs of arms are very clearly aligned with identification. Hideo’s skin ‘reveals’ he and his family to be reduced to the ‘you people’ victims and he in turn victimized his ‘inferior’ wife while his daughters stand as helpless witnesses to violence and essentialism. When the four sisters finally find relief from the trauma of the prairie motel scene, the heat, the dust, the forced meal of fried chicken earlier in the day, emotional trauma, and exhaustion finally take over and the girls are unable to contain their bowels (Goto, 2001: 72). As Emiko gently cleans her daughters and allows them to rest in the cool sanctity of the wet bathtub, the chapter ends with the loving Okasan giggling and saying ‘there’s a story about a kappa who liked outhouses’ (Goto, 2001: 73). Although bodies and body theory may be common in feminist theorizations, less than a few literary scholars would prefer to read about diarrhea in analysis. This kind of wetness as contrasted with prairie dryness is likely not what Beeler had in mind. However, the cleansing bath and privacy of a Hideo free space operates as the wet, cool, calm after the desert storm. The boundaries of moistness and dryness however begin to collide, breakdown, become queer in an uncomfortable scene for the narrator and her sisters as they listen to their parents having sex in the dark a few feet away. The narrator even feels betrayed by her mother as the narrator asks ‘how could she’ twice (Goto, 2001: 79). What remains to be seen, is that whenever boundary or limits collapsing occurs, there is a corporeal element present in this text.

When being Canadian is associated with violence and ignorance, one may question how national identities and definitions by ethnicity even make sense for a young girl attempting

to maintain a positive view of her self? In an introduction to an anthology containing Goto's short story 'Stinky Girl', Smaro Kamboureli reminds readers that 'multiculturalism has been attacked for offering a policy of containment, a policy which, by legislating "otherness", attempts to control its diverse representations, to preserve the long-standing racial and ethnic hierarchies in Canada' (Kamboureli, 2007: xxix). If the macro government and nation building agencies and proponents are engaged in policies of further defining and making strict the boundaries and lines of ethnicities, turning inward to the local, localized, and localizing may seem to be an answer. For Goto's narrator however, the local will have to be even more micro than her own family unit. As she lays in the middle of a field in the middle of the night as she and her family dig a trench to steal water from a neighboring farm to grow Japanese rice in Alberta, the narrator ponders her options thinking 'there were none. I was ten years old and I didn't have any money [...] 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' (Goto, 2001: 199). Acknowledging commonly held beliefs, whether stereotypical or practical depending on the family, Goto positions her narrator as being an outsider even within her already marginalized family. Goto also highlights prevalent themes in the criticism of literature that so much as mentions a character struggling with conflicting identities. In an article titled 'Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature and Racial Minority Women', Arun Prabha Mukherjee notes that non-Canadian born writers find themselves in a category of 'immigrant writing' that

supposedly comes in two kinds: if it deals with subject matter that alludes to where the writer came from, it is perceived as nostalgic; and if it has Canadian content, it is automatically considered to be about an immigrant's struggle to adjust to new realities. As [M. G.] Vassanji has pointed out, white immigrant writers have not had their writing branded in this way. (Mukherjee, 1999: 159)

As theorists like Kit Dobson and others engaged in transnational criticism propose opening borders to wider are-

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nas of analysis, I propose to analyze Goto's text according to the framework set out or avoided within her own rhetoric. Though Goto is involved in these debates does not mean we as scholars should continue to place Goto and her work into neat and manageable boxes also known as 'immigrant writing' or 'minority women's writing'. While being in the margin allows Goto to provide a text rich in play and playfulness, this marginalized position also means that this author is facing an audience who more often than not would prefer 'to label' instead of engaging in the practice of the unnamed narrator who is unable to fit inside labels and finally finds solace in the acceptance of a labelless position.

As the scales of analysis and indeed audiences become larger and more loosely defined by specific nation based borders, Goto presents us with a work that is decidedly micro in its practice, rhetoric, and even publishing. This Alberta based and published book is the story of a person who has a community of two friends and her grocer, one childhood neighbor, and a family she rejects; but not once is there a mention of school or other jobs. She has one boss whom she rarely sees as they communicate via radio and every significant event whether in the flash back memory scenes or the present magic and mystery of the pregnancy are felt and dealt with in a corporeal manner. Nothing about this text can be generalized, and theories of globalization or transnationalism suggest a wider array of analysis that would not be appropriate for a text written with such minute attention to detail. The title *bodies in Canada* then holds new meaning as this particular novel queers borders of geography, sexuality, and frequently race in favor of a local and localizing trend.

