

WHEN THE MESSIAH COMES:
THE POSTSECULAR MESSIANIC IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

When the Messiah Comes:

The Postsecular Messianic in Contemporary Literature

Despite proclamations about the death of God and the decline of religious institutions throughout the twentieth century, questions of secularism and religion are currently being re-thought through the lens of postsecularism. The concept of the postsecular does not imply that religion has been temporally or intellectually superseded as the secularization thesis posited, but instead indicates the necessity of new approaches to thinking about spiritual life in the early twenty-first century. In this dissertation, I consider how literary postsecularism constructs an alternate space – which I frame as the messianic – which challenges the binary erected between secularism and religion. Though literary postsecularism has become a lively and growing field of late, the messianic remains an under-theorized aspect of this field. I examine how authors such as Marilynne Robinson, J.M. Coetzee, Marjorie Liu, Gene Luen Yang, Colum McCann, and Mohsin Hamid re-evaluate the role of religion in literary discussion post-9/11. Following Manav Ratti's model in thinking of the postsecular as a negotiated term, I argue that these authors respond to urgent contemporary matters such as neoliberalism, colonialism, and migration by reconceiving the messianic as an ethical practice with critical aesthetic dimensions.

In the first chapter, I draw on Walter Benjamin's and Jacques Derrida's work on weak messianism to argue that the postsecular situates the messianic as a collective instantiation of responsibility, intimacy, and possibility. In later chapters, I explore the hopeful possibilities that postsecular readings of Robinson, Coetzee, McCann, and Hamid produce, while also highlighting the often-Eurocentric tensions and problems that arise in conceptualizing the postsecular in Yang's and Liu's comics. Motivating my readings is a consideration of how each author invokes a sacramental poetics of the everyday that offers a pluralistic and imaginative vision for living well with others in the twenty-first century.

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After this dissertation has been signed, sealed, and delivered, my next great goal in life is to get a puppy. Also, maybe I'll start cooking for myself again.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Athens & Jerusalem in the 21st Century:

Postsecular Issues and Contemporary Contexts

In a chapter titled “The Humanities in Africa” from *Elizabeth Costello*, South African writer J.M. Coetzee explores an encounter between the writer Elizabeth and her sister Blanche. Blanche is a nun working in a hospital in rural Zululand fighting AIDS, while Elizabeth is an aging writer hazily floating from one speaking engagement to the next. Their encounter becomes a debate about the humanities as an institution – its origins, its future, and its purpose – and its relationship to the human condition. In Blanche’s eyes, Elizabeth represents the Greeks and the weakened Hellenistic legacy left to the arts and humanities as a consolation for true faith. Blanche, on the other hand, embodies a devout (Catholic) Christianity, a faith which she considers the actual origin of the humanities and the entity best suited for exploring issues of meaning and suffering in life.¹ Given the sharp contrast between the sisters and their views on literature and religion, Tertullian’s famous question – “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” – emerges once again.

¹ As Kai Wiegandt writes, Blanche “[h]aving studied Classics before she trained as a medical missionary...now insists that the study of the classic Greek texts ‘amounts to no more than picturing to us our darker potential’ because they contain no True Word of redemption. Christian faith, she argues, caters more competently to the human need for redemption, for ‘[w]e are fallen creatures’” (15). Blanche focuses on the issue of redemption because she sees humanity as in a fallen state, whereas Elizabeth seeks meaning and a way to understand and parse human desire.

Coetzee raises these issues about the arts and faith, but then he suspends the tension wiring them together. In *Elizabeth Costello*, he contemplates the contemporary linkages between religion, the secular, and the humanities. Despite Blanche's Christian steadfastness and Elizabeth's own commitment to the ideals of the humanities, the very categories they hold to are shown to be more indeterminate and interrelated than they wish to grant. What if, Elizabeth asks, reading is a kind of literary pursuit of salvation? Are there essences of approach that truly separate the humanities and the religious or are both domains engaged in a similar search for meaning? Could the humanities even really move past the ways religious study has inflected its vocabulary, methodologies, and concerns?²

While Coetzee remains within the frame of fiction, the questions that he raises extend beyond the literary – they have been puzzling theorists of secularism for a number of years and have made their way into mainstream literary studies within the past decade and a half. His concerns suggest an opportunity to think about the relationship between religion and literature given broader contemporary discussions about secularism. What societal and political conditions influence and structure religious experience (and vice versa)? How are these conditions explored as part of a moral and spiritual search for meaning within literary texts? I consider these questions throughout this dissertation as I examine several post-9/11 literary texts and authors who engage with trenchant issues such as neoliberalism, colonialism, and mass migration. In analyzing these texts within

² For example, philosophy has a long and entangled history with Christian and Jewish theology. See Michael J. Murray and Michael Rea on some of the ways the two disciplines have shaped, contested, and influenced each other.

the context of the postsecular – a mode of thinking that offers galvanizing insight into the relationship of religion and the secular – I suggest that they offer a constructive, imaginative, and ultimately hopeful vision for living well with others amid urgent social challenges. I further position this vision within a notion of the postsecular messianic, in which the messianic embodies a weak force that signifies the convergence of mutual responsibility and intimacy while gesturing towards future possibilities. Motivating my reflections is a desire for a sacramental poetics of the everyday that recognizes the spiritual while honouring the plurality of approaches to the sacred.

In this introduction, I explore the role literature can play in contemporary debates about secularism and religion. I highlight the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this dissertation, situating it not only within current postsecular literary contexts but also within the framework of world literature. Both arenas – the postsecular and world literature – remain useful, if critiqued, ways of thinking about the relationship of religion and the secular. I also invoke how the postsecular messianic functions as the primary lens through which I consider postsecular possibilities for literature after 9/11. Throughout my discussion of major terms and issues, I offer a brief description of how these concepts will feature in each of the subsequent chapters.

Secularism, Religion, and Literary Studies

Godwin, a character in *Elizabeth Costello* who is also a professor of English Literature, comments to Elizabeth, “This is a secular age...You cannot turn back the clock. You cannot condemn an institution for moving with the times” (125). Godwin’s claim

rests on a version of the secularization thesis, which sees religion retreating from public spaces, politics, and importance in response to modernization's inevitable progress. According to this narrative of religious decline, science, rationality, and political neutrality have come to occupy the spaces formerly held by religious faith and belief. As Charles Taylor notes, this version of the secularization thesis – or variants of it – possesses a persuasiveness, an explanatory power for what seem to be substantial changes in how religious life takes shape and is experienced privately and publicly in the contemporary moment. Fewer people are attending religious services, and science has disproven many of the central beliefs of numerous religions. Religion primarily functions as consolation for a general loss of enchantment and transcendence, and it should therefore remain private, or so the story goes.³

But, as Taylor points out, this account deserves further scrutiny, not least because it pitches belief and unbelief against each other in an adversarial relationship.⁴ It demonstrates very little curiosity for “alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life” (5), or for acknowledging how important religiosity remains for many people around the globe. This rendering of secularism is, at its heart, a very Western notion of

³ Taylor writes about these issues, as does Paul Bramadat. Bramadat observes, looking at Canada as a particular example, “These changes may be characterized in a variety of ways, but most accounts note the importance of two broader historical processes often described as rationalization (that is, the process of organizing life around scientific and logical principles) and disenchantment (that is, the gradual disempowerment of ideas and institutions associated with magic or religion). As the powerful ‘narratives’ of objective reason, humanism, democracy, the free market, liberalism, and industrialization rose to prominence in Europe in and after the 16th century, religion was increasingly framed by cultural elites as being associated with a pre-modern era that was awash in unreason. This period witnessed a kind of chasm slowly opening up between religion and society; in the new, modern world, there would certainly be room for religion, but it must respect its inherent limits” (2005a, 4).

⁴ It also upholds a Eurocentric way of understanding religion, which may not apply, for example, to Indigenous issues in a Canadian context. Later in this introduction, I discuss how Manav Ratti and Asha Sen provide a critique of the Eurocentric issues in religion and secularism debates.

modernization, one that treads perilously close to seeing any form of religious belief or spirituality as primitive and irrational. It's a narrative that therefore risks undercutting the religious needs and spiritual desires of groups such as First Nations, Muslims, or pagans whose freedoms are already at risk because they have differing notions of theism or who face systemic racism tied to religious discrimination. In other words, it's an oppositional interpretation of secularism that does not deal with old problems of colonialism, racism, and economic inequality. These problems have come to haunt political implementations of secularism, especially post 9/11. As Graham Huggan observes, religion has taken on a notable public and political valence after 9/11 – most often a negatively tinged one (751).

For Taylor, the account of the secular sketched above rests on reductionistic narratives that need to be deepened in order to appreciate how human beings have not simply “lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge” (22). Instead, the secular assumes a constellation of meanings, not least of which is the shift from “a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others...There are alternatives” (3). These alternatives can assume any number of forms or religious affiliations, identifications, syncretisms, or fashionings. Mass migration, asylum seekers, the rise of the religious ‘nones,’ and the challenges of populism have contributed to a rapidly changing religious

topography.⁵ Duane Bidwell writes that religious multiplicity, “the experience of being shaped by, or maintaining bonds to, more than one spiritual or religious community at the same time – is occurring more frequently in the United States and Europe. In other parts of the world, religious multiplicity has long been a norm” (1-2). But such multiplicity is often still perceived as a transgression and “Spiritually fluid people evoke prejudice and curiosity, uncover assumptions, and disrupt our typical labels; they undermine religious authority, complicate religious communities, and blur social categories. Their lives question ordinary assumptions about pure, static, and singular religious identities” (2). The bottom line: such religious multiplicities all texture current understandings of secularism, religion, and the conditions for pursuing our ethical and spiritual lives.

Given the diversity of voices and perspectives on religion, what does literature uniquely offer to such discussions about fluidity? How can literature complicate and make space for religious multiplicity? What can it contribute to broader dialogues about religion and secularism? Before considering these questions, it is important to see how literary studies has often engaged in the kinds of simplistic understandings of secularism that Taylor examines. Godwin’s remarks in Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* highlight a notable problem in the professional history of literary studies, which both Michael Kaufmann and Tracy Fessenden have pointed out. Kaufmann notes, “It seems generally accepted that while the discipline and its practitioners were once more religious, literary studies is now a decidedly secular enterprise” (607) and matters of religion are now often held at arm’s

⁵ See Joel Thiessen (2015) and Linda Woodhead (2016) for more on the ‘nones’ and shifting religious terrain in Canada and the United Kingdom.

length. This comment is not to dismiss the long history of writing about religion within individual works of literature (Knight 1): religion – especially Christianity – has long been an important object of study for literary criticism. Instead, I view it as an opportunity to reassess how religion and spiritual identity is considered professionally and critically. In an account that bears similarity to Taylor on secularism, Fessenden wonders if literary studies has forged its own story of scholarship “from which the traces of religion even in its own institutional genealogy or the objects of its attention must continually be expunged” (633).⁶

However, perhaps given what Huggan identifies as a kind of ethical urgency post-9/11, a number of scholars – including Kaufmann, Fessenden, John McClure, Amy Hungerford, and Lori Branch – are challenging this institutional narrative. They critique the claims of this supposedly secular and neutral professional identity as well as its dependence on more or less stable categories of the religious and the secular. Yet, they are also concerned with highlighting how religion and secularization remain important in contemporary literature. The decidedly contested term ‘postsecularism’ has come to offer one route towards understanding religious matters in literature as well as conceptualizing the problems posed by terms like religion and the secular. It touches upon shifting landscape of contemporary religious experience as writers have taken up the task of, in John McClure’s words, “tell[ing] stories about *new* forms of religiously inflected seeing and being” (ix).

⁶ See also Lori Branch’s account of “how – intellectually, historically, institutionally – the relationship between literature and religion has been troubled” (2014, 9).

Despite the prefix ‘post,’ the postsecular does *not* designate a more or less linear movement from religion as an accepted part of public life to secularism as the dominant paradigm with a pendulum then swinging to religion again. Religion has not suddenly and unexpectedly poured into public and private life like a river breaking the dam of secular containment. To borrow from philosopher Richard Kearney’s description of anatheism,⁷ postsecularism is “not a hypothetical synthesis in a dialectic moving from theism through atheism to a final telos” (6). Rather, the postsecular has, like secularism, become a site of a constellation of meanings. It can indicate, to go back to Charles Taylor’s account of secularism, “new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices” (22). In Chapter 2, I suggest that Pulitzer-Prize winning author Marilynne Robinson articulates a faith conducive to postsecular readings as a practice of charity and generosity and largeness of spirit that she sees as sadly lacking in contemporary public life and some forms of American Christianity. Robinson insists on faith not as an answer, but as a mode of living in relationship to others in order to bear the anxieties of the present. In this aspect, she echoes McClure’s remarks that other novelists such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison, “are all thinking in the narrative mode about postsecular movements and possibilities that theorists...treat more abstractly...in each case, the forms of faith they invent, study, and affirm are dramatically partial and open-ended” (ix). Robinson embraces the open-ended as part of the beautiful mystery of life and faith.

⁷ Anatheism is his term for grappling with faith after “letting go of God” (3).

McClure also describes literary postsecularism as “at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity” (ix). Postsecularism signals the search for belief, the sacred, and spirituality that both draws on the resources of various religions, yet may reject the doctrines, theism, or identities defined by those religions. This definition can appear to set in place a binary and “teeter[s] on the edge of a supersessionist formulation in which dangerous, inadequate, or naïve religious discourses get replaced by secular discourses, which in turn get replaced by postsecular ones” (Watt 125). This concern remains an important one, especially in reading texts that engage with religious fundamentalism and modernity. Laura Levitt, a scholar of Jewish studies, is likewise concerned about such supersessionist impulses in addition to the “‘invisible hand’ of Protestantism...[which] controls so many discussions about what constitutes the secular” (107) as well as the religious. These cautions demonstrate a desire to do justice to the complexity and multiplicity of religious and literary histories as well as their relationship to literature as a distinct art form.

Postsecular literature does not trade in nostalgia for a Christian-dominated past. It is an *engagement* with that past that nonetheless partakes of what William Connolly is fond of calling a bicameral orientation that allows for pluralism and openness toward other religions and diverse experiences of faith and spirituality.⁸ Manav Ratti and Asha Sen highlight this possibility of postsecular pluralism in their work on South Asian writers

⁸ For Connolly, a faith is a creed *plus* a sensibility; it accounts for the visceral along with one’s stated beliefs. The pluralistic bicameralism he emphasizes means being able to tolerate one’s own resentment that others are not oriented by faith the same way. In other words, pluralism displays engagement with others without expecting others to feel exactly the same as one does. Postsecularism demonstrates a similar capacious generosity towards other faiths and practices.

and postcolonial theory. While literary postsecularism has taken shape over the past decade, it has generally been discussed in terms of American fiction. However, Ratti emphasizes the necessity of bringing postcolonial studies into dialogue with postsecular questions. He highlights how secularism has fuelled Western nation-states' description of themselves as modern and progressive, while differentiating themselves from "the religious other" (7) of "non-European religious people, particularly Muslims" (qtd. in Ratti 8). At the same time, Ratti notes that Western secularism has privatized religion, pushing it to the personal sphere rather than acknowledging its "social and collective expressions" (9). Multiculturalism and tolerance thereby become coded with religious implications as the putatively benevolent state must 'manage' the religious other, who is seen as superstitious and intolerant. For Ratti, postcolonial literature emerges as a crucial site to reimagine these dynamics: writers employ what he heralds as "a brave new imagination of the religious and the secular" (18).

Asha Sen reiterates this need for postcolonial literary studies to attend to religious and spiritual dimensions. While wary of the dangers of religious sectarianism, she points out that "the codification of 'religion' that was introduced as a by-product of colonialism created an arbitrary division between the sacred and the secular that continues to permeate civic society to this day" (9). She comments, "Unfortunately postcolonial criticism has yet to develop strategies for interpreting patterns of spirituality in emergent postcolonial literature" (3-4), and this has had the effect of reading religion primarily as a marker of "inter/intra national violence" (2). In her desire for "the creation of a new language and epistemology for postcolonial studies" (6), she focuses on the spiritual as a

less institutionalized expression of religion in an effort to bridge the sacred/secular divide constructed by colonialism. Though Sen doesn't necessarily call her approach postsecular, her points find important echoes within Ratti's insistence that postsecular literary studies can re-think colonial epistemologies and practices of religion.

Though there are many definitions of the postsecular,⁹ I see it as designating a particular set of concerns that can be of value for literary studies. These include a distrust of binaries which pit institutional religion and secularism against each other, and a questioning of the narrative of decline of religious belief and practices in the twenty first century. More particularly, Graham Huggan sees in postsecularism a set of critical tools with which to read texts, specifically a "different wa[y] of reading global modernity in our times" and a "deconstructive reading of established religious texts" (757). This broad-spectrum view can, I suggest, work well with a world literature approach which considers global interconnection in contemporary fiction, as I discuss in more depth below.

But Huggan also sees postsecular literature as a philosophical project that has, in his words, "little political purchase" (757). I appreciate Huggan's concerns, but I nonetheless think that there is a need for literary studies to read religion in 21st century literature as in direct conversation with current political and ethical conversations. Literature itself is a public medium, and it provides a space for numerous voices to engage the pressing concerns of belief and religious identity in the present. In this way, postsecularism can operate as a critical methodology as per Huggan, but it can also participate in broader social discussions about religion. Christopher Douglas' *If God*

⁹ See Lori Branch and Mark Knight for four ways that the term 'postsecular' is often deployed.

Meant to Interfere offers a timely example of this interpretive dynamic by tracing the upwelling of the Christian right as a political force in the United States in recent decades. He marks the relationship between the resurgence of conservative Christian belief and secularization in contemporary American literature, noting how the Christian right has negatively reacted to American forms of multiculturalism. He further traces how these concerns have surfaced in the work of writers like Don DeLillo, who warned against the increasing public presence of the Christian right. Related to Douglas' thesis, the writers I examine in this dissertation – including Marilynne Robinson and Colum McCann – resist coercive understandings of religion, such as the ways in which it has been mobilized by the religious right in alliance for the purposes of neoliberal capitalism and political control.

I'm thus particularly interested in literary postsecularism not simply as a critical methodology to apply to texts, though this methodology remains an important starting point, but as a contribution to contemporary discourse about religion. More specifically, I'm concerned with the questions arising from postsecular literature and how writers reconsider the multifaceted, ever-shifting relations among religion, people's lived experiences and practices, and the political. Literary postsecularism channels both an awareness of the importance religion and spirituality continue to wield globally for billions of people and an alternate mode of thinking about religious and spiritual issues outside of rigid (even if over-simplistically understood) categories of religion and the secular that were generated by the secularization thesis. Despite these contradictions and tensions, the messiness of thinking and re-thinking what religion and postsecularism mean for literature simultaneously presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It invites an

articulation of what literary studies can contribute to broader social discussions about religion and the sacred – to a notion of how the abundance of life can be realized and communicated – in the twenty-first century. Literature itself is a public medium – a public sphere, as Diana Brydon refers to it – and it provides a space for numerous voices to engage the pressing concerns of belief and religious identity in the present.

The political philosopher William Connolly, in his search for “other spaces of possibility” that form some sort of middle ground along the continuum of secularism and religious adherence, observes: “I have increasingly found secular conceptions of language, ethics, discourse, and politics...to be insufficiently alert to the layered density of political thinking and judgment, even as I oppose a religiously centered politics in which the state represents the dictates of a specific church or of a religious faith as general as Christianity” (2000, 4). Though he doesn’t employ the term ‘postsecular’ to describe alternate political possibilities, he conveys a sense that there is “more religious and nonreligious variety in public life than many traditional secularists and monotheists tend to appreciate” (4). Connolly focuses on politics, but his remarks invoke the significance of language and layered, imaginative thinking – the domain of literary studies – for approaching difficult questions. Literature’s use of language and poetics heralds what Kearney calls “an aesthetic openness to the gracious and the strange” (14), as well as an acceptance of interpretive ambiguity. For Kearney, “Imagination and narrative play as important role in my inquiry as do faith and reason” (xvi). These two qualities emerge as important characteristics in each of the texts I discuss throughout this dissertation, as does an attention to each text as an aesthetic creation which provokes profound affective

responses. These facets relate to what Rita Felski terms “a work’s power of address” (10) as well as its dynamic and highly intimate relationship with the reader.

Like Connolly and Taylor, I am interested in the other spaces of possibility generated by an affective engagement with literary texts. My focus on the messianic invokes the political not simply as the governmental organization of life, but as an unavoidably entangled relationship with others and with the world around us. In concentrating on more earthed, yet still sacramental, notions of the political and the postsecular, I differ from scholars such as Andrew Tate, who explores the Christian implications of the miraculous, transcendent, and prophetic in contemporary fiction, and John McClure, who highlights the partial and unfinished nature of faith in recent literature rather than its political dimensions. I align more with Lori Branch and Mark Knight’s emphasis that the postsecular does not “replace one monolithic idea (the secular) with another (the religious)” but that it rather “acknowledge[s] and open[s] up the creative space for thinking that emerges when difficult ideas and disciplinary modes of thought are allowed to cross-pollinate” (495). I understand the postsecular in literary terms as a creative attempt to seek relational healing, find intimacy, and forge new constructions of self and relationship under dizzying conditions of late capitalist modernity. As Elleke Boehmer writes, “literature...has the capacity to keep reimagining and refreshing how we understand ourselves in relation to the world and to some of the most pressing questions of our time” (1).

In this dissertation, I employ postsecular analyses to examine several contemporary literary texts.¹⁰ I follow Manav Ratti's model in thinking of the postsecular as a *negotiated* term. In each of the subsequent chapters, I explore how authors such as Marilynne Robinson, J.M. Coetzee, Marjorie Liu, Gene Luen Yang, Colum McCann, and Mohsin Hamid animate readings that grapple with such negotiations in response to urgent contemporary matters such as neoliberalism and migration. While I highlight the tensions and problems that arise, I also explore the hopeful possibilities that postsecular readings of texts produce. I use the concept of the postsecular not as an indication that religion has been superseded – the number of religious adherents (especially for Islam and Christianity) has been growing world-wide, most prominently in the Global South and across Asia (Jenkins 2011) – but in the terms I have outlined above: as an indicator of the multiplicity of approaches to the domain of the sacred and a consistent desire in people's lives for fullness, spirituality, and identity. More specifically, I employ postsecularism as a set of critical tools for reading individual literary works, but then situate that engagement within larger frameworks of the political, religious, and secular.¹¹

All of the texts that I examine in this dissertation have been published in the wake of 9/11. Huggan highlights “a reawakened interest in the role of religion in world society and politics” that emerges after this event, noting that “some of the latest ethical

¹⁰ Though the postsecular remains under critical reflection, no replacement term for ‘postsecularism’ has yet gained traction, and it remains a useful, if problematized, designation for literary work that explores contemporary expressions of religion and spirituality while grappling with the pitfalls of religious and secular ideologies. See Lori Branch and Mark Knight (2018) for a more detailed discussion of the problems and potential for the postsecular in literary studies.

¹¹ In my understandings of these terms, I often follow the models of Charles Taylor, William Connolly, and Richard Kearney outlined earlier in this chapter, as well as feminist and postcolonial theologians and theorists such as Catherine Keller and Kwok Pui-Lan.

developments in continental philosophy” have been “inexorably shaped by the events and aftermath of 9/11,” in response to “the increasing politicization of religious attitudes, values, and beliefs in an unevenly developed late-capitalist world” (752). This visibility requires public discussion about the political facets of religious belief, even though these conversations will be difficult: “the political dimensions of belief post-9/11 render any discussion of religion as fraught as it is necessary” (Knight 1). 9/11 has therefore emerged as a critical event marking public visibility – and ignorance – about religious matters and their imbrication in everyday politics and culture.¹² As Paul Bramadat argues, “Because religion is typically placed in the same private category as one’s salary and sexual preferences, it usually erupts into the public arena from the margins of our awareness...The widespread public confusion about Islam evident in the fall of 2001 and thereafter is probably the best, but not the only, example of this kind of systemic ignorance” (2005, 207). 9/11 becomes an important marker for world literature and transnational fiction, as well, as in the work of Colum McCann and Mohsin Hamid, both of whom I discuss in Chapter 5. For McCann and Hamid, the destruction of the towers

¹² In employing 9/11 as a marker of intensified interest in the relation between religion and politics, I am aware that there are certain critical dangers associated with it. Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito argue that the “‘9/11 context’ reinforced the secularist view that politicized religion is always about political instability, a disordered state of international affairs, fundamentalist politics, and terrorism” and ultimately that religion engendered “a militant and violence-prone form of politics and the eruption of irrationality in the otherwise rationally-working international system” (934-935). Also, James Liu et al. note in a study on collective remembering that 9/11 remains within a Eurocentric view of world history. Collective memory is biased towards ethno-nationalism and “Westerners virtually ignored all non-Western history” (668-669). I grant both of these concerns: that 9/11 led to the perception of religion in politics as unstable, irrational, and violent, and that it can lead to a Eurocentric version of world history and a biased privileging of American national trauma. However, I agree with Huggan and Bramadat that 9/11 (1) became an event that prompted widespread re-thinking of political and scholarly ignorance about religion and politics and (2) presented an opportunity to challenge both the United States’ imperialist policies abroad and national myopia about other world religions.

signals an opportunity to rectify ignorance about religion and complicate narratives of national identity, while cultivating a more compassionate awareness about issues of migration and mobility that also became more visible post-9/11.

In thinking about the manifold reverberations of 9/11, I invoke the idea of the Messiah and the messianic as a specific lens to concentrate my discussion of postsecular literature. Messiah figures have been important historically and theologically for the world's three major monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the wake of 9/11 and resurgent nationalisms around the globe, the image of the populist hero who will save his nation from terror has emerged as a potent apocalyptic icon (Keller 2). However, I am primarily interested in postsecular conceptions of the messianic – conceptions that often engage with and often re-negotiate traditional religious understandings in response to urgent social, cultural, and political necessities such as migration, racism, and LGBTQ+ claims. I think of the Messiah and the messianic as a postsecular *project* and as weak, in the sense developed by German essayist and critic Walter Benjamin. The weak messianic indicates our entangled relationships with others, as well as a cultivation of one's own ethical and imaginative attention, responsibility, and responsiveness. In this way, it becomes possible to think of the Messiah and the messianic as postsecular – as prompting important discussions about how to think “about religion alongside and within the secular” (Branch and Knight 499). There are, of course, diverse religious genealogies and histories of the messianic that matter, that should neither be elided nor erased. But, to borrow from and reinterpret Talal Asad's work on modernity, “The important thing in this comparative analysis is not [the Messiah's' origin]

(Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate [it], the powers [it] release[s] or disable[s]" (17). What does it mean to think of contemporary literature as offering glimpses of weak messianism? What is the potential in thinking of the messianic as embodying a diffuse sense of ethics, or as being dispersed – perhaps contradictorily, heterogeneously, and unevenly – throughout the planes of culture and politics and not just theology? How can it contribute to thinking about contemporary challenges?

In Chapter 1, I theorize the postsecular messianic in terms of weak messianism. Weak messianism disputes the militant characteristics that have become fastened to many representations of the Messiah. I draw primarily on the work of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, and Catherine Keller in conceptualizing a weak messianism that seeks a more diffuse understanding of ethical and planetary entanglement. Benjamin and Derrida especially offer instructive engagements with the messianic: they simultaneously value their Judaic heritages and acknowledge their immersion in the Christian culture around them even as both posit a messianicity that queries the relationship of religion to the secular. Derrida's famous emphasis on religion without religion prefigures a desire for a postsecular mode of thinking about a fluid sense of the sacred. Keller also offers a critique of the gendered critique of apocalyptic messianism that becomes vital for my readings of gender in the rest of the chapters. The concept of weak messianism articulated in this chapter undergirds the invocation of the messianic in the following chapters, including Chapter 3, in which I discuss J.M. Coetzee's two most recent novels, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. The novels ponder

weak messianism as the potential for relational transformation that can occur in an embodied practice such as dance.

The Postsecular Possibilities of World Literature

To think through this conjunction of the messianic and the postsecular in contemporary literature, I am informed by recent work on world literature. The novels I discuss in this dissertation encompass a broad geographical area, including fiction from American, Chinese-American, South African, Irish, and Pakistani writers. They are all written in English, but some – especially the comics – invoke issues of translation and the global circulation of texts and religious influences. Religious ideas and literature both cross spatial and temporal borders, and I am interested in the implications of considering them together. In this section, I also consider how postcolonial insight can challenge postsecular literature's Eurocentrism.

Elleke Boehmer traces the field of world literature from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's first use of *Weltliteratur* in 1837, a word he coined "to refer to what he saw as a rising new epoch of global understanding and the consequent retreat of exclusively national literatures" (147). She further notes that world literature "has been taken to refer to writing that not only reaches beyond the nation and its linguistic boundaries, and hence invites translation as well as more interactive modes of reading, but that also addresses modern, global, and even universal themes and questions" (147). Some of these themes and questions include the continued strengthening of the global marketplace; the unprecedented mobility of people, goods, and ideas; and interwoven,

transnational political structures which mean that multiple religious traditions, beliefs, and practices as well as literatures are now circulating around the world at an unprecedented pace.

Given these issues, I am indebted to Debjani Ganguly's characterization of the global novel, in which she marks 1989 as "a historically significant threshold [for] a new kind of novel as a global literary form [which] emerged at the conjuncture of three critical phenomena: the geopolitics of war and violence since the end of the cold war; hyperconnectivity through advances in information technology; and the emergence of a new humanitarian sensibility in a context where suffering has a presence in everyday life through the immediacy of digital images." Though she uses 1989 as a marker of intensified political and literary activity¹³ and I refer to 9/11, the resonant idea remains that both events signify a critical conjuncture of geopolitics and (digital and humanitarian) connectivity that come to bear on global literary texts in important ways.

For example, translation and widespread networks of circulation have brought a tremendous number of texts into ready access for global audiences. However, the effects on literary production of such shifts have come under considerable scrutiny in recent years, notably through the vector of "world literature" as a category of study. Criticisms usually fall under the issue of scope, in which it's suggested that world literature as a classification is too broad temporally and geographically to be really useful as a subject

¹³ For example, 1989 marked the year of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie for *The Satanic Verses*, a novel which ignited literary and cultural attention, "sparking a set of oppositions that seemed to replicate infinitely, such as freedom vs. oppression, religion vs. secularism, modernity vs. tradition, and the west vs. the non-west" (Ratti 141).

for research (Cheah 2). Sitting alongside this concern of over-spaciousness, commoditization has emerged as another point of critique, influenced to no small extent by the work of Sarah Brouillette and Emily Apter. Apter suggests that ideas of the nation and national difference are becoming commercializable as niche identities in capitalism's desire to co-opt and market discourses of difference. The novels that become recognizable as world literature – those that, for example, get on the lists for prizes such as the Man Booker – are instrumental for a publishing industry that produces and sells such difference. Furthermore, translation enacts a kind of violence on the original text: the original defies the cultural and linguistic substitution that translation attempts and suffers irreparable loss in the process. Apter's criticisms resonate with those of Sarah Brouillette, who is concerned that world literature's publishing machinations construct a de-fanged commodity for a largely Western cultural elite (4). They ask: how is the reception of global audiences shaping and containing world literature in ways that damage its expressions of agency?

Though Apter writes of the inescapable losses involved in translation and the problems of commercialization, other scholars examine world literature less in terms of what it can't do and more in terms of its relationship to evolving understandings of human community and globalization (Cheah 2). Perhaps world literature's expansive sweep of the hand can't do full service to more localized and much-needed critical contexts as can postcolonial literary studies, but the two fields aren't necessarily opposed or mutually

exclusive, though there are challenges.¹⁴ The problem, as Cheah argues, may necessitate new definitions, deepening and complicating accounts such as David Damrosch's classic characterization of world literature as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4). Cheah foregrounds the role of literature in cosmopolitan discourse (3) in which world literature's focus on "circulatory movements that cut across national-territorial borders" can productively meet cosmopolitanism's "circle of political belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country" (3). Cheah's insistence on cosmopolitan world literature brings to understandings of literary circulation an ethical component of belonging, kinship, and human entanglement across borders.

Despite the contestations marking the field of world literature (perhaps a situation not unlike that surrounding postsecularism), using a world literature approach allows for different kinds of conversations about how texts are read and what concerns they are engaging. Transnational concerns about issues such as capital and migration as well as the limits of the nation state are trenchant, but literature possesses its own unique capacities to contribute to the discussions about how such problems flow across borders (and even reconsider what borders are). Bearing in mind Boehmer's concerns that world literature studies trips too hastily over the postcolonial and its attention to the nation, world literature navigates the shifting territory of fine-grained local context while demonstrating broad appeal and interest. As I suggest in Chapter 4, it is necessary to

¹⁴ As Elleke Boehmer points out in her recent book *Postcolonial Poetics* (2018) and Pheng Cheah suggests in *What is a World?* (2016).

situate comics such as Gene Luen Yang's intertwined graphic novels *Boxers & Saints* (2013) and Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda's *Monstress* series of comics (2015-) within the global comics phenomenon of superheroes while attending to the particular dynamics of empire, race, and religion at play in China's early twentieth-century history. The messianic figure of the superhero and its links to racist caricatures and histories of imperialism become re-thought in terms of the relationship between fundamentalist religiosity and modernity. Moreover, the unique relationship of Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda – who can only communicate to each other via translators – means that the actual creation of the *Monstress* comics offers an interesting perspective on world literature in translation. Furthermore, the success of comics in Southeast Asia – where translations into multiple languages are common – also provokes necessary questions about the importance of translation into languages other than English.

Given the rapid expansion of comics publishing and reception in the last two decades, perhaps comics will offer one route towards thinking about world literature in the future: comics writers and producers often rely on alternate models of dissemination, such as serialization and online publishing, and independent publishers have been central both to comics' history and to the propulsion of comics forward as a worldwide industry. Comics have also generated a tremendous amount of fan engagement, and fan communities have utilized different forms of media to skip, confront, or provide alternatives to the usual prize circuits that shore up world literature as a commodity. These communities are forming their own transnational networks of response and involvement, addressing issues such as translation, barriers to access, and even political

constraints such as censorship. These kinds of disruptions to traditional publishing and the hold of global publishing houses initiated by comics is now being felt in other areas of literary fiction. Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian Kurd seeking asylum but being held in an Australian detention centre, won one of Australia's most prestigious literary prizes in January 2019 – for a book he wrote via text messages on WhatsApp. His win confronts Australia's cruel treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and calls into question the literary establishment's relationship to politics and foreign policy – Behrouz couldn't accept his prize in person because of his detainment. His method of writing via text and app likewise re-frames conventions of literary production and dissemination to take advantage of current technologies that are widely available.

World literature can thus consider different audiences, including how those audiences are mobilizing, as well as changes in global literary circulation. I suggest that it is also generative to employ world literature as a framework to think about religion in contemporary literature. I agree with Daniel Wong about the potential for postsecular cosmopolitanism, though I extend its potential into world literature. World literature is often seen as having an intimate relationship with theories of cosmopolitanism, especially in terms of globalization and the contestation of cosmopolitanism as a form of social capital. For Kwame Anthony Appiah, cosmopolitanism is fundamentally *ethical*: it can form an urgent ethical response to the challenges and tensions of globalization, which unevenly and inequitably affects local relationships but nonetheless contains the seeds of hopeful global citizenship. Shameem Black appears to channel Appiah's ideas into her suggestion that literature remains a crucial site for engaging with social difference and

alterity across the borders of race, class, nation, ethnicity, gender, etc. (2). She insists on the possibility of a literary ethics of representation that refuses to discursively dominate marginalized and oppressed identities (4), but instead imagines just relations across various social and representational borders. Black's sense of literary ethics and border-crossing fiction infuses my understanding of postsecular cosmopolitanism.

As Wong suggests, "a postsecular perspective helps contribute to the broader understanding of cultures and customs which...form a critical part of the cosmopolitan endeavor." Wong notes an "absence of any sustained discourse on religion" in cosmopolitan scholarship, citing Peter van der Veer's critique of the assumption that "a cosmopolitan person has to transcend religious tradition and thus be secular." We're therefore back at the notion that a truly encompassing public space and pluralistic commitment must be secular, a narrative that requires reconsidering on national and cosmopolitan levels. As I discuss in Chapter 5, novels such as Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* dispute the idea that spirituality doesn't travel well or that cosmopolitan commitments must be religiously neutral. The structures of both novels enact a pluralism of voice, place, and spiritual feeling in which vibrant postsecular possibilities emerge even from death, forced migration, and displacement.

Returning to the image with which I opened this chapter, I remember Richard Kearney's insight: "Athens and Jerusalem are both guests and host to one another. They question and amplify the respective notions of the sacred" (9). The sacred and the secular need not be pitched in an adversarial battle but can be seen as providing different resources to help collective life flourish. I see literature as a window of poetics opening

to “interpret [this] ambivalent secular-sacred space” (11) and contemplate its possibilities. By focusing on a weak messianism, I hope to explore that poetic ambivalence, inhabiting a figure that haunts and dislocates as well as transforms and revitalizes. To re-situate Christopher Douglas’s claim about the religious right in American post-war literary fiction, I suggest that the messianic appears “in roundabout ways and by indirect address” (4). The postsecular messianic signals an insistent call to re-think habits of relationship and politics in response to the devastating challenges posed by declining social safety nets, climate change, and humanitarian crises around the globe. By prioritizing responsibility to – and entanglement with – others, this form of weak messianism urges global intimacy and the importance of working on relational healing. World literature is attuned to these challenges in significant ways, as the literary crosses national, economic, and cultural borders and offers an important forum for writers voicing their thoughts on the issues shaping our world today. It further offers a fruitful arena for considering how postsecularism can become a vital critical approach to contemporary literary studies: the postsecular provides a space to explore how world writers are bridging the religious and secular and transforming these domains in new and exciting ways.

CHAPTER TWO

A Moment of Weakness:

Re-Thinking the Messiah in Postsecular Times

As in *Hamlet*...everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the waiting for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated...

Derrida (1994, 2)

The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last.

Kafka (1958)

In her book *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*, theologian Catherine Keller writes of a troubling development in secular-religious discussions: political messianism. Noting what she calls the “apocalyptic unconscious” (viii) of American life in the twentieth century, she outlines how conservative religiosity has made common cause with American military imperialism. The figure of the Messiah who battles evil and saves the nation has become a strange, but substantial, instance of how a certain form of religious discourse has influenced mainstream political spheres. It has fomented an anxious, populist brew of fear and crisis and posited the strong Messiah figure as the only saving measure for individuals as well as for nations.

The religious cross currents Keller identifies in politics have been noticeable in recent literature and popular fiction. Aaron Mauro argues that “literature and culture” in

the United States (as one prominent example) have become “a critical site of a distinctly American tradition of prophecy and messianism” (63). Christopher Douglas situates this development in literature within a resurgence of a powerful conservative Christian bloc. The bestselling *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins – the first book of which was published in 1995 – offers an important case in point. The *Left Behind* novels fictionalize Christian dispensational premillennialist¹⁵ understandings of the apocalypse, presenting images of societal collapse, the ascension of the AntiChrist, and a warrior Messiah who will set the world to rights. To date, the series encompasses sixteen novels, four films (the latest having been released in 2014), several video games, and a number of spin-off books, demonstrating remarkable cultural staying power. While the novels and the resulting franchise have received little interest outside of North America, they point to an appetite for what Douglas calls the “fantasy” of the Christian right (130) which responds to “aggressive public secularization” (155) through the medium of popular fiction.

The *Left Behind* novels betray an anxiety about the place of belief in contemporary cultural forms. They yoke a conservative religio-political vision to a fictional platform in order to present their own deterministic vision of politics and history. In these novels, the Messiah exemplifies what Keller outlines as militaristic strength coded in heteronormative masculine terms: this Messiah reasserts the power of the nation and its

¹⁵ Dispensationalism refers to the idea that “different passages of biblical prophecy” can be applied to “different eras of divinely ordered time, or dispensations” (Pietsch 1). Premillennialists “hope...for the arrival of the promised Millennium, Christ’s thousand-year reign of peace and harmony over the Earth...[they expect] that the Bible offers accurate predictions about the future sequence of events that will lead up to the Millennium” (1).

roots in (white) Christian traditions of home and country, a bulwark against the corrupting encroachment of secularism. Amy Hungerford suggests that the “popular genre fiction of LaHaye and Jenkins...plays a special role in the culture by embodying the imaginative work required to maintain the viability of belief in the secular age” (122), further emphasizing “the relevance of literature” and the “relevance of American religion to the contemporary development of literary work” (122). Fiction like that of the *Left Behind* series – only one example of a popular market that continues to exert enormous commercial influence – demonstrates a literary history of the messianic that is often overlooked, but which possesses considerable cultural sway.

While Keller highlights the issues dogging the messianic within an American context, the convergence of crisis, politics, and literature is not limited to the United States. Charles Taylor situates this messy entanglement within numerous Western societies, as I outline in the introduction, and Manav Ratti explores it within the fiction of South East Asia. Granted, the history and relationship between religion, politics, and literature in the United States is a unique one. However, as Ratti observes, countries such as India and Sri Lanka are facing similar questions in how they approach private belief and its “social and collective expressions” (9); he further emphasizes how authors like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, and Mahasweta Devi are taking up such issues of secularism and religion in their writing. I echo Ratti’s argument that literature, in national and transnational contexts, “can constitute a site for translations across the different modes of the secular and the religious” (14).

Bearing Ratti's literary hopes in mind, I argue that there is another literary trajectory of the messianic, one that can be a generative way to read post-9/11 world literature, in contrast to the apocalyptic renderings of the Messiah that can be found in popular fiction. The texts I have chosen for this dissertation indicate an ongoing diversity in ways of relating to and using religious ideas as well as an urgent sense that faith or a longing for spirituality have not diminished or receded into the past. These authors – Marilynne Robinson, J.M. Coetzee, Gene Luen Yang, Marjorie Liu, Sana Takeda, Colum McCann, and Mohsin Hamid – are concerned with human vulnerability and fragility in the midst of perceptions of profound societal fracturing and everyday pressures, and they consider how to forge relations with others in the face of such troubles. For these writers, religious spirituality – still a vital category for understanding human experience and longing – signifies less a totalizing framework of belief and doctrine than a practice of responsibility and ethical struggle in difficult times. Despite their many differences of literary approach, style, and subject, they are united by a commitment to construct alternate presents and imagine positive futures.

The messianic becomes one framework for thinking about imaginative possibilities of responsibility and belonging in recent texts. The problems with the apocalyptic conceptualization of the Messiah are manifold, and I explore some of these issues within this chapter. However, I focus on identifying other ways of thinking about the messianic, inspired in large part by Walter Benjamin's influential invocation of weak messianism and Jacques Derrida's idea of "messianism without religion" (1994, 211). Writing amid the growing social and political anxieties leading up to World War II, Walter

Benjamin calls for each new generation to embody a form of weak messianism that must pay attention to the past in order to instantiate collective responsibility in the present and future. In doing so, Benjamin asks us to pay attention to what shape that historical responsibility can take amid ethical crisis. Not unlike Benjamin, Derrida simultaneously secularizes the messianic while crafting it in response to Judeo-Christian inheritances. He seeks, as Ratti observes, “an abstract location where he can reflect on the religious without the historical phenomena of religions” in order to embrace a more open-ended faith that avoids “the ideologies of organized religion” (18-9). Both Benjamin and Derrida contribute to an understanding of weak messianism that combines responsibility with imaginative possibility, religious heritage with new, fluid experiences of faith and the sacred.

I also suggest that weak messianism shares many features with postsecular literary study: a decentering of strong belief, an openness to unanticipated possibility, a focus on pluralistic relationality, and an interest in how a sense of the sacred can still infuse everyday life. Benjamin’s and Derrida’s reflections on weak messianism, on the messianic without religion, offers an important guide for reading the literary texts with which I engage throughout the following chapters. While the messianic has acted as an important locus of philosophical exploration in recent years, very few studies exist which explicitly connect the messianic to postsecular thought. For this reason, I sketch an outline of what I call the postsecular messianic for literary studies in this chapter and explore how it can be a productive framework in which to think about current issues in postsecular thought. I am aware of no work considering the postsecular messianic in

literary studies at any length,¹⁶ so the concept offers an exciting opportunity to consider the texts discussed in the subsequent chapters in stimulating ways. In the last part of this chapter, I look in more depth at how weak messianism can support postsecular literary studies as a critical endeavour and as a practice of relationship with literary texts.

Walter Benjamin's Weak Messianism

The twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin continues to be a crucial thinker known for his important work on culture and the aestheticization of politics. In this section, I examine his invocation of weak messianism and explore how he unlaces the messianic from the figure of the messiah to pursue different possibilities of collective action. Benjamin explores the threads of crisis in response to very real threats on his own social and political horizon – the fascism of the German National Socialist party and imminence of World War II.¹⁷ Writing in the shadow of both world wars, he borrows from and transfigures theological traditions in order to form and articulate a response to the abuses of power he perceived, even if he refused the deterministic label of theologian. Though Benjamin saw himself as a secular Jew, he grapples with his Judaic heritage as well as with the Christian ideas that influence the culture around him. His thought

¹⁶ Manav Ratti does briefly highlight Derrida's conception of the messianic in *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*, but it is not a central focus of the book.

¹⁷ In the following chapters, I discuss several contemporary threats that preoccupy the authors whose work I examine. For example, Marilynne Robinson writes in response to the predations of neoliberal capitalism; Gene Luen Yang, Marjorie Liu, and Sana Takeda take up issues of colonialism and violence; and Colum McCann and Mohsin Hamid reflect on war, globalization, and asylum seekers.

therefore offers valuable ways of reconceiving the Messiah in the context of a postsecular questioning of faith and belief.

In his book *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton recounts an anecdote about Benjamin and how the writer saw the map of his own life:

One afternoon, Walter Benjamin was sitting inside the Café des Deux Magots in Saint Germain des Prés when he was struck with compelling force by the idea of drawing a diagram of his life, and knew at the same moment exactly how it was to be done. He drew the diagram, and with utterly typical ill-luck lost it again a year or two later. The diagram, not surprisingly, was a labyrinth. (i)

Why was Benjamin's choice of the labyrinth not surprising? The labyrinth is a visual as well as spatial diagram that curves back onto itself repeatedly. In some classical labyrinths, there is not even a centre per se, simply a looping path upon which a person can stop or continue at any time. While the labyrinth was popular in Greek and Roman antiquity, it has come to signify a physical and spiritual practice in many contemporary cultural traditions. It marks a contemplative pilgrimage that offers a metaphor for living – an experience of time, history, and relationships not as linear, but as a recursive multiplicity wherein past experiences may be revisited and where one may rest at any point without being dragged forward to a definite endpoint. Time stops and flows, repeatedly connecting to other life experiences rather than leaving them behind. The labyrinth represents a useful image for understanding Benjamin's work, especially his idea

of history and time. It unites the spatial and the temporal, embodying their interconnection – how one moves through time is always joined to movement through a material, worldly space. And it is into this entangled conjunction that Benjamin sees the Messiah as emerging. In his essay “Franz Kafka,” he states, “No one says that the distortions which it will be the Messiah’s mission to set right someday affect only our space; surely they are distortions of our time as well” (135).

Benjamin notably addresses the distortions the Messiah will make right in two aphoristic writings: the “Theologico-Political Fragment” (1921/1986) and “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (often translated as “On the Concept of History”), written just before his death fleeing the Nazis in 1940. Though I focus on “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” both writings are concerned with the Messiah’s relation to time as well as to revolution, a thorny issue given that Benjamin takes great pains to suggest that the Messiah is always outside of time as we know it. Given the importance of the Messiah to Benjamin’s idea of history and revolution, Robert Gibbs claims that “[t]here is likely no theme more over-exposed and over-theorized in Benjamin’s work than the messianic” (197). And indeed, the messianic in Benjamin’s work has provoked a great deal of commentary on how exactly Benjamin conceives of the Messiah’s role in redemption and to what extent this role is explicitly theological. How does the wizened, hunchbacked figure of theology invoked in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” fit into Benjamin’s own relationship to faith and religious practice?

The latter question has perplexed critics of Benjamin’s work, who often attempt to conclusively outline the theological elements of Benjamin’s writing, especially the

messianic, or show how he separated the theological from the secular. Certainly, the idea of the messianic that Benjamin invokes is shaped by Jewish conceptions of the Messiah, the religious and cultural tradition with which Benjamin grew up as a German Jew. He was also life-long friends with Gershom Scholem, the well-known Jewish scholar interested in Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, and the two had numerous conversations about Judaism and religious identity. In his longer essay on Kafka, Benjamin tacitly acknowledges the influence of Scholem in his famous remark that “[T]he Messiah, of whom a great rabbi once said that he did not wish to change the world by force, but would only make a slight adjustment in it” (2007, 134). According to Scholem’s own correspondence with Benjamin, Scholem is the “great rabbi” to whom Benjamin refers. Eric Jacobson highlights Benjamin and Scholem’s strong connection with each other, especially in their early work, and argues that both see a very clear separation between the divine and profane realms in their younger writings.

However, a shift happened over the course of their relationship, and Scholem became deeply invested in Jewish mysticism. In her introduction to *Illuminations*, a collection of Benjamin’s essays, Hannah Arendt comments that Scholem “begged Benjamin to make a choice and a commitment (and to make the choice and the commitment that he himself had made...he was right to worry about the spiritual implications of Benjamin’s indecisiveness)” (ix). Jacobson similarly wants to identify a hesitation in Benjamin about the divine and how he sees it connecting to the profane. He notes that in Benjamin’s and Scholem’s early work, “[t]he emphasis of the authors is...distinctly oriented toward worldly affairs, not merely in the sense of somehow

‘secularizing’ theological notions to take on profane meanings but also in advocating qualified restraint with regard to the divine realm while searching for its link to the profane” (5). For Scholem, Arendt, and Jacobson, Benjamin can’t clearly be classified as a dogmatic skeptic or a doubter. Instead, he is wary of (or attentive to) how, as Judith Butler puts it in her discussion of the “Theologico-Political Fragment” (2013), the divine and the eternal traverse the transient. Even the two temporal modalities of the eternal and the transient¹⁸ in the “Theologico-Political Fragment” once again reinforce a separation or line between the two that Benjamin is apparently struggling to sort out.

I wonder, however, if Scholem’s and Arendt’s conflation of Benjamin’s lack of choice with spiritual indecisiveness forces upon his work a line between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, that he himself was unwilling to resolve. The religious and the secular foregrounds an aporetic tension in his work, and given this lack of certainty, I am interested in the possibility of reading Benjamin’s work through the lens of the postsecular. As is evident in his thoughts on history and weak messianic power, Benjamin sought to disrupt totalizing visions of time and power, seeing in them an overwhelming inclination to consign the past and its people to the wreckage of history. And yet Jacobson’s wariness about religious labelling displays a concern about locking Benjamin into a theological framework. A fear remains in much critical scholarship that religion or religious streams will shackle philosophical investigation into a totalizing view

¹⁸ The idea of the eternal as a temporal modality harkens back to Butler’s interpretation of Benjamin. As Alyda Faber has pointed out to me, the eternal can also be thought in theological terms as *not* a temporal modality, but as the radical ‘other’ of the temporal, which induces an irresolvable question as to their relation.

of God, being, and faith. Benjamin clearly resists such regulatory frameworks, and “Theses on the Philosophy of History” focuses on the uncertainty and tenuousness of how the messianic will emerge, even as he underscores the importance of each generation’s weak messianic power in bringing about redemption. The undecidable and indeterminate qualities of this idea of the messianic become crucial for breaking apart fascism’s insistence on unilateral power. I suggest, then, that Benjamin was not spiritually indecisive, nor can strands of his work clearly be labelled as religious or secular. Instead, he refuses to situate himself on one side or another – he listens to Talmud injunctions about remembering the past while waiting for an ambiguous Messiah or weak messianic to show up in each second of time. In her introduction to *Illuminations*, Arendt concludes, “Benjamin’s work is evidence of the light that a religious sensibility may shine upon secular existence” (x). The two domains mesh and entangle in his work, lending a postsecular character to his deliberations.

For Benjamin, the sacred and the secular bleed into each other, and the Messiah’s relationship to time and crisis offers one example of their disorderly mingling. I’m particularly interested in how he reconceives the messianic not solely as a figure to come in the future but as a moment in the present in which every person has “been endowed with a weak Messianic power” (2007, 254) in order to “fight for the oppressed past” (2007, 263). This weak messianic power rejects the idea that the Messiah has total control and mastery over time and space, or that time is teleologically directed towards the Messiah’s arrival. I suggest that Benjamin imagines the Messiah as a figure that can be embodied by anyone in the present – that the messianic emerges each time a person

takes a stand against the forgetting of the past and fights against permutations of fascism. Benjamin's focus on time simultaneously displays a concern with how we move and act in specific spaces: he demonstrates that relationships to time are not abstract. Rather, orientations toward time indicate what society values as important, guiding how individuals act to realize collective goals and how each individual is valued as a member of a larger community. Benjamin's problematizing of time offers a way to question such structures as well as to develop an idea of how weak messianic power can participate in personal and social redemption.

Benjamin's most pressing issue with time arises in his concern for how history and the past are appropriated and the forms of power such appropriations sanction. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" contests the idea that time both flows linearly and shows humanity's general social, moral, and political progress: "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself" (261). Andrew Benjamin notes that "Walter Benjamin's concern with history involves a reconfiguration of the way the political and the temporality of history interconnect" (1) in a critique of Enlightenment philosophies that privilege time as the future achievement of a goal or telos. In other words, Benjamin takes issue with conceptions of time that understand it as linear flow towards perfectibility. According to a narrative of linear time, redemption, insofar as it emerges at all, arises as an inevitable product of human technical and political achievement, rather than ethically motivated social change. The present simply functions

as a *transition* towards future improvement, and Benjamin repeatedly calls this idea of time “homogeneous, empty time” (264).

Benjamin concludes “Theses on the Philosophy of History” with an enigmatic meditation on Jewish relationships to the future. He writes:

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance – namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (264)¹⁹

Benjamin embraces a radical possibility open to every second of time, focusing on a Jewish sense of hopefulness that imbues the present with potential. With their intimate relationship to time, the soothsayers provide a constructive – and poetic – model for experiencing a vitalizing sense of temporality. However, his focus with time reveals his

¹⁹ For Benjamin, remembrance, as Jeremy Worthen argues, is evidenced in attention to the brokenness of the past and it becomes a site in which redemption can happen: “Redemption becomes manifest through remembrance, which still holds the power momentarily to interrupt ‘the one single catastrophe’ that the angel of history beholds” (263). Furthermore, Judaism offers an instructive model for remembrance because of the prohibition on investigating the future.

deeply-felt responsibility for the past and how to engage in acts of remembrance and memory. His urgency in reconceptualizing linear temporality confronts the idea of how sameness and homogeneity get entrenched in society's understanding of its own trajectory and relationships with people in the past as well as the future. Homogeneous time excludes different temporal possibilities as well as difference and multiplicity and displays connections with a vision of social and political life that similarly enforces order and sameness. A totalizing idea of time is linked to a state of emergency that suspends imagination, dissent, and spontaneity in order to manage populations in the name of crisis. Benjamin's emphasis on Jewish open-endedness around the Messiah's return suggests the radical importance of uncertainty and openness, offering a temporal and political challenge to time based on predictability and conformity.

Yet Benjamin also resists the idea that the Messiah will come at a far-removed future date, which would similarly render the future as homogeneous as well as the past. The future is not an 'end' as in a temporal end to history or a spatial stopping point for the world. As Robert Gibbs describes it, "If we were able to draw time as a line or as a circle, the messianic would break it apart. It is not the end of a line, a distant far-off moment, thousands of years hence, but rather, an interruption now, or almost now. In the next moment. Today..." (197). A radical uncertainty is involved in the messianic, in which it is displaced from the future and could occur at any second, in any place. The Messiah does not come in time – either in a temporally conceived world order or in time to save us – but breaks apart into a multiplicity that can potentially be instantiated any moment. There is thus no epistemological certainty about when the messianic will

happen or what the messianic will do, nor will the Messiah consummate human history. As Sami Khatib writes, Benjamin's messianic relates "the historical happening to redemption – in an a-teleological way" (2).²⁰

Judith Butler similarly stresses that the Messiah cannot come in time – the Messiah can never occur in temporality as it is currently conceived. Butler instead focuses on the messianic as a stilling, a standstill, or a cessation of the movement of linear time altogether into a crystallization of an image. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin explains the crystallization with reference to thinking: "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (262-263). For Butler, the crystallization of the image is critical to the fight for the oppressed past – the crystallization is an image outside of oblivion, a fragile flash of memory that helps to "blas[t] open the continuum of history" (262) rather than giving "the 'eternal' image of the past" (262). The crystallization is spatial, she emphasizes, not just temporal; it occurs in a specific place in a specific moment, "flash[ing] up at a moment of danger" (255) before it is never seen again.

Benjamin's re-working of the concept of time concomitantly indicates a shift in how time and space are to be understood in relation to one another. To change ideas of time as a progression entails thinking of time, via the crystallization of the image, as taking

²⁰ Romand Coles also writes about time as "pluri-time" in which different, complex temporalities "solicit[] patient receptivity and new possibilities for political relationships and action" (84).

a stand. Michael Levine notes Benjamin's dissatisfaction with the notion of the present as simply a transition and explicates the English translation's focus on standing:

What Benjamin proposes in the theses is a way of thinking the present as something other than a bridge, other than a mediating link between past and future presents. Thus, he writes, 'The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand (einsteht) and has come to a standstill (und zum Stillstand gekommen ist)'. That the English translation of the theses contained in *Selected Writings* takes pains to emphasize the element of standing that links the German terms *einstehen* (taking a stand) and *Stillstand* (standstill) is telling. For the stand in question is related not only to a pause, suspension, or holding open of time, but also to a spatial shift, a change in orientation from the horizontal axis to the vertical one. That this stand is to be understood as a reworking of familiar temporal-spatial coordinates – and, by extension, as an unsettling of the language to which we have recourse when speaking about the movement and stasis of time – is apparent in Benjamin's famous definition of an origin (*Ursprung*) in the first chapter of his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. There, he writes, 'the origin stands in the flow of becoming as a maelstrom'...this maelstrom interrupts the horizontal flow of time not only as a vertical descent but also, and above all, as a swirling movement of coming-to-be and passing-away. (6)

The link between space and time that Levine points out in this passage emphasizes the importance of the present as a crucial temporal mode in its own right, rather than simply a bridge or transition. Benjamin calls for a stillness of time, a conception that involves a radical openness to the present. This stillness indicates a spatial pause as well as a temporal one, a moment of physical rest in the maelstrom. In this moment of rest, one can cultivate awareness of the ebb and flow of life, of the “coming-to-be and passing-away” (Levine 6). The crystallization of the past can take place through a deepened attention – a standstill – to the situations and people and creatures that shape a particular life. In this way, one can become aware of how the present is “the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (263). The chips of messianic time do not denote some mysterious divine essence that breaks into the present, but a rhythm of stillness and flow, attention and silence, that gets enacted in every moment and place. It’s a flow that opens itself to the multiplicity and sacredness of life and history, and participates in “a Messianic cessation of happening...a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past...in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework” (Benjamin 263). Benjamin stresses specificity and attention to particularity to fight against the obliterating effects of homogeneity, which enforces sameness on both experiences of time and space.

Benjamin’s messianic time has much to do with redemption, but it’s an idea of salvation that expands everyone’s potential to contribute to collective wellbeing. He upends societal understandings of redemption, judgement, and the messianic through his

focus on time. In doing so, he resists conflating the image of the Messiah with futurity. The past should not be superseded by a better present and a superior future. If there is to be a Judgement Day, it will be predicated not so much on what perfectibility has or has not been attained, but on how humanity has handled its responsibility to the past in the present.²¹ Benjamin writes, “only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation à l’ordre du jour – and that day is Judgement Day” (254). Each moment is Judgement Day. John Caputo comments on Benjamin’s “peculiar sort of messianism, one that is turned toward the past, not the future, in which we, in the present, occupy the messianic position; we are not the ones who expect but the ones who were expected” (2006, 95). Weak messianic power places the onus for redemption on every person in each generation: redemption is, at least in part, a collective responsibility in which everyone participates. It also prompts a sense of enlarged perspective and capacious consciousness that exceeds individuality.

Benjamin sees early 20th century society as in the midst of a state of emergency, one that has become normalized and unquestioned. Fleeing from the Nazis on the eve of their takeover of Western Europe, he recognized the devastation of obliterating the past, seeing a tenuous hope only in the historian “who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (2007, 255). He uses the term “state of

²¹ In this reading, I am therefore more in line with Shoshana Felman’s secular interpretation of Benjamin’s reference to Judgement Day: “The invocation of a Judgement Day to which history itself is destined is often read as testimony to Benjamin’s involvement with – or act of faith in – a Messianic eschatology. I read it secularly as the (revolutionary, legal) day that will put history itself on trial, the day in which history will have to take stock of its own flagrant injustices” (15).

emergency” while referencing the present’s totalitarian hold on the past and its enforcement of homogeneity and conformism in daily life. He writes,

[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. (257)

Giorgio Agamben, a political theorist and philosopher, notes his indebtedness to Benjamin in his own characterization of the “state of exception” in contemporary politics. As Agamben remarks with urgency in *Homo Sacer*, “the emergency has, as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule” (12). He sees Benjamin’s idea of the state of emergency as equally relevant to the 21st century as it was in the early 20th because of new forms of crisis: intensifying biopolitical pressures under contemporary capitalism as well as mutations of totalitarianism emerging in corporate and political sovereignty. Agamben and Benjamin are attentive to how the state of emergency – what Agamben calls the state of exception – emerge from circumstances of crisis. For both, the political rhetoric of crisis becomes a justification to institute a new status quo of order, security, and control. Crisis may be a signifier of vaguely defined but deeply felt social and political unease, upheaval, and general turmoil, but Agamben argues that it gets deployed

politically in order to shore up forms of sovereignty, law, and security that take a drastic toll on individual bodies.

Benjamin's pensive answer to social and political crisis is "to bring about a real state of emergency" (2007, 257), a task that involves remembering the dead and stilling the relentless flow of progress. This "real state of emergency" implicitly exposes the assumptions and manipulations inherent in the political state of emergency initiated by fascism. In other words, Benjamin desires a revolutionary state of emergency that radically reorients understandings of history, time, and thus the form of modern politics. History, ethics, and politics are not to be described as distinct and separate modalities, each of which generate their own particular theoretical problematics, but rather as inseparably intertwined.

Given the importance of the messianic to Benjamin's conception of history, I suggest that weak messianic power becomes a crucial force in inducing the true state of emergency Benjamin invokes in the struggle against fascism. As Benjamin does not separate the categories of time and space, the true state of emergency involves a stand in time that concomitantly means a stand in space: taking a stand in time – resisting dominant narratives of progress that pile the past into the garbage bin of history – simultaneously means taking a stand in a real space with one's own body. It increases the stakes involved in redemption, making it an endeavour fulfilled by the individual body rather than an abstract task carried out by the historical materialist. As Judith Butler remarks, redemption for Benjamin isn't simply a matter of better chronologies or more accurate archives (2013). The historian may be one of the more visible figures in the

struggle for the oppressed past, but Benjamin insists that each generation is endowed with a weak messianic power. Everyone is implicated in this messianism rather than simply waiting for a Messiah who will master time by being outside of it. Waiting, in other words, doesn't preclude ethical action in the present, and we can all embody the messianic as a disruption of forms of totalitarianism in the present. Benjamin warns that the past has a claim on each generation's weak messianic power, and that "claim cannot be settled cheaply" (2007, 254). Weak messianism does not – cannot – rely on control or mastery like the warrior Messiah Catherine Keller discusses, and the present cannot act simply as a bridge to the end of history. Weak messianism is therefore at odds with the way society is currently organized, emphasizing weakness over power, responsibility over conformism, and diversity over homogeneity.

"Messianism without Religion": Jacques Derrida and the PostSecular Messianic

Though arguably more well known for his work on deconstruction, French philosopher Jacques Derrida treats matters of religion frequently and deeply in his writing. Born to a Sephardic Jewish family in Algeria, he demonstrated interest in a multiplicity of religious traditions, engaging with the Judaism of his family heritage as well as Christianity, Islam, and atheism over the course of his career. His diverse interests are perhaps one reason why Edward Baring and Peter E. Gordon describe the "question of 'Derrida and Religion'" as "complex in its indeterminacy, resisting easy answers to questions such as whether Derrida harbored any personal commitments of faith, whether

he even believed in God, and the no less vexed questions concerning the status of his own identification, practical, institutional, or existential, with Judaism” (2). The messianic appears as one flashpoint for considering Derrida’s thoughts on religion, especially his iconic formulation of “messianism without religion” (1994, 211).

Derrida articulates this idea in *Spectres of Marx*, which situates his reflections on Marxism within the context of globalization and rapidly changing world politics.²² Derrida’s famous claim of imagining messianism without religion provokes an ambivalence in how to think about religion in secular contexts, as he borrows from Judeo-Christian vocabularies and traditions to sound out the apparitions haunting the present moment. He asks pointedly, “Can one conceive an atheological heritage of the messianic?” (1994, 211). In posing the possibility of an atheological heritage, Derrida does not necessarily pitch the messianic within the camp of secularism as opposed to religion. Sami Khatib suggests that “[i]n *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida extracted the notion of the messianic from its religious shell and Abrahamic legacy...he calls for a ‘messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism’” (2). Khatib further argues that “Derrida provides us with a heuristic model to relocate the site of the messianic beyond the thought pattern of theological original and secularized double” (2). Khatib sees Derrida as constructing a third space that does not oppose religious and secular notions

²² Derrida mentions a “return of the religious, whether fundamentalist or not, and which overdetermines all questions of nation, State, international law, human rights, Bill of Rights” (1994, 210). He earlier points out, however, that “[t]he religious is...not just one ideological phenomenon or phantomatic production among others” (209). He is speaking of religion’s relationship to Marxism and how religion is an important but ultimately irreducible analogy for discussing Marxism in terms of “the social relation between men” (208).

of the messianic. Manav Ratti identifies this third space as the desert: Derrida wants a desert which functions as “an abstract location where he can reflect on the religious without the historical phenomena of religion” (18), a “faith without dogma which makes its way through the risks of absolute night” (Derrida qtd in Ratti 18). Ultimately, Ratti observes that Derrida desires a “faith [and a messianicity] that is open-ended and deconstructive...resist[ing] any predictable goal or end” (18-19). Ratti aligns Derrida’s desires for a different space for the messianic with postsecularism.

Derrida himself notes that there is a multiplicity embedded in the heritage of the messianic. He observes, “[a] heritage is never natural, one may inherit more than one, in different places and at different times” (210). This caveat prefaces his focus on the messianic as an “absolute hospitality, the ‘yes’ to the *arrivant(e)*, the coming of the future that cannot be anticipated” (211).²³ Derrida thus orients the messianic to the future, in contrast to Benjamin, emphasizing its urgency: “The messianic, including its revolutionary forms (and the messianic is always revolutionary, it has to be), would be urgency, imminence but, irreducible paradox, a waiting without horizon of expectation” (211). The messianic is therefore plural *and* revolutionary, awaited *and* unanticipated. Paradox structures the very conceptualization and experience of the messianic, and Derrida refuses to smooth it out.

This paradox is important to bear in mind; nonetheless, there is a kind of anchor to it – the twin responsibilities of hospitality and justice. Thinking about Derrida’s

²³ Derrida also writes of the *à venir* or *l’avenir* – the ‘to come’ of the future that also comes from the past and has responsibilities to the past.

emphasis on the “to come” of the messianic, John Caputo locates it as an important development of Benjamin’s weak messianism, noting how both are tied to redemptive perceptions of justice. He writes,

the weak force of Benjamin’s back-ward directed messianism needs to be joined with the weak force of Derrida’s ‘come,’ which is a call for justice to come...For in Derrida’s conception of the messianic, in which mourning is held in tension with hope, and remembrance with expectation...the messianic is concerned not only with redeeming the dead, the *revenants*, but with redeeming the future, the children, the *arrivants*, the ones to come, which is the more usual meaning of hope. For Derrida, it is not a question of choosing between the two. (2006, 96)

Caputo here focuses on the apparitions which arise not only from the past but which appear on the horizon of a murky future. He therefore sees Derrida’s orientation to the future as a re-working of temporality as *telos* – an orientation similar to Benjamin’s refusal of the empty, linear time of the Enlightenment – and as a more hopeful position than that of Benjamin. Exploring Derrida’s notion of messianic time, Caputo elsewhere underlines the importance of conceiving the Messiah in terms of openness rather than a single, totalizing vision that completes history. He writes,

[t]he messianic idea turns on a certain structural openness, undecidability, unaccomplishment, non-occurrence, noneventuality, which sees to it that, in contrast to the way things transpire in ordinary time, things are never

finished, that the last word is never spoken. Were the Messiah ever to show up, that indiscretion would ruin the whole idea of the messianic. (1997, 78)

In the last thesis of “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin similarly insists on a lack of certainty regarding the messianic when he writes that the Messiah might enter any second (1968, 264). Perhaps Benjamin and Derrida had Kafka’s parable on the coming of the Messiah in mind, as Kafka invokes a Messiah who “will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last.” This open-ended notion of the Messiah’s coming decentres the significance of the Messiah as a figure and focuses attention on the current conditions which will mean the Messiah is no longer needed. It concentrates on the individual and collective work that must be done to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, effectually resituating the plane of the messianic to contemporary circumstances. Additionally, positioning the messianic as open-ended helps locate it within the uneasy maelstrom that marks modernity and its oft-cited secular disenchantment. If the messianic is predicated on openness, it means that religious and secular projects will never be completed or fulfilled; they involve perpetual negotiation instead of one triumphing over the other.²⁴

Though Caputo mentions the non-occurrence of the Messiah, the messianic therefore still holds a sense of present and future possibility. The future may not be a

²⁴ This idea of continual openness and negotiation recurs frequently in Derrida’s work, especially on hospitality and forgiveness. Unconditional hospitality and forgiveness are impossibilities, but they must be attempted nonetheless. See Derrida’s *Of Hospitality* (2000) and *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001).

given and the Messiah's coming will offer little help, but Derrida's messianic joins redemptive justice to temporality. It begs the question: how does one *do* messianic justice while waiting without "horizon of expectation" (Derrida 1994, 211)? I suggest that the openness of the messianic imparts a quality of wonder, or at least opportunity, to ordinary time.²⁵ Caputo frames Derrida's messianic as noneventuality, unaccomplishment, or even non-occurrence, but perhaps this kind of negation can be re-framed in more positive terms as that which defies determinate attempts to control and master history, time, politics, and experience. Messianic happenings may not be an Event in Caputo's sense of the term – a momentous breaking or disruption of ordered time – but they can be thought of as *weak* elements or encounters that emerge in everyday life.

Derrida writes of the Messiah's arrival in terms of deferral – waiting, anticipation, coming. His emphasis is not so much on the *arrival* of the Messiah and whatever change that figure will bring, but on both the aspect of waiting and the process of attaining the point when the Messiah is no longer needed. The waiting exposes the anxieties of the people who are doing the waiting; it also focuses on the problems of the present, even as it hopes for the future. This act of waiting disperses the messianic to all those who wait, temporally but also practically – what does one *do* while waiting? They are to urgently work for justice in their surrounding relationships.

²⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles might call this the "radical ordinary" in which "the inexhaustible complexities of everyday life forever call forth new efforts of attention, nurture, and struggle that exceed the elements of blindness that accompany even our best words and deeds" (4). Ordinary time becomes an opportunity to "nourish[] these textures of relational care" and cultivate receptivity to others in need (4).

Justice for Derrida possesses an extra-legal dimension, emerging in situations of hospitality, the welcoming of the stranger, the embrace of the neighbour, and even in forgiving the unforgivable (see, for example, his essays in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* 2001). These themes remain consistent throughout Derrida's writing, demonstrating his indebtedness to philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's work on ethics. How does one exercise responsibility and accountability in the face of an unknowable and heterogeneous other? These concerns are echoed in another Jewish philosopher who greatly influenced Derrida – Franz Rosenzweig. As Eric Santner remarks, "For Rosenzweig, the messianic dimension of thought and action turns on our understanding of the concept of the *neighbor*, of what it means to engage in acts of neighbor love, and ultimately what it means (and doesn't mean) to work to make room in the world for such love" (xii). The messianic, non-occurrence though it is, encapsulates an ethical dimension that refuses to place all expectations on an event – the Messiah's coming – that may never actually come. For Levinas and Rosenzweig, paramount attention should be placed upon one's relation to others, who can be called one's neighbours. In waiting without horizon of expectation, Derrida's messianic refocuses responsibility on the present and on the individual and the everyday (rather than the extraordinary, supernatural, and apocalyptic), though it is a present that is oriented to the future. Ultimately, for both Derrida and Benjamin the present is not simply a temporal bridge but an open invitation – even obligation – to weak messianism.

Caputo further discusses this weak messianism by situating it as something which is not conducive to domination or coercive forms of strength. Referencing Maurice

Blanchot (another important influence on Derrida's messianism), Caputo suggests, "The arrival of what is to come (the coming of the Messiah) is nothing we can control or master, nothing over which the self has any authority or powers of disposition, nothing the self can actively bring about..." (81). Waiting for a figure that may never come, or at least come in time, forecloses the attempts of those who would bring about change by force or violence. The messianic, dispersed in an anticipatory present, cannot be enacted through hierarchical forms of pressure or power or totalitarian forms of sovereignty. Blanchot possesses a similar perception of the messianic which clearly establishes the Messiah not as an event but as an ordinary person responding to injustice:

The Messiah could never be a God-man, or anything divine, nor some gigantic Hegelian event which would signify 'the end of history, the suppression of time.' The Messiah might simply be a just man, one who tends to God's poor. Perhaps not even that, perhaps not even some determinable, identifiable person...The Messiah might simply be each one of us just insofar as we wait for the coming. (Caputo 80-81)

Blanchot's humble understanding of the Messiah hints at how the messianic can be thought of as a relation amongst people, one based on care and ordinary notions of justice. He expresses the urgency of this idea, stressing that "justice won't wait; it is to be done at every instant, to be realized all the time...Every just act (are there any?) makes of its day the last day or – as Kafka said – the very last: a day no longer situated in the ordinary succession of days but one that makes of the most commonplace ordinary, the extraordinary" (qtd. in Caputo 81). Blanchot seeks to cultivate awareness of how justice

can imbue everyday actions; his concept of justice extends far beyond the courts, reconfiguring its legal register into a more capacious understanding that informs everyday relationships. As Caputo argues, Blanchot's formulation of the messianic helps us to understand Derrida's insistence on redemptive justice that can appear as a possibility that can open at any moment.

This conception of Derrida's messianic aligns with Benjamin's insistence that each generation is endowed with this weak messianic power:

The past carried with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. (1968, 254)

A common thread running through the work of Benjamin and Derrida therefore lies in the need for responsibility, ethical accountability, be it to the past, present, or the "to come" possibilities of the future. Both thinkers seek alternatives to the dominant organization of life under capitalism, biopolitics, and the constant surge of new forms of totalitarianism. For them, religious concepts and vocabularies provide critical resources to ascertain problems of the present and visualize and energize alternatives, even if critics debate the extent to which each particular thinker can be characterized as "religious" or "areligious." I don't think it would be amiss to describe their notions of the messianic as

postsecular in this regard, and they provide important models of thinking about the messianic in postsecular literature.

Benjamin's and Derrida's work on the messianic takes on a certain note of urgency given what Catherine Keller calls "messianic imperialism" – the apocalyptic imaginary that she argues has influenced Western political discourse for decades but has intensified since 9/11. Such messianic imperialism cuts across secular and religious lines, private and public divisions, in a chilling "fusion of messianism with power" (2005, ix). Keller highlights the rhetorical sleight of hand that transmutes contemporary issues such as the plight of refugees or asylum seekers or constraints on the free-market economy into the evil of the day which will ultimately face "final confrontation with (our) messianic Good – which is always Coming Soon" (viii). Keller calls for an examination of this "warrior-messianism" (x) in order to expose the religious and political assumptions at work in such conceptions and uses of the Messiah. She also advocates the need to find alternatives, suggesting that unmasking and re-imagining collective understandings of the Messiah and messianism is one place to start. She thus adds an important theopolitical, as well as feminist, dimension to re-thinking the messianic and articulating it as an affirmative postsecular possibility.

Building upon the groundwork of the messianic in Benjamin and Derrida, I want to briefly examine how the warrior Messiah is further being re-thought in terms of interdependence, openness, and collective solidarity. The Messiah figure Keller sees as rampant in American politics stems from a hierarchical notion of power that is said to typify divine relationships with human beings and the created order. Power is

represented as in terms of strength and force, which leaves little room for alternative, more relational understandings of God or faith or power: “[f]rom the vantage point of a self-deifying masculinity, God is either omnipotent, or impotent” (Keller 2004, 891). Impotence connotes an almost emasculating lack of power, insofar as power is defined as control and dominance over something or someone rather than something that is instead embodied and exercised in relation to others. The apocalyptic Messiah – who possesses connections to the rise of populist heroes – employs this power to overcome evil in the world and instantiate peace and a new creation.²⁶ It’s a militaristic understanding of both divinity and the messianic, one with stark implications for a religious and political imaginary built on these assumptions. Keller argues that the warrior Messiah crosses religious and secular lines – especially, but not solely, in the United States – and forms part of the apocalyptic unconscious “that dance[s] at the edge of our collective rationality, stirred up by any feeling of catastrophe” (2005, viii). It emerges in rhetoric which demonizes certain groups of people and dictates polarized, fear-motivated responses to terrorism. It gets deployed in political and foreign policy as military intervention in regions around the world or as the closing of borders to refugees under the deceptive guise of security. Keller sees these examples as part of a larger project that yokes the Messiah to a political messianism driven by imperialism – the crisis of the day becomes an opportunity for shoring up geopolitical, economic, and totalitarian interests.

²⁶ This understanding of the apocalyptic Messiah is not the only way the Messiah figure can be read; however, Keller’s interpretation offers an important account of how the apocalyptic Messiah has been mobilized politically.

Re-thinking the power hierarchy embedded in the messianic means giving up the idea of power as an essence that can be possessed and reconsidering how the messianic can be enacted if not unilaterally or coercively. In *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, Martin Kavka critiques masculinist assumptions that see interdependence – and weak messianism – as constituting a threat to being (16). In focusing his discussion of the Messiah in Jewish thought, he points to how masculine ideas pervade the very expectations of the messianic, suggesting that meontology, or non-being, challenges these ideas:

Meontology does not await the transformation of a world encoded by lack into one encoded by plenitude, or from ‘woman’ into ‘man.’ It does not await the conquering army of being, courageously riding in to conquer the threats of everyday existence and the risk of friendship and love. It does not await a presence that will bring us to a truer life than this one, which would in comparison be marked by death. (16-17)

Kavka exposes a number of assumptions about the messianic and provides an important alternative through Jewish thought on meontology. In the masculinist imaginary Kavka evaluates, the Messiah will ‘fix’ the world, filling in its lack with an abundance of divine being. It is of no small significance that lack in this world is gendered as feminine and linked with death and must be transformed through masculine – military – agency. It’s an old binary, and it bolsters the warrior messianism that appears in contemporary political discourse, to the detriment of sustainable, peaceful alternatives. Kavka employs

meontology to disrupt the problematic suppositions embedded in many renderings of the Messiah, focusing instead on friendship and love in everyday existence.

Friendship, love, redemption, and justice thus form a core part of how Derrida, Benjamin, Kafka, Blanchot, Keller, and Caputo contribute to an alternate way of thinking the messianic that refuses notions of coercive forms of power, domination, and strength. They offer a genealogy of a messianic idea that spans a century of critical thought: in other words, weak messianism offers a durable idea, one for which many thinkers have reached in periods of social crisis. Furthermore, it is not simply a private, existential resource, but a *public* one, pertaining to the polity as much as to the individual soul. The weak messianic disperses ethical responsibility amongst interdependent relations, wherein justice becomes a collective project. It flashes up in glimpses of the domestic or in encounters with strangers or relationships with friends. These situations constitute the bulk of our everyday existence, and therefore deserve significant attention for how they can embody their own kinds of hope within dehumanizing systems such as totalitarianism or neoliberal capitalism. The weak messianic encapsulates the postsecular hope that collective flourishing is both desirable *and* possible in the spiritual and political plurality of the contemporary moment.

The Messianic for Postsecular Literary Studies

What kinds of possibilities does weak messianism open for postsecular literary studies? How can it be interpreted as a critical literary methodology, a way to approach

literary texts, if it focuses primarily on new forms of collective responsibility, open-ended temporality, and justice? I suggest that there are two potential dimensions, one of which challenges the stance of the critic, or reader, as a knowing subject, and one which examines some of the impulses undergirding literary critique. Together, both dimensions affirm a generative process of engagement that makes space for thinking about generosity and responsibility as legitimate postsecular literary approaches. By decentering the messianic figure, the messianic can instead be explored for how it becomes dispersed through interdependent relations with texts, authors, and ideas. I suggest that the messianic is thus both a mode of postsecular reading *and* relating, and this praxis informs my own critical engagements with the literary texts I study throughout the following chapters.