This self-reflexive text that speaks of 'the saturation of the past with the present is an ongoing story' (Goto, 2001: 215), is presented in such a fragmented way that memories of the narrator's past constitute entire sections of the text that are also juxtaposed with passages in italics in which the fetus appears to speak and bubbles appear or parables are related (Goto, 2001: 60, 74-75). What is important about the attention to the past, to memories, to

the localization of the narrator as child in her life and mind, are the allowances Goto is able to make for her characters. While certain moments, conversations and sentences committed to public hearing would not be appropriate for an adult character to voice, Goto's foray into the thoughts of children are what take this text from one that engages in debates about race, racism and racial identity, to one that actively investigates the inner workings of internalizations regardless of race. Throughout the text, the narrator as child carries with her and reads the literature of Laura Ingalls Wilder. These prairie tales are the narrator's first, and of course most problematic introduction to people who identify as First Nations. Some of the memory passages detailing the narrator's childhood even appear intertwined with both the narrative and rhetoric of Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. When looking at her father in the hot sun, the narrator thinks 'he could pass for an Indian' (Goto, 2001: 44). Of course when the narrator actually meets her neighbor, even a child for whom forgiveness and allowances may be made, realizes the errors in internalizations.

Gerald Nakamura Coming Singer was incomprehensible. In Laura Ingalls' book-world, Indians meant teepees on the prairies and that was that. Indians didn't equal someone who was both Blood and Japanese Canadian. Indians certainly never meant someone who lived next door on a chicken farm.

"Call me Janice," she croaked and thumped me on my arm, when I called Gerald's mom, Mrs. Nakamura Coming Singer.

I eye-glanced at Gerald's face for signs. Flipping from his face to his mother's, searching for where the ancestry bled into more Japanese and less Indian, but I couldn't tell, and only stared with my pea-sized eyes until Janice noticed.

"Whatchya staring at, kiddo? You never seen a First Nations person before?"

"First Nations?"

"Yeah, kiddo. Don't cut me any of the 'Indian' crap, how they keep on teaching that shit in school, I'll never understand!" She scowled and flicked paper into a cigarette with her tongue (Goto, 2001: 188-189).

Because Goto places this scene in the context of the pea-sized eyes of a 'racially othered' child, we as readers are less inclined to be put out by the internalized ignorance

in this scene. The same allowances cannot and would not be made if an educated adult reader were to be asking these kinds of blunt, no matter how honest, questions. While ‘the problem and practice of classifying Indigeneity has been something “given to” and “expected of” Aboriginal people’ (Heiss, 2001: 206), readers of this particular text must be held accountable for their own internalizations. Though allowances are made for a child narrator, the same allowances cannot be made for my privileged Caucasian students who ask of Goto without shame or apology in the middle of class ‘why can’t she just write Mom instead of Okasan?’ While some readers of this article may find offense in my suggestion that readers need to examine their own internalizations, others may delight in Goto’s willingness to deconstruct borders and her active ‘(dis)placing or (dis)locating the national narrative of subjectivity, for example, into the diaspora of cross-cultural, -racial, -gender, -class, and -erotic identifications’ (Dickinson, 1999: 157).

The deconstruction and queering of boundaries of appropriateness, ethnicity, discussion, and childhood continue with the narrator as child’s first discussions with Gerald. After the quiet child finally speaks they discover that not only does the narrator speak English but Gerald in fact does speak (Goto, 2001: 167). After several more minutes of silence Gerald asks the narrator ‘you a boy or a girl’ (Goto, 2001: 168)? She retorts ‘you blood or Japanese’ (Goto, 2001: 168). The lines are drawn literally in the prairie dust sand. These children, echoing what they have seen and been taught, are expecting those they meet to fall on one side of a line or the other. When neither is true the conversation shifts. The narrator actually becomes so comfortable in Gerald’s calm, non-violent male presence that she falls asleep. When she wakes he gently comforts her and tells her that she spoke in Japanese and English when she was asleep. In the same way that Goto queers what the reader expects of children—to play nicely together instead of engage in hugely political questioning—so too does she complicate the notion of the ‘child’. The narrator had

always hoped that childhood could be a book, a sequence of pages that I could flip through, or close. A book that could be put away on a shelf. Even boxed and locked into storage should the need arise. But, of course not. Childhood isn't a book and it doesn't end. My childhood spills into my adult life despite all my attempts at otherwise and the saturation of the past with the present is an ongoing story. (Goto, 2001: 215).

In a text entitled *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton writes that 'the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back' (Stockton, 2009: 5). This point of view that would challenge many readers to revisit their ways in which they conceptualize the children in their own lives very accurately summarizes the narrator in Goto's text. The narrator defines her sister as having 'never grown up. She isn't a child and she isn't an adult, she lingers somewhere in a region where general modes of human conduct are skewed in a Mickey manner' (Goto, 2001: 19). The skewing of general modes of human conduct is a description that obviously mirrors the narrator's own actions. Even though I argue for a queering of boundaries and in fact a shifting away from using commonly defined labels, Goto's text has much in common with a bildungsroman or coming of age text. However, in true queering fashion, Goto does not present a linear narrative of growth. Instead, the reader becomes accustomed to the narrator looking back on, remembering, and attempting to move past her childhood into something resembling adulthood. Working as a collector of abandoned shopping carts and having a sexual relationship consisting only of a vibrator however, does not a 'stable' adult make. The narrator is far from stable in this text as she moves in and out of emotional trauma and in and out of her pregnant state. It is through the body, corporeality, the queering of the corpus that the narrator finally finds some sense of self.

In an article entitled 'Towards a Queer Genealogy of SF' in which Wendy Gay Pearson includes *The Kappa Child* in her discussion of science fiction, queer genealogies become engaged in processes of undoing. Pearson writes:

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queer genealogies of sf, then, are engaged as much in a process of un/doing history as they are of un/doing gender. Indeed, the process of undoing is inseparable from the process of doing, since the former depends upon the latter; if we can return momentarily to [Judith] Butler, it would seem that undoing may be less a refusal than a failed iteration, even where that failure is, to some extent, deliberate and agential. (Pearson, 2008: 75)

The idea of undoing as a failed performance rather than a specific active attempt not to do or to fragment, suggests that the idea of queering, making different, placing the action in an active rather than accidental sense can both define and fail to define the narrator's actions. As Sandra Almeida argues, the narrator's 'abject body, and what it now contains—the alien creature—and the memory it triggers, become key to the protagonist's understanding of her experience of dislocation and unbelonging' (Almeida, 2009: 56). Goto's attempt to undo or redo the concept of pregnancy involves a failing and triumph for the narrator. Having previously been unable to imagine her self as pregnant, the narrator begins to become very defensive about her non-pregnant, pregnant state. The undoing or failure to repeat normative performances constituting regularity means for the narrator that she is further marginalized as a person who is pregnant but yet not pregnant by any medical definition. The narrator however, reacts and responds to all moments of trial corporeally. As she yells at her compassionate friends for questioning her pregnancy, she says 'I feel awful. I wish I could cut the words right out of my face' (Goto, 2001: 153). This abject body, the site of the undoing, or failure, or enlightened queering as I would argue—that is, existing in a queer identity that involves not only sexuality but an altering and challenging many different labels or markers of identity—harbors the fetus which eventually will lead to self healing, but in this moment, journeys with the narrator as her subconscious attempts to deal with trauma in her dreams. Feeling as though she could literally cut off pieces of her body that cause harm to others, the narrator dreams that during a meal her father 'pulled pieces out of Okasan. Balled them up. Handed them to us to eat and

they tasted so good we ate and ate and ate, Okasan asking us if we liked it, we should have more, enryo nashi' (Goto, 2001: 159). In a chapter about boundaries between friends and lovers, doctors and patients, fetuses and mothers, daughters are fed their mother's flesh in a dream by their father and their mother asks them how they are enjoying her body? The body in this moment is synonymous with consumption, and yet it is flesh being consumed. This pseudo cannibalism represents not only an active queering of the boundaries of dreams and reality as the dream is strikingly similar to the narrator's wish to cut the violent words from her face, but also signals a fragmenting of both the body of the narrator and her mother. This fragmenting is not an undoing or failure to repeat a normative process or practice, but rather an attempt by Goto to illustrate shattering boundaries of language, custom, gift giving, violence, consumption, family and perhaps sanity. The narrator wakes up and the narrative shifts into a passage in italics that reads 'perhaps in dreaming, the world grows material' (Goto, 2001: 160).

As the narrator's sense of self grows, and her non-pregnant, pregnant body does not, the reader's appreciation for the intensity of Goto's commitment to localizing the text in the corporeal grows as well. As the narrator 'stroke[s] the unpregnant curve of [her] belly in a pregnant woman type of way' (Goto 2001: 13) the reader is reminded that this unpregnant or non curve in the narrator's belly is visible only to her through touch. The narrator is not visible as pregnant in the same way that a comparatively 'thin' woman who carried weight only around her middle and also displayed a protruding belly button may be 'read' or 'perceived' as pregnant. The narrator, though not visibly pregnant, is still subject to 'overlapping and contradictory discourses around identification, recognition, visibility, and belonging' (Pearson, 2007: 77). Goto, once again preempting the discussion in the academy, overtly deals with the politics and practical side of issues of visibility and representation. Instead of writing a text that deals with race and questions of ethnicity and nationhood in dialogue or perception alone, Goto presents a narrator who

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muses on the subject of recognition. In a queering, not undoing or failure or passive avoidance, an active moment of queering, Goto manages to make strange(r) both Hegel's master/slave narrative and Lacan's mirror stage.