Like images of the Messiah, the notion of critical reading has lately received scrutiny for its assumptions about power and control. Rita Felski asks, what if the practice of critical reading has become inflected with a kind of stinginess of intent? It's a question that she has pondered in her recent writing, including *The Use of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique*. In these two studies, Felski decries what she perceives to be an overwhelming reliance on a hermeneutics of suspicion in literary criticism. Felski is not the only one questioning this kind of critical stance – Shameem Black and Saikat Majumdar highlight how it implies a Eurocentric conception of the literary critic as well as how it became institutionalized in colonial structures of education (Majumdar 2017, 12-13). Felski wonders what would change if readers focused less on hidden meanings and more on the pleasures of the text. Her questions pinpoint an ideological struggle between those

readers who claim literature wholly in terms of aesthetics and those who argue that it makes either a direct or indirect political statement. Both camps interrogate the text from a position of mistrust, questioning its language and its place in a given cultural and political milieu. While most readers likely tend to fall somewhere on a continuum between these positions, Felski nonetheless argues that there is a need to approach texts and the task of critique with an expanded idea of criticism and how it need have not its basis in an overwhelmingly negative hermeneutics of suspicion. Such a hermeneutics has deep ties to a spirit of disenchantment, she suggests, and limits more affirmative – or less oppositional – practices. She writes about our relationship to a text, “reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” and “thinking of reading as a coproduction between actors rather than an unraveling of manifest meaning, a form of making rather than unmaking” (2008, 12).

Felski’s concern about re-thinking the impetus of critique demonstrates not so much an anti-theoretical trend as a search for a reading practice that emphasizes the joys and strengths of relationships with others – including aesthetic appreciation. She recognizes the usefulness of hermeneutics rooted in a form of interrogation that does not “bloc[k] receptivity and inhibi[t] generosity” (188). Instead, it notes how texts affectively engage readers, possibly even calling them into affective transformation (17). And affect is something a writer such as Marilynne Robinson (discussed in Chapter 3) is deeply concerned with, particularly how people feel the effects of vulnerability, poverty, and uncertainty. While Robinson draws attention to these effects in her interviews and non-fiction, she illustrates them in her fiction and in her characters’ experiences with

impoverishment and communal exclusion. If, as feminist scholars Lauren Berlant and Rosi Braidotti point out, advanced capitalism produces disorganized, schizophrenic affects, then Robinson equally believes in the power of fiction as an aesthetic argument to evoke and encourage “affective realignment” (Felski 17).

Instead of the critic as chief knower and arbiter of knowledge, John Michael suggests a different tack for critique, which need not adjudicate “meaning or to service truth (at least not always) but to exemplify how problems of understanding and otherness...might be and already are being lived” (271). Michael displaces the role of the critic from that of a Messiah, an emancipator of meaning and truth, instead asking how critics can dwell with textual multiplicity and otherness. His sense of the critic’s role involves an attitude of receptivity and necessitates the reader and text’s co-production of meaning. Reading becomes a relationship, a moment of connection and intimacy with the text as well as an act of making meaning alongside the author. This kind of reading is more in line with Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the hermeneutics of faith (1969), where trusting the text – instead of wholly dismantling it, as with a hermeneutics of suspicion – can help the reader form a different relationship with the text. It’s a hermeneutical position that implies openness to the text, its otherness, and its call of address; together, reader, author, and text dialogue with each other and collaborate in the meaning making process.

Ricoeur further describes the hermeneutics of faith as a “rational faith” or a second, naïve faith that seeks to recollect and restore meaning through both interpretation and belief (28). Drawing on the phenomenology of religion and the phenomenology of the sacred, he coins both phrases – hermeneutics of suspicion and

hermeneutics of faith – while intending for them to work together as constructive critical orientations. He notes the apparent conflict between them: “To let ourselves be torn by the contradiction between these divergent hermeneutics is to give ourselves up to the wonder that puts reflection in motion: it is no doubt necessary for us to be separated from ourselves, to be set off center” (55). Instead of focusing on conflict and contradiction, he urges readers to abide in the disorientation, suggesting that this act of dwelling can lead to wonder and more profound reflection.

All of these critical responses – be they affective or hermeneutical – are orientations of generosity that can inflect a range of reading activities, expanding outwards into other practices. William Connolly frames a kind of hermeneutics of trust in political terms, emphasizing a “presumptive generosity” that does not “seek any sameness of worldviews” but “supports the repetitions of our difference in a spirit free of antagonism, though not without agonism” (Keller 2015, 111). For Connolly, this move entails a coalition between theists and non-theists, while for Felski and Michael it indicates the desire for different modes of making critical arguments about literary texts. Undergirding their contentions lie their hopes for constructive political and literary relationships that make positive futures rather than solely tear down.

These orientations of generosity and openness bespeak a potential for postsecular literary study to contribute to discussions about contemporary practices of critique and the role of the critic. I recall John McClure’s discussion of how postsecular literature seeks to inhabit a place of “open dwelling” (193). He is motivated by the “great [religious] traditions (and the local ones as well) [that] have also sponsored practices of open

dwelling that have not closed the door onto otherness, shut the windows on the larger world, or cut off all questioning and innovation within the house of belief” (193). Following scholars such as Charles Taylor, McClure highlights a constructive, non-antagonistic relationship between religion and secularism in contemporary literature. Literature can provide a place of communal inhabitation that invites readings focusing on how a plurality of spiritual identities can flourish and co-exist. In this respect, I see postsecular literature as a kind of weak endeavour like Benjamin’s and Derrida’s weak messianism – an open possibility to dwell differently with each other spiritually and communally. As McClure reminds readers at the end of *Partial Faiths*, postsecular novelists operate under a concept of dwelling capacious enough to welcome “postsecular innovators and adventurers” as well as those “who work within familiar forms of traditional religiosity or refuse to abandon completely the traditional faiths they cannot fully affirm” (196).

Though I argue for the importance of reading postsecular literature and critique in terms of generosity and openness, I heed the warning of Aaron Mauro “to temper the exemplary status often given to literature. It is necessary to remain vigilant to the prophetic aura often afforded to authors...who are assumed to be able to divine the future out of the torn and burned entrails of that assemblage of texts we call culture, as modern mystics or mediums” (67). Mauro writes about the history of American prophecy and literature, but his concern about the potential for literature to contribute to real social concerns is widely shared. Shameem Black, however, articulates a conviction that literature can cross borders and help readers re-think their attitudes to otherness and

multiplicity. She holds to the notion that literature can be transformative because it involves encounters with difference, not because it prophesies inevitable futures. In her own study of recent fiction, she argues that “while some of these novels do not always perform the emancipatory imaginative practices valorized in their pages, they nonetheless help their readers understand new ways to challenge hegemonic or identitarian positions” (4). Even given the inevitable flaws of individual works, literature provides an encounter with otherness that provokes important affective and ethical responses.

Derrida himself stakes critical importance on the relationship between literature and democracy, expanding the frame of literature’s domain from the personal to the political. He contends that “[t]he possibility of literature, the legitimation that a society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together – politically – with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyse every presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility” (qtd. in Mauro 67). He highlights literature’s potential to question ossified structures and assumptions – even ethical ones. Aaron Mauro remarks that Derrida’s conception of literature means that “[l]iterature operates in this context as a critical space that allows its participants to ready themselves to receive that which is unknown” (67). Literature heralds a messianic possibility of the “to come” (67) that is challenged only by “an inherent poverty of foresight and an ecstatic excess of possibility” (67). In other words, perhaps literature enacts a desert space which can hold the religious and secular together as an irresolvable paradox that is nonetheless not “simply a reactive oscillation between

‘reason’ and ‘mysticism’” (Ratti 19). This space further can be thought of in terms of the openness with which Derrida describes the messianic.

I suggest throughout this dissertation that contemporary literature provides a space to articulate messianic alternatives for both reading and relating. Part of identifying that alternative involves recognition of what Benjamin outlines as our obligation to the present – and presence in the now – rather than a deferred future. Postsecular literature grapples with these obligations amid debates about religion and secularism and spiritual diversity. I argue that writers such as Marilynne Robinson, J.M. Coetzee, Gene Luen Yang, Marjorie Liu, Sana Takeda, Colum McCann, and Mohsin Hamid reject “strong” answers in the form of a warrior Messiah, preferring instead forms of responsibility, embodiment, and action that are rooted in affirmative relationships with others. Like Keller, Benjamin, Caputo, and Derrida, these authors re-interpret the messianic in terms of the more nebulous, ambiguous terrain of people’s swiftly-changing daily lives. Even though they point out the limits of the messianic – especially in postcolonial situations as highlighted by Gene Luen Yang, Marjorie Liu, Sana Takeda, and Mohsin Hamid – they challenge images of the warrior Messiah rooted in historical determinism and hierarchical systems of power.

I contemplate how authors – all working amid the economic, political, and social challenges of the early twenty-first century – reflect on what it means to embrace responsibility in a rapidly shifting global context, and what a reading open to uncertainty means for religious faith and practice. Moreover, what does it mean to practice the messianic within our daily lives when we are beholden to others both locally and

transnationally? Derrida's evocation of redemptive justice here becomes the implicit foundation for how I engage with, for example, J.M. Coetzee's search for redemptive embodiment and Colum McCann's meditations on global intimacies. These writers reject simplistic oppositions of good vs. evil, religion vs. secularism, in favour of acknowledging the complexity and diversity of people's lived experiences. Re-thinking ideas of the messianic on postsecular literary terms can situate it as a collective project of ethics and responsibility, a vision for how justice is done in the smallest of circumstances within characters' daily lives. One of Benjamin's most well-known quotes – the one that references Gershom Scholem – says of the Messiah, “he did not wish to change the world by force, but would only make a slight adjustment in it” (1968, 134). His remarks hold true for many of the authors I study.

CHAPTER THREE

Open-handed:

Marilynne Robinson's Postsecular Generosity

In 2015, then-President Barack Obama sat down with American Pulitzer-winning author Marilynne Robinson for a conversation. It was a remarkable occasion – a sitting President taking time to interview a writer about her work, her beliefs, and her concerns. The resulting dialogue was published in two parts in the *New York Review of Books*, and it offered a snapshot of how two very different, but nonetheless influential, people perceive the role of politics, faith, and literature amid contemporary questions about democracy. The connections were not hard for either of them to make, as both Obama and Robinson expressed the conviction that literature and writing offer an intimate window to understanding a social polity. As Robinson has emphasized in many of her other interviews as well as her own writing, her fundamental belief that “people are images of God” has an undeniable political dimension. She understands politics and democracy as “the logical, the inevitable consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level...It’s not any loyalty or tradition or anything else; it’s being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it” (Obama). For Robinson, religion and politics ideally merge in a mutual affirmation of the humanity and dignity of others at all levels of human society. Both enable a generosity of spirit that works equally within

public institutions as within the family home; furthermore, they become practices that seek the flourishing of all citizens in a diverse spiritual-political community.

With these ideas coursing through her writing, Robinson's fiction and non-fiction have gained significant attention in public as well as theological circles, both in the United States and globally. Critical scholarship on her work, including Siân Mile and Paula Geyh's earlier studies, has noted her portrayal of grace and Christianity as well as female relationships. I build on this foundation to examine Robinson's persistent attention to how people – notably women – live in the midst of crises such as economic struggles and threats of violence. I suggest that her ideas of the domestic offer an important consideration of women's agency and translate into a broader political ethos, one which melds an insistence on the value of all persons with an understanding of how the practices of everyday life can be sacramental. Concomitantly, her sensitivity in her novels to people experiencing financial and spiritual despair and her enduring concern for how to forge affirmative relationships in difficult times are linked in her non-fiction to a political appeal for generosity against austerity and neoliberal ideology. In this chapter, I argue that Robinson articulates an ethics of generosity in her non-fiction (including *When I was a Child I Read Books* and *The Givenness of Things*) that she explores in her novels *Gilead* and *Lila*. While this ethical urge is very much rooted in her Christian faith – Robinson identifies as a Calvinist, not as a postsecularist – I suggest that the vision she presents reconceptualizes the borders between religious and secular instantiations of politics and finds common ground with contemporary postsecularism. Her religious practice of

attention and responsiveness to others – especially strangers – provides an instructive model for a postsecular ethics of generosity.

Open-handed Value in *Gilead*

In Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2004 novel *Gilead*, the elderly Congregationalist minister John Ames writes a long, contemplative letter to the young son he will never see grow up. He has lived in Gilead, Iowa, for much of his life, and here suffered the death of his first wife and daughter in childbirth. He marries a young woman named Lila late in life, and they have a son together, though he expects to die of old age long before his son reaches adulthood. *Gilead* combines Ames' memories, including those of his father and grandfather disputing the theologies and tactics of the abolition of slavery, with theological reflections on his experiences, such as reconciling his struggle with jealousy with his fundamental belief in the beauty and sacredness of all human beings. Published ten years after *Gilead*, *Lila* takes up the story of Lila, providing details about her life and hardships of which Ames has little knowledge. In contrast to Ames' strong sense of place and home in the small town of Gilead, Lila has faced perpetual nomadism. A woman named Doll takes Lila away from a violent home situation when she is a child, becoming Lila's mother-figure, and the two of them wander together for years before separating in a moment of conflict. They survive hunger, threats of violence, and constant precarity, but Lila is aware of how her struggle for subsistence has compromised her attitude towards life and other people. Her marriage to John Ames prompts a time

of spiritual searching, as she wrestles with how to give her life meaning and understand her own value.

Always a man of contemplation, Ames' letter to his son furnishes an opportunity for him to consider how his faith has changed over the years as well as how his faith has taken shape within a particular community. One of Ames' most striking memories centres on the debates between his father and grandfather about political tactics to fight injustice. Ames' grandfather had fought in various struggles to abolish slavery, including the American Civil War, while his father became a pacifist in opposition to slavery. Though Ames notes that "my father had never really told me the substance of his quarrel with his father" (2004, 80), he remembers their many arguments and the visceral emotion with which each man defended their positions. Ames' father, opposed to war, saw the "graves in the churchyard" after the Civil War while "there was his father, preaching every Sunday on the divine righteousness manifested in it all. That would set the old women to weeping" (87). The argument between Ames' father and grandfather is about the just use of war to fight inequality and how religious rhetoric can be employed in the service of combat. Their heated discussion highlights profound questions about religious justifications for the necessity of war and the fight against injustice. However, the argument between the two of them means that a political matter comes to occupy the centre of the home: the kitchen table signals how politics has become engrained in the rituals of their family life.

Robinson often uses this mode of domestic discourse to highlight the influence of political events on her characters' lives without going into extended discussion of those

events. We therefore get the partial and emotionally charged memories of Ames rather than historical information about abolitionism or the Civil War. As Christopher Douglas observes, “the moral question of slavery attains national significance as examined through the prism of family memory” (85). While this circuitous form of address structures Robinson’s fiction, she takes a different tack in her non-fiction, in which she more directly references current events with the goal of outlining how they either diminish or affirm life’s sacredness. In her interviews and her essays in *When I was a Child* and *The Givenness of Things*, she makes an explicit connection between a generosity that occurs in domestic spaces and a generosity that she hopes will inform public spaces. A non-negotiable respect for the value of every person forms the core element that flows through and connects these spaces, as Barack Obama notes in their 2015 interview.

Gilead and *Lila* explore Ames’ and Lila’s economic, domestic, and spiritual crises in mid-century, mid-West America. However, their situations contain a grain of familiarity: social, economic, and racial inequality continue to be evidenced in fears about strangers, worries about social violence and intolerance, and a sense of anger and powerlessness about the unfairness of wealth disparity.²⁷ These concerns all connect the events of *Gilead* and *Lila* to contemporary life, and the novels pose trenchant questions about how generosity can be practiced amid profound inequality and violence and what help faith can offer in such circumstances. These questions prompt the broader

²⁷ See, for example, Michael Savage’s report that the “world’s richest 1% are on course to control as much as two-thirds of the world’s wealth by 2030.”

consideration of how faith can positively contribute to public life when it has so often been allied with the neoliberal systems that produce such inequality in the first place.

Nearing the end of his life, John Ames' sense of the intrinsic value of every living being has intensified: "now that I am about to leave this world, I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face" (2004, 66). He vocalizes what Robinson elsewhere notes as the "profound and unique sacredness of human beings as such" (2015, 222). Her understanding of this sacredness stems from "the Christian mythos," but even that mythos partakes of what she calls a "general truth" (222) – that human existence is beautiful and sacred and intrinsically of value. Robinson's insistence on the sacredness of life possesses several important corollaries, including the need to reject fear-based politics and austerity ideologies and instead reclaim the meaning of the word "value" from capitalism in order to respect the dignity and unequivocal worth of each human being. For Jeffrey Gonzalez, Robinson's emphasis on the sacredness of human life means that it cannot be interpreted in terms of a capitalist system of value – the value of the person cannot be translated into monetary value or even labour value (383). Consequently, Robinson's vision stands in contrast to contemporary fiscal conservatism and free-market ideologies which value the human being solely in terms of productivity: those who produce more according to current market demands are valued more highly, leaving those left behind to face precarity, public shame, and declining public resources. As Henry Giroux comments, "Within neoliberal ideology, an emphasis on competition in every sphere of life promotes a winner-take-all ethos that finds its ultimate expression in the assertion that fairness has no place in a society dominated by winners and losers"

(2016). Labourers are replaceable – even disposable – while being deprived of social safety nets in the name of fiscal restraint.

Austerity politics therefore represent a diminishment of the economic conditions necessary for the thriving of human life by prioritizing competitiveness over human need. Such austerity reinforces social and economic precarity for many and ends up being, in Robinson's words, "an economically coerced subordination to the treadmill of 'competitiveness,' mitigated by the knowledge that at least no poor child expects a free lunch. This is repulsive on its face, destructive of every conception of value" (2015, 187). For Robinson, neoliberal capitalism has hijacked all understandings of 'value', and part of Robinson's project has been to outline alternate definitions of the term to challenge the exploitation embedded in capitalism. She approaches the issue in two ways: 1) demonstrating the effects of poverty and precarity on her characters' lives and relationships, and 2) insisting on the inalienable value of the human person that is irreducible to economic or labour conceptions of value.

These issues emerge in *Lila* via a warning of the devastating effects of economic collapse: the dust and the food scarcity that accompanies the Great Depression of the 1930s threatens to destroy personal relations, as Lila finds out as a child when there is not enough food to go around their small band of travellers. She and Doll join the band for protection, but the constant scarcity and struggle they face ends up splitting the band apart. Lila remembers the deep emotions – the anger, the desperation, the frustration – each person felt leading up to the band's eventual fragmentation: "Lila heard about the Crash years after it happened, and she had no idea what it was even after she knew what

to call it. But it did seem like they gave it the right name. It was like one of those storms you might even sleep through, and then when you wake up in the morning everything's ruined, or gone" (15). The effort of daily subsistence with no social support except their travelling companions to help them exerts a profound toll on Doll's and Lila's mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Though neither Lila's birth mother nor adoptive mother in any legal sense, Doll protects Lila as much as she is able, but the two of them nonetheless must scabble for birds' eggs, dig in the fields for leftover crops, and roast roots (14). Despite Doll's care and love for Lila, the constant hardship they face deforms their ability to care and enter new relationships, even as it enables them to survive the Great Depression. Lila, in particular, will later wrestle with issues of trust and emotional generosity in her marriage to Ames. She thinks that "when folks are down to the one thing that keeps them alive, that one thing can be meanness" (56). Lila's physical gauntness, caused by a persistent lack of food, is mirrored by a spirit which feels overwhelmed by all the "sadness and meanness" in her life (2014, 202). Continual austerity has imprinted itself on Lila's body and spirit.

The experience of the Great Depression marked a moment when the capitalist system of free markets failed and the effects reverberated across the globe. Shannon Mariotti and Joseph Lane suggest that Robinson's fictionalizing of the Crash shows a "national economic system that is both in disarray and yet all-powerful, exercising massive control over the lives of those people who seem most distant from its mechanisms and its comforts" (6). Perhaps this element is why Robinson returns repeatedly to this time period: the Crash and the ensuing Great Depression demonstrate

the extent to which people's financial, social, and cultural lives are affected by an economic system which has drastically expanded its influence beyond the purely economic realm. Furthermore, the beliefs and mechanisms that produced the stock market crash continue to this day: Henry Giroux argues that neoliberal economic policies, including austerity and attacks on social safety nets such as welfare programs, have persisted throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first (2008, 2). In the United States especially, the banking reforms and public welfare programs enacted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal to aid recovery from the Depression have all but been chipped away.²⁸ The American crash of 2008 – a vivid reminder of failing markets and widespread social precarity – was not as bad as the Great Depression, but nonetheless wiped out the savings, retirement plans, and mortgages of millions of people.

In focusing on Lila's experiences of the Crash, Robinson narrativizes the effects of economic collapse on women. Robinson's attention to domestic life – her evocation of people dealing with poverty, violence, and emotional and spiritual insecurity – resonates with feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti's understanding of the "politics of everyday life, where life is not to be taken for granted, but is approached as an ethical, political, and juridical praxis, as something to be worked on." Braidotti insists that everyday life cannot be divorced from discussions of politics – indeed, that attempts to negate the political and ethical importance of the everyday is counter to feminist projects of rethinking the political. For Braidotti, the "real" political is not simply taking place elsewhere with

²⁸ In the New Deal, economic policy became entwined with social policy, as it initiated support of people's everyday lives through labour laws, housing initiatives, and welfare and jobs programs.

violence, aggression, or antagonism, but begins in a politics rooted in the ways we “live, love, and interact with each other.” Like Braidotti, Robinson understands life, particularly life in the United States, to have been disorganized by capitalism and Robinson explores the implications of poverty for people like Lila – disproportionately women and people of colour (IWPR 2019) – who are the losers in a capitalist system that has no place for them.²⁹ The meanness of spirit Lila sees in herself as well as Doll and their travelling companions expresses what Braidotti calls the “affective economies of advanced capitalism” (2013), in which the basic effort to survive strains one’s emotional resources available for interpersonal relationships.

Robinson’s concern for how economic issues influence everyday life has an important religious dimension. Though she relies on orthodox theology to outline a conception of value in opposition to economic or labour use value, she remains aware that some strains of religion in the United States challenge the separation of church and state and become active in order to “meddle in or to stymie public life by asserting a presence in governments national and local” (2015, 93). As Mariotti and Lane observe, Robinson delivers “sharp critiques of the contemporary religious right” (3) in her efforts to excavate other religious histories of the United States that are not fundamentalist. Mariotti and Lane declare that “Robinson’s writings, both her fiction and her non-fiction, put the protest back in Protestantism and...assert that religion calls us to fight for social justice and equality” (3).

²⁹ Though Robinson has been commended for her focus on race in the Midwest, there have been also been criticisms of her treatment of race in her novels. See Briallen Hopper’s argument (2014) that Robinson prioritizes interracial empathy over concrete action for racial justice.

Given her emphasis on religiously-inspired generosity, Robinson has argued that there is significant resemblance between economic models of value and spiritual ones located in American fundamentalist Christianity. For Robinson, competition is embedded in the idea that salvation must be ‘earned’ rather than emerging from the grace of God: it places a price on salvation which must be paid with right action. It also arises in a “self-declared [fundamentalist] Christian movement” that “shows startlingly little sense of responsibility for the vulnerable in society”, instead “subscrib[ing] fervently to the principles of laissez-faire capitalism” and social Darwinism (2006).³⁰ Robinson argues that certain elements of contemporary Christianity have become complicit with capitalism’s logic: as competition has become the mantra of neoliberal capitalism, it has also inflected ideas about salvation and grace. The congruence between Christianity and capitalism has also extended into the kinds of social policies Robinson likens to social Darwinism, wherein social programs such as school lunch programs or social support networks are called free handouts. There is no room for spiritual or material vulnerability in such a system, and she laments how this attitude has shaped the United States as a nation: “The United States,” she remarks, “is always in an existential struggle with an imagined competitor” (2018, 21).

Robinson strongly rejects the primacy of competition wherever it is to be found – Christianity, the economy, or even the nation – while noting that the kinds of precarity it engenders lead to anxiety, fear, and discipline that weaken public life more broadly.

³⁰ See also William Connolly’s *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (2008) for a more detailed exploration of the links between American forms of evangelicalism and capitalism.

During crisis, “generosity seems like a terrible risk for fearful people. The continuing restraints on traditional policies of generosity, like immigration, are a reflex of fear” (Schulson). But, Robinson repeatedly asserts, generosity should be considered a primary personal and political response. She returns repeatedly to the Hebrew model of open-handedness – or what Derrida would call unconditional hospitality – to offer a different vision for economic, spiritual, domestic, and political relations. The biblical injunctions to leave the gleanings in the fields for the vulnerable, to forgive debts in the seventh year, and other instructions about the Sabbath, labour, and treatment of servants ensure that the most vulnerable people in society are cared for materially and spiritually:

‘liberality’...occurs in a context that continuously reinforces an ethic of liberality, that is, the Old Testament. The many economic laws God gives to Israel as a society are full of provisions for the widow and orphan, the poor and the stranger. And the abuses the prophets decry most passionately are accumulations of wealth in contempt of these same laws.

(2006)

These laws translate domestic precarity into economic policy; they permeate all levels of society and pattern a mode of politics that foregrounds institutional responsibility and communal forms of care.

Robinson’s starting point for this ethos clearly lies in the religious tradition in which she is steeped. This tradition provides her with a conception of value that resists the commodification of the human person, and it offers insight into how to enact social programs to support domestic and economic flourishing. The Sabbath, for example, offers

one way to “shelter[] one day in seven from the demands of economics. Its benefits cannot be commercialized. But leisure is seldom more than a bit of time ransomed from habitual stress...due to secularizing trends, which are really economic pressures that have excluded rest as an option, first of all from those most in need of it” (2015, 115). If economic demands have burdened the leisure time of the human person, the Sabbath resists commodification and provides essential respite. Jeffrey Gonzalez remarks, “For Robinson, revisiting old orthodoxies represents a useful means of recovering interred notions of community and responsibility that effectively speak back to the neoliberal logics of dismantling the welfare state” (373). As Robinson herself states in *The Givenness of Things*, “I attach religious value to generous, need I say liberal, social policy” (2015, 94). Her notion of the liberal is very much tied to its definition of generosity and is therefore opposed to how neoliberal capitalism has co-opted both the term and the tradition in favour of individualism, competition, and the primacy of the free market.

In *Gilead*, the church becomes an important location for performing spiritual and social generosity. As a minister, John Ames treasures the physical location of the church as a space in which to collectively take respite from the pressures of life and to participate in rituals such as baptism that honour the sacredness of life. The church provides a space to breathe, re-focus, and prepare oneself for future challenges. However, for him the idea of church is not solely tied to the space of the church itself, as much as he grieves for when his church will be torn down and re-built (2004, 110). Instead, church as a community and vision of collective life becomes enacted in conversation: “A great part of my work has been listening to people, in that particular intense privacy of confession, or

at least unburdening” (44). He views his sermons ambivalently – they might seem “foolish or dull” (40) in his later years – but he never doubts how much he and his church have given in the form of “comforting the afflicted” (40). It’s a social, or even therapeutic, purpose as much as a spiritual one, as when he tries to comfort the parents of young soldiers who died both in the Great War and later from the Spanish influenza (41).³¹

Ames’ understanding of the expanded role of the church in the community illustrates Robinson’s view of the church’s connection to civic society. She highlights the religious revivals of the late eighteenth and “first third of the nineteenth century,” which have been followed by what she calls a “third awakening in the latter half of the twentieth century” (2015, 95). These revivals recall “the old centrality of the churches as centers of civic life” and they were “attended by a characteristic cluster of reform movements – enhancements of the status of women, broadening of access to education, mitigations of social and racial inequality” (95). She notes a problematic interpretation of the revivals, however, in which “Historians usually treat the earlier awakenings as surges of religious enthusiasm primarily or exclusively” (95) and divorce that enthusiasm from an emphasis on social change. In other words, the role of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century revivals in promoting social care has been misunderstood or underestimated.

Both church and revivals appear in *Gilead* and *Lila* as important loci of community. Lila experiences a number of camp meetings and revivals as a child with the band of migrant workers, and she remembers them as events of warmth, light, and music in which

³¹ To be sure, many Christians have similar feelings that the social cannot be seen as distinct from the religious or sacred. In *On Christian Doctrine* (2000), Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, discusses the connections between the social and the religious in the context of the sacraments.

their “lamps in the trees were the most beautiful things she had ever seen” (*Lila* 66). Though she is not allowed to participate in them, the revival meetings appear to her as a vision of salvation, one which conveys beauty and light in contrast to the dust and grime to which she is accustomed on the road. Salvation has a tangible characteristic for her, like the lamps in the trees; it embodies a quality of joyfulness for the soul and offers an image of encircling warmth. Moreover, for Lila, salvation means a person is fully incorporated into a community rather than having to exist on its edges, just as she is kept outside the revivals. Baptism becomes a symbol of that inclusion, in which the person is “[c]lean and acceptable” (67), something she desperately desires because both cleanliness and acceptability are conditions which signify one’s equality to others in that community. “It would be something to know what that felt like, even for an hour or two” (67), she thinks, as she is constantly coated in the dust of the road.

In the town of Gilead, Lila steps over the threshold of a church as a stranger and is welcomed by John Ames. Ames experiences her arrival as the beacon of an unexpected and sudden transformation, which “occur[s] unsought and unawaited [like] the day I first saw your mother [Lila], that blessed, rainy Pentecost” (2004). Her strangeness – she clearly doesn’t fit in with the other churchgoers – jolts him like the fire of the Pentecost about which he is preaching, inviting him to reconsider the trajectory of the end of his life. Ames welcomes her presence, showing her hospitality and ensuring that his church members do the same. The stranger is to be cared for materially and spiritually rather than turned away or treated with fear; as a minister, Ames models this kind of care to the point of falling in love with Lila. However, Lila once again experiences the situation

differently. She has always been a stranger longing for a day when she no longer must live on the threshold of domestic inclusion: “I used to look in people’s windows at night and wonder what it [to be settled] was like” (2004, 200). Her familiarity with the role of the stranger enables her to understand Jack Boughton, another person who struggles with acceptability and the disapprobation of the community. He is the scoundrel son of Ames’ best friend, Boughton, and a thorn in the side of Ames.

Jack’s and Lila’s situations present two different encounters with the figure of the stranger in which the stranger has been judged pre-emptively: Jack has been deemed by the community to be a moral problem, and Lila has never been respectable enough to participate in community in the first place. Ames struggles with his dislike and jealousy of Jack and must learn to open himself to the benevolence of a grace he freely proclaims from the pulpit. Jack and Lila introduce a flicker of doubt in Ames’ certainty: they are strangers who cannot be assimilated to the norms and conventions of the community. At one point, Ames writes, “Jack Boughton is a piece of work...My impulse is strong to warn you against Jack Boughton...how little I can trust my feelings on this subject” (2004, 125). As Richard Kearney observes, drawing on the ethics of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, “[h]ospitality to the irreducible Other does not come naturally. It requires imagination and trust” (22). Kearney emphasizes the role of imagination and trust in welcoming the Other, noting that hospitality must be cultivated over time as a practice of ethical commitment. At seventy-six years old, Ames finally comes to understand the necessity of both imagination and trust as they relate to grace, thinking that “grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways” (2004, 240). It has taken him

decades to develop the hospitable orientation Kearney describes. Ames' realization marks an emotional thawing towards Jack's strangeness and threat, while indicating the often challenging spiritual and ethical labour of opening a church community to those who do not sit easily within its contours.

The church represents only one node – though a significant one – of Robinson's visualization of domestic communities. Jeffery Gonzalez and Aaron Mauro highlight Robinson's resistance to capitalist austerity ideologies and economies that induce indebtedness through re-envisioning an economy of the domestic. As one of the primary signifiers of domesticity, the home has once again emerged as a central focus of discussions about family life and economic security. The figure of the home, however, has become imbued with apprehension in the wake of major national crises: "After this most recent period of deregulation and market manipulation [following the 2008 debt market collapse and home foreclosure crisis], there is a renewed urgency to re-imagine the home as the figurative and economic foundation of family life" (Mauro 149). In the wake of yet another major market crash, the home has become a primary site in which to examine the predations of capitalism on everyday life as well as the possibility of unconditional hospitality in the face of external threats.

Yet the home assumes contradictory meanings: for some, it functions as a space of reprieve from the demands of intensifying work pressures, while for others it has become a burden with its own set of strains (Hochschild 2001, xxi). Even here, however, capitalism has infiltrated these conceptions of home life, upholding the home as a vital site of consumption – be it consumption of care or consumption of a never-ending list of

products, services, and technologies (Hochschild 2003, 2-3). Robinson is concerned about the commodification of everyday life, and her novels resist this capitalist appropriation of the meanings of domesticity and the home. Mauro argues that “[w]hile the home must be understood as the imaginative and spiritual center of Robinson’s novels, these fictional spaces take up a complex aesthetics of forgiveness and refuge that divests them of the symbolic economies of debt and exchange” (150). In other words, the commodification of the home is resisted through spiritual practices of generosity that challenge spiritual and economic debt.

When cleaning out his old sermons, John Ames finds one from 1947, written when he had been thinking about the Marshall Plan. After World War II, the United States offered billions of dollars in grants and loans to Western European countries in order to aid re-building efforts and improve economic recovery.³² Ames thinks about the Plan in terms of forgiveness of debt for the betterment of the people, returning to the “Law of Moses” to describe his view of the Plan: his earlier sermon “makes the point that, in Scripture, the one sufficient reason for the forgiveness of debt is simply the existence of debt” (161). And forgiveness of debt is tied to the giving of a gift – grace, wherein “grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that we can also forgive, restore, and liberate” (161). Ames’ sermon offers a notion of debt and grace that is incompatible with neoliberal capitalism because it prioritizes both the initial gift as well as the secondary gift of forgiveness. Moreover, generosity has a healing effect on the

³² Though Ames views the Marshall Plan in positive terms (such as the forgiveness of debt), the Plan has recently been critiqued for its imperialist overtones and role in the Cold War division of Europe. See Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe (2005).

giver, recalibrating one's relationship to others as well as one's self. The forgiveness of debt emphasizes the human beings at the centre of the relationship.

Robinson remains focused on the sacredness of ordinary life, something Ames frequently writes about: "[w]hen people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them" (2004, 44). The focus on everyday life shows how Robinson views faith as offering conceptual and spiritual resources to reassert the dignity of all human beings amid a dehumanizing capitalist system. Ames appreciates the beauty of life from within the frame of the language and rituals of the faith in which he is immersed, and Lila makes meaning out of her rough life experiences through her encounter with Ames, his version of faith, and with the bible. She arguably has experienced much worse than Ames: in addition to growing up during the Great Depression, she has been homeless for most of her life, is scarcely literate, and has been a sex worker. Not wanting to be a 'charity case' and feeling ashamed of her poverty, Lila (before she marries Ames) often attempts to pay back money or goods given to her by the people in Gilead with an equal amount of work. When, for example, she does some odd jobs for Mrs. Graham and receives a coat in addition to her wages, she resents both the woman's charity and Ames' interference, thinking, "Let him stop making me feel so damn broke all the time" (71). She feels ashamed of her poverty being apparent to other people, because it means she cannot look after herself. Part of her experience being married to John Ames and dealing with her own past is moving beyond her insistence on exchange value and debt and instead accepting that constructive relationships can't be commodified in such a way.

Open-handedness best describes Robinson's emphasis on spiritual and economic generosity. She employs the term in her collection *When I was a Child* (2012) in an essay entitled "Open Thy Hand Wide: Moses and the Origins of American liberalism." The gesture of open-handedness is one of economics – of giving instead of keeping – but also one of connection. It indicates an embodied relationship between the giver and the receiver that foregrounds the humanity of both persons involved. Open-handedness also crosses boundaries among religious, political, economic, and ethical spheres, and therefore resists what the atomization of individuals and social bonds under capitalism: "Isolation, privatization and the cold logic of instrumental rationality have created a new kind of social formation and social order in which it becomes difficult to form communal bonds, deep connections, a sense of intimacy, and long term commitments" (Giroux 2016). Similarly, Sara Ahmed traces how fear "shrinks bodily space and how this shrinkage involves the restriction of bodily mobility in social space" (64). For Ahmed, fear reconfigures both bodily posture and one's embodied relationship to space. By contrast, Robinson identifies generosity as a physical movement that opens the body to the stranger, deliberately invoking bodily expansiveness and spatial mobility. These embodied elements become realized in the many wanderers and nomads that populate her fiction: Lila and Jack Boughton in *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, as well as Sylvie and Ruth in Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*. Many of her characters experience this form of generosity as the giving and receiving of food, money, clothing, and basic necessities, even when such items are hard to come by, as during the Depression and thereafter. For John Ames, sharing and the distribution of material goods is a Christian responsibility and

a communal one, and he expects the people of Gilead to enact it towards the stranger in their midst – Lila, as one example. Even Lila herself gives what little she has, including her money and her coat, to a young man who thinks he may have murdered his own father. In these situations, she relies on human touch and material generosity to embrace the stranger and overcome the fear and threat he embodies, just as she does with Jack Boughton.

Given the number of national and international book prizes and the amount of media attention Robinson's writing has garnered, her consistent critique of the human consequences of advanced capitalism has reached a considerable audience. Though Anthony Domestico suggests that she can be interpreted as "unfashionable" because of her simplicity of style and "old-fashioned virtues like seriousness and simplicity," her convictions about the sacredness of every human being are compelling and trenchant. She speaks in terms which illustrate how politics, economics, and everyday life rub against each other: the domestic domains of the house and everyday life signify negotiated spaces of shared responsibility and accountability. Moreover, they are sites where the stranger and the outsider – those like Lila who are on the edges of society – are affirmed with material actions of hospitality. Robinson's choice of setting signals the necessity of examining economies of care and ultimately of re-valuing the domestic, building on a religious foundation that finds common cause with contemporary visions of postsecularism.

Postsecular Generosity in *Lila*

Gilead focuses on the aging Reverend John Ames, writing letters as a record of his thoughts and feelings for his young son to read after he passes away. As Christopher Douglas observes, “[i]t muses on the mystery of time and aging; it brings us to the proper wonder and joy at existence which continues to ‘astonish’” (90). John Ames has reached a point in life where he views everything and everyone as shining with glimpses of beauty:

When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the ‘I’ whose predicate can be ‘love’ or ‘fear’ or ‘want,’ and whose object can be ‘someone’ or ‘nothing’ and it won’t really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around ‘I’ like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. (2004, 44-45)

Ames’ idea of beauty has nothing to do with how people look; it is not reducible to appearance. Instead, he is thrilled by the sacred mystery of people’s physical presence and by the intensity of emotion that they experience. Beauty emerges in presence and one’s responsiveness to the givenness of other people’s lives. His profession as a minister provides him with theological resources and ritual practices to honour the life around him. Baptism, for example, does not “enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that” (2004, 23). He baptizes kittens as a child – though his father later reproves him for it – because he senses the inviolable significance of the multiplicity of living creatures and relationships that surround him.

Gilead's attention is thus very different from that of *Lila*, where Lila struggles to make meaning of a life in which she has experienced more than her fair share of darkness and impoverishment.³³ How does she conceptualize her own self value when she is an outsider to any type of community and when she possesses little of economic worth? She has no education or job skills and few belongings. According to the societal frameworks of value Robinson sees as dominating life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Lila is nearly useless: she feels she has nothing to offer a community and no capacity for sustaining secure, skilled employment. She implicitly feels condemned, but develops resistance mechanisms to cope, including a dislike of charity, as “being beholden was the one thing she could not stand” (40). Debt, even charity, produces an unequal power dynamic.

The clarity of life's beauty is therefore not as evident – or seemingly as attainable – for Lila as it is for Ames, given that she has more often encountered threats of violence and starvation than peace or comfort. She snatches glimpses of beauty when she can, often on the edges of community events such as revival meetings, where the warm lamps hanging in the trees contrast strikingly with her experiences of the dirt of poverty. Nor does baptism hold the same hope and promise for her that it does for him – it appears as an eternal marker of separation, a heavenly wall dividing the believers and the unbelievers. Near the beginning of the novel, the drifter Doll steals the young child Lila

³³ Though *Lila* is the third novel set in the small town of Gilead featuring Lila and John Ames, amongst others, Robinson doesn't see it or the second novel *Home* as sequels to the Pulitzer-winning 2004 *Gilead*. Rather, they are companions to one another, to be read alongside each other rather than chronologically or sequentially.

and bathes the filthy, cursing girl: “The water in the basin got so dirty they threw it out the door and started over” (7). It becomes a strange baptismal ritual that ushers Lila into the unconventional life of a wanderer, uniting her with Doll and the other wanderers whose band they join. However, she worries that the second, more official Christian baptism administered to her by the Reverend John Ames has irretrievably separated her from Doll and the others. She “understood that Doll was not, as Boughton said, among the elect. Like most people who lived on earth, she did not believe and was not baptized” (97). She goes so far as to unbaptize herself, to go to “the river and wash[] herself in the water of death and loss and whatever else was not regeneration” (103), as she can’t bear the idea of eternal separation from them. At this moment, faith appears to her to be an instrument of separation rather than unity, a tool that hierarchically orders human beings into spiritual categories of value such as the elect and the unbelievers. She removes herself from any institutional legitimization, even if it is embodied by her loving husband as a minister, by going to the place of the river – a wild place far from the doors of a church.