I don't think of myself as a complainer. Maybe bitterly realistic and sarcastic to boot, but it's hard to be otherwise. Especially if you're an ugly, pregnant Asian born into a family not of your choosing. The odd thing about your looks is that you never see your own face. Funny how that works. How your reflection isn't really who you are, just an image of your real self contained in glass. You go your whole life without seeing yourself as you really are. All you know is how you are treated. (Goto, 2001: 13-14)

Because all we know is how we are treated, according to Goto's narrator and indeed much of Western cultural and philosophical thought, what the readers need remember is that the narrator is most often alone. If indeed, all she knows is how she is treated, then we as readers need to read her as a very unreliable narrator. Yes, she endured violence and belittling for much of her life, but in her life as a pregnant collector of shopping carts, she is treated well by friends who love her and sisters who want to know her as an adult. Goto of course queers, alters, makes strange, deconstructs this notion of recognition by an other and refractures the notion into an image in the mirror. Instead of a physical other in the form of a person, Goto refigures Hegelian recognition to appear more like an ongoing engagement with a mirror. Though the narrator calls the mirror a device that is able to present only an image, the narrator is so often alone that the reader must rely on that mirror. The most often and frequent physical descriptions of the narrator have to do with her 'ugly salvation' (Goto, 2001: 181). Throughout the course of the text, the narrator says this about her body: 'my short calves and my inadequate flat feet ache after a few hours. Corns grow profuse on my bratwurst toes. But I still walk. As swiftly as I can without my short-legged trot looking ridiculous', 'Jules looks up, direct, his gaze so crisp, I turn my head away before he can identify all of my weaknesses. How it's safer to have an ugly face, an even uglier mouth, filled with bite', and the 'ugly pregnant Asian' comment becomes

a refrain (Goto, 2001: 184, 187, 13). The irony becomes that the narrator sees not only her body as ugly, but also her actions.

In one of the memory based chapters, the narrator tells of having to help dig tunnels through the fields so her father could steal water from the neighbors. Gerald comes outside to tell the narrator that if they are stealing water they had better be quiet since he could hear them. The narrator shows off her muscles earned from nighttime digging and Gerald pats her and says 'you're strong' (Goto 2001: 200). She feels tears welling up in her eyes and bits her lip, breaking the skin, to avoid crying.

"Don't," Gerald whispered. Awkwardly pulled me close and licked my lip with his small, neat tongue.

I scrambled back, shocked, embarrassed, elated, I don't know what. And not knowing made me furious. Chin pushed out, my head thrust forward, I drew my hands back then shoved with all my farmer strength. Gerald smashing into the ground.

"Hey, sissy boy!" I sneered. "I don't let sissy boys touch me. Ever." This hateful coil of ugliness twisting in my gut, the words stinging something inside me, but unable to stop. "Why don't you get your baby butt home."

[Gerald quietly goes home and the narrator finishes]:

"Yeah!" I yelled. 'Go on! Sissy! Pansy! Go on home to your slut mother!' I screamed until I was hoarse and gasping.

A heavy hand on my shoulder, I almost fell out of myself, squeaked in sudden fear.

"Good for you," my father nodded approvingly. "Shouldn't be friends with weaklings."

Dad was proud of me.

I stumbled. My face caved in. I tipped my head backward and howled, howled to the indifferent sky, my father stunned to see me wailing, just stood and stared. The fat sun rising keen and relentless, I howled until my mouth was parched and cracked. I howled until my voice had left and salt grained my skin.

I dropped the shovel at my father's feet. Walked slowly, warily back to the house". (Goto, 2001: 201)

Because the narrator is so accustomed to describing her self as ugly as an adult, it is not surprising that this child cum adult looking back would frame the telling of her hateful acts towards Gerald in corporeal terms. Ugliness twists in her guts, her face caves in, not unlike the moment she wanted

to cut words out of her face, her throat is raw from screaming and she is terrified of touch whether that touch comes from her father or from Gerald. Instead of a scene that traffics in rhetoric or emotion that reinforces Gerald as sissy, since he is treated as such and the narrator is treated as strong by her father, Goto presents a scene in which the body is paramount. Touch signals rage in the narrator and then uncontrollable sadness. When the narrator realizes that she is aligning herself with her violent father who is now proud, her face caves in. She does not feel as though her face caves in, but in this moment, her flesh actually recedes into her body, possibly consumed in the same way that her father fed his daughters their mother. Hideo is figured as 'the most powerful and complex adversary in this woman warrior's journey' (Kang, 2010: 27); most powerful adversary possibly because the narrator begins to see her self reflected in the image her father portrays. It is not until the narrator begins to accept and perform her pregnancy that she starts to live a gentler, less violent and obstructive life.

Nancy Kang writes that 'the kappa, whether as childhood myth or embodied presence, reconfigures the limits of the possible and the real. Indeed, the narrator's voice is intermingled with that of *The Kappa Child's*, an in utero/ex utero duet that catalyzes the woman warrior's belated growing-up process' (Kang, 2010: 31). The relationship with the kappa however is not as perfect as critics would have readers believe. Near the middle of the text, the narrator starts to believe she is no longer pregnant, that 'maybe the creature is gone' (Goto, 2001: 194). She slides her 'fingers over the wide spread of my belly, but there is no answer. Never mind! See, Dr. Suleri was right all along. I'd better pull myself together before I go too far down the paths of my parents. Addiction. Fits. I refuse to inherit these unwanted gifts' (Goto, 2001: 194). The problem for the narrator is that Goto is queering the boundaries between child and adult, parent and child. As the narrator stares at her 'double row of toes in the reflection of bathwater' she experiences 'a longing to inhabit that upside-down place where I'm the opposite of myself' (Goto, 2001: 194). Unfortu-

nately for the narrator, the self is not as cut and dry as an object and its opposite. To suggest that the narrator could become the opposite of her reflection in the bathwater would mean that she would have to have a concrete idea of the object of which she wishes to be the opposite. At this moment in the text she cannot simply be the opposite of her father because she is so aligned with him. This moment also represents a point of inbetweenity as the narrator does not feel the fetus inside her: she is and is not pregnant. Kang writes that

[T]he kappa, alongside the narrator, suggests a genertive site between such traditional binaries as male/female, native/transplanted Asian, and myth/reality. The text is not, however, a conventional mediation on liminality, or the threshold state between one state of being and another, because *The Kappa Child* is a part of and yet apart from its presumptive human parent. (Kang, 2010: 33)

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The text can fit on neither side of a binary, nor can it fit properly into what Kang believes to be the in between state. This particular scene creates an even queerer moment for the narrator. Having staunchly defended her pregnancy to her friends and doctor, she now feels a loss, a loneliness, the kind of loneliness that comes only when the impossible pregnancy is gone and may not return with no signs of a birthing or releasing. The Kappa Child has agency and appears and disappears in and from the narrator's body at will. This agency and inability of the narrator to hold or contain the fetus in her womb suggests that yet again, the kappa pregnancy falls outside of the available labels we could choose for definition. The movement then, as the book continues, becomes a neither/nor engagement with binary definitions rather than an either/or. Neither one of the definitions of pregnant/non pregnant, Asian/Canadian, lesbian/nonlesbian, child/adult seem appropriate. Unlike other texts, this novel is not as concerned with the narrator as part of a larger immigrant community. Instead she is incredibly isolated until she becomes not alone in her body, and then becomes further isolated when she feels even more alone in her body. The borders of nation cease to matter when the borders of the self and other are so intertwined, intermingled,

intermeshed through intercourse and active discourse with a mythical yet not so imaginary fetus.

When the novel begins to move from the tragic moments of the narrator's childhood into the joyous moments of self acceptance and adulthood, the reader finally sees the narrator with a smile on her face, a face no longer described as ugly. Though her remarks are specific to Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, these observations are perhaps more poignant when applied to *The Kappa Child*. 'Through these unconventional scenes of ecstasy, Goto rescripts female desire, subjectivity, and pleasure. What is noteworthy in each of these instances is that self-fulfilment, though achieved through the body, rarely comes about through the typical heterosexual coupling' (Ty, 2004: 167-168). In other words, not only does self-fulfilment occur through the body, the lived experience of the narrator in her own undefinable skin, but self acceptance and love occurs in a queer, not so traditional or definable way. Self acceptance, however corporeal, involves a visit from the Stranger who when least seen, impregnated the narrator via sumo wrestling.

On one of her long walks through downtown, the narrator stops into the restaurant where she met the Stranger the first time and sees her sisters Slither and Mice eating together. Slither had tried to call but reminds the narrator that no one knows where she lives. Through the course of eating with her sisters, the narrator sees her sister Mice as the scholar she is, attending a conference at the university, not the Micely child. The narrator also realizes that Slither is a compassionate woman, not a girl who lacks depth. When she goes to use the washroom, the narrator encounters the Stranger again who strongly suggests the narrator have her hair cut because the Stranger tells the narrator you are 'wasting your great face with this odds-and-ends, deck brush hair gone wild' (Goto 2001: 248). The Stranger, likely part kappa, part manifestation of the narrator's choosing, sees the narrator as having a great face. What a surprise to the reader who has no doubt come to think of the narrator as she sees her self.