The novel presents Lila’s meditation on her difficult life, her search for rest, and her doubts about the appeal of faith as she marries Ames and prepares to have a child. Through Lila’s experiences, Robinson once again ponders the mystery of grace as an instantiation of spiritual value that affirms the dignity of every human person. In this open-handed vision of grace, Robinson’s understanding of faith can enrich postsecular conversations about the value of life in a capitalist society. As a deeply committed Christian, her thinking and beliefs offer a model for “positive social transformation and

acts of radical hospitality” (Branch and Knight 498). At the same time, Robinson’s overall interest in how ideas of the domestic and of the home contain a grain of wildness means that they are never truly settled or uncomplicated sites of belief or relationships. So, too, postsecular thought considers the unpredictable – yet significant – ties between the religious and the secular.

Robinson develops her understanding of grace in opposition to the kinds of theological and economic rigor she abhors. Aaron Mauro comments that her novels “are equally at home as a humanist ethics, a political commentary, or a divine grace...reclaiming grace as a theologically radical and polysemic term that also holds a profoundly progressive social imperative” (151). Her open-handed conception of grace introduces an aperture through which to read her work on postsecular terms, wherein her insistence on the mystery of life and the necessity of affirming the value of others becomes a mode of honouring life in a multiplicity of ways. Robinson’s characters, to use John McClure’s description, “are transformed and steadied...by the sense that the world is seamed with mystery and benignity, by awakened impulses to reverence, wonder, self-forgetfulness, and care, and by coming into company with others” (6). Even baptism can be interpreted on postsecular terms: in *Lila*, the symbol of baptism displays “an equal weight on its humanistic meaning, as the sacrament that acknowledges human dignity” (Engrebretson 94). As a sacrament, baptism demonstrates how the religious and the secular can productively work together to imagine the human person rather than perpetually being in tension.

In this sense, grace exceeds the beneficence of a single person or structure, such as a messiah or a saviour. Instead, grace becomes dispersed through encounters that affirm individual worth and encourage the soul to flourish and thrive. Grace is ultimately a mystery, glimpsed in fragmentary moments in the midst of the vulnerability of relationship and the anxiousness of uncertainty. This connotation of grace embraces a character of weakness and humility that Robinson finds lacking in both public strains of Christianity in the United States and secularism. Matthew Scherer writes that “[s]he associates secularism...with aggressive, polemical positions that tout the advances of science and seek to restrict the role of religion in public life” (168). Similarly, Robinson “suggests that faith traditions must not only adapt and grow in order to survive and flourish but must also maintain deep and vital connections between faith and life in this world, between religion and politics” (Scherer 167). Both contemporary religion and secularism must be willing to bend and avoid inflexibility in order to enrich the life of all persons in democratic polity. Robinson’s conception of grace offers one instance where she seeks to re-think the contours of the religious and the secular by reconceiving the very grounds of sacred experiences. Given Robinson’s extensive knowledge of Christian tradition and theology (particularly Calvin’s work, the Reformation, and the history of Christianity in America), her idea of grace is surprisingly simple. In her essay “Realism” from *The Givenness of Things*, she writes:

I suppose I might have been expected to speak about grace more theologically, when it is perhaps the major term in my religious tradition. But by my lights I have spoken theologically, since everything depends on

reverence for who we are and what we are, on the sacredness implicit in the human circumstance...We know how profoundly we can impoverish ourselves by failing to find value in one another. (286)

In eschewing more theologically precise definitions, Robinson provides a description of grace that can be understood on postsecular terms: she questions the purpose of unyielding doctrines (such as those found in the calcified Christianity she decries as having ties to American capitalism) in favour of a meaning that enfolds all people in an affirmation of sacredness and value.

The transitory and ephemeral quality of grace embedded in mystery mirrors the experiences of many of Robinson's female characters, who are often spiritual and geographical travellers. Lila has lived her life as a nomad, wandering the roads in accordance with the changing of the seasons and the rhythms of work. However, unlike Ruth and Sylvie in *Housekeeping* who leave stability behind because they find it stifling, Lila and Doll seek stability in a bid for survival. It's a situation that has drained the strength from Lila's mother-figure Doll and left her frail and brittle. Lila herself trusts no one; she is unwilling to let herself enter relationships with people that would leave her exposed and vulnerable, but she nonetheless longs for rest and human contact. Describing her feelings to John Ames, she says, "I don't trust nobody. I can't stay nowhere. I can't get a minute of rest" (89). For Lila, it's a question of how to make meaning out of, or despite, such debilitating circumstances, especially when it seems no one wants her in the midst of loneliness and poverty and isolation and constant threat of harm.

Doll acts as the mother that Lila did not have as a child, nursing her through ill health and nurturing her through childhood. Yet, as women on the road, both are exceedingly vulnerable. They seek protection under the leadership of Doane and his band while they wander with the seasons. As a young woman travelling by herself, Lila faces implicit social attitudes about women and sex, as when, for example, she goes to buy a dress. Her other one needed to be replaced after it was covered with Doll's blood – the latter had been in a knife fight – and the sales lady assumes Lila has had a backdoor abortion (177). Lila soon enough comes to experience very real worries about this possibility when she ends up in the hell of a St. Louis brothel and the abusive Madame who runs it. She feels shame at these experiences and struggles to come to peace with her past and with her current life. When she crosses the threshold of Gilead's church where John Ames is reverend – a border crossing that changes her life – the novel focuses less on the church as institution than on the old idea of faith and love as a way to make sense of a life that constantly threatens to be meaningless.

In many ways, *Lila* continues a number of themes that have preoccupied Robinson's work, both fiction and non-fiction alike. As with Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping*, *Lila* foregrounds female relationships and the importance of maternal figures. Additionally, Lila and Doll are wanderers for much of their lives, just like Ruth and her Aunt Sylvie in Robinson's first novel. This theme poses trenchant questions for female subjectivity and domesticity, especially as critical reception to *Housekeeping* has often lauded Ruth and Sylvie for throwing off the shackles of domestic ties and transgressing the societal boundaries placed on women in mid-20th century mid-West America.

Robinson's most recent novel could, from one perspective, almost represent a step backwards insofar as Lila is placed squarely within the bounds of home, husband, and motherhood. However, this reading would do a disservice to Robinson's persistent attention to female agency and intersubjective relationships. The issue is not so much about whether Lila is shackled in a domestic situation, but what this particular domestic space illustrates about the human relationships taking shape within it. What kinds of power relations are enabled or critiqued within the home? Centrally, "Robinson's depiction of domestic spaces and relationships within small communities dramatizes the necessity of interdependence and the precariousness of human life" (Gonzalez 374). After Lila marries the Reverend John Ames, he and his house offer her stability of a kind she's never had. While the material security of possessing a house and a new social position as the minister's wife helps in this respect, ultimately this domestic situation provides an opportunity for Lila to learn to trust another person. While she perceives – and is intimidated by – John Ames as an educated man who holds significant social and moral standing within the community, she retains the power to leave (and frequently considers doing so).

At the same time, Lila's presence both in Ames' life and in Gilead represents a strangeness or an otherness that cannot be domesticated by either the community or the home and husband. She defamiliarizes the routines the townspeople and Ames had in place, posing a challenge to the sense of complacency John Ames sees in the lives of his congregation members as well as in his own situation. Their marriage exposes the townspeople's judgement about her poverty and lack of social standing, though Ames

notes, “If a few people did make remarks, I just forgave them so fast it was as if I never heard them, because it was wrong of them to judge and I knew it and they should have known it” (2004, 230). He insists that “I never felt there was anything the least bit scandalous about my marriage. In her own way, [Lila] is a woman of great refinement” (230). He may feel that, but she nevertheless experiences the weight of social expectations in something as simple as using knives and forks at their wedding reception – “Damn knives and forks...Lila had never understood the whole business of knives and forks, that there was a way you were supposed to use them” (*Lila* 92-3). Despite knowing that the women talk about her (36), she enjoys the singing and the society at church, because it helps with her loneliness (26). She also surprises Ames, jolting him out of his taken-for-granted assumptions about theology until the only thing he can comment is that their conversation about the Bible has “been interesting” (31).

Given her recognition of how exclusivist and unwelcoming community can be as well as the tense relationships that occur in a household, Robinson’s warm view of home doesn’t ultimately position it as an idealized haven. Instead, the home emerges as a multifaceted site of domestic economics, generosity, and emotional labour. Lila and Ames need time to grow accustomed to one another, and Lila remains wary of Ames for a long time; she also realizes that her newfound sense of domestic stability is not likely to last because Ames is an old man and will soon die. Rowan Williams comments on the misconceptions that surround readings of Robinson’s fiction:

There have been some accounts of these novels that might lead you to imagine that Robinson is constructing an idyll of unfallen rural America, a

celebration of small-town values, community loyalties and simple faith. Because she has identified herself as not only a Christian but a Calvinist of sorts, many have assumed that she will line up with a conservative religious agenda and an appeal for a return to frontier values. In fact, her political record (including eloquent support for Obamacare) has made her a deeply controversial figure for the religious right. And this novel [*Lila*] ought to dispel any such myths for good. The earlier novels actually provide a sharp indictment of the way in which the comfortable society of the town has forgotten its own history – its record in the conflicts around the civil war as a bastion of the Union and a safe refuge for runaway slaves.

(2014)

Williams highlights the ways in which Robinson punctures religious and domestic dreams of uncomplicated comfort, calling on readers to confront their own suppositions about the past, about American religious history, and about the American history of slavery and racism. The idea of home Robinson explores in mid-century, mid-west America does not uphold what Williams elsewhere describes as “the sense that we can feel ultimately satisfied with where and what we are, longing to hold on to it and unwilling to respond to challenge; we are not to settle down in our place and our time because we feel comfortable” (2000, 84). Home becomes an important site to reassess both one’s domestic and one’s social values and histories.

Ames, in particular, tries to remember his family and his town’s history with abolitionism to avoid the dangers of hardening into theological and domestic comfort. He

desires to prevent such a personal and spiritual congealing in the small, church-centred town of Gilead, especially in terms of racial injustice. When he learns that Jack Boughton – the godson he has thought of as an irresponsible troublemaker – has married an African American woman named Della, Ames must confront his own assumptions about Jack and about racial discrimination in the United States. He thinks, “I was so long in the habit of seeing meanness at the root of everything he did” (2004, 230). Ames comes to see in Jack’s “unacknowledged and ordinary actions toward Della and her African American family...an ethical commitment” in the face of widespread anti-miscegenation laws (Zamalin and Skinner 92). He ultimately recognizes how he and “[t]his whole town [looks] like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more” (2004, 247). But, he concludes, “hope deferred is still hope” (247). He ultimately resists the allure of complacency, though he warns his son about its dangers via the letter he is writing.

However, if religious people are prone to social and spiritual complacency then so too are secular-scientific accounts of human existence. Robinson has vocalized persistent critique of scientific narratives which reduce the mystery of human life to deterministic biological narratives. Robinson finds herself drawn to quantum physics and the kinds of radical questions it poses about existence and the mysteries of life it opens up. But she also consciously resists narratives of faith which diminish such mysteries to a manual on how to achieve salvation:

In contemporary religious circles, souls, if they are mentioned at all, tend to be spoken of as saved or lost, having answered some set of divine

expectations or failed to answer them, having arrived at some crucial realization or failed to arrive at it. So the soul, the masterpiece of creation, is more or less reduced to a token signifying cosmic acceptance or rejection, having little or nothing to do with that miraculous thing, the felt experience of life, except insofar as life offers distractions or temptations.

(Robinson 2012, 8)

She criticizes much of contemporary American Christianity, tracing its roots through 19th Century American revivalism and “the idea that one could be securely persuaded of one’s own salvation and could even apply a fairly objective standard to the state of others’ souls” (2006). This attitude places dangerous boundaries around God’s freedom and ignores the sacredness of human life that unfolds in “glimpses and through disciplined attention” to the circumstances of daily experience (2006). As Lila thinks near the end of the novel, “It couldn’t be fair to punish people for trying to get by, people who were good by their own lights, when it took all the courage they had to be good” (259). By insisting on salvation as an open-ended question, Robinson refuses to limit the possibility of grace, preferring instead to articulate faith as a practice of charity and generosity and largeness of spirit that she sees as sadly lacking in contemporary public life and some forms of American Christianity (2012, 59-84). She simultaneously critiques an economy of salvation that functions somewhat along the lines of austerity politics: capital flows only to the deserving. As Aaron Mauro puts it, “Austerity appears as the expression of a theologically informed moralizing that aligns sin and debt” (151). “Robinson’s novels” instead redefine “the traditional alignment of the sin of indebtedness and the salvation

of forgiveness by reclaiming grace as a theologically radical and polysemic term that also holds a profoundly progressive social imperative” (Mauro 151).

The generosity of spirit Robinson advocates is, like grace, a process of giving attention to the glimpses of sacredness and value of others: “It is not my belief that personal holiness – sanctity, as the theologians call it – inheres in anyone in isolation or as a static quality” (2006). Community becomes a central feature of Lila’s search for meaning, as she seeks to overcome the loneliness that has imbued her entire life. Before she married Ames, Lila even “went to the movies just to see people living, because she was curious. She’d more or less decided that she had missed out on it herself, so this was the best she could do” (210).

Lila profoundly acknowledges the suffering of life and the influences it has on the human person; Robinson’s novels are all concerned with those on the edges of society, those who live with terrible loss, poverty, and insecurity. Because of her experiences, Lila never stops seeing herself as an outsider to the community – and church – of Gilead in which she finds herself soon married to Ames. But Robinson’s works do not emphasize happiness. Instead, they focus on how characters deal with sorrow, discontent, and suffering while finding meaning and hope through spiritual and domestic encounters with others. As Lila knows too well, one’s sense of existence and selfhood can be brutally deformed and dampened by these experiences, but an important part of Lila’s journey is moving into trust and away from a fear-based life, opening herself up to love and to being loved by John Ames, by Doll, and even by the son she soon begins to carry.

What does grace mean for Lila? If she could conceptualize it theologically – the language of faith comes so easily to John Ames but is a struggle for her – it would, on one level, be simple. In part, it means a warm house, food, safety, and stability, and she gets all these things by marrying John Ames. These are the bare materials for economic security, and she is given them through love – she doesn't have to earn them through labour. Yet, she often thinks that she only wants these things so she can fulfill Doll's wishes for her to have a stable future – a difficult challenge given her position as a young woman on the edges of "respectable" society – and she spends a good deal of the novel worrying over whether she should stay with Ames or leave for the road again. Economics are only part of her affective dilemma. Given the reception of the female protagonists of *Housekeeping*, the capacity to leave domesticity becomes a crucial part of how Lila conceives her agency in relation to Ames: "She was thinking, I'm gone the minute he talks down to me, no matter what" (161). She always retains the option of leaving and starting over, of walking out of Gilead and heading down the road to a new situation. With little money and no social status, such agency remains meagre – but important nonetheless for her sense of selfhood.

This depiction of female agency and its uneasy relationship to the domestic correlates with Lila's existential questions as well as her desire for meaning and affirmative human contact. Lila's anxiety in part stems from the lack of trust she has been habituated into – a wariness that has become irreversibly embodied in her physical gauntness – but it also indicates her spiritual discomfort. The overarching issue of grace persists in the background, particularly as Lila feels that all of the people she knew

growing up wouldn't qualify for the salvation offered by Reverend Ames' Christian faith. There is no Messiah for people like her and Doll, and she consequently "hate[s] the thought of resurrection as much as she had ever hated anything" (101). Her worry indicates not just a moral fear – she knows what shame feels like – but a sincere spiritual question about what faith means if forgiveness and grace aren't given to those who live "[s]uch hard lives" (101). Where's the generosity in a faith that "punish[es] scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn't even like them" (99)?

Lila's concerns about the eternal salvation of those she loves is also an acknowledgement of how intertwined her life is with all of the people she has met, how she has been shaped by others, for good or ill. Thus, in searching for home and security, Lila realizes that home isn't tied to a place or a domestic situation – it's a mode of relationship to the people in one's life. Her agency can here be broadened not just to agency as the capacity to make choices or to act in a certain way (a narrow understanding of what constitutes personal and political agency), but to an attention to the way in which "all creatures are radically interdependent [and how] we know no existence outside of our flowing, shifting, layered relations" (Keller, 2003, 414). Through such attention, Lila comes to the point where she is able to cry at "[j]ust the touch of [Ames'] hand" (88) and finally to tell him she loves him (257). She experiences an emotional release, signalled by the unblocking of her body as she is baptized in the flow of her own tears. She comforts and is comforted, and her worry for Doll and the others demonstrates her desire to open to them the idea of home and its concomitant security. She wants to extend to them

unconditional spiritual and domestic hospitality; in her desire for hospitality, she models a possibility for a religious and political ethic.

The capacious understanding of grace and home in *Lila* and the other *Gilead* books says much about the deity Robinson embraces as part of her faith. While in her various collections of essays Robinson writes of her Calvinist-informed belief in God and Christ, Christ as a messianic figure of salvation is almost completely absent. Initially, Lila fears God because she is afraid he won't accept Doll into eternity (142). However, the novel rarely mentions Christ per se, but when it does, it is to show how he surprisingly meshes with Lila's own experiences: "she was thinking how strange it was for them to be there singing songs to somebody who had lived and died like anybody. Doll would say, That's the way it is. They could as well be singing about Doll" (222). As Lila continues reading the bible and thinking about theodicy and salvation, Christ becomes decentred in the text, hardly the warrior Messiah of the conservative fundamentalism Robinson decries. Ultimately, she comes to a vision of heaven that focuses more on being re-united with Doll and Ames than God (259). Lila and Doll had broken apart after a violent episode in one small town, and Lila often wonders what happened to Doll – where did she end up? Did she die alone in poverty? In her spiritual contemplations, Lila seeks restoration with Doll and an opportunity for relational repair.

In coming to see Christ as both a regular person and in the face of Doll, Lila implicitly challenges the hierarchical ordering of salvation and any gendered aspects it has. Throughout the novel, Lila considers Doll to be the one who "saved" her – not her husband John Ames – and Lila dislikes rigid notions of theology precisely because they

would exclude Doll. In writing this way about Christ, Robinson challenges dominant public narratives about Christ and salvation. Robinson's image of Christ depicts him as embodied in the weakness as well as the kindness of others. He isn't, contrary to the forms of American fundamentalism she contests, some sort of warrior who comes to punish or a political figure who will enact coercive forms of sovereignty. Rather, he is a figure who can be found in the face of all those who live on the ragged edges of society, particularly the scarred face of the bitter and brittle Doll who sacrifices herself to care for Lila. Moreover, if redemption, grace, or salvation – any of these theological terms for a new life for the soul – are to happen in this life, they can only be realized through interdependence, in looking out for and attending to one another, the way Doll carries Lila away from neglect.

At the end of *Gilead*, Ames comments on the kinds of assumptions that become embedded in doctrines of salvation: “doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief...[also] the Greek word *sozo*, which is usually translated ‘saved,’ can also mean healed restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation narrows the meaning of the word in a way that can create false expectations” (239). Both Ames’ and Lila’s redefinitions of grace and salvation echo feminist theology, which reappraises the masculine imaginary predominant in traditional theology that seeks to assert dominance and control over the (often gendered) conditions of grace and salvation.³⁴

³⁴ See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s pioneering work on images of God in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (1992), or Laurel C. Schneider on how theological language and signification excludes certain bodies via a restrictive vision of Christ’s fleshly incarnation (2010).

Catherine Keller and others such as John Caputo have also engaged with the necessity of reconceiving salvation and the figure of the Messiah in order to highlight faith as a sincere and inescapable entanglement with vulnerability as a condition of life on earth. As Keller argues in *God and Power*, the Messiah has been all too often rendered in heavily masculinized terms as a militaristic warrior who embodies strength, power, and aggressive leadership. Such a reading, she suggests, denies the biblical Christ's enmeshment in the circumstances of creaturely life and thus demeans embodiment, care, and interdependence – values all too often associated with women and the domestic. But where this confrontational version of the Messiah prizes a strength that can conquer the world and correct its problems, Keller sees only blockage and stagnation in being cut off personally, theologically, and politically from “our interlinkages with each other and with the planet” (2005, x). What Keller calls “transfigural feminism” (2004, 891) is crucial to re-imagining the Messiah as a process of relation that enables the world's creatures rather than an omnipotent deity who imposes or coerces. Along similar lines, John Caputo describes it as the weakness of God that prioritizes interconnectedness over mastery and control (78), and such weakness engenders cracks in the masculinized imaginary of faith, salvation, and redemption.

These issues have preoccupied much of Robinson's authorial attention over the past two decades. Her response offers an instructive model for a postsecular generosity that connects the domestic and the political while exploring issues of economic and spiritual value. While Christianity is deeply important to her, Robinson decries that “[s]omething called Christianity has become entangled in exactly the strain of nationalism

that is militaristic...and that can only understand dissent from its views as a threat or a defection, a heresy" (2015, 134). She refuses prescriptive doctrine and any alliance of Christianity with nationalist, messianic notions of glory. She holds no patience for a warrior Christ that swoops to the rescue of American exceptionalism.

Instead, salvation, grace, and religious experience are processes that must be worked out in relationship with others, through small "acts of comfort offered and received" (2012, 93) with an open hand. She thus resists ideologies, such as those of neoliberal austerity and individualism (Gonzalez 373), that would impoverish the person and cut them off from community.³⁵ One of the subtitles for her 2006 essay "Onward Christian Liberals" reads: "Faith is not about piety or personal salvation, but about helping those in need" (2006). Tied with her emphasis on affirming the dignity of all people, this statement offers a view of faith that melds its most generous and open-handed impulses with a practical orientation to both everyday and political situations. Generosity is not simply an ideal – it involves attention to what others, including the under-waged and the poor, require for survival instead of blaming them for their poverty (2015, 177).

Robinson herself thus sees continued value for faith-based images, traditions, and beliefs in forging positive personal and political futures, while at the same time warning against Christianity "decay[ing] into rigor" (2012, 93). For her, rigor indicates a negative hardening of attitude rather than any kind of intellectual enterprise that embraces the testing and evaluation of ideas. When rigor institutes high boundaries around grace,

³⁵ In *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (2008), Jean Bethke Elshtain makes an interesting distinction between the concepts of the "individual" as a locus of sovereign will and the "person," who is always related to others.

thereby inhibiting people from accessing much-needed spiritual, emotional, or economic help, it has become a barrier to the love she identifies as central to the gospels, a spiritual version of austerity which “appears as the expression of a theologically informed moralizing that aligns sin and debt” (Mauro 151).

These ideas circulate throughout *Lila*, particularly as she sees only spiritual stagnation in attempts to control the conditions of grace. The flowing, feminist vision of multiplicity and interconnection Catherine Keller emphasizes (2014, 5) resonates with Lila’s own transition into a more spacious understanding of eternity and of salvation that makes sense and meaning of the experiences of her own life – of John Ames’ gentleness, of her own struggles with trust, and of Doll’s self-sacrifice for her. Keller uses the term “becoming” to refer to a process of identity making and remaking that embraces unfolding potential and possibility. Lila becomes human through the affirmative touch of Doll “carr[ying] her off through the rain” (12) and resting her head on Ames’ shoulder. Lila ends up thinking of heaven as a kind of eternal home; for her, home isn’t reductively figured as a confining domestic space for women – one in which, moreover, she is only Ames’ second and less important wife – but as a process of relationship. What are often gendered as feminine virtues – love, affirmation, care, and interconnection – become part of a broader discussion about offering alternatives to a narrative of faith that has damaged people’s spirits and everyday lives through exclusion, limits, and punishment. Turning to John Calvin, Robinson writes warmly of “a mystical/ethical engagement with the world that fuses truth and love and opens experience on a light so bright it expunges every mean distinction. There is no doctrine here, no setting of conditions, no drawing of

lines. On the contrary, what he [Calvin] describes is a posture of grace, generosity, liberality” (2006). Grace is figured here as a spiritual generosity that inflects all levels of relationship and emerges in acts of hospitality and material forms of care. It provides the conditions for a vibrant possibility of becoming.

At the end of the novel, Lila undergoes yet a third baptism, once again by her husband, the Reverend John Ames. Each baptism has marked a momentous shift in her relationships as well as her own process of developing her identity – the first one ushering her into a mother-daughter relationship with Doll on the road and the second an “official” baptism in part so that she can marry Ames. She rejected this second one as a terrible division between her and those she loved, unbaptizing herself in the same river out of a desire to maintain her spiritual connection with Doll and Doane and the other travellers, even though it has been many years since she has seen either Doll or the other wanderers. Ames carries out this last baptism partially out of fear – he wants to make sure Lila is in some sense a ‘real’ Christian who is saved in case she dies after childbirth as his first wife did, though he has all along insisted on God’s mysterious and encompassing love. He too can’t bear the thought of eternal separation from her: “I should have asked you first. But I wanted you to know that we couldn’t bear – we have to keep you with us. Please God” (2014, 257). Lila goes along with his wish, but not because she sees it as being a precondition for salvation. Instead, she has come to feel that baptism and heaven signal a vision of community that is large enough to embrace those who have never crossed the threshold of a church, including those who are poor and suffering and only find home in each other rather than a particular place. Lila’s own vision of heaven challenges a narrow

understanding of faith and the sacredness of human life, and instead makes room in heaven for those who have accompanied us through our lives. She thinks to herself, “Eternity had more of every kind of room in it than this world did” (260). In a reversal of position contained in the very last line of the novel, Lila will someday educate Ames about grace, “tell[ing] him what she knew” (261). She now has the theological resources and “more words” that she earlier wishes she possessed in order to “understand things better” (113).

Despite these dramatic shifts in Lila’s sense of self and spiritual experience, neither her problems nor her worries over the future halt simply because of her new access to domesticity and community. She knows too well that Ames is an old man and will neither live to see their child grow nor offer her material support and she will be left on her own again, though caring for her own child this time. But, as Catherine Keller writes, facing the idea of the future and of the impermanence of relationships is part of living well with others: “What relationship that matters doesn’t twist us to the faltering edge of possibility? Desire and fear blur together. What future comes before us unclouded?” (2014, 1). Lila keenly understands this taut dynamic of fear and desire, as well as how anxiety about an insecure future can dampen social existence and diminish the soul. But, at the same time, she thinks wistfully that “[s]he had never been at home in all the years of her life. She wouldn’t know how to begin. But the shade of the cottonwoods and the shimmer of their leaves and the trill of the cicadas were a comfort to her” (2014, 107). The life humming in the garden and creatures around the house show her capacity for

perceiving beauty and beckon her to a place of peace in which she can rest from the exhaustion that has followed her footsteps.

By the end of the novel, she has come to realize the potential of the human spirit to flourish and thrive in relationship with others, despite, or perhaps in the midst of, life's precarity. This recognition emerges most clearly when she gives birth to her son (246). Alex Engebretson suggests that the child "represents a solidified trust between Ames and Lila. It is the moment that Lila begins to live in the present tense, ceasing to find her only comfort in Doll and the past, at least as long as Ames is alive" (98). She feels she has been given new life and has been "integrated into community" (Engebretson 99) – to the Gilead community to an extent as well as to her new family – and consequently she chooses to place her faith and her hope in a future in which she has spiritual and communal value. As she thinks to herself, "Pity us, yes, but we are brave...and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself in us" (261).

Robinson's exploration of the domestic sphere integrates a concern for those who have experienced economic and spiritual poverty while challenging neoliberal conceptions of value that reduce the human person to labour utility. It is within this domesticity and its attendant politics of ordinary life that she sees housekeeping as holding a kind of sacramental value, though one that is liable to become hardened and inflexible:

At a certain level housekeeping is a regime of small kindnesses, which, taken together, make the world salubrious, savory, and warm. I think of the acts of comfort offered and received within a household as precisely

sacramental. It is the sad tendency of domesticity – as of piety – to contract and of grace to decay into rigor and peace into tedium. (2012, 93)

In the novels *Gilead* and *Lila*, her characters struggle with navigating the fragile line between generosity and hardness, especially when poverty, loneliness, and the threat of violence structure their daily realities. Their experiences of the domestic therefore hinge on perpetual negotiation as well as intimacy, in which complacency is constantly challenged. The novels offer what Braidotti would hail as an alternative to capitalism, one which resists the commodification of care and life and offers a more generous, affirmative model of interaction. Instead of prioritizing economic competition, Robinson's domestic vision is rooted in interdependence and the task of affirming how others matter, though it often involves difficult emotional and physical labour. It also necessitates the possibility of failure: Ames' father and grandfather never reconcile their differences, and any future chance for resolution is curtailed when Ames' grandfather disappears one day. This theme is repeated: Ames' friend Boughton and his son Jack also do not experience resolution in their relationship before Boughton dies. Though the domestic is fraught with its own tensions, it nonetheless stands as an important site in which to assert the value of all those who meet at the kitchen table. It also remembers those who are not present at the table – the homeless, the strangers, and the outsiders – but who nonetheless form an essential part of human community. For Marilynne Robinson, this table must be gracious enough to welcome a diverse group of strangers in a thriving democratic community.

CHAPTER FOUR

Postsecular Embodiment in J.M. Coetzee's

The Childhood of Jesus and The Schooldays of Jesus

I wish someone, some saviour, would descend from the skies and
wave a magic wand and say,
Behold, read this book and all your questions will be answered.
J.M. Coetzee (2013, 239)

Neither primary philosophy nor God provides a roof for our potential to dwell
as mortals.
Luce Irigaray (62)

After winning two Booker prizes and the Nobel Prize for Literature, J.M. Coetzee has established an impressive career status as one of the most recognizable contemporary world writers. In addition to Coetzee's own prolific oeuvre, a veritable cottage industry of literary criticism has emerged over the past three decades, in large part engaging with his work via issues such as the legacy of South African apartheid and the ethics of human–non-human animal relations. Given this critical background, Coetzee's latest novels *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016)

have prompted a surprising amount of bafflement among reviewers.³⁶ The novels' relationship to Christianity – evoked in their titles – has proved confusing: there is no central character named Jesus, nor are there any religious structures, institutions, or communities in the two cities Novilla and Estrella which form the setting.

Perhaps deliberately stoking the uncertainty, Coetzee himself has refused to explicitly make the connection that many readers have posited between the child David, a main character in the two novels, and Jesus. When he gave a reading in Cape Town, he remarked: "I had hoped that the book would appear with a blank cover and a blank title page, so that only after the last page had been read would the reader meet the title, namely *The Childhood of Jesus*" (Farago). The mechanisms of the publishing industry stopped him, but his comments point to the difficulty of reading the two novels and situating the characters within Christian frames of reference. Nonetheless, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* overflow with biblical and theological references, exhibiting a rich and complicated intertextuality that has perplexed readers. What role exactly does religion, particularly Christianity, and belief play in Coetzee's latest writing? Do we read religion as just another example of what Elizabeth Anker calls Coetzee's penchant for 'false leads' (206) or as a constitutive influence on Coetzee's thought?

³⁶ Elizabeth Anker laments the problems of finding an interpretative *llave universal* (a reference to the universal key mentioned in the novel) for *The Childhood of Jesus*, worrying that critics may either get lost in Coetzee's hall of mirrors of critical theory, philosophy, and religion or impose their own interpretative predilections on the novels. For Anker, much of the attraction of Coetzee's fiction rests in his astute and nimble engagements with contemporary critical theory, which invite readings from postcolonialism, deconstructive ethics, and literary philosophy. Yet, she argues that "chasing his narratives' innumerable false leads can become fatiguing" (206).

Though I understand Anker's frustrations, I view Coetzee's engagement with religion as neither false lead nor short-lived interest on his part; rather, it has formed a meaningful, if knotty, thread throughout all of his work. Like the situation with religion and literature generally after 9/11, Coetzee's writing is being re-evaluated for its engagement with Christian themes, especially in terms of how religious ideas can catalyze ethical thinking in the midst of major political, philosophical, and social challenges to lived experiences of belief. In this chapter, I examine three aspects of how Coetzee thinks about religion in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*: 1) I point out how religion has been a persistent question for a number of Coetzee's novels, including *Disgrace* and *Boyhood*; 2) I explore explicit links between *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, an early non-canonical Christian text which I suggest offers significant cues for understanding the child David while also illuminating ways in which Coetzee juxtaposes the human and the divine, the postsecular and the theological; and 3) I focus finally on the importance of desire, redemption, and new life to Coetzee's thinking, arguing that he locates them in an ultimately postsecular register rather than a theological one. However, it is a postsecularism that draws its strength from surprising roots – notably a fascination with ideas of dance and numbers that trace back to Greek philosophy – in addition to revealing Coetzee's usual indebtedness to Dostoevsky. I argue that in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, dance emerges as a postsecular practice of embodiment that bridges the spiritual and the physical, opening up possibilities of shared communication, redemption, and new life.

Redemption doesn't have the same theological overtones for Coetzee as for a writer like Marilynne Robinson, who remains firmly tied to Calvinism. If, as Simón says in *The Childhood of Jesus*, there is no saviour from the sky with a magic wand, what *is* there for him and David? David, the dubious analogue for Jesus, claims to be the truth, but he proves to be a challenge to his guardians as well as his teachers and friends. David's unsettling presence and Simón's struggles with bodily and sexual hunger pose a question about having faith in each other and what redemptive relationships can look like without a saviour in the wake of what Jack Dudley calls the loss of a centre in much of Coetzee's fiction (110). I suggest that Coetzee's interest in religion simultaneously questions what a postsecular messianism can look like, notably through the relationship between the child David and his guardian Simón and their involvement with dance. There is no universal key or Messiah figure to help Coetzee's characters achieve new life; this element forms a crucial part of Coetzee's literary postsecularism. However, they can come to the recognition that new life is a task or sensibility that can be shared and that can, moreover, encourage them to explore new ways of individual and collective being.

Postsecular Knots: Coetzee's Religious Imagination

In J.M. Coetzee's two latest novels *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), the enigmatic city Novilla functions as the first port of call for all residents of the unnamed country. Everyone here is a migrant from other lands, but they have little to no memory of their previous lives. The Spanish-speaking Novilla also appears to have no identifiable past – no history, no national stories or literature, no

institutional identity, no diversity of people groups, no religion or culture, no notable landscapes or geography. It is a land – and a body politic – that has been “washed clean” (20) of such defining markers, including past familial relationships. New citizens are advised to similarly jettison any traces that remain of their old ways of thinking and living. As one office worker, Ana, says to Simón, “You should be doing the same: letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them” (20). However, Novilla possesses a significant apparatus for relocating and looking after its citizens. The systems that do exist in the city tend towards a type of socialism, with free transportation, schooling, housing, medicine, philosophy classes, and sporting events. It has bland food and little to no sex, but at least one can find a job and an apartment fairly easily. Novilla engages with utopian ideals about societies that care for the basic needs of their people, even if the novel refuses to divulge the city’s origins.

The characters, too, are somewhat of a puzzle, and their relationships shift palpably over the course of the two novels. There is Simón (about 45 years old), a migrant who comes across the child David (about 5) on the boat to Novilla. David appears to have no family accompanying him, and Simón takes responsibility for the child. While working, Simón even goes so far as to find a woman, Inés, who will act as a mother for David, because he believes that a child needs a mother more than a father. The rest of *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* traces the trio’s complicated relationship as well as David’s thorny involvement with Novilla’s school system. The child struggles with conventional schooling, refusing to demonstrate his abilities to read and write and

disturbing the classroom, though whether he is exceptionally gifted or simply disobedient is not wholly clear.

At the end of *The Childhood of Jesus*, Inés and Simón go on the run with the child to avoid him being put in a reform school, and they end up in the city of Estrella in *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Estrella is quite different than Novilla, and its pattern of life is more recognizable: it has coffee shops, fashion, and schools that focus on music and dance rather than standard math and reading. *The Schooldays of Jesus* follows Simón and Inés' attempts to find alternate learning arrangements in Estrella – including dance lessons – that suit David better. David loves the dance lessons, but he grows distant from Simón and Inés, much to their dismay. Life in Estrella is then upended by a murder, and Simón is left with difficult questions about what justice and salvation can look like and how one can achieve new life. The courts and psychiatry both prove to be inadequate structures in answering these questions, especially in the midst of personal turmoil in his own relationship with David. Simón anxiously faces the problem of whether David is right about him being past redemption and whether he is capable of experiencing new life.

While *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*' explicit relationship to Jesus and to Christianity is a new development in Coetzee's work, Jack Dudley notes that Coetzee's interest in religion can be traced throughout the author's career, emerging most notably in *Disgrace*, but also surfacing in previous interviews.³⁷ Dudley argues that Coetzee's stance towards religion indicates a clear hesitance towards certain markers,

³⁷ Kai Wiegandt (2017) also traces strands of Coetzee's engagement with religion throughout the author's earlier works, and Adam Kirsch (2017) highlights some of Coetzee's public statements about his religious stance.

remarking that “Coetzee’s novels show that divine and human calls offer neither simple guidance nor direction, but often lead to profound disorientation. Yet, rather than commit to atheism or nihilism, Coetzee interrogates what remains of ethics and subjectivity in the fragmented ruins of western philosophy,” particularly in what David Lurie, the main character from *Disgrace*, calls the “post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” condition (110). Lurie’s ethical disputes stem as much from his own lack of generosity toward others, including his students, as they do from an ambivalence about the place of religion in the modern university in which he works. For Dudley, Coetzee’s attitude regarding faith stems from loss, be it “the loss of a stable self, the loss of God, and the loss of a transcendent center or origin” (110).

It is this notion of a transcendent deity that in large part influences the conception of religion characters have in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Simón exclaims at the end of *Childhood*, “we don’t live under the eye of God. In the world we live in there are random numbers and random names and random events” (275). Simón’s idea of “God” is an omnipresent deity who is all-powerful and who lives in the skies (239). Crucially, Simón doesn’t think such an omnipresent, omniscient God can be reconciled with daily life’s randomness and contingency. Not until the very end of *Schooldays* does he even consider the idea that there are possibilities for faith or religious experience outside such strict definitions of God. But he does agonize about how to live in Novilla and how to bring up David in the absence of any clear religious, societal, or moral framework. At one point, he wishes “someone, some saviour, would descend from the skies and wave a magic wand and say, *Behold, read this book and all your questions will*

be answered" (239, emphasis in the original). Simón lacks a strong centre, and this is conceivably one reason why he clings so much to his relationship with David and falls into despair when David grows distant from him. He has no core motivation or purpose, stumbling through the tensions of everyday life without the support of a defined meaning-making scaffold.

Simón's struggles plumb "the question of what it means to be saved in the postsecular novel" (Dudley 113). Dudley distinguishes this reckoning as a postsecular impulse in Coetzee's fiction, as the idea of being saved carries legal and theological connotations that have emerged elsewhere in Coetzee's writing. Though she only discusses *Disgrace*, Alyda Faber points out how Coetzee foregrounds "the tensions between secular legal and religious discourses which do not settle into belief, but which nonetheless acknowledge the 'uncanny insistence' of religious sensibilities" (314). Similar tensions arise in *Schooldays* when a character named Dmitri, who has committed murder, contemplates the distinction between forgiveness granted by a legal institution and the kind of atonement he can achieve through his own penance; Dmitri is sent to a mental institution for help, where he simultaneously enjoys the amenities and disagrees with the goals of psychology.

John McClure identifies more indirect forms of postsecular discourse, wherein "the turn to the religious is little more than a cautious probing, and the process of ontological opening is extremely subtle: a quiet loosening of the fabric of 'the real'" (3). McClure's definition illuminates Coetzee's work, especially in understanding how religion and religious ideas function as significant echoes or traces that aren't always explicitly

declared, but which nonetheless hinge on resonance and suggestion. Coetzee has stated his own atheism in his fictionalized autobiography *Boyhood*, and a number of readers have noted his ambivalent relationship to the Dutch Reformed church of South Africa as well as his broader fascination with Protestant notions of grace, confession, and salvation.³⁸ Vincent Pecora argues that Coetzee secularizes these notions – in other words, Coetzee contemplates what it means to confess “in a world where no authority has the divine power, the keys, to loose and bind.” *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* continue this dialogue with the secular and the divine, maintaining Coetzee’s previous interest in new life and redemption while blurring the very borders demarcating any definite sense of secular and sacred. Coetzee does not necessarily dichotomize the two, nor does he simply secularize religious concepts in an attempt to keep the idea without religious baggage. He does, however, establish an interest in the grammar and vocabulary of sacred experiences without a central key to define them.