The barber however, sees the narrator not as a her self, but rather, as one who needs a hair cut with an electric shaver that 'takes all of five minutes' (Goto, 2001: 248). The implication in this scene is that the narrator is perceived as male and given a masculine cut (Goto, 2001: 249). When she leaves, the narrator exits with a wide grin and leaves a 'five-dollar tip for an eight-dollar haircut' (Goto, 2001: 248). The simple act of a barber seeing a person in pajamas with ragged hair and giving a 'masculine' hair cut with clippers fundamentally changes the way the narrator perceives 'her' self. This scene also forces readers and scholars to question whether continuing, or having even used from the beginning, female pronouns is at all appropriate in the case of this unnamed narrator? This narrator clearly struggles with identity and is by the end of the text identifying with her so called masculine hair cut wondering 'now that I've changed my hair, should I change my wardrobe' (Goto, 2001: 249)? She never once in the text calls her self female, male, saying only 'I'm not a guy' (Goto, 2001: 119). What remains clear is that for this narrator the body dictates gender, not necessarily even sex, but gender. The narrator's physicality of her body, adornments, pregnancy is known to only those whom she has told, or with whom she has been intimate, but her hair cut is witnessed by strangers who comment (Goto, 2001: 250). Her gender then, becomes defined in the masculine arena and her sex remains ambiguous. Presumably she is female as she identifies as being, not only having, a sister (Goto, 2001: 246), however, the presence of a male nurse goes unnoticed (Goto, 2001: 103) and a sumo wrestling match on an airstrip with a green, genderless spirit could very well have impregnated a man or sexually neutral person. The predominant practice in *Kappa Child* criticism however is to consider the narrator female. I of course wish to make strange that practice and at least suggest that nowhere in the text does the narrator confirm, in the positive, 'I am female'. The narrator renounces masculinity twice, once as a child and once as an adult, but she does not then affirm a sexual or gender identity (Goto, 2001: 168, 119). Her sexuality however, is affirmed by the narrator's desire for her friend Midori and then Bernie, the grocer,

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but never defined (Goto, 2001: 235, 274). Lines of sexuality in this text remain queer rather than held steadfast as the narrator was attracted to Gerald at one time, and Bernie has a child: that, even in this novel, biologically suggests an acquaintance with heterosexuality (Goto, 2001: 204, 169). As the narrator continues to refuse self definition, localizing her identity through daily experiences, she visits her sister which proves insightful for both narrator and reader.

After attempting to kill her father, the narrator drives back to the city and goes to her sister's apartment. After sleeping for a long while, Slither very gently helps the narrator realize how ignorant she has been in her anger for so many years. Slither has been through counseling and reminds the narrator that she should let their mother 'have something for herself, now' (Goto, 2001: 267). Slither's insight surprises the narrator who sarcastically says to her self 'did I think I had a monopoly' (Goto, 2001: 266)? As the narrator sits in conversation with her mature, settled sister, one more surprise comes before leaving. Slither asks that the narrator now call her Satomi saying 'Slither was funny when we were children, but we're adults now' (Goto 2001: 268). The narrator asks her sister if she is happy, having trouble heeding the request as 'Slith-Satomi' becomes 'Sli-Satomi' in the narration (Goto, 2001: 268). As the narrator learns that Satomi has had someone in her life for a long time, the narrator is left wondering how much she has missed because she 'never cared to ask' (Goto, 2001: 266). As the narrator grows in maturity and acceptance, she begins to understand that her grown adult body, her lived corporeal experiences are beginning to manifest in varying ways including emotional maturity.

In 'Bodies that Matter', Judith Butler writes on the subject of materiality and materialization that are in Goto's work, akin to manifestation. While the kappa suggests that 'in dreaming, the world grows material' (Goto, 2001: 160), Butler suggests that:

to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what 'matters' about that body, its very intelligibility. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how

and why it matters, where 'to matter' means at once 'to materialize' and 'to mean'. (Butler, 1993: 32)

What is poignant about aligning Butler's theorization with the musings of one fictional kappa fetus is the idea that mattering, to mean, to be recognized by someone or something, is and is of, corporeal. In Goto's work, dreaming becomes an enacting of guilt or fears and in Butler's writing, significance signals a materialization, a manifestation, an action.

The term intelligibility also takes on new meaning in the context of a body that contains a fetus that does not remain in the womb but literally wanders out. In a queering of a Freudian slip, or stroll, or jump, this fetus wanders from the womb all the way up to the protagonist's ears in one scene as what Mice saw when the narrator was frightening her sister was the likeness of green in and around the narrator's face (Goto, 2001: 108). While neither significance nor meaning can be reduced to the body and defined solely in and of the corporeal, what is useful about fiction is that fictional texts can inform theory. Butler seeks to understand the systematic and systemic faculties at work in defining and regulating bodies and Goto is presenting an entirely poetic and potent example that theorists might otherwise ignore.

To return to a discussion of appearances and fragment this particular narrative, I feel called to remind my reader of the narrator's intense engagement with defining her self as an ugly pregnant Asian. In a moment of queering, certainly not undoing or failing to perform, the narrator decides to watch the lunar eclipse with a green kappa like Stranger who while in the van drinks from a flask and tells the narrator 'don't be a party pooper! I thought you were a fun guy' (Goto, 2001: 119). The narrator responds that she does not drink and drive because 'it's an ethical thing', she frowns and continues 'and I'm not a guy' (Goto, 2001: 119). The narrator is quick to confirm that she is not a guy, however, she does not place her identification in the positive form saying 'I am_____'. The Stranger responds in a wonderfully post everything fashion saying 'Guy, girl, so what?' Then scoffs. 'Do I look like someone who cares' (Goto, 2001: 119)? Continuing to oper-

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ate within the continuum of appearances, the Stranger asks the narrator if the Stranger looks like someone who cares, not acts, or even appears. How do I look to you? Do I look like someone who cares what gender you present? Does my body appear to you materially as one that could be bothered to care how you recognize me or what my recognition of you may cause? This is a particularly disarming moment for the narrator since she is used to operating purely within the biological realm of sex, and not within the behavioral or social realm of gender as this scene is pre-haircut. The problem comes for the reader in that the narrator is not a reliable narrator. We have no real idea of her appearance, of the body she presents to those within the text as at every opportunity possible, she describes her self as ugly. After she and the Stranger have decided to climb over the barbed wire fence, using the Stranger's leather jacket as protection, the narrator relates what follows as such: 'the Stranger winked, kissed me full on my ugly lips, and hopped out of the van' (Goto, 2001: 121). The narrator in this text cannot be said to be actively performing any gender, but rather she actively avoids performing 'either' gender. She wears pajamas all the time, has a job as a collector of abandoned shopping carts, appears as male or female depending on who is gazing and aligns her self with her sex rather than femininity or a feminine gender ideal. What the narrator does perform however, is an image of an 'ugly pregnant Asian' (Goto, 2001: 14). She performs an image of her body she believes is being reflected back to her when in reality, she is the one in complete control of her image. The reader has no visual to confirm or deny the very subjective claim of ugly. Instead, the reader is left to watch the narrator perform her non-pregnant, pregnant body in a variety of ways—none of which relate solely to gender—all of which are rooted, localized, materialized, in the biological. By this moment however, we as readers have come to complicate this notion of performance and recognition. What I have neglected to mention however, is Goto's commitment to maintaining the ambiguity of the narrator's gender.

What may surprise the reader is that the narrator, however skewed in her own ability to care for her self, is well aware of the genderization of society as she is unable to pin point the Stranger's gender identity. While they are trespassing on Calgary International Airport property, the narrator says 'if I were to go to jail, it would be for a better reason than for being caught running around an airstrip with a retro-dressed person of questionable gender and racial origin' (Goto, 2001: 121). After they become naked, the narrator cannot help but stare as she reports: 'when the Stranger turned to face me, I could only gaze with wonder. No nipples. No bellybutton' (Goto, 2001: 122). They begin to sumo wrestle and the Stranger becomes increasingly more kappa like and feminine pronouns are now used. The reader who has read the glossary in the back of the text knows that kappas can be beaten only by spilling the bowl of water on their heads (Goto, 2001: 277). However, at this moment in the text the narrator is so confused by the mystical and magical events of the evening she reports the end of the sumo contest as follows:

Stranger hit the ground before I did, the beret knocked off a strangely shaped head, something cool-wet spilled, covered me in liquid sweetness. I thought that 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. (Goto, 2001: 124)

In keeping with the queerness of this text, the moment of conception, of impregnation of a lesbian woman with a kappa child, occurs with the meeting of two lips:

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. (Goto, 2001: 124)

When the narrator provides her own analysis of this scene later in the text, she reminds readers of the moment of conception saying 'there was no penis! There was no penetration' (Goto, 2001: 155). The reader by this point may reply, 'of course there was no penis'. However, for Goto to include these details in numerous different ways continues to show the manifesta-

tion of her commitment to relaying all events in a corporeal manner.