Though these elements of Coetzee’s work have been aligned with literary postsecularism by other scholars, I am suggesting that Coetzee takes a very different approach to thinking about religion and religious issues in his latest novels by focusing on the practice of dance. Dance emerges as an embodied form of becoming – of cultivating orientations of attention and responsiveness – in *The Schooldays of Jesus*, and it signals a new possibility in which to think about Coetzee’s postsecularism. Whereas Marilynne Robinson publicly identifies as a Calvinist and her Christianity deeply informs her moral perspectives as well as her consciousness of American history, politics, and religious life,

³⁸ Including Adam Kirsch (2017), Kai Wiegandt (2017), Alyda Faber (2009), and Vincent Pecora (2015).

Coetzee, on the other hand, has made no such public professions. In conversations with David Attwell, Coetzee has circled ideas of faith and transcendence, but resists any definite identification with either Christianity or with theological conviction. When discussing *Age of Iron* with Attwell, Coetzee switches from referring to his character, Elizabeth, to himself: “As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet” (250). He remains outside of any institutional, denominational, or confessed faith, though he is nonetheless immersed in the cultural effects of Christianity and is intrigued by how its spiritual ideas of grace, belief, and new life can inform ethical relationships to non-human animals and to others in the midst of global challenges such as racism and mass migration (forced or economic).³⁹ Here again there is the loss of a kind of cultural and theological power afforded to Christianity in the West as well as in South Africa, but also an opportunity to reconceive its traditions and sense of ethics in the face of new social and political exigencies. Dance becomes one way to explore these resonances and read his relationship with religion on postsecular grounds.

These are all issues that continue to be on Coetzee’s mind when he writes the Jesus novels almost 20 years after his discussions with Attwell. Most notably, there is a loss that structures life in Novilla in *The Childhood of Jesus*. All the inhabitants are migrants, a significant detail given how mass migration has emerged as a key global issue.⁴⁰ They have, moreover, landed in Novilla from unknown lands and lost all memories, all traces, of their past lives; in this novel, migrancy appears to demand an

³⁹ See Alice Brittan (2010), Alyda Faber (2009), Derek Attridge (2000), and Kai Wiegandt (2017).

⁴⁰ Like Marilynne Robinson’s characters Doll and Lila, the migrants are all strangers, provoking questions of how to hospitably treat the outsider.

expungement of the past in order to move productively into future opportunities. But Simón, one of the main characters in both novels, still thinks of the experience as a loss and he tries to remember his past every now and then. When his memory eventually fails completely, he makes up memories about what could have happened to him and David on the boat. He tries to fill the gaps he feels instead of succumbing to “the emptiness of the life in Novilla” (Tajiri 74).

But is this really the only new life available to people in the a-historical world of Novilla? I suggest that *The Schooldays of Jesus* presents a different vision than *The Childhood of Jesus*, in which the issue is not so much focused on loss, but on passion and desire. Simón exhibits emotional and spiritual fatigue in *The Schooldays of Jesus* as he deals with a new school and its strange quasi-religion and as he struggles to parent an increasingly disruptive David. Despite the lack of historical and religious structures in both novels, the religious echoes that emerge in *Schooldays* possess a strong intertextual resonance with the New Testament Gospels but particularly one text that imagines the childhood of Jesus – the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Within the context of this resonance, the experience of loss becomes reconfigured – or perhaps transfigured – into the possibility for relational repair and a kind of new life for Simón and David.

Intertextual Cues:

The Childhood of Jesus, The Schooldays of Jesus, and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas

Given the titles of the two novels, the figure of Jesus has attracted fascination as well as confusion. Coetzee’s avowed atheism and postsecular commitments complicate approaches which consider the importance of Jesus as a religious figure in the novels as

well as the sacred status of the gospel source texts. One point of contact for thinking about the issue is to explore how Coetzee has been influenced by the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, though this parallel has often been obscured in other critical readings of the texts in favour of how *Childhood* and *Schooldays* rewrite or borrow elements from the canonical gospels. References to the gospels that came to comprise the New Testament permeate *Childhood* and *Schooldays*, as Yoshiki Tajiri and Ileana Dmitriu have outlined. These references include the lineage of David's own name, the parallel family structure (Jesus/Mary/Joseph and David/Inés/Simón), the census, and the flight from Novilla/Egypt as well as an exploration of David's impulses to save people (Dmitriu 77). These are important resonances to highlight and examine, indicating Coetzee's knowledge of and interest in a variety of source texts about Jesus' childhood.

However, the non-canonical Infancy Gospel of Thomas can be read as an equally important intertext for *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. As Vincent Pecora observes, Coetzee often "reread[s] and rewrite[s] canonical writers whom he has brushed against the grain," so Coetzee's engagement with a less known gospel and its narrativizations of Jesus' childhood is provocative and noteworthy. Intertextuality has remained a steady feature of Coetzee's writing, yet another example of his predilection for incorporating multiple voices and perspectives, like his frequent interlocutor Dostoevsky.⁴¹ Kristi Upson-Saia argues that the Infancy Gospel of Thomas itself was a result of several intertexts: she contends that the gospel presents the uneven, multivocal

⁴¹ Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) regards Dostoevsky as one of the most notable examples of using multiple voices in a single text. Bakhtin calls it polyphony, in which no voice or perspective triumphs over any of the others.

outcomes of a dialogical encounter between early Christian communities and their opponents over how Jesus was portrayed. Coetzee's use of the canonical gospels as well as the contentious Infancy Gospel implicitly recognizes the variegated textual, theological, and narrative histories surrounding Jesus in early Christian history. I suggest that *The Childhood of Jesus's* and especially *The Schooldays of Jesus's* intertextual relationship with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas does not necessarily position David as a Christ figure, but it does foreground issues of how human desire and pedagogy can be in productive tension with each other and how they are complicated by the viscosity of emotions and familial relations.

Roughly dated to the 2nd century CE, The Infancy Gospel of Thomas emerged in written form after the now-canonical gospel texts. Like them, it includes oral stories circulating in early communities by both detractors of Christ and adherents (Upson-Saia 3) in addition to positing stories about Jesus's childhood to fill the gaps left open by other early gospels. The canonical gospels have little material directly dealing with Jesus's childhood or the time prior to his ministry, and thus his early life became fertile ground for speculation about how Jesus Christ would handle the challenges of what is now called childhood. Robert Pippin reads the Infancy Gospel as a kind of question about what it would mean for Jesus to work out both his humanity and divinity as a child (149). The Jesus of the Infancy Gospel acts much like a regular child, playing in the mud and going to school. However, this Jesus famously has a bad temper: he gets angry when his playtime is disrupted and cranky when people teach him things he doesn't want to be taught, and he goes so far as to curse children who disrupt his play (Burke 2.2). Jesus also already

knows how to read even though he's only five years old (5.9), and he lectures those around him about truth (5.6). This child Jesus is clearly aware of his divinity – he states that he was created before the world began (5.6) – but he also struggles to mature and manage his emotions within the contours of this realization. The Infancy Gospel gives an unflattering depiction of a child struggling with the multiplicity of his nature in an effort to use his knowledge and abilities in an appropriate way and relate to other people less temperamentally.

As Pippin points out, there are enough parallels between Coetzee's two Jesus novels and the Infancy Gospel for the Gospel to be read as an important influence. Both imagine the challenges of raising a precocious child. David, too, has taught himself to read, and he challenges his teachers and their modes of teaching, all the while proclaiming his superior knowledge and magical abilities. Both, directly or indirectly, evoke the lack of information about Jesus as a child – his character, his likes and dislikes, his encounters with other children and with learning, as well as his understanding of his relationship with God – in the canonical gospels. Coetzee's two novels are not an attempt to write an infancy gospel which fills in these gaps, nor are they any kind of historical account about Jesus's life. However, they do wrestle with central questions circling what it means to be a child inundated by learning experiences as well as emotional reactions. While there isn't anything directly mentioned in either novel about David being divine or actually having supernatural powers (though in *Childhood* he expresses a desire to be a magician when he grows up), David is intelligent and provocative, just like the Jesus of the Infancy Gospel. They are also the same age and have similar relationships to their father figures,

Joseph and Simón. Pippin describes David as “*more* realistically divine *and* human (age-appropriate human) than the biblical Jesus, and so is much more like Thomas’s Jesus” (150).

In the Infancy Gospel, Joseph gets frustrated with Jesus, who has been cursing other children when they bump into him or disrupt his play. They die from being cursed, and though Jesus later restores everyone, Joseph worries about his own reputation in the village as well as about Jesus’ development and learning (3.2-4.1). The same goes for Simón, who, like Joseph, tries to find a teacher for David while also fretting about David’s stubbornness. Both fathers aren’t the child’s “real” fathers so to speak, but both are concerned with the moral and educational upbringing of a demanding child who disrupts the society around them. However, both employ a hierarchical understanding of knowledge – they conceive of themselves as authority figures who dispense social and moral knowledge to the child.

The parallels between the Infancy Gospel and *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* demonstrate Coetzee’s interest in exploring non-canonical sources about Jesus, sources, perhaps, that are less flattering in many ways, but which grapple with what Adam Kirsch calls the “scandal, the strangeness, the exigency of Jesus’s message” in the midst of a deadening tradition. Coetzee is, as I noted earlier, ambivalent about the theological and cultural legacy of Christianity. The Dutch Reformed Church, which permeated life in the South Africa where Coetzee grew up, was an important vector for Coetzee’s ambivalence. Kirsch suggests that Coetzee aligned himself with Catholicism

as a boy as an act of dissent⁴² against the dominant religious culture surrounding him. For Kirsch, *The Childhood of Jesus* stages a similar kind of speculative rebellion: “Coetzee presents Novilla as a society in which all problems have been solved, and he wants to know what happens when Jesus is born into a kind of paradise. How can the antinomian power of his message confront a world in which everyone lives happily according to the law?”

The short answer is: not easily, and I think Coetzee’s use of the Infancy Gospel, a Gospel deemed heretical by Irenaeus in the 2nd century, prompts a unique reflection on the relationship between disruption and an anesthetized society. Desire and passion become disrupting forces to the status quo. By engaging the Infancy Gospel in addition to the canonical gospels, Coetzee indicates an interest in stories and ideas that were part of early Christianity yet also challenged the prevailing tradition that was being shaped. These other strands sought to explore the relationship between the divine and the human, imagining it as more textured and fraught than the canonical gospels later decided upon. An often-redacted record of the struggles between proponents of Christianity and their opponents over the portrayal of Jesus, the Infancy Gospel displays a roughened, “self-indulgent” Jesus that needed to be “domesticated” (Upson-Saia 3). Coetzee isn’t concerned with ironing out these accounts or smoothing the visualization of Jesus, focusing instead on the issues that they highlight – particularly, concerns with

⁴² Coetzee’s interest in Catholicism can also be understood as an act of dissent against apartheid. The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa was closely aligned with the apartheid regime. It is the church of Afrikanerdom, and Coetzee’s father was an Afrikaner. Thus, his childhood turn to Catholicism also possesses a political motive — it’s a way to express his rejection of the ruling National Party and the apartheid system. My thanks to Alice Brittan for pointing this out.

divine and human knowledge and how (or if) affect and passion can have a place within such knowledge. Does the divine overcome human emotion and desire or render it superfluous? How do passion and desire relate to the law, psychiatry, and education systems, all of which have often been situated as secular replacements for authority after the waning of religious political influence?

Given both these questions and the nature of intertextuality in Coetzee, in which he treats the gospels neither as authoritative nor as sacred text, reading *David* as a metafictional allusion to Jesus tangles a number of threads together. To be sure, there is little doubt in reviewers' minds that the Jesus of Coetzee's two titles is an allusion – if a complex one – to the Jesus of the biblical Gospels, to the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and ultimately to perceptions of Jesus that have grown up theologically and narratively within Christianity. It is, however, not a historical account of Jesus's life or childhood. *David*'s very name traces the lineage of Christ. However, is the child *David* definitively supposed to be Jesus? Is he, as Kirsch asks, "the Christ of the next world, who will grow up to be its saviour? Is he, perhaps, the reincarnation of the historical Jesus?" At one point, *David* writes "I am the truth" on the school chalkboard in a very obvious echo of Jesus' words from John 14:6, evoking Jesus' messianic and salvific role within Christianity.

However, deciding whether *David* is supposed to be wholly a Jesus-figure – a new Messiah for a postsecular age – runs persistently into questions of both referentiality and deferral. It is clearly not a case of historical re-writing, as *Novilla* possesses no clear history of its own nor any particular temporality. But neither do I think that the reference

to Jesus is simply ironic, a case of Inés and Simón – wishful parents – regarding David as a special child. I wonder instead if the parallels with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas pose questions about identity and knowledge, about how Simón and Inés believe in David and want a kind of reassurance that their faith in this person, their adopted son, isn't misplaced. It also raises questions about David's penchant for saving others, as Dmitrii notes, but also about ideas of the child and childhood. By approaching Jesus as a child, or concerning himself with texts that foreground Jesus' childhood, Coetzee shifts the focus from Jesus' theological messianism and the expectations, responsibilities, and politics tied to his adult mission to a focus on Jesus' becoming, his growth, and his relationships as a child to others around him, including his parental figures.

In this latter sense, the Infancy Gospel and Coetzee's novels move past questions of divinity and the young Jesus' struggles of identity into the realm of relationships. The young Jesus upsets the social hierarchies in place, sometimes leading to great damage, but also exposing deadened or desensitized epistemological assumptions about learning, about sociality, and about the divine, in the community around him. This Jesus feels and expresses his passions while learning how to balance these affects.⁴³ For Upson-Saia, young Jesus' struggles to manage his anger in the Infancy Gospel are often characterized as "unbecoming portrayals" and have "caused a good deal of consternation among contemporary commentators" (3) and most likely for early Christian audiences as well. Such strong displays of anger are at odds with a conception of the Messiah as a figure of

⁴³ Kristi Upson-Saia argues that the Infancy Gospel represents an attempt by early Church communities to incorporate and thus forestall critiques of Jesus' character by opponents of Christianity. It functions as a way to "control his [Jesus'] public image" (38).

power and control, a leader who doesn't surrender to feminized emotions.⁴⁴ It leads to a representational question about Jesus – how is Jesus to be depicted with regards to human emotions? Can the divine and the messianic only be imaged in certain, restrictive ways, and who gets to decide what those ways are?

In Coetzee's novels, these questions are funneled through both David and Simón's experiences of a similar challenge: how to navigate passions and a strong will, given a radically unpredictable and unknowable spiritual landscape. It is a challenge that is by no means resolved at the end of *The Schooldays of Jesus*, when David's benefactors, the three sisters Consuelo, Alma, and Valentina,⁴⁵ decide that he is still too disruptive. He possesses a messianic impulse – a desire to care for people outcast by their own disorderly passions such as Senor Daga and Dmitri and to save the weak like the animals El Rey and the duck killed by another little boy – but he remains resistant to working with other people aside from the Arroyos. He has a capacity for imagination and a concern for other beings but doesn't know how to harness or direct these traits. However, as Ileana Dmitriu comments, "To pursue the spiritual path [in *The Childhood of Jesus*] is to overcome one's initial, child-like consolations of easy salvation, and create bridges between the opposites of reason and faith, fact and fiction, and good and evil" (76). Though Dmitriu uses the term bridging, I see David's and Simón's spiritual path as a hunger for a space of engagement in which to transfigure the gap between the mind and

⁴⁴ See Catherine Keller's *God and Power* (2005) for a look at how messianism has often been entangled with masculinized, militaristic notions of power and sovereignty on personal and political levels.

⁴⁵ Their names possess metaphorical significance related to virtues when translated from Spanish: Alma means soul, Consuelo indicates comfort, and Valentina signifies strength and bravery.

the body and the relational distance between the characters themselves. They seek a possibility for which they as yet have no language or model.

It is within this new space of possibility that I suggest Coetzee's preoccupation with new life and salvation finds its messianic pulse, going beyond its references to either the gospels or the Infancy Gospel. David cannot save people alone, though he can expose the stiffness and unresponsiveness of people around him, including Simón. Where David as a child can directly voice and enact his emotions, Simón struggles with how to express his feelings, in large part constrained by societal expectations about how adults are to behave. Inés often censures his frustrated outbursts about David, as do people like Elena in *The Childhood of Jesus*.⁴⁶ But Simón is sensitive to the critiques of others, taking his time to mull over their words – including David's devastating claim that he is beyond redemption – and ultimately risking his sense of self as well as his epistemological assumptions about the world when he learns to dance. In his review of *The Schooldays of Jesus* for the *New York Times*, Jack Miles goes so far as to suggest that “[t]he adopting father rather than the adopting son is perhaps the real Christ figure and the real learner in these Jesus novels in which Jesus is nowhere mentioned.” Miles reads against the grain in looking at Simón as “the self-appointed savior” of the novels rather than David, as he simultaneously associates Simón's willingness to learn and parent with a kind of Christ-like sacrifice.

⁴⁶ Inés often refuses to speak about her passions or emotions, telling David that her passions are “none of your business” (*Schooldays* 20).

Instead of yoking specific characters to Jesus, however, I wonder if the messianic might more productively be thought in what is asked of the characters and how they respond. If neither the characters nor their society hold to any conception of a deity, what do characters believe in? What forms can redemption take? Who's going to save Simón, for example, when he despairs about David and about his own passionless identity, when he starts drinking and sleeping more and going outside less? A simplistic faith in David as his child isn't enough, nor can he find solace in writing or his relationship with Inés. Ana Magdalena – the primary dance teacher at the school David attends in Estrella – had been the closest figure to a deity for him: she appeared as an almost other-worldly person to him, with alabaster skin and a discomfiting gaze that could see through to his soul (93).⁴⁷ She is murdered, however, and Simón is left without any kind of strong figure to give him answers about how to teach David or even how to reach new life. He can't even find the textual answer he seeks, as there are no extant copies of Senor Arroyo's book on numbers and dance. In other words, he can't find a *llave maestra* – the universal key to all doors mentioned at the beginning of *Childhood* – or a saviour figure to guide him and David to new life together.

The answer isn't wholly structural or institutional, either, as Simón discovers in Novilla, but it does have roots in how passion is conceptualized. At first, it appears as if he has everything he needs to make a new life in Novilla, where all people are welcome

⁴⁷ The figure of Ana Magdalena in *The Schooldays of Jesus* is an interesting one. Her name bears traces of Mary Magdalene, a follower of Christ who is frequently mentioned in the canonical gospels and in apocryphal Gnostic gospels, but who was also widely believed to be a prostitute. In Coetzee's novel, Ana Magdalena unsettles Simón, but he also becomes strangely obsessed with her.

and have access to ample resources to ease the transition into a new environment. Simón may have trouble with the idea of a supernatural deity who saves everyone, but he also comes to feel very dissatisfied with a city that has saved people in its own institutional way. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, Novilla has a peaceful society where everyone can easily and affordably access public housing and transportation, but at the same time it's a society sanitized of desire and passion – it has philosophy and rationality, but it has no sense of material or spiritual hunger. Instead, Simón and David are invited on a picnic that has only unsalted bean paste and crackers, and Simón is repeatedly told how sex is base and ugly; he can't even get into a brothel because there's too much paperwork.

But human beings cannot live on bean paste alone and Simón questions the anemic nature of Novilla. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, his physical and sexual appetites threaten to disrupt his relationships with his neighbors and co-workers. As Baylee Brits notes, "Simón's desire to lend weight and value to his world lies in stark contradiction to the organization of Novilla and the disposition of its inhabitants" (134). By *Schooldays*, however, he has either been worn down or has (mostly) learned to keep his hunger to himself, even as he discovers that there are many other people who secretly struggle with their passions. Dmitri calls Simón "our famous man of reason" who cultivates a façade which covers over the "waves" and "ripples" in his own soul (171).

If anything, Simón has a new yearning in *Schooldays* – a desire to offer useful guidance to David in response to the child's many questions, to teach him well in addition to functioning as an important parental figure for him. But he is tired, saying of David, "He is like a bulldozer. He has flattened us. We have been flattened. We have no more

resistance” (40). Shortly after, he has a moment of pedagogical and psychological breakdown when he wonders if David really listens to him after all:

He would like to believe that he is guiding the child through the maze of the moral life when, correctly, patiently, he answers his unceasing *Why* questions. But where is there any evidence that the child absorbs his guidance or even hears what he says?...“You tell me you are thirsty and I offer you a glass of water. Instead of drinking the water you pour it out in the sand...Today, at last, I am tired of offering you water.” (*Schooldays* 51)

David’s only 6 years old at this point, but Simón can’t understand why David prefers his dance classes and its mumbo-jumbo about numbers coming from the sky.

The dance school’s philosophy sounds very much like a kind of bizarre quasi-spirituality, a mysticism without core texts or core figures and possessing only a fuzzy sense of the importance of numbers and stars. Ana Magdalena, the co-director of the dance Academy in Estrella, tells her students and their parents that language has limits, but that there are “a handful” of primal words and numbers that can evoke the transcendental movement of the universe and the stars (67-8). The Academy uses dance to “guide the souls” of the students (68) towards that dance, and David intuitively understands both the dances and their relationships with the numbers. Simón doesn’t believe any of it, denying as he does any possible connection with transcendence or something beyond the world around him. Ana Magdalena’s description nonpluses him, as it is unlike any philosophy or spirituality that he has heard of. He thinks of her as “a preacher. She and her husband have made up a religion and now they are hunting for

converts. David is too young, too impressionable to be exposed to that kind of thing” (75). He agrees to let David continue at the school simply to keep the peace, even while he tries to protect the boy from such fantastical notions.

At first glance, the Academy’s philosophy of numbers functions much differently than any kind of Christian theology of transcendence or redemption. It has no god, no core texts (except, perhaps, the short book Senor Arroyo wrote, but this text is not used to teach students), and no institutional identity beyond its provisional arrangements above the town Museum. Christianity focuses not on numbers but on the word, the logos, which Christ represents as he plays a central role in the redemption of the universe. However, the Academy’s ideas about numbers have a deeply-rooted lineage in ancient and medieval philosophy, particularly that of Plato and Neoplatonists such as Plotinus.⁴⁸ Plato’s thoughts on numbers influenced numerous philosophers connected with his school; his work invited both disagreements and modifications, but nonetheless remained an important touchpoint in ancient and medieval philosophy.

Plato conceived of numbers distinctly from how Aristotle would later come to see them – primarily as an instrument of measurement and quantification. Instead, Plato viewed numbers as integral to understanding both the unity and multiplicity of the universe. *Numbers* as a word for multiplicity is implicated in *number*, which is part of the activity of the universe’s ontological substance. Though being substance, number is not a deity: its presence in early philosophy is an attempt to figure out the relationship

⁴⁸ See Valeria Mosca’s detailing of Platonic influences in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2016). It is also possible to link the numerology in Coetzee’s novels to the Kabbalah tradition of numbers and mysticism; Joseph Dan writes about this history.

between “the overwhelming diversity in physical reality and the underlying principle of order in it” (Svetla Slaveva-Griffin 3). This relationship fuses the material and immaterial, wherein the tangible participates in a greater sense of order.

The debate between Plato and Aristotle about numbers parallels the differences Senor Arroyo of the dance academy has with his friend Moreno in *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Moreno studies the life work of an ancient philosopher named Metros; Metros is a figure not unlike Aristotle, one who endorses the idea of numbers as a mechanism for measurement. For Moreno, Metros also “marks a turning point in human history: the moment when we collectively gave up the old way of apprehending the world, the unthinking, animal way...to discover new laws, laws that even the heavenly bodies have to obey” (242). Senor Arroyo remains friends with Moreno, but diverges drastically from the latter about the place of numbers and the way to know the universe:

we believe...music-dance...is its own way of apprehending the universe, the human way but also the animal way, the way that prevailed before the coming of Metros...we do not distinguish between mind and body. The teachings of Metros constituted a new, mental science, and the knowledge they brought into being was a new, mental knowledge. The older mode of apprehension comes from body and mind moving together, body-mind, to the rhythm of music-dance. (243)

Arroyo denies the idea that numbers simply measure and quantify aspects of existence – an instrumentalist notion of life that at best ignores or at worst suppresses different forms of knowing. Arroyo rejects Moreno and Metros’ teaching on the grounds that it instates

a division between body and mind, human and animal; the result is an epistemological standpoint that takes little notice of the embodied knowledge that emerges from music-dance. For the Arroyos, numbers and dance are intimately interconnected and together they communicate knowledge distinct from a “mental science” that uses numbers as a tool for measurement.

While Arroyo had at one point written a text on his own philosophy of dance, that text has since been lost, and with it any of Arroyo’s more precise views on dance. He often declines to go into more detail about his thoughts, leaving it unclear whether dance implies elevation of the soul through a hierarchy of being towards the cosmos and its principles of number, or if it is a form of worship and praise, or an attempt to “free body and soul from the constraints and suffering of the material world” (Syson Carter 8). At the very least, in *Schooldays* dance functions as an embrace of the body’s capacity to communicate and unite, perhaps similar to Plato’s understanding of number as both mediating the singular and the multiple and participating in a cosmic ordering of the universe. As Simón notes of David’s motivations for dancing, “By joining in the dance of the stars, he [David] would like to believe, we participate in their heavenly being” (*Schooldays* 202).

Françoise Syson Carter highlights these aspects of dance in her exploration of sacred dance in Renaissance art and literature. She traces “how the classical idea of dancing gods was gradually Christianised by Neoplatonists and the Church Fathers” (4), underscoring the long history of sacred dance in philosophy, theology, and mysticism. Given that there are no extant copies of Senor Arroyo’s text on music-dance and thus no

systematic treatise on its function or philosophy beyond the words of Ana Magdalena and Senor Arroyo, I suggest that Coetzee is more interested in the general philosophical lineage and knowledge of dance rather than the thought of any particular philosopher or theologian. In the absence of a structured religious institution and the presence of a social order built on rationality, the Arroyo's conception of music-dance employs its own understanding of the sacred, particularly the unity that is possible between an individual and a greater order hinted at by numbers and stars.⁴⁹

The idea of dance and numbers in both texts, especially *The Schooldays of Jesus*, weaves together passion and rationality. Karin Schlapbach writes that "Dance is a medium of the human body. It is dynamic and transitory, but it nevertheless possesses a physical and tangible concreteness. It is ephemeral, but it is also a site of unmediated, bodily experience for both performers and spectators. This oscillation between presence and absence fascinated ancient authors." Dance resists narrative: the dances in the novels are dances of abstract entities (numbers), not stories; they are understood only by those who already have their ears tuned to hear, like the sister Alma, who is the gentle sister most understanding of David's dances and ideas and whose very name means soul. Both the aesthetic and embodied aspects of dance push the limits of representation – it is non-semantic but nonetheless communicative and open to an unspecified, and thus uncontained, sense of the mystical or transcendental. The dance of the numbers

⁴⁹ Whether Coetzee takes on the tenets of mathematical platonism is a different argument that exceeds the scope of this chapter. According to Øystein Linnebo in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, mathematical Platonism is "the metaphysical view that there are abstract mathematical objects whose existence is independent of us and our language, thought, and practices." The question could thus be asked if Coetzee regards numbers as separate objects, though the topic is a hotly debated point of discussion in terms of its mathematic as well as metaphysical implications.

therefore holds open an embodied space for characters to explore meanings and modes of communication that have previously been foreclosed to them.

This potential for communicating through the body becomes vital for Simón, who has persistently struggled to speak and connect with other people despite his thoughtful, rational efforts. As a result, he becomes frustrated, especially with David, who has “tired [Simón] out with his wilfulness” (*Schooldays* 40). Simón’s frustration betrays a basic, raw need: he wants someone to listen to him, be it through his teaching or his writing. When he attends the local college for composition classes, he writes about his relationship with Dmitri and David instead of focusing on the course assignments; he is subsequently asked to leave the program because the instructor has neither the time nor the emotional energy to deal with Simón’s implicit pleas to be heard and understood (182). But while Simón longs for someone to read his own story and acknowledge his moral and relational quandaries, he himself has a hard time listening to other people, including David. Indeed, many of the characters don’t want to listen – Inés only talks about her job and doesn’t want to hear about Simón’s job as a mail carrier. David doesn’t want to listen to his teachers because he thinks he already knows more than they do. Another character, Dmitri, who is a museum caretaker but who commits a murder, doesn’t want to listen to what the court says about justice and guilt. The failure to listen in each of these instances points to a relational distance that the characters themselves have no desire to bridge.

But listening is an act of attention, and in *The Schooldays of Jesus* it’s also an important form of recognition. David won’t perform his dances in front of Simón because he says that Simón doesn’t recognize him. Simón doesn’t comprehend David’s claim – he

loves David and wants the boy both to be happy and to get a good education. Isn't parental faith enough? Simón says that he wishes to understand, but Senor Arroyo notes that Simón's desire to understand is instead an appeal for certainty and for a definite answer: "You wish to understand. You address me as if I were the sage of Estrella, the man with all the answers. I am not. I do not have answers for you" (96).

David's frequent use of the term recognition indicates that it possesses a special valence for him. It doesn't involve political/legal recognition or the desire for resources, nor does it imply basic recognition of David's personhood. Instead, I wonder if recognition functions for David on an epistemic level, linked to his strong sense of selfhood and how he relates to others. It signals a kind of valuing of his self that Simón cannot see because Simón remains enveloped within a hierarchical framing of the parent-child relationship, one rooted in controlling the child's disruption rather than exploring it. Simón imagines himself as the one who teaches and explains morality, basic life skills, and social proficiency. He thus has trouble imagining David in other ways, particularly with attending to the ways David would like to be seen and heard.

Recognition has an ethical dimension tied to its epistemological one, though there are significant discontinuities between the two: epistemology "undertak[es] to construct the other as object of knowledge" (Spivak 195). Such a position carries with it the possibility of reducing others to knowable objects or to copies of the self and of thus of subsuming them within our own dominating frames of knowledge.⁵⁰ In other words,

⁵⁰ See, for example, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's work on ethics in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas is concerned with ethics in the face of the alterity and unknowability of the other. We are called to be

epistemology can become a way to control the other and construct them according to our own ways of knowing the world. Rita Felski grants the dangers of epistemology, observing that recognition entails giving up epistemological certainty in the face of ethical necessity: “Ethics means accepting the mysteriousness of the other, its resistance to conceptual schemes; it means learning to relinquish our own desire to know” (2008, 26). Senor Arroyo says as much to Simón in denying that he has any answers.

However, like the messianic, I think of recognition as a task, not just an event. It requires the “effortful” (Spivak 18) work of recalibrating one’s assumptions and relations with others. This is Simón’s task: to acknowledge that knowing can take many forms and to understand that David is asking him to imagine different ways of knowing and thus of relating to the child. Recognition can involve “clarifying self-scrutiny [with] the latter process...likely to be discomfiting, even unpleasant, requiring a reckoning with one’s own less appealing motivations and desires” (Felski 47). For Felski, recognition means hearing echoes of oneself in a text or a character or another person, while also reflecting on our “failings and blind spots” in how we “misjudge” (48) ourselves and others. It is a case of responding to familiar, recognizable pulses in others, be it text or person, while attending to their differences and their own desires in how they want to be seen.

David’s desire for recognition from Simón requires that Simón examine their relationship from a new angle. Recognition here functions as a different kind of belief or faith for David, one which reframes Simón’s expectations of parenting. David wants

responsible and answer the demands of the other nonetheless and not to try to subsume them to our own frameworks of power and control.

Simón to see past all the latter's rational ideas about life and embrace ideas about dance and numbers that challenge both his thinking and his understanding of his own identity as a person of reason. While David poses the question of recognition to Simón, reiterating even at the end of the novel "I want to be recognized!" (231), Coetzee asks the reader what they recognize in David. The issue circles back to how David's connections to Jesus Christ, in either capacity as historical figure or as divine Messiah, are to be read. Is David to be recognized as Christ and thus as a messianic event? Or, are we as readers to re-examine our own assumptions about what we think we recognize?

Certainly, there are textual cues that point to David's exceptionality in many senses. Whereas Simón wrestles with his own identity – over whether he is too rational or a bad father – and denies any possibility of belief or transcendence, David seems surprisingly secure in his own identity. He has a true self that is not definable by language. When he is introduced to new people as "David", he always rejects that name and says it's not his *real* name. This is perhaps partly why David takes to dance so quickly – he understands the limits of language for communication and disagrees with the level of rational control of the self for which Simón advocates. The self contains possibilities for feeling, expressing, and being beyond that which can be contained by reason or categorization alone. Though he is a child, David seems to know very clearly who he is, though Simón passes this off as one of his quirks. Simón is mostly concerned about David's inclination for relationships with unsavoury people like Senor Daga in *The Childhood of Jesus* and Dmitri in *The Schooldays of Jesus*, though critics such as Ileana Dmitriu identify this inclination as a child's desire for saving others (77).

Despite David's self-assurance about his own identity, it is far from clear that he stands out as a saviour figure who initiates the transformation of other characters. Simón's struggles encourage a reading that the messianic is a task and not simply an event. David thinks he knows who he is, but the other characters like Simón and Dmitri don't. They struggle to recognize and parse their own feelings and they struggle to connect with each other. There tend to be two poles in how they express feelings, evidenced by the lacklustre relationships of Novilla and the disorderly passions of Estrella. Where Simón is told to relinquish his passions in Novilla, in Estrella the Museum caretaker Dmitri worships and lusts after the dance teacher Ana Magdalena, which produces terrible violence.⁵¹ Both represent extremes, and yet both long for a new sense of life that will bring them balance.

In *Schooldays*, the trial of Dmitri for murder brings out a host of questions about justice, guilt, and what it means to be saved and achieve what Dmitri calls new life. As all of the people in Novilla and Estrella are migrants who have been 'washed clean' and experienced new life at least once, the second reference to new life is interesting not only for its Christian connotation but also its relation to justice and psychiatry. Psychiatry, according to Dmitri, gives one a "new head" (156) where one yet again forgets one's past life and memories. Dmitri doesn't want the new life offered by psychiatry – he wants to work in the salt mines in payment for his crime and hopes for some kind of afterlife where

⁵¹ There is one character, Senor Daga, in *Childhood* who also commits crimes (mostly theft). He too offers an example of passion run amok, especially as he is rude and disruptive. Perhaps he can be read as a precursor to Dimitri in *Schooldays*.

his debt will be repaid and his guilt will be absolved. Dmitri is ambivalent about whether confession can bring about his salvation or only hard work can.⁵²

Simón's contemplation of new life is quite different from Dmitri's, though they both undergo similar experiences of self-questioning. Simón remains weighted by the heaviness of his responsibilities for David and his failures of recognition, while at the same time continually struggling to tamp down and manage his desire for a different state of being for himself. He demonstrates a desire to confess in the sense that Coetzee highlights about Dostoevsky's work in *Doubling the Point* – a hunger after truth, to “tell the truth to and for oneself” (291-292). Coetzee's concern – or at least one that he identifies in Dostoevsky – is that this activity can become endless and sterile, needing to be relieved by some sort of faith or grace. Certainly, Simón attempts such a truth telling, notably in his composition class in *The Schooldays of Jesus*, where he writes a kind of diary instead of following the class exercises, but its therapeutic value, much less its redemptive value, is not certain for him.

In this concern with guilt and confession, the Jesus novels possess several similarities to Coetzee's much earlier work *Disgrace* (1999), which was similarly occupied by the question of confession. The main character of that novel, David Lurie, contests the university's framing of confession. A major element of *Disgrace*, however, arises from the lack of any extraordinary moment of ethical or spiritual clarity or epiphany. Instead, David Lurie stumbles towards what Alyda Faber argues is a “transforming disgrace” (305)

⁵² Dmitri's character shows Coetzee's continued interest in Calvinism and Dostoevsky's work. See Vincent Pecora (2015) and Kai Wiegandt (2017) for further discussion of Coetzee's interest in Dostoevsky, confession, and forgiveness.

or what Dudley terms an “anti-epiphany” (112). Both Faber and Dudley point to Coetzee’s postsecular orientation: ethics emerges in encounters and relationships with others rather than through adherence to a theology. Ethics is thus partial and personal, and transformation is never guaranteed, yet the desire for different modes of relationality and different epistemologies or ways of knowing the world remains persistent and critical. Grace and faith, if they are to inform such an ethics and epistemology, require openness and responsiveness to a sense of the unknown or even unthinkable that revitalizes life. As Alice Brittan observes in her reading of *Disgrace*, “Unless grace continually renews itself by admitting the unthinkable, it becomes no more than a closed routine, a perceptual and ethical limit rather than a moving horizon” (500). *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays* once more ponder how the unthinkable can break the sterile, self-referential loop of truth-telling in a postsecular landscape. If there is no specific messiah to initiate the unthinkable as an event and act as an anchor point for truth, what beliefs and practices are left to the characters?

I suggest that in the Jesus novels Coetzee takes a much different tack than in *Disgrace* by exploring the possibility of the unthinkable through the passion of dance and its evocation of transcendence. It’s an unusual notion of transcendence, to be sure. It hints at Christian mysticism even as it is tied to dance, numbers, and the stars in ways that harken back to Platonic thought. Nonetheless, it demonstrates once more Coetzee’s penchant for intertextuality, and his need to think through embodiment issues, from a variety of philosophical, theological, and cultural lenses. His indebtedness to such diverse

genealogies of thought reveals a wariness of frameworks that remain trapped within their own parameters of thinkability, forestalling chances for renewal and change.

Transcendence implies ascension and movement out of one's immediate situation, but not necessarily detachment or independence from one's material condition.⁵³ Dancing reaches through the body toward the unity – or at least co-existence – of reason and eros, linking the sensuousness of the body and its combination of physical and immaterial being to the substance that makes up the cosmos.⁵⁴ Certainly, dancing and music play an important role in the awakening of Simón's soul and the interruption of his established patterns of thinking, though he has demonstrated a continued sense of longing for a different, more enlivened state of being throughout both novels.⁵⁵ Ileana Dmitriiu characterizes his sensibility as “a painful longing for something invisible, a yearning for a state of being that has not yet emerged; an obsessive reaching towards wholeness...[the characters are] longing for an element beyond themselves: a longing for an irreducible, or radical alterity (or god?)” (70). While Dmitriiu focuses on materiality in *The Childhood of Jesus* and might not term the longing she describes transcendental, the different state of being she evokes can lie alongside a more capacious understanding of transcendence. Some of these possible understandings include a general sense of the

⁵³ The Oxford English Dictionary includes both definitions for transcendence – elevation and ascension beyond physical limits as well as to be “above and independent of: esp. said of the deity in relation to the universe.”

⁵⁴ Though as Syson Carter and Svetla Griffin point out, there were many variations of thought on the exact nature of the relationship between the human and the cosmos, especially among Plato's students and the later Neoplatonists.

⁵⁵ Dancing implies connection with others through movement as well as containing spiritual dimensions. Hasidic dance offers one long-standing tradition of how dance occupies a vital place communally and spiritually.

more-than-rational or that which exceeds conventional or symbolic representation while being aware of the dangers often associated with transcendentalism – the inscription of a totalitarian deity or even western epistemological hegemony (Schwartz vii-viii). These possibilities are enfolded in the dancing of the numbers in *The Schooldays of Jesus*, where the numbers and the stars foreground a possibility not tied to any pre-existing religious system or set of beliefs in either Novilla or Estrella. Dance ushers in different potentialities that are neither strictly secular nor religious, yet wholly embodied and more-than-rational.

Where his earlier work held to the anti-epiphany, Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus* offers a tentative kind of epiphany, a moment of partial transcendence at the end, or at least a more-than-rational experience. Simón tells David that "the only way to be saved is to save oneself" (227), but he doesn't believe his own words because "if he, Simón, had to rely on himself, what hope would he have of salvation? Salvation from what? From idleness and from aimlessness." Simón desperately wonders if David is right when he says that Simón is past redemption and if he has reached a state where he is unteachable: "David thinks I am unteachable, past redemption. Is there not time for a single lesson? A quick introduction to the mysteries of the dance?" (258). Redemption in part means letting go of the self, abdicating control and accepting vulnerability in order for grace to work or new possibilities for relationship to flourish. It also implies a brokenness of self and relationship that must be acknowledged, though Simón has not really wanted to question himself about his own assumptions, be it about the dance academy or about his method of teaching David or even about his own state of being. He

has maintained a forced division between reason and eros, between reason and the body, perpetuating through his teaching of David the notion that reason must govern human behaviour. As David says – though Simón argues he is wrong – “You always say that passion is bad...Inés too. You both hate passion” (136). Simón himself thinks that he is not on close terms with his soul...Unable to see his soul, he has not questioned what people tell him about it: that it is a dry soul, deficient in passion. His own, obscure intuition – that, far from lacking in passion, his soul aches with longing for it knows not what – he treats skeptically as just the kind of story that someone with a dry, rational, deficient soul will tell himself to maintain his self-respect. (195)

The redemption Simón seeks involves healing a painful split, but it also entails a process of tentatively stepping into new life. However, the new life that is spoken of so often in both novels turns out to have a plurality of possibilities, and not all positive ones. For the immigrants arriving in Novilla, new life entails adapting to a new country, a new mode of living, and new codes for social relations. It offers baptism into opportunity, though at the cost of forgetting completely the old life, and thus of obviating their old selves in order to receive new ones. Additionally, Novilla can seem tepid and dulling of the senses rather than stimulating, so new life in that place involves habituation to a lukewarm existence.

Estrella moves under a different star: in contrast to Novilla, the inhabitants of Estrella speak openly about the intertwining relationship of life and passion. The city possesses a dance academy for children that differs drastically from a traditional school

(especially the reform school surrounded by a wire fence to which David was sent in *The Childhood of Jesus*) and focuses on a pedagogy based on embodiment and relationship with the universe. One of David's benefactors, the sister Alma, speaks hopefully about passion and its importance to the very foundation of the world:

'I think passion is good,' says Alma. 'Without passion the world would stop going round. It would be a dull and empty place. In fact' – she looks to her sisters – 'without passion we wouldn't be here at all, not one of us. Nor the pigs nor the cows nor the chickens. We are all here because of passion, someone's passion for someone else. You hear it in the springtime, when the air is thick with bird calls, each bird searching for a mate. If that isn't passion, what is? Even the molecules. We wouldn't have water if oxygen didn't have a passion for hydrogen.' (136)

Simón thinks of Alma as different from her sisters – as perhaps only a half-sister – so her views on passion seem in the minority. Nonetheless, she vocalizes a dynamic, even spiritual view of life that neither her level-headed sisters nor Simón or Inés quite understand or appreciate. For Alma, passion imbues the very molecules of life with love and connection and thus embodies a creative potential rather than simply a destructive impulse. New life is thus an exciting prospect for her, one not tied to blandness but a possibility embedded in textures of daily existence. Not coincidentally, she is also one of the few people who 'recognize' David and understand the importance of the dances. When David performs a dance for the three sisters, Alma is the only person to understand him and the meaning of the dance. Consuelo asks her to explain, but Alma says, "There is

nothing to explain” (138). Explanation would mean appropriating David and his dance to a regime of knowledge that requires language to perceive and explain. Alma’s form of understanding recognizes without diminishing the alterity of either David or the dance.

Alma verbalizes the most hopeful possibility for new life, while other trajectories for new life emerge and are debated – justice, psychiatry, confession, and even the possibility of an afterlife – during Dmitri’s trial for murder, and Dmitri discusses these options while he is on trial. According to Dmitri’s understanding, psychiatry offers new life only through giving one a ‘new head,’ which once again entails a loss of memory and with it a sense of self. He refuses the court’s attempt to measure his crime because he wants to be “master of his fate” (*Schooldays* 156) and because the price for receiving new life is too high and is rooted in deception: “Yes, they want to give me a new head. It’s the price of forgiveness...don’t ever listen when they promise you a new life. The new life is a lie, my boy, the biggest lie of all. There is no next life. This is the only one there is. Once you let them chop off your head, that’s the end of you. Just darkness and darkness and nothing but darkness” (157). According to his logic, new life means yet again giving up the old self to become what others (including the psychiatric professionals and the courts) thinks he should be. Dmitri thinks that justice, too, is an incomplete route for achieving new life, and he seeks new life through penitence and paying off his debt through physical labour, rejecting the court’s attempts to save him.

Neither the justice system nor psychiatry offer the new life that Simón ultimately desires when he opens himself to redemption. He doesn’t want a new head, nor does he think much about a potential afterlife. But, as Ileana Dmitriu observes, Simón exhibits a

yearning for a sense of life that breaks the haze he has been living in, a lethargy produced in part by an unfulfilling job and a fear that he is no longer important to David. Financial and social security have not been enough to help him manage his growing depression as he gets caught in a dispirited loop of sameness and lassitude.

Though he resists it at first, cloaked as he is in the rhetoric and methods of reason and personal exhaustion, redemption comes to possess a mystical tinge that contains the seeds of what Simón had considered unthinkable. It involves the awakening of his soul, harking back to what Ana Magdalena calls “the training of the soul through music and dance” (*Schooldays* 43) in the “direction of the good” (44). That being said, the new life Simón seeks through dance at the end of *The Schooldays of Jesus* is neither a panacea nor is it assured. It is a process filled with uncertainty, appearing as a gradual emergence of the soul from its torpor. Simón begins to listen to the music at the Academy where he has previously had so much trouble listening to others, and he begins to feel it working its way through him. The music stirs something in his soul, the “timid soul...which is indeed like a little bird [which] emerges and shakes its wings and begins to dance” (194). *The Schooldays of Jesus* ends with Simón taking his first dance lesson: “Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle” (260). Senor Arroyo emphasizes that dance unites body and mind. However, while dancing connects the individual to the cosmic dance of the stars and numbers which undergirds the universe, it is not a propositional activity. There is mystery at the core of the dance – mystery as to how exactly it connects a person to the stars and numbers, what kinds of knowledge it produces, and how the dancer communicates with others through the dance. For Simón, dance opens up a new channel

of communication to his own sense of selfhood; he participates in a “*rhythm of bodily becoming*” (LaMothe 583, emphasis original) in which his movements create “a range of sensory experience[s] and expression[s] that [he] would otherwise not have known possible” (583). Dance enacts a new “potential for sensing and responding, for seeing and understanding” (589), even though he is hesitant and timid.

Simón has been unable to take this step alone. He thinks back at one point to how David was frightened of falling through the gaps between numbers in *The Childhood of Jesus*. Yet, through the teaching and encouragement of Ana Magdalena and Senor Arroyo, David has found a way to bridge the numbers (*Schooldays* 208). The mystical experience found in dance comes through training, receptiveness, and involvement of the body – via relationship with others. While David is very good at dancing the numbers (better than the Arroyo children, he claims), the point of the dance is not to showcase brilliance or emphasize the individual – it is to herald a different way of being. It is fundamentally participatory and relational. The dancer unites with other dancers in some of the dances, with those audience members who recognize the message of the dance, and with the stars and the cosmos itself. David may continue to be somewhat self-absorbed, but his relationship with Simón offers a vital catalyst for Simón to broach the unthinkable and break out of his own sterile mode of being. Dance emerges as a shared image for them, one that can shape a different sensibility. Instead of a saviour or a

hierarchical implementation of redemption, dance heralds a participatory potentiality that is open to anyone.⁵⁶

As is the case with dance, redemption in part means letting go of the self, abdicating tight control to open up new possibilities for relationship to flourish, including one's relationship with one's own body as well as societal bodies. Simón may have little social influence in either Novilla or Estrella, but he vehemently holds onto his ownership over his own person and philosophy of life. In the schema he has constructed for himself, belief and rationality are opposed, and passion and philosophy vie with each other for power. Control is an exercise of the rational self on three counts: it disciplines desire, regulates morality, and orders society. Dmitri's violent murder of Ana Magdalena disrupts all three levels, offering an extreme example of disordered passions. Inés feels very strongly on this point, saying "So much the worse for passion...If there were less passion around the world would be a safer place" (131).

But Senor Arroyo suggests that there is a thread connecting all three levels that need not be violent or divisive – it can be healing, unifying, and passionate. Dmitri locates the central idea of a person's identity in the head and as tied to the rational, i.e., taking the head on and putting on a new one to become something new as well as a person redeemed. Such a psychiatric process of becoming a new person – according to Dmitri, at least – does not necessarily include a change in the body. This view, perhaps, suggests why dance is so important in the novel: Simón can only recognize a change through

⁵⁶ Perhaps functioning as an embodied form of Derrida's horizon of expectation (mentioned in Chapter Two).

embodiment – a physical, psychological, and spiritual change that takes place holistically with the mind and body participating together rather than separated into head versus body.⁵⁷ This embodied experience becomes a profoundly spiritual one for him, imbued with transcendence.⁵⁸ As he dances, “there is only the music...Over the horizon the first star begins to rise” (*Schooldays* 260); by the end of the novel, Simón has finally connected to the stars in some small measure.

Like the sister Alma, Senor Arroyo maintains a positive conception of passion and its spiritual role in life.⁵⁹ However, several co-workers and neighbours Simón encounters in Novilla caution him about the harmful side of passion, equating desire with lack. One may achieve one’s desires, but then a new desire will arise, leading to an endless cycle of desire motivated by desiring what one lacks. This conception stems from a wholly negative understanding of desire, where desire itself cannot be redeemed. It forever remains an unfulfilled yearning and an empty want. Various aspects of desire and passion are thus explored in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, demonstrating a profound questioning of the role of passion in everyday life and relationships. If desire can disrupt society, as with Dmitri’s actions, the argument that desire is lack also strips it of any positive political or ethical potential. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee resists “marking the ethical as the pole with the lack” in opposition to the political

⁵⁷ Dmitri also murders Ana Magdalena, the dance teacher, because of his lust for her, perhaps also indicating his assault on the relational aspects of dance.

⁵⁸ Dance also relies on improvisation and the unpredictable – both elements that Simón has fiercely resisted in his life.

⁵⁹ Although it is important to note that Alma experiences “black days” and melancholy (*Schooldays* 39). Her passion for the world is not a credulous one, but is rooted in her own struggles with what may be interpreted as depression.

(*Doubling the Point* 200; see also Poyne 3). The ethical and the private are imbricated in the political and public, but there remain significant questions about how they take shape for Coetzee in his two most recent novels, which are arguably less overtly political than earlier novels such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Disgrace*.

Does *The Schooldays of Jesus* move toward Rosi Braidotti's suggestion that undoing the "associat[ion of] desire with lack and negativity" spurs a new focus on the ethics of embodied beings (284)? Almost three decades ago in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee questioned whether he really opens a third position between or beyond the poles of positive and negative or whether he is "drawn or pushed there [to the positive or negative] by a force" (200). I suggest that by *Schooldays* the dance of the numbers represents an attempt to quite literally feel through and embody one such third possibility, but that it is dialogical in nature rather than a dialectical contest between the ethical and the political, the sacred and the secular, or the material and the immaterial. It can be linked to the postsecular impulse in Coetzee's work – a search for a possibility that combines aspects of both religion and secularism. The problem is thinking through this third possibility in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* without viewing it as either a place of anemic neutrality or escapism.

This struggle for a third possibility between two strong positions emerges most clearly in Simón's personal angst and offers a route for conceptualizing Simón's postsecular embodiment at the end of *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Simón's struggles with passion, rationality, and the spiritual find a familiar chord in what Richard Kearney calls anatheism, an idea which – like postsecularism – is similarly preoccupied with articulating

a third way of thinking, believing, and living beyond the binary of religious faith and atheism. Kearney explores faith that undergoes questioning and criticism, yet retains a yearning:

The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. What faith? No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith...It is a rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second naivete...[phenomenology's maxim is] 'Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe.' (28)

Kearney identifies anatheism as a form of faith that emerges after God: it continues to employ reason while also preserving a sense of wonder and openness to belief in the sacred and the more-than-rational, if not a particular model of deity. But anatheism isn't the triumphal atheism of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, or Sam Harris. Nor does anatheism engage in a dialectical progression beyond faith or reason, where one side triumphs over the other or a resolution is achieved (6). It also refuses to reinstate a clear boundary between the secular and the religious, regarding such a division as artificial and unproductive for thinking about the complexities of human belief. Instead, anatheism "revisits the sacramental structures of human sensation and embodiment so often occluded by the anticarnal dualisms of mainstream metaphysics and theology (soul versus body, spirit versus senses, mind versus matter)" (4). Anatheism's persistent focus on the body, wherein "[a]ntheist moments are experienced in our bones – moods, affects,

sense, emotions” (5) holds open a third space of enchantment and wonder beyond the frames of the sacred and the secular. Kearney further thinks of this space through the lens of John Keats’ idea of negative capability – “the ability to ‘find oneself in mystery, uncertainty and doubt without the irritable reaching after fact and reason’” (11).

Kearney’s focus on the embodied potential of faith and wonder after suspicion resonates with Simón’s crisis of self. Spurred by David’s broken faith in him, Simón’s uncertainty and disoriented drifting can certainly be read as another instance of lack in the novels – lack of a strong centre such as a meaning-giving deity, to use Dudley’s terms, as well as indicative of a desire that cannot be filled. However, his desire for new life, for the redemption that may be closed to him, does not solely have to be understood as lack, as the Novillans think. Instead, his desire enables him to trouble his own assumptions about faith and reason and take the first steps into dance – an activity he previously regarded as silly and part of the Arroyos’ superstitious beliefs. It’s a shaky desire, wobbling under the weight of Simón’s stifling experiences in Novilla, the pressures of parenting, and the suffocating sense of self control to which he holds. But it also amplifies a partial epiphany when he realizes that music and dance stir him in ways he didn’t know were possible. The very end of the novel models an embodied atheistic moment that Simón experiences in his bones, pervading his “moods, affects, sense, emotions” (5).

Simón’s experiences therefore constitute an atheistic journey – a physical and spiritual one – ineluctably woven into the streams of movement occurring over the two novels. *The Childhood of Jesus* begins with Simón concluding one journey via boat and starting a new one in Novilla, and it involves a process of acclimation. At the end of this

novel, he, Inés, and David flee to Estrella. This time, the journey is not so much about physical migration or social adjustments but about working into a sense of the spiritual and a shared sense of the sacred that is to be found in wonder and mystery. Ileana Dmitriu interprets their movement as a perpetual state of homelessness, one that is, moreover, mirrored by Simón's tension between the rational and desire, but which encapsulates the atheistic or postsecular vibration of the two books:

It is precisely in this state of homelessness – in the undecidability between rationality and imagination – that the novel 'feels' its religious impulse. Neither Simón's sterile doubts nor David's blind faith can offer ultimate answers to what is true and what is real. Neither can the novelist of *The Childhood of Jesus* offer ultimate answers. Rather, we the readers are offered religion without religion, wonder in the mud of the quotidian, the sacred imagined as earthed, embodied, ordinary and sublime...The religious impulse lies in the negation of opposites, in a faith based not on dogma or doctrine, but on a search for the inchoate, unimaginable and 'invisible' alternatives to polarities. (78)⁶⁰

Though I wouldn't describe it as the "negation of opposites" but rather its own unique possibility, the alternative Dmitriu identifies is the third position between the ethical and the political, the secular and the sacred, that has fascinated Coetzee throughout his

⁶⁰ Dmitriu's use of the phrase "religion without religion" references Derrida's desire to invoke the importance of religious ideas without necessarily holding religious faith or beliefs. Dmitriu's linking of religion without religion to images of homelessness and undecidability gesture to the difficulty of describing this alternate possibility.

career. Rather than suggesting that David is wholly and uncomplicatedly a Christ-figure who saves or redeems (though Dmitri suggests that David tries to save several figures in *The Childhood of Jesus*, including Marciano the stevedore and El Rey, the horse who dies), the meditation on new life and redemption comes through “the urge to find another realm of experience (for both David and Simón)...It is in this very determination to pursue the inexpressible amidst the shards of the real that the novel’s religious/weak messianic power can be located” (77).

The weak messianic power Dmitri highlights once more points to messianism as a shared project rather than located in a single character. It recalls Walter Benjamin’s remark that every person has “been endowed with a weak Messianic power” (1968, 263) to help redeem the past instead of waiting for the Messiah to arrive in the future. Benjamin’s weak messianic power emphasizes each person’s responsibility as well as the shared nature of that responsibility; Benjamin thus recasts attention from a future temporality to the present. Coetzee’s novels, however, erase any sense of a past: Simón declares “There is no before. There is no history...we are plunged into the here and now” (*Schooldays* 17). This erasure challenges the possibility of redeeming the past on Benjamin’s terms – how can the past be redeemed when society has no collective memory of it? This shared amnesia is never resolved in either novel.

I suggest that the idea of redemption is re-situated from memory to imagination and the repair of intimate relationships. Simón’s relentless focus on the present is not inconsistent with Benjamin’s emphasis on the ethical urgency of each person’s responsibilities in the now. Simón keenly feels such responsibility, especially as a parent,

but he has yet to share any profound experience *with* David. For Mike Marais, “the child in most of Coetzee’s works stands for that which History has damaged, be it imagination or faith; it is incumbent upon the adult to attempt to repair this brokenness” (Dmitriou 79). The fact that the past has been damaged in Novilla and Estrella does not mean that redemption is impossible for Simón and David: instead, it requires radical new possibilities, such as the practice of dance. Dance offers a new realm of shared communication for both of Simón and David as well as a mutual sense of wonder in life. It presents an opportunity to repair – or redeem – their damaged sense of imagination.

Perhaps to be expected, the novel doesn’t tell us what happens with Simón or David after Simón’s first dance; it contains an abrupt ending not unlike that of *Disgrace*. As Valerie Mosca comments, “Coetzee’s self-reflexive fiction is famous for raising more questions about itself than it can (or would) answer” (127). Does Simón have an immersive mystical experience? Does he achieve any kind of long-lasting transformation? Does he find the salvation, the redemption, for which he was looking or a repaired sense of relationship with David? These are lingering, unanswered questions, but as with atheism, they don’t need to be answered in order to read in Simón’s actions and his halting physical movements the possibility for transformation, or even what Kearney might call transfiguration. Though Simón feels faintly ridiculous at first, he has taken both a literal and a figurative step into a new life. It is an act of faith without any guarantees, but it is something he has yearned for throughout *Schooldays*. At the end of *The Schooldays of Jesus*, Simón is still far from a more open and vulnerable understanding of his selfhood, but he has initiated what Rita Felski calls “a phenomenology of self-scrutiny

rather than self-loss" (35). He has moved past his suspicion of dance towards a new place and a new kind of faith, an "aesthetic openness to the gracious and the strange" (Kearney 14).

CHAPTER FIVE

Postcolonial Messiahs:

Violence and Monstrosity in *Boxers & Saints* and *Monstress*

Images, it seems, simply will not stay inert on the surface where they're drawn.

A. David Lewis & Christine Hoff Kraemer (1)

On October 1, 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized 120 Catholics who had been killed in China between 1648 and 1930, most of whom were targeted during the 1899-1901 Boxer Uprising against foreign imperialism and missionaries. The move was a contentious one: it functioned as a performative gesture acknowledging the enduring existence of the Catholic Chinese church. However, for the Chinese government it represented yet another Western infringement on Chinese history and autonomy. The Uprising remains the centre of competing narratives, in which Western accounts emphasize the brutality and violence of the Boxers levelled against foreigners and Chinese converts, while the Chinese government hails the Uprising for its nationalism and its struggles against Western imperialism. These accounts continue to reverberate in contemporary discussions about the ways in which religion, nationalism, and identity flow and churn together. In this chapter, I examine the work of two comics writers, Gene Luen Yang and Marjorie Liu, who take profoundly different directions in exploring events in Chinese history over the past two centuries. Both question the political and religious uses of violence and explore its effects on personal relationships and questions of identity.

As comics interrogate and challenge their conventional lowbrow status (Chute 2017), they are increasingly viewed as an important interlocutor for contemporary religious discussions. The study of the relationship between popular culture and religion has been flourishing as popular culture gains recognition as a crucial site of exploration for contemporary forms of religiosity and spirituality (Kraemer and Lewis 2010; Forbes and Mahan 2017). No longer considered the lowbrow cousin to literature, comics – a general term which encompasses comics, graphic novels, graphic memoir, and sequential art (Chute 2017) – have emerged as a popular culture art form in their own right (Beatty 2012) and are increasingly appealing to literary studies for their dynamic possibilities for storytelling. Because the study of comics has only gained traction relatively recently, this field contains valuable possibilities for gaining new perspectives on religious experience as well as on important debates within fields such as postcolonial and critical race studies, as Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji point out (1-2). For Mehta and Mukherji, the visual aspect of comics can contribute to a re-thinking of postcolonial iconographics and visual vocabularies. I suggest that both Yang and Liu employ visual grammars and tropes in order to refer to and re-think the superhero genre of comics, a genre that has all too often been aligned with American imperialism and white racial hegemony in the West. The success of comics such as *Boxers and Saints*, *Monstress*, and even the recent *Black Panther* film and its comics franchise make it necessary to ask critical questions about how comics can contribute to discussions regarding postcolonialism, race, and anti-imperialism.

Best known for his critically-acclaimed 2006 graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, Gene Luen Yang has made his Taiwanese-American identity a focus of his work. Where *American Born Chinese* tackles the stereotypes and pressures he faced as an Asian American child, *Boxers & Saints* (2013), explores his Catholicism and its complicated relationship with Chinese history, particularly the Boxer Uprising. He centres on the tension between Western and Chinese accounts of the Uprising while seeking to defuse the 'othering' machinery employed by both sides after the conflict. He does so by focusing on the stories of a young man who becomes a Boxer and a girl who converts to Christianity. Like *American Born Chinese*, *Boxers & Saints* received a number of accolades, including the Michael L. Printz Award and the shortlist for the National Book Award in the Young Peoples' Literature category. Yang was the first comics artist to make it to that finalist position, highlighting both the increasing recognition afforded to comics as an important cultural medium and Yang's pivotal work as a comics writer and artist representing issues of identity and race.

Monstress is an ongoing comics series authored by Marjorie Liu and illustrated by Sana Takeda. In contrast to the two volumes of *Boxers & Saints*, the *Monstress* series has been published in short issues – annually collected into volumes – since 2015. Since beginning the series, Marjorie Liu has become the first woman writer to win a prestigious Eisner Award. Sana Takeda has also won an Eisner for her artwork, and the series has garnered several other awards, including the 2017 Hugo Award for Best Graphic Story. The success of the series stands out as notable for several reasons, not least of which rests on its status as a creator-owned series published by Image Comics in which Liu and Takeda

retain all copyrights over the work instead of forwarding control to an employer such as Marvel or DC Comics. Their success as women comics creators is notable in an industry that, while changing, still faces situations such as the 2016 Angoulême comics festival, in which no women were included on the shortlist for the esteemed lifetime comics achievement award.

Central to Yang's, Liu's, and Takeda's commercial and critical achievements have been their insistence on issues of race and the representation of Asian women. Additionally, they enfold these issues into an examination of embodiment, as characters in both *Boxers & Saints* and *Monstress* incarnate the gods to some degree. Where Yang makes use of a constitutive narrative doubling, layering the two characters' stories in separate graphic novels, he similarly employs a form of magical realism that highlights the relationship between the human and the divine. He emphasizes the historical realities of these religious experiences, drawing on Chinese spirituality, opera, and accounts of Christian missionary activity. For Yang, religion stands out as a focal point to examine issues of nationalism, conflicting religious identities, colonialism, and gender. The main character Lee Bao, a young boy living in a rural village at the end of the 19th century, begins to resent the growing influence Catholic priests and foreign representatives have over the political, social, and religious life of the Chinese people.

Monstress takes a different tack by incorporating religion as a feature of genre worldbuilding: the series builds an explicit fantasy world, complete with its own species, history, gods, and other markers of worldbuilding. Liu has often described it as an alternate Asia driven by a matriarchal society, influenced heavily by her grandparents'

suffering during the Second Sino-Japanese War and its aftermath in China; Roland Kelts describes the series as “a visceral fantasy in which race and gender, war, colonialism and slavery are brutally foregrounded.” The *Monstress* comics conceptualize religion as part of the mythos of the world they construct. Religion appears variously in the Ubasti goddess cult worshipped by the cats or by the terrifying figures named as “the old gods”. Religion in terms of any sense of deity, creeds, beliefs, or adherents therefore takes a significantly different form than the clear invocations of Judeo-Christian beliefs and Chinese gods in *Boxers & Saints*. I suggest, following Marco Arnaudo’s argument, that religious readings of comics that either would not usually be considered religious or invoke religion through an alternate fantasy reality can illuminate cultural attitudes to religious themes and ideas.

Liu’s approach to exploring Chinese experiences of war and violence contrasts with Yang’s more realistic rendering of a specific moment in Chinese history, but both remain concerned with the ravages of war, colonialism, and violence on characters’ everyday lives, relationships, and bodies. Both ultimately ask the question: how do we embody the divine? What does such embodiment mean for social and political relationships in the midst of great instability and rupture? By and large, these questions get funneled through an attention to the matrices of power and relationships in which violence occurs. At the same time, they occur within a larger conversation about the cultural place of superheroes and the messianic overtones of such figures in a spiritually diverse world. The superhero blurs the lines between human and god, an ambivalence that marks their tactics as much as their conceptualization: they offer a productive site in

which to think about comics on postsecular terms as multivalent and heterogeneous figures. Comics, I suggest, accentuate this postsecular polysemicity by foregrounding what Yang calls comics' own slippery melding of text and image. Like the divinity of its (super)heroic characters, comics such as *Boxers & Saints* and *Monstress* must be negotiated with attention to the body of the page. The visual inscriptions on that body, as well as its materiality, generate a proliferation of meanings that calls attention to the act of representation itself.

Reconceiving Messianic Superheroes

In *Boxers & Saints* and *Monstress*, currents of national identity and postcolonial perspectives are swept up into religious readings, notably, I suggest, through engagement with comics' most well-known genre – the superhero comic. Yang and Liu especially demonstrate their love for superheroes and their indebtedness to the ideas, characters, and histories superhero comics have produced since the late 1930s. Nonetheless, the complex eddies of superhero comics, politics, and industry have prompted them to rethink the gendered, colonial dynamics regularly circulating there. These dynamics have often been channeled through issues of representation of women, Asian characters, and international conflicts,⁶¹ but also through the conceptualization of superheroes themselves as, in Grant Morrison's words, supergods (2011). It is in their grappling – at times affirmative, but also profoundly confrontational – with the legacy and conceptions

⁶¹ For example, the problematic depiction of Japanese characters in American comics during World War II, as well as the equally problematic illustrations of Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War (see Duncan and Smith 2009).

of the superhero that they lay bare the connection between the superheroic and the messianic.

The superhero has equally been venerated and criticized by turns. Though Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith argue that superheroes are “mistakenly interpret[ed] as merely a symbol of power” by those outside America (243), they retain an ultimately positive conception of the superhero. Christopher Knowles (2007) suggests that “All superheroes are essentially savior figures,” which is why they “traditionally enjoy greater popularity – with children and adults – in times of national stress” (111). Knowles also holds the idea that “superheroes have come to fill the role in our modern society that the gods and demigods provided to the ancients” (xv). It’s an argument that has been rehearsed and applied in many contemporary contexts – popular culture, sports, celebrity fandom, and art have all been variously viewed as filling the social gap left by religion – as people search for alternate sources of enchantment as the cultural and social power of institutionalized religion shifts. As Knowles explains,

The modern superhero came to life in the midst of the Great Depression and at the dawn of the Second World War. Americans were afraid, and superheroes provided a means of comfort and escape. Superman, the first of the great superheroes, didn’t fight robots or space aliens in his early adventures; he fought the villains that people were really worried about at the time: gangsters, corrupt politicians, fascists, and war profiteers. (3-4)

Superman’s appearance during this era as well as the identity of his opponents imprinted the connection that has subsequently gained traction: comic book superheroes remain

irrevocably tied to contemporary social and political events, discussions, and anxieties. Captain America fought the Nazis, Batman tackled the gang violence of the 1980s, the Hulk comforted the American people after 9/11, *Black Panther* appeared during #BlackLivesMatter, and Wonder Woman contributed to #MeToo discussions.⁶²

The superhero has functioned primarily to respond to societal threats as a beacon of morality and hope, modelling courage and seeking justice in the face of adversity. Nonetheless, problems have arisen in conceptualizing what that justice looks like – who, exactly, is that justice for? By what methods is it achieved? – and some comics have deliberately invoked these tensions: “Works such as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* examine the fascist implications of superhero vigilante justice taken to the extreme” (Duncan and Smith 233). At the very least, Richard Reynolds argues that superheroes are conservative figures who react to external challenges in order to protect the status quo rather than transform it (Duncan and Smith 232). Rarely do superheroes topple governments or tackle wealth inequality. However, Marco Arnaudo argues that superheroes cannot be reduced to such a singular conception. He suggests that there are equally as many interpretations of superheroes which posit them as champions of minorities and immigrants since Superman first appeared in 1938. However, every decade has had its own challenges and changes, such as the societal panic in the 1950s that targeted comics as purveyors of immorality and the intensification of violence and

⁶² While these examples are based in an American comics tradition, American superheroes have become a global phenomenon, especially through the successes of the recent Marvel Cinematic Universe. However, it is important to note that their transportation to other worldwide cultures has not been without criticism: for example, Phiona Stanley discusses how American superheroes have influenced conceptions of masculinity in East Asian countries, posing issues of gendered neo-imperialism (2012).

fight imagery in comics in the “dark climate of comics in the nineties” (75) to boost economic profits. I would add, though, that issues of racist imagery and stereotyping persist throughout comics’ history, and comics remain burdened by echoes of imperialism, often signalled by their frequent appearance as “proxies of US foreign policy” (Reynolds 18) and their history of racist caricatures (Duncan and Smith 250, 260).

While the relationship between superheroes and politics has provoked continued debate, the connection between superheroes and religion has been an easy one to make. Not only have religious traditions been important to the creators of superhero comics – for example, Arnaudo references Simcha Weinstein’s work on the “impressive number of Jewish authors who have made major contributions to the development of the superhero genre” (29) and figures such as Superman⁶³ – they have significantly shaped interpretation and reception in comics’ communities and, more recently, religious studies.⁶⁴ The superhero can be readily identified as a god-like figure, a messianic saviour of human life across time and all dimensions. This connection is fairly straightforward, but Arnaudo suggests that the representation of religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or others still practiced by large numbers of people today – as opposed to Roman or Greek forms of worship and belief, which are no longer followed – involves

⁶³ Superman has been hailed as both a Jewish and Christian superhero icon with readers interpreting “religious/scriptural meanings or subtexts” (Clanton Jr. 33) throughout the superhero’s long history of publication. Dan Clanton Jr. suggests that Superman is “religiously multivalent” as “different interpreters find various kinds of symbols and themes within the same aesthetic product” (33), including Jewish themes of immigration and identity as well as potential Christian symbols of Superman’s Christ-likeness (39).

⁶⁴ See A. David Lewis’s *American Comics, Literary Theory, and Religion* (8-9) for a short literature review of recent scholarly books devoted to examining Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and mythic influences and interpretations of superheroes in comics.

both presence of religious imagery as well as absence of any particulars (40): comics creators both invoke religious symbols, myths, and figures of the divine, while dampening direct reference to specifics. Arnaudo explains this in terms of what he lists as

two editorial motivations: (1) to create symbolically elaborate but indirect references to today's widely practiced religions to avoid offending adherents of that religion or making others feel excluded and (2) to feed the ever-hungry publishing machine with new and interesting ideas, a task for which traditional mythologies revealed themselves to be a wonderful source of narrative resources to draw from. The intentions at the root of this formula can be explained in exclusively commercial terms: selling comics to everyone and selling comics in the long run. (59-60)

Religion makes for good business: it provides a wealth of "narrative resources" for authors and illustrators, ensuring diversity of content and access to different audiences. But aside from the commercialization aspects that tacitly limit how much – and what – can be said about religion, I wonder if comics, like literature more generally, are quietly responding to the postsecular currents pulsing throughout contemporary societies. A. David Lewis sees the appearance of religion in comics as a move towards pluralism and tolerance, in which no particular faith supersedes any other but in which comics embrace a multiplicitous understanding of selfhood and religious experience (142-3). According to this view, comics – including the superhero genre – can productively engage with various traditions, beliefs, and identities by examining otherness, fragmented notions of the self, and interconnected relationality (142). Interpretation from a religious studies or

postsecular vantage point pays attention to such heterogeneity, highlighting its economic importance as well as its responsiveness to current spiritual diversity. It necessitates a fluid interpretive practice that can, for example, read fantasy superhero comics such as *Monstress* in terms of sacred relationships alongside *Boxers & Saints* and its treatment of Christianity, colonialism, and Chinese gods.

Rooted in the American comics scene, Gene Luen Yang's work demonstrates his keen awareness of this complex political and religious history of superheroes in comics. His 2014 collaboration with Sonny Liew *The Shadow Hero* revitalizes the Green Turtle – the first Asian American superhero. The original version of the Green Turtle by Chu F. Hing halted after having only a short five-issue run in 1944 and ended up being whitewashed by an editor who thought the American public wasn't yet ready to have an Asian superhero. Yang and Liew's Green Turtle foregrounds his Chinese American identity and has since expanded beyond *The Shadow Hero* into a six-issue series, indicating a much more positive public reception to the re-emergence of the figure in recent years. Yang himself enthusiastically speaks about his personal love for superhero stories, especially their themes of sacrifice: "at the root of almost every single one of those stories is the sacrifice of the self for the sake of the other" (Rozema 8). The element of sacrifice is one Yang associates with his own Christian beliefs and the figure of Christ; this link constructs a kind of parallel between the superhero genre he loves and his religious identity.

Boxers & Saints further frames this parallel within a complex history of Western racism, "visual imperialism" (Wanzo), and colonial power struggles, thereby performing a critical reading of the superhero's embeddedness in imperial projects. The superhero, for

much of its history, has been a white, male, heterosexual saviour, one who has been cloaked in the racism embedded in the United States' own soil as well as the peculiarly American brand of imperialism that took shape during the Cold War. Yang notes that "I wanted my versions [of Chinese national and religious figures] to evoke American superheroes. I wanted to blend traditional Chinese imagery with a Jack Kirby/Bruce Timm sensibility" (Goellner). This aesthetic emerges particularly in the fighting scenes when the peasant warriors embody Chinese gods and heroes both physically and in terms of costume. The visuality of comics allows for the reader to see the merging of identities, wherein the peasants become the Chinese heroes rather than simply adopting their dress. The blurring gives the text its magical realist elements while also reconceiving the dominance of white, Western superhero figures; the Boxers have their own rich tradition of spiritual and national heroes on which to draw, one enshrined in the Chinese forms of opera main character Lee Bao avidly watches each spring and summer. It also allows Yang to more deliberately represent the connection between superheroes, their salvific mission, and the embodiment of the divine. Both aspects emphasize his debt to and his re-thinking of the superhero within a very different Asian American context and Chinese historical circumstances. In *Boxers & Saints*, the Boxers who become new incarnations of important Chinese heroes and gods challenge Western encroachment on their forms of religiosity, national identification, and ideas of justice.

Monstress also performs its own critical examination of superhero comics, focusing on the intersection between gender and violence. Both Liu and Takeda have worked in the same milieu of American comics and superhero stories that Yang has, and

they are equally concerned with questions of representation, especially the possibility for the visual and verbal capacity of comics to grapple with Asian American experience and gender issues. The genre of fantasy allows them to create a female-driven world in which a young woman, Maika Halfwolf, has a terrifying old god sealed inside her. This profane incarnation invokes a consideration of how she embodies a kind of monstrous female pain that marks her as a racial and societal other and thus as an outsider that threatens collective order. Maika's character participates in a gendered re-thinking of superhero sacrifice as well as how violence inflects human beings' relationship to the gods of her world.

The relationships that inform Yang's, Liu's, and Takeda's work re-orient the locus of comics' reading public – all three have deliberately cultivated global partnerships in their work, decentering the United States and Europe as the only, or even primary, centres of comic consumption or as the international driver for comics work. Yang's work with Sonny Liew stands as one example: Liew, born in Malaysia, remains currently based in Singapore, bringing an international audience to his collaboration with Yang. Sana Takeda continues to live and work in Japan and communicates with Liu through a translator because she doesn't speak English and Liu doesn't speak Japanese (Magnett). Their mode of working together attests to their desire to embrace their creative, cultural, and linguistic differences in order to explore issues of monsters and representation. Their partnerships underscore their persistent attention to the massive reading publics that exist in many different Asian nations outside of the America/Europe spheres that receive

much of Western marketing consideration,⁶⁵ as well as their desire to bring these concerns into their work in different ways. These thriving Asian milieus⁶⁶ particularly stimulate their visual practice: Takeda's art is as much influenced by the Japanese art traditions and popular culture genres (such as ukiyo-e art and kaiju monsters) as art deco aesthetics, and Yang's art merges his appreciation for Chinese opera costumes and Catholic iconography.

Liu and Takeda's partnership also raises the related issue of translation and comics. Because their collaboration involves constant translation from English to Japanese as well as from text to image, translation emerges as both multivocal concept and site of constant visual/verbal negotiation. And since they are each informed by different national and ethnic backgrounds, they are simultaneously labouring across disparate expectations, heritages, and textual codes. Rather than homogenizing Asian experience, they bring their knowledge into a productive interplay. For example, Liu remains concerned with how monstrosity is applied as a negative trope to other Asian Americans, especially women, and her scripts reflect a persistent attention to how species and characters are othered in her fantasy world (an "alternative history" 1920s Hong Kong). Takeda channels these ideas of monstrosity and otherness through visual references to Japanese kaiju monsters.

⁶⁵ See John Lent's study *Asian Comics* (2015).

⁶⁶ The vitality of Asian comics and Asian fan cultures extends far beyond that which is usually associated with Japan. Comics creators from Hong Kong, Thailand, and Singapore have a respectable base at WorldCon (the World Science Fiction Convention) as well as the recently inaugurated, but nonetheless still massive, AsiaPOP ComicCon, in addition to many other Asia-specific comics conventions that have rapidly grown in the last ten years.

Where Liu, Takeda, and Liu involve translation as an integral part of their artistic process, thereby modelling new possibilities for collaboration, Yang addresses this process in the text of *Boxers & Saints*. The speech of anyone speaking Chinese is presented in English, while the speech of the foreign troops and priests is drawn in characters, with an asterisk pointing to their translation at the bottom of the page.⁶⁷ By utilizing the capacity of the verbal or linguistic to simultaneously function as an image, Yang defamiliarizes and thus disrupts the primacy of the foreigners' discourse. Additionally, due to the spacing of the comics' page, he can visually diminish the importance of their speech and thus re-centre focus on the narratives of the Boxers and Chinese Christians, who have historically received little literary or political attention in the West.

These issues are not ancillary to Yang, Liu, and Takeda's representation of superheroes and of the heroic. Instead, they intertwine what Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji identify as two "distinct approaches to think about comics [as meaningful postcolonial work]: first, in terms of (visual/verbal) textualities, and next, in relation to (social/popular) cultures" (1).⁶⁸ Drawing on Timothy Brennan's study, Mehta and Mukherji highlight "the important postcolonial work of decoding and contesting image-objects of everyday ideology within resistant postcolonial visual cultures and in the

⁶⁷ Yang developed the characters himself, and they do convey a message should readers wish to decode them.

⁶⁸ Chiann Karen Tsui and Russell Berman argue that "the post-colonial model [is] insufficient as an analytic tool" for discussing the "distinctiveness of the relations between China and the West" because their history of encounter, trade, and colonialism is substantially different from other examples, such as New Zealand (181). I grant this distinction but employ postcolonial frameworks and concerns to better understand the imperial dynamics at play in the Boxer Rebellion and because of a lack of alternative vocabularies to describe such dynamics.

deconstructive textual strategies of postmodern iconographics” (3). Furthermore, they discuss how comics “introduce...new postcolonial vocabularies. These scripts employ visual grammars, image-texts, and graphic performances that reconstitute conventional ‘image-functions’ in established social texts and political systems and thus, perhaps, re-envision competing narratives of resistance or rights” (4). Yang, Liu, and Takeda are doing this work – albeit in two different genres (historical fiction and fantasy) – and deconstructing the superhero in important ways for contemporary audiences.

Their success at this work attests to a radically changed comics landscape. David Hajdu notes that in the 1940s and 50s, comics was the haven of “untold members or racial, ethnic, and social minorities who turned to comics because they thought of themselves or their ideas as unwelcome in more reputable spheres of publishing and entertainment” (5). As comics continue to reap commercial and critical success, the medium has become legitimized as a cultural and literary object – one no longer less reputable or unwelcoming than other literary and media forms like the novel or film. It’s concomitantly become fertile ground for writers and artists of all backgrounds to draw historical and racial issues for new audiences and interrogate current forms of marginalization and social vulnerabilities. The 1962 issue that introduced Spider Man articulated an idea that has continued to pulse in contemporary superhero comics – “with great power there must also come – great responsibility!” Yang and Liu explore this aphorism for transcultural, postcolonial audiences, asking what it means to save others when the only tools at hand are shaped by violence.

**Visualizing the Religious Spirit of the Nation:
Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers & Saints***

As Gene Luen Yang's stature as a comics author grows, most scholarly attention has been directed to his graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006) rather than his more recent *Boxers & Saints* (2013). In these intertwined novels, young boy Lee Bao and the girl Vibiana confront conflicting ideas of justice, nationalism, and spiritual identity as they become embroiled in the Chinese Boxer Uprising that occurred in 1899-1900. Pitched to young adults but situated within Yang's ongoing concern with Chinese history and Asian representation in comics, the novels centre on the ethical quandaries Bao and Vibiana encounter under the expansion of foreign imperial power and missionary influence in a China ruled by a fading Qing empire.