The scene of sumo wrestling, the manifestation or materiality of a pregnancy for the unnamed narrator marks the beginning, the creating of meaning for the narrator that involves more than negative and belittling body memories. In a discussion of 'The Body in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*' Smaro Kamboureli theorizes the permeability of the body saying:

[The] fact that the body becomes part of a network of forces that dismember and warp it, that it dissolves under the weight of history, is exactly what I mean by saying that the body is permeable. (Kamboureli, 2000: 187)

The body of the narrator in this text is entirely permeable. She desires to hide this body, to cut out this body, to pleasure this body, to be less alone in this body, align this body with the moon cyclic cycles. Still, the narrator doubts the materiality of what could be a form of psychosis, just a manifestation rather than the magical result of a sumo wrestling contest. In a poetically titled section 'Silences as the Talking Cure', Kamboureli writes 'hysteria—be it conservative or subversive, self-afflicting or contagious—is conventionally seen as a sign of dis-ease, the body speaking on behalf of the afflicted subject; it has to be moved beyond, cured, eased' (Kamboureli, 2000: 207). The beauty of Goto's work in *The Kappa Child* is that the mythical manifesting pregnancy is not viewed as hysterical. The fetus has agency and apparently understands English because as the narrator speaks of her loneliness 'carrying some unmanifested creature inside my body hardly counts as a legitimate companion. But I get an annoyed poke in my right armpit for thinking this too loud' (Goto, 2001: 148). Even though there is a moment when the narrator relates that 'the word pseudocyesis reverberated loudly in my head and I had to hold it still' (Goto, 2001: 151), throughout the text, the narrator and those who care for her treat her pregnancy with respect. The body becomes the ultimate signifier, both holder of and site in and on which meaning is made. The body does not signal dis ease but rather movement, healing, flow,

even in the absence of menstruation. What I am suggesting is that a link existing between a female body 'afflicted' being outside the centre, prompts or makes material a desire within the narrator once the body is accepted to remain further from the centre, to find joy in the margins: to queer the labels once previously applied and abandon the need for such boundaries and limitations.

At the end of the text, the moment when corporeal and not so corporeal self acceptance occurs comes in the company of friends. When the narrator sees Genevieve and Midori, the narrator begins to actually care and acknowledge their lives and how she has missed them (Goto, 2001: 270). They love her new haircut and are delighted by the literal change in heart (Goto, 2001: 270–271). Genevieve asks if the narrator is still pregnant and the response is 'maybe, but it's okay' (Goto, 2001: 271). This inability to know for sure whether she is pregnant, and the willingness to remain less than fully aware, signals a final commitment to queering boundaries and localizing identity in the moment, the corporeal. The narrator is full of realizations at this point in the text that come with varying touches. Genevieve and Midori go with the narrator to the market to pick up Bernie who willingly goes along for the ride after embracing the narrator (Goto, 2001: 272). As they sit together on a blanket to witness the most recent celestial event, Bernie and the narrator share an intimate silence and touch that is broken by Genevieve's silliness prompting the narrator to realize and question 'my friends are silly and beautiful beyond belief. How have I been this lucky and not known' (Goto, 2001: 274)? As the friends and lovers sit and wait for the moons to collide, the dryness of the prairie gives way to rain and a possible birthing takes place. The last paragraph tells of the narrator seeing 'kappa rising from the soil. Like creatures waking from enforced hibernation, they stretch their long, green limbs with gleeful abandon. Skin moist, wet, slick and salamander-soft, kappa and humans dance together, our lives unfurling before us. And the water breaks free with the rain' (Goto, 2001: 275). This beautiful, holistic, some would say corny or stupid, moment occurs and divides readers. There are

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those who have read carefully and journeyed with the narrator who cannot help but feel a smile creeping across their own faces as the embodied reader engages with this finally settled narrator who identifies along no lines and accepts joy in her life. And there are those who cannot wait to close the book and comment on the many ways this text needs to be classified and categorized and label this yet another foray into 'Asian Canadian writing' or 'immigrant writing.' The end of this text however, leaves questions of nation and ethnicity behind as the narrator realizes a cohesive, stable to her, identity that is rooted and localized within the permeability of her body.

As Goto celebrates the birth of a settled, accepting self for her narrator, the reader may remember Charlotte Sturgess's observations about the shifting space of identity in literary sites of play. Sturgess writes that "'identity" is no longer to be seen, or theorized, as an unmediated, fixed link between nation and individual, but as a negotiation of subject positions within a network of material forces affected and inflected by class, gender, and race' (Sturgess, 2003: 12-13). As words like transnational, genderqueer, and ambiguous become applied more frequently to labels as diverse as female, Asian, young and lesbian, I cannot help but maintain an argument for and towards queering rather than existing inbetween lines that stand in opposition. To make strange, to embody and to embrace what queering can and does offer seems like the most poignant advice to take from Goto's work. Fiction can, and has been informing theory from Kristeva to Eagleton and I argue there will come a time when theorists have no choice but to seek advice from the hopefulness embedded within fiction that queers. To echo Donna Haraway and her manifesto for situated knowledges, I would proudly stand queerly around a cyborg and a kappa.

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