Yang, a Taiwanese-American author and avowed Roman Catholic, foregrounds the role of Chinese gods and Christian evangelism in the ideas undergirding the Uprising. However, he complicates notions of religious identity and national identity: Bao's belief that imported Christianity is un-Chinese is troubled through Vibiana's own gendered response to finding a name and an identity in Chinese convert communities. I am especially interested in how Yang visualizes Bao's and Vibiana's experiences with violence as an influence on each character's search for truth and justice. Bao physically embodies an ancient Chinese ruler and god Chin Shih-huang (first emperor of China) before battle and often ruthlessly enacts Chin Shih-huang's vision of China. Facing increasing violence from her family and then the Boxers, Vibiana dialogues with Joan of Arc over what faith means for them both. The magical realism of these visualizations is accentuated by the comics medium, which serves to highlight the difficulties each character faces in their

struggles with identity. I suggest that Yang uses the graphic medium to question the fraught stories that underpin national self-definition and examine how these stories must be read against both the backdrop of colonialism and a complicated spiritual landscape.

The two graphic novels follow main characters Lee Bao and Vibiana as they live with the encroachment of British power and missionary influence at the end of the nineteenth century in China. Local resentment about this situation spurred the Boxer Uprising that occurred between 1899 and 1901, when many young peasant men with martial arts backgrounds organized and battled the foreign soldiers and missionaries. *Boxers & Saints* offers a unique take on this historical moment: it presents two parallel stories, that of Bao, a young boy who becomes involved in the Uprising as a poor village teen who learns martial arts and begins attacking foreign soldiers, missionaries, and Chinese converts to Christianity; and Vibiana, a girl who becomes a Chinese Catholic convert – a “secondary devil” as Bao calls them. Converts like Vibiana were despised and thought to be traitors because they gave up their own Chinese gods.

The intertwined packaging of the set – two books meant to be read together – visually foregrounds the different questions each book asks. Bao’s narrative shoulders a profound consideration of nationalism, religion, violence, and imperialism. The long arms of the British empire show up in Bao’s small village when his father is severely beaten for challenging a British officer and the foreign priest Father Bey ruins a statue of Tu Di Gong, a local god. The foreign missionaries also shelter people who had previously stolen and wrecked the resources in the village, leading Bao and the other villagers to think of the priests as shielding thugs and criminals from accountability in the name of their religious

redemption; the priests themselves are under the protection and concern of the (mostly British) troops.⁶⁹ These are issues of political and religious power, throwing into sharp relief how Western missionary efforts were often integral to larger imperial projects of influence and control. These incidents spur Bao's own gradual spiritual journey into what would now be called an extremist nationalism that seeks to instantiate national purity through exclusion and violence. Bao ends up becoming a Boxer – most often a poor, illiterate practitioner of martial arts – who catalyzes a rebellion against foreign influence and embodies the gods and heroes of Chinese tradition by enacting a ritual. The comics allow for a visual depiction of this ritual embodiment, graphically demonstrating how Bao and the others become the gods both in terms of costume and identity.

Bao's embodiment and actions stand in contrast to Vibiana's story in part two of the set, entitled *Saints*. Vibiana originally doesn't have a real name – she's simply called "Four" because she's her mother's fourth daughter as well as the only child who survived. Her grandfather refuses to give her a name, and the name "Four" sticks with her, even though it also means "death." She is very much an outsider in her own family, seeking both affirmation and guidance about how to shape her identity. In a quirky turn of events, Four becomes interested in Christianity initially because of cookies: the local doctor offers her the cookies along with religious lessons about Jesus Christ and Christianity. Most times, she falls asleep after these lessons, but she returns to the doctor's house for the companionship as well as the food. By showing her initial boredom, Yang emphasizes that

⁶⁹ Zhen Sun notes that at the time of the Boxer Uprising and immediately following, China was subject to the competing interests of a number of foreign nations, including the United Kingdom, Russia, etc.

Four's gradual conversion to Christianity is less about its religious message and more about how it offers her a kind of domestic nourishment she can't get at home.

This aspect is so important to Four: she finds a home, a family, and a domestic life in the Chinese Christian church. In her own family home, her grandfather calls her a devil and every time she tries to fit in or seek attention from her family, it backfires. She accidentally chops off the head of her grandfather's god statuette and gets beaten for it. When he calls her a devil, she takes this identity seriously and tries to warn everyone about it, though they end up thinking she's got some kind of disease. The Christian community she joins isn't perfect by far – it's very patriarchal and the foreign priests influence and control the converts' lives as well as their spirituality. But she appreciates its sense of community and how she can find a function within that community caring for orphans. She also finds a spiritual mentor when she has visions of Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc sympathizes with Vibiana being an outsider and helps the young peasant girl navigate her identity issues in the midst of increasing political instability.

The result is that Four gains a name – Vibiana – as well as an identity. The panel illustrating her baptism shows her smiling and surrounded by the doctor, his wife, and Joan of Arc – the people who have supported her. Of course, her decision once again makes her an outsider, this time to members of the Chinese community who dislike the influence of Western colonialism and religion. Vibiana's story highlights the complex motives embedded in her conversion: she doesn't convert out of retaliation against her neglectful and abusive family, even as she seeks a supportive and validating community, nor does she desire to override any Chinese spiritual beliefs. In other words, Vibiana

doesn't perceive her conversion as in any way related to politics or national identity. Instead, Christianity gives her emotional comfort as well as a model and a vocabulary with which to understand her own experiences of being an outsider.

Both parts of *Boxers & Saints* emphasize the complicated entwinement of identity, religion, and nationalism. Carissa Turner Smith reads the graphic novels in light of contemporary understandings of fundamentalism and postsecularism, suggesting that Bao "performs [the] god's identity with the modern fundamentalist motive of bringing back the enchanted past," which involves a nationalistic vision of a "unified, pure 'China'" (208). For Turner Smith, Bao wants a return to what Habermas calls "the exclusivity of premodern religious attitudes" (qtd. In Turner Smith 208) in order to save his nation and unify its peoples. Bao's fundamentalism functions as a response to modern disenchantment, wherein "[e]ncounters with Western colonial forces increase Bao's sense that the world of his ancestors and their spirits is diminished" (206). There are a number of distinct problems with this characterization of Bao's struggle, not least of which is its elision of the Western imperial dynamics of power at play in the encounter Turner Smith describes. Though she argues that *Boxers & Saints* serves to destabilize "any clear distinction between... 'secular' and 'fundamentalist'" (208), particularly through the Boxers' performance of the gods, her reading veers overly close to equating fundamentalism with resistance, or resistance to a desire for premodernity. Such an interpretation renders the Western soldiers and missionaries as the bringers of (a disenchanted) modernity, against which Bao and the other Boxers seek to revive a nostalgic version of their premodern religious identities. They appear in this view as low-

class peasants scared of change and inevitable globalization, rather than subjects worried about the disproportionate level of control the foreigners possess and the inequitable power relations that result.

Bao's first encounter with the strangers highlights this tension. One day, his father punches another man for beating an elderly woman. This man returns to the village with a Catholic priest demanding justice, and the priest takes fish from Bao's father to settle the score before smashing the local statue of Tu Di Gong, the earth god. In this single incident, Bao and the other villagers are faced with very different notions of justice and belief – instead of protecting the vulnerable and innocent villagers, the priest takes the side of a thug. The priest, Father Bey, also claims that Tu Di Gong's statue is an evil idol and that only one God should be worshipped (18). He presents a totalitarian vision of belief in which only one God – the Christian deity – can rule the spiritual lives of the people. Furthermore, the priest's actions cannot safely be challenged by the villagers: the constable tries to prevent Bao's father from redressing the situation by noting that the "foreign priest is protected by foreign soldiers. If you make trouble, you'll lose your head!" (17). Thus, the priest's version of justice and belief become embedded in a larger context of Western imperial presence in China, as well as a lack of accountability for military or missionary actions, few mechanisms for villagers to lodge objections, and a pervasive threat of violence. To underscore the hostility and aggression on the part of the foreigners, Bao's father ends up grievously wounded by their soldiers when he refuses to move aside on a shared road.

Bao's own journey to becoming a Boxer and a leader in the Uprising is gradual. He is motivated by a yearning to protect those who are at the mercy of the "foreign devils" and a desire for a conception of justice that does not shield the powerful. At the beginning of *Boxers* (the first part of the graphic novel set), Bao is an illiterate peasant with no social or political influence either in his village or his nation. His first act of violence – slaughtering foreign troops in order to free their prisoners – compresses his anger at the death of his friend and mentor at the hands of the troops, the prior wounding of his father, and a grasping for whatever kind of power (however limited) he can wield. His action reverberates outward and he becomes a leader in the peasant-led Boxer Rebellion, a movement which becomes known for its relentless violence towards foreign armies and missionaries as well as Chinese converts. Bao personally struggles with the use of such brutal tactics in his quest to challenge the authority and aggression of the foreigners. He often quarrels with Chin Shih-Huang – the god/first emperor of China he embodies – over the appropriate use of force as well as the ultimate goal of such force. Seriously wounded after one battle, Bao refuses to die, saying, "I want to fight." Chin Shih-Huang laughs at him: "Fight?...Fight for what? Justice? Your precious little edicts?" (236). Bao's response that he wants to fight for China marks a turning point in his mission – the fight is no longer about justice for those disempowered by foreign influence; instead, it has transformed into a war for national identity. The stakes have escalated, and brutality becomes a means of empowering the disempowered and of aligning the Boxers' cause with the very founding of the nation of China.

This introduction of nationalism in Bao's motives hinges on a time of instability in Chinese historical understandings of nation-building, national identity, and sovereignty. As Prasenjit Duara argues, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth century stirred a "kind of tension between nationalism on the one hand and transnational and globalizing forces on the other" (1030). In *Boxers & Saints*, this tension in large part gets directed through a focus on the way foreign forces exercise influence and violence in small Chinese villages without being accountable for those actions. Nonetheless, Yang situates *Boxers & Saints* as a way to think through the relationship between the Chinese and Europeans without othering them: "The Chinese and the Europeans thought of one another as very much 'the other,' but there were so many parallels between the two" (Goellner). For example,

among the Chinese...rumors circulated that the Europeans would kidnap Chinese babies and pluck out their eyes to make medicines. This was cited as evidence of the Europeans' inhumanity...Among the Europeans, rumors circulated that the Chinese would sacrifice their own children to their heathen gods. This was cited as evidence of the inhumanity of the Chinese.

(Goellner)

These rumours mobilize both sides in *Boxers & Saints* to kill the other, particularly the Boxers who feel that they are fighting against the barbarism and cruelty of the Westerners. By highlighting the similarities between the Chinese and Europeans – especially in terms of their use of violence but also how they 'other' one another as a means of seeing them as less than human – Yang seeks to undo the oppositional

framework of modern/primitive that has become fastened to the conflict. This approach challenges Turner Smith's characterization that Bao wants to return to a unified nation and a premodern religiosity under threat from the Westerners; her account embeds a deep-rooted Western narrative that what is "at stake...is the encounter between a notionally advanced western culture and the underdeveloped societies it deems primitive" and, I would add, not properly "modern" or "civilized" in the ways that Western societies dictate – including religiously (Tsui and Berman 181). However, Yang upends such divisions in order to question how the mechanism of othering becomes tied to issues of basic humanity.

Bao's struggle is definitely one of identity – personal as well as national – and I agree with Turner Smith that "*Boxers & Saints* challenges the view that global conflicts are between religion and secularism; we all worship, especially through our embodied actions, and much of what we worship – including 'the nation' – may have a spiritual dimension" (204-5). *Boxers & Saints* does not oppose Chinese spiritualities against an invading Christian imperialism, though this opposition certainly has been written into many Western accounts of the Uprising, so much as it queries the gendered and colonial implications of how Christianity becomes an important issue for the Chinese at a highly unstable political moment. But Turner Smith's reading emphasizes the comics' postsecularism, wherein postsecularism emerges as a form of cosplay – costume play that merges with role playing, when Bao and the others take on the identities and dress of Chinese ancestors and gods. Although Turner Smith's understanding of Bao's cosplay prompts interesting discussions on contemporary cosplay practices, it is problematic

insofar as such a reading dismisses the Boxers' violence as fundamentalism without accounting for the larger matrices in which such violence is enmeshed. Fundamentalism has become a sullied word, associated with religious extremism, intolerance, and violence; it has also been wielded as a neo-colonial hammer to dismiss the claims of various kinds of subjects and groups, especially racialized ones or members of former colonies.⁷⁰

In the years following the Uprising, "China was portrayed by the Western press as the most savage and xenophobic nation in the world" (Zhen 198). The violence initiated by the Boxers became enfolded into over-simplified competing narratives: internationally, the Rebellion was viewed as a "struggle between the forces of civilization and barbarism" (Zhen 198), in contrast to China where "it has been defined as a conflict between foreign imperialism and the Chinese people's patriotic resistance" (198). *Boxers & Saints* grapples with this legacy of negative Western representations of the Boxer Uprising and offers a more sympathetic examination of the Boxers' motives, even as Yang persistently questions their use of violence as a tactic to achieve their goals. He mostly focuses on the Boxers themselves, omitting the larger transnational debates about Chinese sovereignty or the conflicting attitudes emerging from various quarters within the Chinese government itself, although these issues emerge in the narrative through the

⁷⁰ Turner Smith's use of the term fundamentalism also reiterates what Rebecca Joyce Frey notes as common stereotypes of fundamentalism, including a tendency towards militancy, a "complete rejection of modernity" (7), and that followers are stupid or poorly-educated (8). Frey also observes that fundamentalism "first developed in North America" (35), and she questions how the term has been employed in describing people in a variety of global and historical contexts.

hints that the Empress Dowager of the Qing Empire tacitly supports the efforts of the Boxers to expel the foreign influence.

As with his earlier *American Born Chinese*, Yang employs visual codes of representation to challenge the racist stereotyping that has become entrenched in graphic storytelling from the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Such stereotyping has emerged as a form of what Rebecca Wanzo calls visual imperialism. Wanzo outlines how visual imperialism has functioned in terms of imperialism more broadly by uniting the imperial goal of cementing “a nation’s authority through colonization” with a history of European aesthetics and standards of beauty. She traces this element in terms of blackface caricatures in comics, while Noah Berlatsky echoes her point in noting that such caricatures were employed against Asian peoples as well: “Comics has a very long history of racist iconography...Using exaggerated racist imagery [as in blackface imagery or the racist anti-Japanese cartoons of World War II] for comic effect is one of the most characteristic moves of the comic medium” (Cave). This racist iconography contributes to the dehumanization of the peoples represented, as Ronald Wimberly argues, “by degrading their features into symbols of the subhuman” (Cave).

In *American Born Chinese*, Yang directly engages these issues by portraying how one of the characters, a white boy named Danny, sees his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee “appears as a grotesque amalgamation of exaggerated Asian American stereotypical traits” (Pinti 234), embodying the image of “the Chinese as racially alien, a stereotype first cast in the nineteenth century as Western imperial countries chipped away at China’s sovereignty and Chinese workers began to populate the [Western United States]” (Song

78). Danny's perception of Chin-Kee shifts over the course of the graphic novel as he learns that he has been suppressing his own Asian American identity due to a desire to fit in at school. *Boxers & Saints* does not present a character similar to Chin-Kee, but it nonetheless problematizes the racialized depictions of Chinese barbarism that permeated Western accounts of the Boxer Uprising. Yang draws Chinese characters in their regular lives and depicts them as embodying Chinese gods and heroes in moments of battle. The Chinese heroes and gods offer a positive cultural tradition which they can use, and Yang sympathizes with their use of Chinese popular culture, even if he remains troubled by their exercise of violence. In terms of the deeply problematic history of Western cultural representations of the Boxer Uprising and visual stereotypes of Chinese people, Yang's normalization of these characters and their motives for joining the Uprising pushes back against the history of visual dehumanization of Asian peoples and its naturalization in comics. By doing so, *Boxers & Saints* quite literally re-draws the archival record and emphasizes the humanity and recognizable struggles characters face.

Given these complex reception histories that are, moreover, entwined within the mechanics of Western imperialism, describing Bao and the other Boxers as fundamentalists obscures the neo-colonialism at work in such labelling. A more productive way of examining these characters would be to link this history to ideas of comics superheroes – including their social and political functions as well as their representations of power and agency – as an important influence on Yang's own thought and work. Yang discusses his ambivalence about the Boxers, denouncing their violence yet seeking to understand them through parallels with today's popular culture:

They were poor and illiterate...Powerless kids who really had no position in life, no hope in life. So where do they turn? They turn to their pop culture. They turn to stories. And there were stories about heroes and magic and super powers and colorful clothing. And then they almost cosplayed. They wanted to be these gods so badly they came up with this ritual where they believed they would be possessed by them, get their powers. (Rozema 6)

Boxers & Saints can be read as a thoughtful exploration of superhero identities through its portrayal of Bao as a proto-superhero: he is a young, low-class boy who is becoming an important figure in a movement about national identity while adopting the garb of gods and historical figures. Moreover, Bao cannot be white-washed like the Green Turtle was, covered up by a mask even as he saved white Americans from danger, and Bao therefore remains firmly entrenched in an anti-Western and anti-imperial struggle. Bao and the other Boxers are nonetheless derided as “Some unwashed village rats [who] have come to play hero” (*Boxers* 126). Through his ambivalence and desire to understand the Boxers’ motives and their contemporary parallels, Yang presents a much more nuanced picture of some of the origins and issues at play in the Boxer Uprising. He also takes up what Hilary Chute notes as the “staples of superhero storytelling – the origin story and the vexed question of vigilantism” (91).

Bao’s journey to violence and nationalism stems from his personal experiences of pain and powerlessness, but Vibiana’s story (in part two of the set) offers an alternative vision of China and Chinese identity. She demonstrates the potential role for both

diversity and plurality in the nation-state over and against the narrow, coercive definition of nation and national unity demonstrated by Bao and the Boxers. Furthermore, by giving Vibiana her own story and not simply enfolding it into Bao's narrative in *Boxers*, Yang carves out a clear space for discussing Asian women's complex experiences of religion on their own terms. He shows Vibiana's struggles with patriarchy in her own home, from her grandfather's preference for her male cousin Chung, as well as her initial indifference to the foreign religion.⁷¹ She is originally more interested in cookies than Christ when she starts attending religious lessons at the doctor's house. Nonetheless, she decides to convert after she becomes increasingly drawn to Christianity, an action which emphasizes her agency as well as her desire to incorporate Christianity into her life for her own reasons.

With Vibiana's story, Yang complicates how religious identity, colonialism, and gender come together. Feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan writes that Asian women have historically been keenly aware of the colonial frameworks of Christianity, including its collusion with Western domination, capitalism, and patriarchalism. Though she notes that many Asian women and theologians would hesitate to describe their work as feminist because it retains class and racial overtones of "middle-class European and American women" (9), Pui-Lan emphasizes that Asian women like Vibiana have also re-worked Christian elements to reflect their own purposes, social contexts, and personal motivations. Vibiana converts to Christianity for her own reasons and remains firm in that

⁷¹ Jinhua Emma Teng offers a detailed exploration of Chinese women's experiences with patriarchy from a Chinese women's studies perspective, as well as critiques the constructions of the "traditional Chinese woman" in Western women's studies scholarship.

decision even though she faces the prospect of being killed for it. These kinds of stories are important to understand because they acknowledge and honor the complex socio-religious realities of Chinese women's lives and their engagements with religion in colonial situations,⁷² rather than homogenizing them or positioning Chinese women simply as victims (Pui-Lan 72).⁷³

Crucially, *Saints* offers a new perspective on the relationship between religion and colonization. Where Bao understands Christianity as in direct competition with Chinese religiosity, Vibiana doesn't see her conversion as a betrayal of her Chinese identity or her Chinese religion, instead melding it with Christianity in a more syncretic way. Chiann Karen Tsui and Russell Berman challenge the strict, binary division between colonizer and colonized that they argue has informed much of postcolonial literary scholarship. They suggest instead that "If colonizer and colonized existed in separate spheres in the realm of ideology, in terms of lived experience more complex forms of contact and exchange prevailed" (183). Vibiana's story depicts one such account of lived complexity, especially in matters of religion. While Christianity was an integral part of Western imperialism⁷⁴ –

⁷² Though Vibiana has a positive experience with Christianity, the concept of religion itself has been problematically employed in situations of colonization. Drawing on William Cavanaugh's work on religion and violence, James Bernard Murphy points out that "our notion of religion as a genus whose species are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc. is a modern, European idea which emerged only after the seventeenth century...the description of Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Animism, etc. as 'religions' was imposed by European colonial powers against the objections of the colonized peoples, who often denied that their cultural practices were 'religions.' The idea that non-Western cultures must have something corresponding to our notion of 'religion' may just be an imperial fiction" (481).

⁷³ See also the important work of Marianne Katoppo, particularly *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology*, and Hyun Kyung Chung's *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*.

⁷⁴ For example, Hilary M. Carey discusses the entwinement of religion and British empire, noting that "The churches were essential to the creation of a Christian consensus which supported the expansion of the British world through the planting of religious institutions in every conceivable corner of the empire" (xiv). *Boxers & Saints* doesn't specify which nationality the foreigners are, and there were many nations,

and all too often complicit in the latter's colonial abuses – its reception history signals one such variegated contact zone in China in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Religion here emerges as a negotiated category, one in which the elements of choice and personal volition assume vital significance. Kwok Pui-Lan draws on Stuart Hall's work in reflecting that "[w]e are used to thinking of colonization as a one-way process, with the powerful dominating the powerless at will. Instead...colonization must be seen as a transnational and transcultural 'global' process [which] challenges a simple binary construction of they/we, there/here, then/now, and home/abroad" (2002, 77-8). Robert L. Montgomery echoes her point, observing that though Christianity's frequent alliance with imperialism meant that conversion was often associated "with coercion and domination by the colonial powers" (174) by local peoples, individual motivations for conversion are "extremely complex" (177) and touch on issues of social and group identities. As Vibiana converts against the pressures of the majority religion and political will surrounding her, emphasizing her choice and decision-making agency becomes important for considering conversion in colonial contexts. She negotiates her personal and religious identity in relationship with her familial and political groups. A large part of her decision rests on her treatment as an unwanted girl, one who is subject to her strongly patriarchal family structure; her new Christian group allows her more freedom and more leeway to contribute to the daily life of the community and the wellbeing of others. Her conversion therefore stands out as a site embodying the complex relation between

including Britain, Russia, and France, jostling for influence in China at this time and who eventually formed a coalition against the Boxers. However, Father Bey is Catholic (most likely a Jesuit priest), and Vibiana joins the Chinese Catholic convert community.

colonizer and colonized that Kwok Pui-Lan, Robert L. Montgomery, and Chiann Tsui and Russell Berman identify.

Yang thus complicates the narrative of how Christianity has historically interacted with local peoples, especially women. At the same time, he explores the trajectory of his own Catholicism and its complicated relationship with Chinese history through his comics. In interviews, Yang connects Vibiana's desires to fit in with the appeal of Christianity for contemporary Asian Americans: "I think for outsiders in general, for people in general who have a hard time finding a place in the world, this idea of intention [that God has an intention] – this idea that there's this divine will that wants you to be who you are – that intended for you to be who you are, is a really powerful one" (Rozema 6). Vibiana is an outsider in her own family, and she struggles to develop her own identity. Christianity provides her with a model for finding meaning in her own life, a situation that resonates with many Asian Christians, as Yang's own experiences highlight. Ultimately, Yang's works suggests that Chinese and Christian identities are not mutually exclusive, but that they can be negotiated. Just as both Bao and Vibiana struggle to establish their spiritual heritage,⁷⁵ so too Yang excavates a historical moment that allows him to consider important markers in his own life, aesthetically and narratively.

⁷⁵ Vibiana, especially, finds a home and a domestic life in the Chinese Christian community where she has previously been minimized in her own home environment. Joan of Arc becomes Vibiana's spiritual mentor as well as a replacement for the mother who no longer wants her. Lee Bao has a turbulent relationship with Chin Shih-huang, though I wonder if he retains the connection to the Chinese emperor because he has no other older mentor – his father has died and Red Lantern (a friend and teacher) has been killed by foreign troops.

Yang has spoken about the challenges of depicting spiritual elements in comics, a form which relies on the visual (Goellner). Comics, like superheroes, “has a dual nature, because it combines two different media, still pictures with words...Comics itself has an ambivalence: it doesn’t really know...It sorts of sits in between” (Rozema 7). Despite – or maybe because of – this ambivalence, comics make space for reflective engagement, operating analogously to religious imagery. Yang notes how Catholic iconography has influenced him, pointing out the importance of the visual arts – illuminated manuscripts, the sequence of the Stations of the Cross – for Catholicism’s history (Rozema 7) as well as for comics. His simplicity of visual style is evocative of icons: “the simplicity of the icon lets it represent the most essential thing” (Rozema 7), wherein simplicity involves an economy of line and shading capable of profound expressiveness. This expressiveness allows an openness for reflection on the part of the viewer or reader, be it spiritual, ethical, or other. Turner Smith highlights this possibility for spiritual openness in writing about the ritual Bao and the Boxers carry out: she says that the characters “dwell in a culture in which spiritual forces are perceived as real entities” and that they “enact rituals in order to *open* themselves up to the spirits” (205). They then “‘put on’ spiritual identities” to help themselves “feel more significant or better suited to address the expectations put upon them” (205), though this ritual entails a loss of control over which spirit they meet or what actions those spirits carry out. Turner Smith’s focus on the visual portrayal of the ritual and its concomitant identity transformation demonstrates how comics offers a new space in which the aesthetic and the spiritual can be evoked and contemplated.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the consistent focus on ambivalence in the comics, both parts of *Boxers & Saints* end in violence. Bao kills Vibiana for not denying her Christianity, and then faces death himself at the hands of foreign soldiers. At the end of *Boxers*, he thinks, “The Gods of the Opera are fleeing” (325), an indication of profound spiritual and national loss for him as well as for the Uprising. It points to a sense of his own failure to save both himself and his country. He doesn’t turn out to be a superhero after all; he emerges once again as a vulnerable young man whose plans fall apart. The end of *Saints* suggests that Bao may end up living, despite being grievously wounded, because he starts reciting the words to the Lord’s prayer to avoid being shot yet again by the soldiers. But this ending reconfigures what it means to save others as well as one’s country and one’s neighbours – the only reason Bao can recite the Lord’s prayer is because Vibiana gives it to him as her final gift before he kills her: “Just *listen*,” she says, “So that’s what you say when you pray...It’s the only thing I could think of to give you” (*Saints* 159-161). At the moment of her death, Vibiana has reached a security in her identity and a purposefulness for her life through extending a possibility of peace and reconciliation to Bao. Encouraged by Jesus appearing in a vision to her, she doesn’t see Bao as an enemy, but rather as a person in need of healing and care. For Bao’s part, he remains ashamed that he “pretended to be a devil to save my own life. I’ve...betrayed *everything*” (*Saints* 169). He continues to be myopic about the fact that Vibiana gave him a chance to reconceive what it means to build a nation as a community built on diversity rather than a group of like-minded believers. The two-part ending to *Boxers & Saints*

therefore underscores the comic's ambivalence about the Boxers and their Uprising, and offers a sympathetic, yet questioning depiction of an anti-imperial superhero.

The Monstrous Female Messiah of Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda's *Monstress* Series

In Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda's ongoing *Monstress* series, Maika Halfwolf appears human but is outcast even by her own animal-like people known as the Arcanics.⁷⁶ Her hybrid heritage mirrors her hybrid body: a genderless monster named Zinn lives inside her; Zinn is a powerful creature who has been sealed in Maika's ancestors for centuries. Described as a terrifying god, Zinn emerges as a creature of appetite who often overwhelms Maika in order to satisfy that appetite. While the two battle for space and control inside Maika's own body, Maika searches for her matrilineal heritage – piecing together her childhood memories of her mother as a young woman while confronting unsavoury details about how her mother conceived her to be a tool to restore an ancient power in the world. An important part of her growth rests on her newfound relationships with a vulnerable fox child and a mysterious cat, both of whom rely on Maika for protection as much as she needs them to remind her of her responsibilities to others as well as the humanizing power of relationships. Her mother once told her, “No matter what happens, you belong to *no one*. You will be controlled by *no one*. Swear it to me, Maika” (Vol. 2, 146). Maika's central struggle in the series revolves around differentiating between relationships that control and coerce and relationships that nourish and sustain.

⁷⁶ Arcanics possess animal features. They appear either as fully animal (for example, Maika's grandmother is a wolf) or as a mixture of human and animal. The child Kippa, Maika's travelling companion, has a human face alongside fox ears and a bushy tail.

Maika's story occurs within a backdrop of war as the comics contemplate what it means to be monstrous in the midst of widespread, often racially motivated, violence. Her world possesses some surprising elements: the majority of characters are women with emotional and ethical range – diverse characterizations that Liu argues have all too often been denied to women in fiction (Alleyne). They are sadistic prison guards, power-hungry sorceresses, tender lovers, caring friends, and hopeful activists. In building a matrilineal, matriarchal world, *Monstress* de-centres both the female body's reproductive capacities and heteronormative relationships in order to emphasize different forms of kinship and relationality and reposition ideas of the monstrous feminine. The series' title itself invokes a consideration of how women are imagined and policed as monstrous. As Jane Ussher argues, "Women who fail...to perform femininity within the tight boundaries within which it is prescribed at each stage of the reproductive life cycle, are at risk of being positioned as mad or bad, and subjected to discipline or punishment, which masquerades as treatment or rehabilitation to disguise its regulatory intent" (4).⁷⁷ *Monstress* repeatedly problematizes these assumptions of female monstrosity, focusing instead on dynamics of power and appetite. It also ponders the ways in which bodily pain, experiences of violence, and trauma are considered monstrous. In doing so, the series questions societal expectations of heroes as well as the conventions of the superhero genre – Maika's experiences and relationship with the god Zinn sealed inside her do not

⁷⁷ There is a long, vibrant theoretical tradition of examining the trope of monstrous women. Dianna Taylor traces some of this tradition in arguing that monstrous women violate "moral and gender norms" and are figures of ambivalence. Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Coody are also co-editing a volume entitled *Monstrous Women in Comics*, hopefully to be released in Fall 2019.

situate her neatly as superhero or even as anti-hero. Is the escaped female slave and the demon god the destroyer or the saviour of worlds?

The very first page of the series pulls these threads of the monstrous female body together with considerations of race as a socially constructed tool of division: Maika, naked, is about to be auctioned off to the humans in their city of Zamora. Standing against a washed-out, darkened background, she alone takes up the entire page. Clearly visible are her severed left arm and a strange brand in the middle of her chest. A metal collar around her neck signals both her status as slave and as a potentially dangerous member of the Arcanic race of beings while a whip slices across her neck and chin above the collar. She gazes to the right of the page, eyes narrowed as she identifies the person she has been pursuing for five years.

A number of issues arise from this single panel, all of which implicate the reader's own gaze. Takeda's drawing of Maika's nakedness both invokes and deposes a number of assumptions about the sexualization of Maika's body, her severed arm, and her social condition as a slave. For the terms of the auction, she is categorized as an object, most likely for sexual or labour uses. Furthermore, as an Arcanic – a race of beings that had been at war with the humans only a few years prior to the start of the series – she is feared and hated. The operations of the auction are intended to strip her of dignity and any sense of personhood, and exposing her bare flesh reinforces the hierarchies of power at work.⁷⁸ Her enforced nakedness is meant to render her vulnerable and governable,

⁷⁸ Takeda's lush art throughout the series is inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e traditions of representing the ephemerality of the 'floating world' – lavish scenes of opulence and pleasure in addition to rich landscapes – as well as the decadent, yet entwining use of lines of 1920s art deco styles. This aesthetic

but this flesh instead poses a conundrum for the auction attendees, one that the auctioneer attempts to defuse: Maika appears fully human whereas most Arcanics combine human and animal characteristics. Her apparent humanness makes it more difficult for others to demonize her as merely an Arcanic animal – a lesser creature, according to their ontological hierarchy, and one thus deserving of the degradation and debasement she receives. As one potential buyer asks, “Are you certain she’s an Arcanic? We wouldn’t want to buy a *human* by mistake. We’re criminals, not savages” (2).

Her nakedness therefore raises questions about the categories of race structuring this world: race is supposed to be imprinted on the body, making it easy to sort the humans from the Arcanics. Race is taken for granted as a visible marker of difference, one that is used repeatedly to denigrate and debase others.⁷⁹ It even physically shapes this world’s societies by means of a massive wall separating human and Arcanic territory. Moreover, the melding of the human and animal in many of the Arcanics’ features blurs categories of the body and destabilizes notions of fixed human identity. Maika’s appearance disturbs the entire racial and social order on which the world runs, and it prefigures the vast upheaval she will initiate with her actions and her search for her mother’s legacy.

merging of Eastern and Western art traditions emphasizes the wealth and lavishness of the auction participants and the power hierarchies of the human world, underscoring how the characters – especially the Arcanics and Maika – are enmeshed in a decadent system of consumption and exploitation. There is potentially an eco-critical reading of both the art and its implications: the humans both exert dominance over and fear the animal-like Arcanics, desiring the latter’s bodies for personal use even as they are repulsed by the creatures they see as unholy and threatening.

⁷⁹ In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks offers a seminal study of how race becomes marked on the body; she also explores the role of representation in constructions of race. As I mention earlier, comics has a charged history of racial representation, and Liu and Takeda’s focus on the physical features of the Arcanics is important to parsing the way race is tied to the body.

Maika's thin frame is drawn somewhat perfunctorily, almost fading into the background, and the true focus in the image is on the triad of her face, the collar, and the image marking her chest. Her sideways look refuses to engage with the people – the auctioneer, buyers, or even the reader – contemplating her body, as she instead follows her own purposes; she doesn't cower, cry, or exhibit any signs of fear. The next few panels explain that Maika has allowed herself to be caught by the slave dealers so that she can get closer to a certain woman who, as part of the Cumaean order of witch nuns, is known for her medical experimentation on Arcanics.⁸⁰ Maika thus retains a measure of control over her situation and her embodiment despite being in a collar – she may be naked and desired as a sex and labour object, but she ultimately refuses to play by the terms her captors have instituted.⁸¹ She has allowed herself to be captured so that she can pursue her own objective.

So, too, the very image branded on her chest signifies a different script for reading her body: it is a third eye that stares fixedly at those who would look at her.⁸² It marks her as different and as an outsider to both humans and Arcanics, but it also retains unsettling links to familial inheritance as well as to conceptions of godly power. When

⁸⁰ The medical experimentation may perhaps be a reference on Liu's part to the infamous Japanese experiments perpetrated upon Chinese men, women, and children during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Liu frequently calls attention to her Chinese grandparents' experiences of this War – her grandfather as a member of the air force and her grandmother as a refugee – and the physical and psychological troubles that followed the trauma of war (Clemente) for them but also for her as an inheritor of these stories.

⁸¹ This position stands in marked contrast to a time in her childhood when she was forced into slavery as an orphan and a refugee from the human-Arcanic war.

⁸² The stylization of the eye bears traces of Egyptian art, particularly the Eye of Horus. Other character headdresses also resemble Egyptian deities such as Anubis. There are also other iconographic traditions that make use of eyes, including hamsas in the Middle East and Northern Africa, and the eye of Providence/all-seeing eye of God in Christianity.

Zinn – who is one of the old, most dangerous, gods – emerges from Maika, its body is riddled with eyes. Later in the series, readers learn that the eye on Maika’s own chest indicates her lineage from the Shaman Empress, a matriarch who pursued both power and knowledge, as well as a relationship with Zinn; bearers of the eye were often tortured, killed, or experimented upon because of their familial descent from the Shaman Empress. The eye complicates how Maika is seen by both readers and other characters in the story – it gazes, unsettling the idea that those who look at Maika’s nakedness possess the balance of control. Maika’s posture and the glaring eye on her chest thus function in a number of ways: she resists the commodification of her body at the slave auction, she confronts the negative racialization of her body, and she forces a reconsideration of the equation of nakedness with fragility. From this very first panel, it becomes clear that Maika’s body is a site of contestation and multiplicity.

From this very first panel, it becomes clear that bodies are a central focus of *Monstress*, and this focus highlights a number of concerns about race, commodification, othered bodies, new forms of embodiment, and the effects of violence on the body. This constellation of meanings constantly swirls around bodies in the series, persistently underscoring the vulnerability of all creatures to violence and dehumanization. Given the violence that structures much of the action in the comics, the representation of such violence and its narrative purposes becomes an important focal point for problematizing the uses to which violence is put in this world – and in our own. Violence between the two major groups – the Arcanics and the humans – has erupted through war and scientific experimentation. As a child, Maika was displaced during the war and forced to scrounge

for scraps in a refugee camp alongside her best friend Tuya. After the war, the Cumaean order of witch-nuns engage in torture and experimentation on the bodies of Arcanics to mine their bones for a powerful substance called ilium. Liu holds these acts of violence in front of the reader as a way to foreground the devastation of war and the consequences of dehumanizing other people: violence assaults the dignity of the person, leaving physical, emotional, and psychological wounds. In a scene near the beginning of the series, *Monstress* examines the attitudes necessary to get to the point where Arcanic bodies can be displayed on the Cumaean laboratory tables, pried open, and mined like non-sentient objects that can neither feel pain nor possess any kind of sacred value.

This kind of violence combines techno-scientific racism and capitalist utilitarianism, providing graphic commentary on the daily conflicts that mark contemporary global politics. Liu's use of violence on a narrative level indicates an ethical awareness of the world beyond the page: "I've been very conscious of that while working on *Monstress* – the experimentation, people being hacked apart to serve science, slavery, even cannibalism...None of these are new inventions that I created for the story. They are all practices committed in wartime, and I didn't want to shy away from them" (Alleyne). Within these larger concerns about war lies a burning consciousness of the particular effects of war upon women. Liu's grandmother was a refugee during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and Liu recounts hearing the traumatic stories her grandparents told about their experiences when she was growing up. She also notes that the Nanking Massacre, a period of mass murder and mass rape committed by the

Japanese in 1937-1938 after they captured the Chinese capital, was very much in her thoughts as she wrote.

Liu combines her historical awareness of war-time dangers for women such as her grandmother with a consciousness of the cultural fetishization and diminishment of Asian women in the present moment. Her insistence on representing Asian women such as Maika with moral greyness and psychological complexity works against such fetishization in an effort to write Asian women's experiences into comics and thus popular culture. While the under-representation of Asian and Asian American characters has long been a problem for the North American film industry as well as graphic narratives, Frances Kai-Hwa Wang notes that even those characters who do make it to the page or the screen are "less complex, with fewer romantic and familial relationships, and with shows often falling back on negative stereotypes...such as perpetual foreigner, 'yellow peril,' 'model minority,' emasculated men, exoticized women, and sidekicks to white characters" (2018). Min Huh echoes this observation and highlights the tensions embedded in designations such as model minority,⁸³ which has been used to limit characterization of Asian Americans along restrictive moral, behavioural, and occupational expectations. The issue of representation in popular culture becomes even more weighted considering the fetishization of Asian women's sexuality. Patricia Park traces the long history of such gendered fetishization in Western art, film, and cultural objects in which "the Asian

⁸³ Huh (2016) also points out the problems of using the labels "Asian" and "Asian American," which homogenize the large numbers of ethnic groups, nationalities, and heritages that comprise Asia (Huh counts "fifty-one different Asian countries" 4). The perils of such generalizations include a flattening of Asian representation in popular culture as well as unhelpful connotations in terms of politics.

female has continually been exoticized and eroticized” (2014). She argues that “the fetishized subject becomes the objectified” and erases the individuality of individual women. All of these interlinking issues intensify Liu’s concern with the gendered depictions of Asian women and illuminate her choice to portray a world in which there are hardly any male-identified characters and most of the characters are visibly of Asian descent.⁸⁴

These gender issues shape Maika Halfwolf’s characterization and her function within the ongoing narrative arcs of *Monstress*. As with *Boxers & Saints*, American superheroes function as an important point of context and contestation for *Monstress*. The melding of deity and Arcanic (an animal-like species) within Maika attracts a comparison with the god-like superheroes of American comics. Indeed, Liu forged her comics writing skills through work for Marvel on titles such as *Wolverine*, *Black Widow*, and *Astonishing X-Men*, and notes that with *Monstress* she wanted to write superheroes as “real people with real problems, not just power and action” (Kelts). Liu takes issue with the idealization and fantasies of power that structure much of the production and reception at play in the long history of superhero comics – fantasies that have often been enacted in comics at the expense of female characters.

Liu’s emphasis on a matriarchal, alternate Asia reflects her desire to challenge the superhero as the “romanticized figure for American manhood” (Chute 87) while also allowing her to question the idea of female heroism and the thin line separating it from

⁸⁴ Indeed, the old gods such as Zinn frustrate the female-male spectrum altogether by calling each other “Brother-Sister.”

monstrousness rather than the superheroic. When, in issue 18, Maika and Zinn (the old god embedded within Maika) partner together to save the world from an invading old god, she rejects the label of hero. However, another character complicates this identity by telling Maika: “He didn’t say you were a *good* person. He said you were a *hero*. There’s a difference” (20). The distinction highlights the ethical ambiguity that surrounds Maika’s actions throughout the series and indicates Liu’s ambivalence about equating heroism and moral character. In openly embracing this ambivalence throughout the series, *Monstress* deconstructs masculine notions of superheroic modes of characterization as well as questions the salvific overtones embedded in such a masculinized superhero. The superhero comes to save, but what happens when that superhero ends up destroying? Of course, this tension has been explored in many contemporary comics, notably in works such as *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, which debates the shaky ethics and unstable moral ground propping up the mission of many superheroes. Moore presents a vision of superheroes as paternalistic, often making decisions that will affect vast numbers of people without their consent. In many ways, the power of the superhero exists as power *over* people, even if it is benevolently conceived.

Much of this work rests on an interrogation of the links between female characters – including female superheroes – and monstrosity. Maika is both feared and desired for her power stemming from her relationship with Zinn. At one point, she thinks of herself merely as a weapon or an instrument to be used for the purposes of others rather than as an individual person. Her personhood is erased by those who would exploit her; she remains an outcast physically marked as different and thus as monstrous. In her

examination of Noelle Stevenson's comics character Nimona, who is another "combination of human-animal, vulnerable-immortal, girl-monster" (551) much like Maika, Mihaela Precup questions the "connection between violence and the construction of social roles such as 'hero' and 'monster'" (551). The thin line between such designations is a fraught one, intensified by the series' exploration of what it means for women to push the limits of their subjectivities in a non-male dominated world.

Precup understands female monsters such as Nimona – and, I would add, Maika Halfwolf – as part of a "definitional cluster...as an ambiguous non-normative category and a pretext for interrogating common definitions of what makes one human" (554). They are part of a long history in which monsters become aligned with sin, transgression, fear, freaks, and liminality – labels which singe the bearer's body as well as their societal positions. They are also markers which become intensified when read in terms of gender "since women's bodies were regarded as more permeable and already othered" (554). Perhaps, as Precup argues, *Monstress* similarly does not deny the caustic plates bolting gender and monstrosity together, but instead "reconceptualise[s]...it as a non-normative category that offers an opportunity of reflection upon various social anxieties around the post-human body, non-normative sexuality, and the amount of violence that may be justified in order to protect them" (556). And such anxieties proliferate, brimming amongst issues of gender, race, and disability that provide the series' impetus.

As an essential part of the series' re-workings of gender and monstrosity, Maika's disability – the loss of her left arm above the elbow – becomes entwined with her monstrousness, however ambiguous its relationship may be to the monster Zinn living

inside her. Precup notes that disability in comics such as *Nimona* heralds female characters who break normative categories. Though some of the auction attendees state that “Even if she is a monster, she’s deformed” (2), her missing arm only bothers Arcanics insofar as it represents a tangible and increasingly necessary sacrifice to Zinn and their appetite. She sometimes chooses to wear a wooden prosthetic, but, more often than not, she goes without it. The arm does not signify lack or abnormality in and of itself, but it does configure a complex relationship with disability and monstrosity because it becomes the portal through which the monster Zinn emerges. Others perceive her to be, in Aidan Diamond and Lauranne Poharec’s words, a freaked and othered body, not because of her missing arm but because of her state of embodiment (402). She simultaneously points to a monstrous version of incarnation – a terrible and terrifying melding of person and deity – while also heralding a kind of posthuman cyborg body.

This version of the cyborg in the world of *Monstress* incites contradictory reactions: fears of the demise of the human (a very real fear for the humans), desire for new posthuman embodiment with technological enhancements (as the Cumean nuns seek), as well as hope for more constructive social relations that move past the persistent war and division. Maika and Zinn function as a cyborg even as there are other cyborgs – sentient guardians of a vault – who turn against them. The cyborg subtext is an important one for *Monstress*: there is a wide swathe of comics in American and Japanese manga traditions which are puzzling through contemporary technological challenges to embodiment. But, as Jillian Weise insists, disabled bodies are more than a metaphor – they possess their own lived realities that don’t match Donna Haraway’s lofty

expectations for the cyborg. Maika as a character and Liu as the writer both struggle with the idea of being more than a metaphor, and I would argue that character and writer feature the cyborg only to then mute its significance: its main focus is not on future technologically reconceived bodies.

Perhaps a way to broach such an invocation of the cyborg is to question how its heroic connotations have become laden with messianic expectations, now with new technologies for a posthuman era. Haraway's cyborg was supposed to inaugurate a cyberfeminist resistance, a technodemocratic order that had moved past the old gods, moved past even gender and bodies. Disability then becomes easily 'fixable' – and almost erased entirely – by prosthetic and cybernetic enhancements. Is the deity Zinn the god for such an order, a powerful and uncanny yet nonetheless bionic other half for a person who has always been defined by halves (Maika *Halfwolf*)? Or does Zinn remain firmly a creature, one who eventually tries to instantiate new relational possibilities with Maika? Is it possible to conceptualize the way through such interpretations, such binaries, while keeping Weise's focus on Maika's disabled body, especially with the comics' emphasis on the *female* disabled body?

Disability is not the primary indicator of Maika's monstrousness – its very normalization in the world of *Monstress* highlights how very non-normative it continues to be in our own – but it does visually signal the process of Maika learning to (re)negotiate her relationship with her own body and the newfound, but strongly unwanted, presence in it. She loses more and more of her left arm as Zinn wakes. Combined with her lack of consciousness when Zinn goes on a feeding frenzy – Zinn overwhelms Maika in such

moments – Maika experiences a disorienting lack of control over and agency within her own body. She is confronted with a profoundly challenging multiplicity of self, a manifold creasing of presence within the folds of her own body. Issues 1-10 depict her angry reaction to this multiplicity, wherein she tries to subdue Zinn by force. When such attempts to coerce and exert power over each other fail, both Maika and Zinn are forced to communicate with each other in order to move through dangerous situations. In this way, Maika comes to understand her body – and what it can do – in new ways. In one noteworthy example of this process, she comes to offer herself as a sacrifice for others, choosing to help rather than be wielded as a weapon.

Liu's choice of fantasy as her literary genre of choice with which to explore issues such as historical trauma, disability, and racism offers a double rebuttal to critics who see both comics and fantasy fiction as low brow. Liu notes that fantasy allows her tackle issues of racism and traumatic histories "without having to...name them" (Alleyne); fantasy also gives her space to directly deal with questions of monstrosity and otherness, both of which she experienced herself growing up Chinese-American and facing systemic as well as personal racism: "I was obsessed with the 'other,' with telling stories about monsters that are misunderstood, monsters that are incorrectly judged, that are vilified because of the way they look" (Alleyne). Maika's physical monstrosity – her profane pairing with a powerful old god – functions as only one manifestation of otherness in the series: race and trauma (especially the physical effects of trauma, such as Maika's missing left arm) are also examined as visible sites of difference.

This perspective on the opportunity for comics to powerfully address histories of war, racism, colonialism, and gender-based violence has only recently become socially and literarily evident. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in which Spiegelman writes of learning about his parents' experiences as Jewish concentration camp survivors, is often cited as one of the major texts that fractured the distance between comics and the representation of "serious" events. Though debates raged about its appropriateness in using comics to represent the Holocaust and depicting characters as animals (for example, Jewish persons as mice, Polish people as pigs, and Nazis as cats), *Maus* has since become a landmark autobiography and an important piece of Holocaust literature. It is now viewed as an exemplar of how comics can utilize its combination of the visual and the textual to comment on traumatic familial histories and cataclysmic genocides such as the Holocaust. Many other examples have joined Spiegelman and *Maus* in conveying social and political commentary, including Marjane Satrapi with *Persepolis* (on the religious crackdown and violence surrounding the Iranian Revolution), Alison Bechdel with *Fun Home* (detailing Bechdel's coming-of-age lesbianism and relationship with her closeted father), and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (which takes up racism, Asian stereotypes, and identity struggles experienced by the Chinese-American protagonist).

These examples depend, to a large extent, on the use of social realism, though it is possible to read *Monstress* as engaging with and even expanding such notions through fantasy. While Jeff Adams doesn't include fantasy in his own study of how contemporary graphic novels are "document[ing] social and political events" (9), he does pry a definition of critical social realism away from mimesis towards a more capacious understanding:

“realism [in his usage of the term] refers to political critiques of beliefs or values, as opposed to the correspondence of depictions to (pre-existing) ideas about lifelike representations” (9-10). This definition aligns with the work that *Monstress* takes up when it deals with the effects of war, violence, and displacement on characters’ bodies and relationships. The series employs fantasy to question such significant themes as instrumentalist political attitudes to war and utilitarian approaches to medical experimentation (such as that carried out by the Cumaean witch-nuns), not to escape from them.

Given their hefty subject matter, comics like *Monstress*, *Maus*, *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*, and others rely on visual economies of representation to struggle with the limits of what can be said about distress, pain, and violence. Hilary Chute suggests that

Comics is a form about visual presence, a succession of frames, that is stippled with absence, in the frame-gutter sequence. We can say that its very grammar, then, evokes the unsaid, or inexpressible. Comics highlights the relation between words and images – and therefore addresses itself to the nature of the difficulty of representing extreme situations and experience. (34)

This capacity to witness through representation has been explored through autobiographical comics, graphic life narratives, and graphic memoirs (Smith and Watson 173; Rifkind and Warley 11). Issues of self-referentiality, authorial personas, and the relationship between reader and author are different in fantasy than in graphic life narratives – but that doesn’t mean fantasy as a genre should be excluded from

conversations about representation. In discussing Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Chute observes that "certain modes of representation, even in a self-consciously artificial form like comics – convey trauma differently, and perhaps even more potently, than realism" (305). In other words, representation of trauma and the witnessing of traumatic events as an ethical act are not limited to realist modes of narratives such as autobiography or history.

As with autobiographical comics, the question can be raised of what responses images of pain arouse in the reader/viewer as well as the ethical issues such responses raise. Scott McCloud suggests that "a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer" (121), while Susan Sontag argues that such responses are complicated – even photographs of bodies in war zones elicit more than just sympathy or witnessing, shock or horror, depending on the context in which they are disseminated or the ways they are structured (13). Images are both powerful and slippery, their effects unpredictable and not necessarily ethical, as Sontag warns in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, but their interpretation in large part rests on context. As a product of popular culture, comics has been at the centre of its own particular storms of controversy, none greater than the 1950s panic about comics promoting immorality and violence to impressionable young people. David Hajdu notes that such responses were "always about many things other than cartoons: about class and money and taste; about traditions and religions and biases rooted in time and place..." (7).

Context is important for reading and interpretation, but so too is materiality. Comics are different than photographs and consequently require distinct forms of engagement. The images on a comics' page are never static – they are always linked to

other panels in a constant stream of motion across the page. Comics have even developed conventions for emphasizing this motion, be it the arrangement of the panels, the flow of a character's hair, the curved lines and blur representing a fight scene, or – quite often – blood spattering across the page. Pain, too, moves through panels in tandem with the characters, not just in fight scenes, but in their visible gestures and facial expressions, as well as on their bodies. Maika repeatedly wrestles with the consequences of Zinn's appetite, with guilt and shame for her actions when Zinn takes over her will and cognition; she also struggles with understanding her mother's motives and desire for power. Her resulting anguish ripples through scenes, especially noticeable on her face. The reader must negotiate the physical flow of the page, piecing together visual and verbal cues to make narrative and emotional sense of the events.

The gutter (the space between panels) often enforces a material separation on the page, reinforcing the pain of characters' separation from each other. Only infrequently are those gutters traversed, usually by an act of violence, character against character, and the distorted intimacy it produces, or – even more rarely – an embrace between characters. A brief, limited example of this emerges when Maika is hugged by a friend who tells her, "If we're here, it's because family protects family. Family endures" (Issue 15, 12). However, pain ultimately overwhelms the gutters more often than unity or family, pointing once again to a sense of pessimism and violence that threatens to engulf the characters and the series. The gutter imposes a gate – a wall – between characters and actions, while also implicating the fortification barricading the humans from the Arcanics as well as the partition separating the mortal world from the world of

the gods. Any breach in that wall ruptures the arrangements that order the world of *Monstress* and reverberates into the experience of seeing and reading the page.

The walls on the page point to the central problem of relationships in the series, including the relationship between the divine and the human, the messianic and the familial. Like *Boxers & Saints*, the religious overtones of superheroes and their salvific mission become a splinter of ambivalence for *Monstress*, as Maika displays a profane, non-consensual yoking with a god who is shown to be ravenous and consuming rather than benevolent and giving. Zinn breaks down the walls between divinity and human being only in an attempt to subsume the human in a macabre vision of the Christian incarnation. The deities of *Monstress* are shown to be terrifying creatures who, at one point in history, had to be battled and forcibly pushed out of the world. Their appetite and power combine to offer a bleak conception of divinity as monstrous, hungry not just for worship but for bodily sacrifice. The cats of the series – creatures which are both poets and nekromancers (they can commune with the dead) – think of the old gods as demons who only destroy with their hunger, but who nonetheless captivated the attention of naïve human beings at some point in the past. The humans possessed a “poverty of spirit” and were “easily fooled...by such otherworldly magnificence, whispering empty prayers” (Issue 15, 26). The old gods became

creatures of tragedy and romance, longing to walk amongst mortals, and share their wisdom. And that was enough...to become a religion. Benign, yes, based on a philosophy of love and compassion, and mercy. Looking to

the Old Gods as guides to an enlightened life. But cats have never been fooled. We have never forgotten the horror. (Issue 15, 26)

Monstress offers a grim depiction of the human search for meaning in deities and religion, seeing it as a romanticizing of divine hunger for worship – gods are dangerous and people easily duped in their desperation for spiritual comfort. The cats in particular vocalize a strong critique of religion and unquestioning faith, but the possibility that they are only presenting one aspect of the story flashes to the surface: the cats are the memory keepers of the world, offering history lessons that are inscribed as Afterwords in several issues. They therefore shape the story of the gods and control the master narrative for readers, perhaps skewing to their own biases in the process, such as admiration for how their own goddess, Ubasti, helped banish the old gods to a different world. In one sense, the cats' educational lessons for their young display a tacit warning about the power to write and therefore dictate history for future generations. In practice, the truth of the story of the old gods and their relationship with human beings remains fragmented in the historical record as well as in personal memory.

But the focus on deities emerges as only one vector for reading religion and spirituality in *Monstress*. What constitutes the sacred for the characters – what is worth loving, remembering, and sacrificing oneself for – is an ongoing question. The sacred at first glance appears to have little purchase in this world, glinting only in shards amidst the brokenness of the characters and the relentless violence done to bodies and relationships. As the series goes on, both Maika and Zinn gain more and more access to their memories, and those memories show them both possibilities for sacred

relationships they thought they had lost: “‘The world breaks us all,’ you once said to me. ‘But strength can flow from those broken places. Made new in ways we never dreamed,’” Maika remembers her mother telling her (vol. 2, 8). Maika’s memory flows at the moment she examines her body and her now completely missing left arm in the mirror. Brokenness and vulnerability are not glamorized in *Monstress*, but the series wonders how to honor them as an aspect of the human condition as well as how to heal. This element is perhaps tied to the depiction of violence in the comic: the violence inflicted on others sounds a warning about the dangers of dehumanization and pervasiveness of trauma as a result of war, colonialism, and racism; it also gets destructively directed against the self, as when Maika loses her arm as a result of her conflict with Zinn.

While dealing with these issues through the lens of monstrosity, *Monstress* focuses on the particular traumas Maika has experienced and her journey to seeing the sacredness in the lives of others. Maika’s cynicism, dislike of relationships, and apathy are in many senses products of the violence she has suffered in the refugee camps as a child as well as the machinations of others who wish to use her and Zinn as an instrument to control and with which to dominate others. Barring the option of controlling her, Maika’s own grandmother and other members of the Arcanic Dusk Court – including her childhood friend and possibly lover, Tuya – seek to destroy Maika. Throughout *Monstress*, Maika remains an outsider amongst both the Arcanics and the humans, as well as a tool to be manipulated for power and politics. The result is that she has experienced trauma as the result of such war and conflict, even as she inflicts violence on others; her apathy towards others is a defense mechanism borne out of the need to survive. These

circumstances generate a tension in her actions and attitudes – a desire to return to the comforting presence of Tuya as well as a growing, but unwelcome, feeling of responsibility for Kippa – though I would argue that her social alienation and relationship problems are symptoms of a wounding that has affected her on many levels. Maika consequently struggles to break the cycle of trauma she continues to reiterate; Ren, the cat accompanying Maika and Kippa, asks Maika, “Do you *ever* stop running? Or would that require you to be too much with yourself?” (vol. 1, ch. 2).

Trauma studies acknowledges that such wounding extends beyond the physical. As Serene Jones comments, “unlike external injuries, a wounded psyche doesn’t always manifest the signs of harm or suffering we typically associate with violence...[but] such harms are no less damaging than more visible ones” (12). In writing about trauma, ethics, and aesthetics in Holocaust representations, Dorota Glowacka draws on Dominick LaCapra’s idea that there are two types of trauma – “the structural trauma, constitutive of every individual’s psychic development and subjective self-construction, and the experience and memory of traumatic historical events” (20). She suggests that

[the] intertwining of traumatic historical events with a sense of oneself as a traumatized subject...allows these witnesses to work through the past and to move toward new ways of envisioning the future. Indeed, the uneasy tension between the two senses of trauma lends a unique force to the authors’ words or images, and it impels them to search for new idioms and means of expression. (20)

Maika has experienced both of these types of trauma, struggling psychically in terms of her “subjective self-construction” (Glowacka 20) and in regards to a number of particular events: the loss of her mother when Maika was very young, the catastrophe that occurred when Zinn overwhelmed her as a child and killed hundreds of people, and her experiences of hardship and starvation in the refugee camp with her friend Tuya. Consequently, she has withdrawn into herself as a mechanism for self-protection, though she remains trapped in a rehearsal of past traumas in which she cannot imagine or create a positive future. Her struggles are compounded because she is both witness to and agent of violence.⁸⁵

Witnessing and thinking through trauma and violence in a multimodal medium such as comics and a genre such as fantasy urges different forms of recognition and engagement with the narratives. As Hilary Chute points out, comics can engage with the unsayable in unique ways, and this fact motivates Yang, Liu, and Takeda as they deal with violence in terms of gender, racism, nationalism, and religion. Comics hold a capacity to witness trauma, according to Chute, as well as engage with what may be unsayable in speech or language. Where language struggles to absorb and express trauma, the visuality of comics can navigate and actually visualize the silence and anxieties of the unsayable, such as those rare instants of remembrance when Maika has brief glimpses of her mother’s face to comfort her. Marjorie Liu has commented on this capacity in Sana

⁸⁵ While scholarship on trauma has a long and important history, there has more recently been a move to examine the tensions embedded in both witnessing and committing violence in times of war and conflict. Concepts such as moral injury and soul injury attempt to grapple with these strains in the context of military veterans and emergency responders. See, for example, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini’s *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (2012).

Takeda's art to evoke the unsayable and its fraught relationship to trauma and violence, noting that "Sana is capable of illustrating silence" (Kelts). Takeda re-locates emphasis from the narrowly-imagined agency and action of male superheroes to explore how characters grapple with their own subjectivities in moments of extreme distress.

As Mihaela Precup notes in her discussion of *Nimona*, many recent comics feature female teenagers who "have experienced traumatic events" and are jaded or cynical, "but what brings them together is the fact they are all outsiders in worlds that have either betrayed, disappointed or simply cannot contain them" (554); these female characters have often been monsters in some sense (like the shape-shifting Nimona) or carried a monster (as with Maika). Maika has been marked as an outsider and as a monster on a number of different levels, and this experience partially inflects her distrust of others. But more than this social condition is a feeling of being an outsider in her own body, how her pain and her own struggles in dealing with it make her think of her own self as monstrous. Zinn constantly threatens to overwhelm her when they awaken, and they force her to commit numerous acts of killing to feed their appetite.⁸⁶ Maika feels guilt and shame as a result, but those feelings stem as much from her loss of control over her sense of self as much as from her remorse at murdering.

Her travelling companion Kippa displaces the violence wholly onto Zinn, as she believes that Maika is fundamentally a good person; however, Maika realizes that the violence emerges as much from her own desires as it does from Zinn. Indeed, it's possible

⁸⁶ Zinn can be construed as either genderless or genderqueer, as the Old Gods refer to each other as "Sister-Brother." I use the neutral pronouns "they, them, their" or "its" to refer to Zinn to reflect this aspect.

to read Zinn as a figure of Maika's own insatiable and socially unacceptable appetite.⁸⁷ A woman's expression of anger and hunger – sexual, material, or otherwise – remains socially contentious, though it becomes more normalized in *Monstress* as the series makes a space for exploring women's non-normative and queer subjectivities – and especially women's psychological and physical pain. To highlight the way *Monstress* broaches issues of trauma through Maika neither diminishes her agency nor glorifies trauma. Leslie Jamison cites numerous literary examples (such as Miss Havisham, Anna Karenina, and Mina Harker) in which women's pain – physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual – is put on a pedestal and reified as both beautiful and essentially part of female experience. At the same time, the lived realities of such pain all too often get belittled or even rendered monstrous. The woman in pain must manage that pain appropriately, without letting it overflow her wounds to touch others; self regulation and containment become more important than imaginatively engaging with that pain. Maika struggles to come to terms with her own desires, past experiences of trauma, grief, and relational position to others. Her "I" as both self and subject have become chaotically and distressingly entangled with the eye of the god imprinted on her chest, rendering her monstrous on numerous levels.

One way the figure of the messianic superhero recuperates notions of selfhood lies in the expression of rescuing others, though masculine notions of agency are reconfigured in *Monstress* to focus on relationships. Maika resists any heroic mode that

⁸⁷ Women's appetites have long been a social concern: Liz Herbert McAvoy's and Teresa Walters's co-edited volume *Consuming Narratives: Gender and the Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* highlights this contentious history.

focuses incessantly upon action in sharp distinction to the heroism of characters such as Kippa, the fox child whose cuteness and vulnerability functions to remind the other characters that violence diminishes personhood. Kippa provides a contrast to Maika's own experience as a refugee child, who, along with Tuya, faced starvation, brutal detention camps, and scientific experimentation at the hands of the Cumea, an order of witch nuns known for their relentlessness and brutality. Kippa is drawn as soft, furry, and adorable – she is infantilized visually, yet is used to promote a tenacious belief in people's goodness and the possibility of helping others. The world is not irredeemably tainted in her eyes, and she therefore shows Maika and Ren the cat that relationships, especially with friends and chosen family, can give a person a reason to live. Kippa influences Ren to such an extent that he sacrifices himself for her as she helps refugees escape, saying only one word on his deathbed – family. The notion of chosen family – one that is carved from traumatic circumstances and irrespective of nationality, religion, and race – offers a powerful meditation on how to heal from trauma.

Maika's sacrifice, occurring at almost the same moment as Ren's, becomes her creative instantiation of agency and subjectivity – the moment when she becomes an "I" for herself as well as a partner in her relationship with Zinn. Cathy Caruth emphasizes this creative agency in her discussion of a child dealing with the death of their friend; she notes the necessity of honoring the dead even as one turns away from them in a creative act that moves "the speaker forward to a life that is not simply possessed, but given, in some sense, and received, as a gift from the dead" (14). In her sacrifice, Maika receives a gift from her ancestor the Shaman Empress, who reminds Maika of her many mothers

(Issue 18) and thus of her lineage and identity. Her sacrifice becomes a creative act of remembering her mothers, caring for Kippa and her other friends, and moving forward to a choice that may very well end in her death.

Despite Maika's final action in the third arc of the series (the next issues will be released in 2019), Liu's anxieties about the traumatic effects of violence on all aspects of human flourishing pervade her conception of female characterization and her concerns about otherness as a form of monstrosity. If fantasy has often been used as a genre in which to explore alternative societies and constructive possibilities for life and relationships, *Monstress* (at least in the issues thus far) seems to remain mired in the violence that tears apart characters' bodies and families. Though Maika has experienced a slow, often begrudging transformation from apathetic cynic to a figure who is willing to self-sacrifice for the sake of others, the question at the end of the third arc of the series remains whether such small glimmers of hope are enough to overcome the violence that structures the foundations of the world in which she lives. Maika has all along resisted the function of world saviour, but the related idea of redemption – of forgiveness for past actions and the hope for a new future – emerges as an unlikely preoccupation for Zinn, the great betrayer of both the Old Gods and the humans. Zinn's perpetual hunger for human flesh has become Zinn's profane way of dealing with a sense of loss for Zinn's previous, but now broken, relationships with the Old Gods and Maika's ancestor, the Shaman Empress. Zinn's hunger has become grotesque and warped – but not unredeemable. Maika's path to knowledge about her lineage and her journey to self-sacrifice has been accompanied by Zinn's own journey to self-knowledge and their

recently-awakened desire for a new future. The question the series poses is whether or not such knowledge can stem the tide of violence that cracks the worlds from which they both come.

At the same time as Maika and Zinn struggle with sacrifice, another narrative arc tentatively proffers Kippa, the fox child, as a vision of hope and redemption in the series. Kippa consistently signifies naivety, innocence, and love – she refuses to give up on Maika or Ren the cat even after they commit violence or pursue their own agendas at the expense of others. Kippa constantly reminds those around her of the preciousness of life and of the duty to protect that life from harm. Kippa, in essence, encapsulates goodness: she continues to be a moral beacon despite the suffering she has endured. She also embodies a non-threatening, non-monstrous otherness, her round fox features representing an example of adorable friendliness. She offers a surrogate vision of childhood – a substitute for Maika’s traumatic childhood – that persists in its cheerfulness, moral conviction, and compassion, and therefore indicates a hope for a redeemable future. She alone believes in Maika’s inherent decency as well as her capacity to halt Zinn’s killing, and thus holds a revelation before Maika that she *can* change, that she can be redeemed from her pain and apathy. The symbol of the child has often been used to signal such future possibilities, gesturing towards a lack of present hope: the child becomes a messianic figure who can positively transform the yet-to-come when the present is broken beyond repair. It has also been critiqued as a displacement of responsibility, an inadequate reckoning with the present and an instrumentalist

understanding of both childhood and the future.⁸⁸ For *Monstress*, I think that Kippa's presence is meant to signal goodness and innocence, but that this aspect ultimately declares the series' difficulty moving through failure and imagining alternative presents. Kippa's character bears a heavy load that the other characters do not – and often will not – share, and therefore collapses under such weight.

Collective hope and societal redemption can only be instantiated communally and cooperatively, and perhaps one tentative and partial way forward lies in Maika and Zinn's anxious relationship: the two of them argue and try to overpower each other for much of the narrative, but ultimately end up talking and learning more about the other's past. These changes in their relationship are represented visually: the more they constructively communicate with each other, the more Zinn emerges from Maika's body to walk alongside her. This dramatic relational shift culminates in Zinn choosing to help Maika bear a particularly heavy burden in an attempt to repel another Old God breaching the divide between worlds. Zinn is now willing to die together with Maika in an apocalyptic end to the mortal world. The Messiah is not one, but two – or, perhaps, not even a person, but a relationship that begins in a profane incarnation based on appetite and power that transforms into a sacred commingling of the monstrous, the female, and the possible.

Both *Boxers & Saints* and *Monstress* end on ambivalent scenes of violence and threat, underscoring the idea that violence is neither puzzle to be solved by a messianic

⁸⁸ See Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* for his well-known critique of what he calls reproductive futurism centred in the figure of the child.

superhero nor a condition that can be eradicated in a single eschatological moment. Violence permeates the worlds of both comics and their relationships too extensively. Nonetheless, it provokes significant ethical questions for characters as well as readers: how do characters overcome the psychological wounding generated by violence that dehumanizes others, especially violence stemming from racial or gendered discourses of difference? Nonetheless, even in these bruised and bloody worlds, there are glimpses of the sacred to be found both in relationships with others, and those glimpses provide a wellspring of meaning, identity, and possibility for characters like Maika and Vibiana, as well as a desire for redemption and hope for Lee Bao and Zinn.

CHAPTER SIX

Walking through the Door:

Postsecular Cosmopolitanism in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

there are atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded.

Dionne Brand (100)

Every person is a half-open door / leading to a room for everyone.

Tomas Tranströmer (2017)

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that “[s]tories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world’s debris” (107). In his study of how people navigate the spaces and routines that make up their everyday lives, de Certeau discusses the practice of walking. He suggests that walking is a way of moving in the world that composes a story from the multitude of significations – the debris – that constitute the spaces and institutions through which one walks. From this debris, the walker composes their own subjective story about their sense of self, their families, and their neighbourhoods, infusing it with fragments of emotion and memory as they travel. de Certeau further compares stories and walking by seeing textual narratives as “spatial trajectories” that “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they

make sentences and itineraries out of them...Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice” (115).

Though de Certeau focuses on walking, his remarks draw attention to conditions of mobility and its spatial and textual possibilities in literature. In this chapter, I examine two novels, Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, that consider mobility in terms of its spiritual and relational dimensions. I frame it as postsecular cosmopolitanism, or what John McClure describes as a cosmopolitan community that is neither tied wholly to the nation nor to religious identity but that nonetheless seeks inclusive forms of intimacy and healing. This understanding of cosmopolitanism centres on both an ethics of global relationality and on what Carmen Zamorano Llena calls a “cosmopolitan sensibility” (361) that embraces the transnational networks that influence one’s own subjectivity and sense of community. I suggest that the two novels offer distinct ways of thinking about postsecular cosmopolitanism: the chapter shifts from the more nation-centred focus of *Let the Great World Spin* to the transnational concerns of highly mobile migrants (including asylum seekers and economic migrants) in *Exit West*. Characters in both novels wrestle with grief and dislocation in their lives and face their own changing intimate and spiritual desires while they are on the move. Both novels ultimately contemplate the power of relational ties across time and distance while exploring contemporary tensions surrounding migration, culture wars, race, and religion.

Let the Great World Spin poses these issues when a central character – a moral beacon connecting the other characters in surprising ways – is killed in a car crash, and

the novel considers how the messianic can be cultivated when the Messiah figure dies.⁸⁹ *Exit West* refuses Messiah figures altogether, instead pondering what kinds of postsecular communities are possible when migrants face danger wherever they go and any hope for cosmopolitanism seems to be disappearing in the face of xenophobia and nativism. Nonetheless, both McCann and Hamid believe in the ethical necessity of hope to imagine different futures based on collective forms of care and responsibility. The darkest moment of *Exit West* – the threat of widespread societal violence aimed at migrants – becomes an opportunity to physically build a new life alongside people from cultures and nations around the world. At the end of *Let the Great World Spin*, when one character lies on her deathbed, a young woman named Jaslyn opens the drapes on a window to let a little light into a darkened room. The image is paired with her reflection on how people live and love each other in the midst of a spinning world. The two scenes offer hope that even in moments of great societal and personal darkness, possibilities for a better world exist and can be constructed. Such hope is neither naïve nor a romantic fantasy; rather, it embodies a vision of collective life worth working for.

Tightropes and Global Intimacies in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*

Winner of the National Book Award, Colum McCann's 2009 novel *Let the Great World Spin* features a Catholic monk, John Andrew Corrigan, caring for sex workers and drug addicts in the New York projects of Vietnam-era America. Inspired by Catholic

⁸⁹ This traditional Christian motif of the Messiah dying is given a new narrative in *Let the Great World Spin*, as McCann explores weak messianism.

liberation theologian and anti-war activist Daniel Berrigan (Foley 2009), Corrigan's character reveals his devotion to the poor and the marginalized as well as his internal struggle about faith in God and what he believes God asks of him morally and vocationally. On the verge of making a choice between celibacy and a relationship with a woman named Adelita, Corrigan dies in a car accident early in the novel and leaves his heart physically exposed to the world.⁹⁰ His death reverberates in the lives of a host of other characters, including his brother Ciaran, Tillie the sex worker, and Gloria, whose three sons died in Vietnam.

Let the Great World Spin upholds a vision of pluralism and cosmopolitan transnationalism that is hopeful, even though 9/11 looms over the novel alongside American wars on foreign soil such as Vietnam. New York City functions as a microcosm of a radically diverse world that constantly spins, changes, and transforms. The structure of the novel itself embraces a multitude of voices across class, gender, race, time, and space. Judge Solomon Soderberg is Jewish and continues to observe Shabbat, even if he hasn't attended synagogue in many years. Tillie, a black sex worker, regrets the way she brought up her daughter Jazzlyn, who continues the family cycle of prostitution and drug addiction. There is also fourteen-year-old Fernando Marcano, who is fascinated by street tagging and its re-mapping of city spaces and is creating an archival record of tags through photography. Corrigan's love interest, Adelita, is originally from Guatemala and moved to New York with her two children after her husband died in a conflict; she wants to be a

⁹⁰ The image of Corrigan's exposed heart is, perhaps, reminiscent of the sacred heart of Jesus in Catholic iconography.

doctor, but the American educational system won't accept her previous experience and education, so she nurses the elderly instead.

The incorporation of so many characters highlights how the novel's structure is itself pluralistic: it enacts a Bakhtinian polyphony of voices which mimics, reflects, and emphasizes the pluralism found on the streets of the city itself; no single voice dominates, but they merge and flow and swirl together in vitalizing ways. A massive metropolitan space, New York hums with perpetual activity and a multiplicity of people, faiths, identities, and histories. The novel's many narrators highlight the diversity that structures their everyday lives, whether they consciously realize it or not. Corrigan is an Irish monk who works with Adelita, a Guatemalan immigrant, and assists people like Gloria in his apartment building who can remember the civil rights movement and her own family's recent history with slavery. Even Tillie's simple trip to her favourite pizza place means that she encounters an Italian-American family who have started their own business. As a city that has been the geographical portal for generations of immigrants to the United States, New York truly embodies cosmopolitan pluralism in terms of its demographics as well as its spatial topographies. It has been built and re-built repeatedly over its history: as Gloria thinks, "everything in New York is built upon another thing, nothing is entirely by itself, each thing as strange as the last, and connected" (306).

Within the context of a highly-diverse, constantly-moving New York City, Corrigan appears as a Christ-like, yet cosmopolitan figure in his care for the poor, addicted, elderly, and sex workers. However, he stands at odds with a movement that threatens his version of pluralist cosmopolitanism – the totalizing, anti-pluralist agenda of the Christian Right

that is forming at the same cultural moment that he is active in the projects. Significantly, *Let the Great World Spin* takes place against the backdrop of the coalescing and mobilization of the religious right in the 1970s amid growing American imperialism. By portraying a Catholic monk who works with sex workers in the poor area of the projects – housing complexes that disproportionately lodge black and marginalized peoples – and depicting other characters whose sons have been killed in the Vietnam war, McCann situates the novel amidst a national conversation about sex, foreign policy, race, and Christian identity. As the characters struggle with their own relationships with others, the United States similarly faces the question of what kind of identity it is going to cultivate at home and abroad in a rapidly globalizing world. Can it as a nation construct a cosmopolitan sensibility when its imperialist activities in Vietnam jostle painfully with its history of racism and poverty at home?

In the 1970s, these discussions were provoked by a burgeoning conservative Christian Right, which directly attempted to impose a unitary vision of American political and religious life on the nation in opposition to the United States' growing pluralist and transnational commitments. The early 1970s exhibit the tremors of dramatic societal and political change: the culture wars initiated by the coalescing religious right in the American heartland were heating up and anxious challenges to American national identity were being felt amid growing pressures of globalization and the tragedies of the Vietnam War. While foreign policy, cultural attitudes, and economic inequality embolden the efforts of figures such as Daniel Berrigan, the priest on whom Corrigan is modelled, other events contribute to the mobilization of what would become known as the right-wing

Christian group the Moral Majority: the historic *Roe versus Wade* decision was handed down by the United States Supreme Court in 1973, and other decisions on school prayer and pornography had occurred within the previous decade.

According to Daniel K. Williams, the late 1960s and 1970s formed the second stage of the religious right's mobilization and entry into the culture wars. However, Williams notes that they had begun their work many decades previously, contrary to other historical accounts that identify them as emerging primarily in the 1970s over issues such as court rulings on abortion, school prayer, and the "1978 IRS ruling that penalized Christian schools for not complying with civil rights policy" (2). He suggests that "Conservative Christians had been politically active since the early twentieth century, and they never retreated from the public square" (2). Moreover, though they struggled to gain national influence for several decades, they figured out early on that they needed to fuse their moral concerns with issues that steered the nation as a whole – economics and foreign policy: "Only when conservative Protestants united in support of a comprehensive program that included not only moral legislation, but also economic and foreign policy, could they create the partisan alliance that would give their movement national influence. And conservative Protestants began doing that in the 1940s" (3).

After their dismay at J.F. Kennedy – a Catholic – becoming president – the conservative Protestants of the religious right reformulated the plan to achieve their political power goals. They "decided that secularism, rather than Catholicism, posed a greater threat to the country. By redefining their vision of a Christian nation as antiseccular, rather than explicitly Protestant, they launched their second phase of political

mobilization, one based on culture wars” (Williams 4). In identifying secularism as a bigger threat to their political and cultural power than Catholicism, the Protestant religious right opened the door to building a broader coalition base.⁹¹ Though this base has shifted substantially over the years – often in response to new political and cultural challenges – the focus on secularism as a foe has persisted.⁹²

This opposition to secularism generated several effects. As Williams pointed out, it prompted the religious right to redefine their conception of the nation and its Christian identity. No longer as concerned with Catholic influence, the religious right yoked their moral and theological agenda to a distinct vision of the United States. Therefore, secularism not only threatened their cultural sway, it became a threat to the identity of the nation as a whole. It also meant that the religious right’s public engagement efforts became uniquely concentrated on cultural issues in tandem with their political goals. Secularism was understood to be a project that affected all levels of society, and it became characterized in opposition to the religious right’s similar project of re-shaping American politics and national character. By representing secularism as an opponent, the religious right – although itself a shifting and often changing coalition of evangelicals, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, charismatics, conservative Catholics, and more –

⁹¹ These efforts to make common cause with conservative Catholics renewed when Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed formed the Christian Coalition in 1988. The Coalition needed to broaden its support across all swathes of conservative Christianity in order to be politically efficacious, even seeking to “bridge the longstanding divide between Pentecostals and Fundamentalists” (Bendyna et al. 52). Despite many theological and moral differences, Catholics became a highly coveted potential base because of their stance on issues such as abortion (Bendyna et al. 52-3).

⁹² And also pluralism as another, related foe – Christian emblems continue to be visible in ‘secular’ government while Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and other religious expressions are kept out. See, for example, the recent United States Supreme Court decision allowing a 40-foot cross to remain on public property in Maryland.

demonstrated little desire to cross partisan lines and work with those they deemed secularists. Moreover, secularism became aligned with government intervention. Because of the court rulings on school prayer and abortion,⁹³ the judicial system emerged as an object of suspicion: the non-elected judiciary could impose rulings on the general populace with little to no consultation. Added to the widespread distrust of so-called big government by both political conservatives and conservative Christians, this judicial re-writing of laws came to be seen as an egregious overreach.

Whether or not such perceptions accurately characterize the secularism at play within the context of the United States of the latter half of the twentieth century is another matter. Indeed, as Christopher Douglas observes, the religious right has a long history of contesting and even ignoring what they deem to be secular knowledge. He also points out that scholarly commentators have likewise been blinkered by their own assumptions about secularization, particularly the idea that “insofar as societies grow more modern they become more secular, discarding outmoded religious traditions and beliefs” (2-3); for many people, faith cannot so easily be replaced by science, rationalism, and “progress.” He argues that this take on the secularization thesis has contributed to a dangerous misrecognition of the ways in which conservative Christianity surged throughout the twentieth century and sought goals to flatten the public sphere under a coercively unifying vision. As Williams outlines, the religious right’s moral programme and their political mobilization combined to create a totalizing agenda aimed at uniting

⁹³ School prayer was taken out of schools in the 1960s and Roe vs. Wade decriminalized abortion in 1973.

the United States under a conservative Christian government that would enact comprehensive moral reform. This agenda, which continues to influence evangelical participation in political matters in post 9/11 American life, draws itself sharply against attempts at pluralism, globalization, or any kind of cosmopolitan ethics. William Connolly remarks, “The idea that each regime must be organized around the same religious faith has had a long run” (2005, 6).

If, as Douglas argues, secularism for the conservative Christians on the religious right exists as irretrievably corrupted by sexual freedom, gender equality, and racial issues,⁹⁴ *Let the Great World Spin's* cosmopolitan sensibility offers a different narrative about the United States through embracing a postsecular ethos. It presents characters such as Tillie, Gloria, and Claire who challenge the old orthodoxies of religious belief because of the suffering they endure. For them, secularism, sexual norms, and the decline of Christianity in the public sphere are not the true spiritual and political problems confronting the nation: poverty, war, racism, and lack of social assistance resources are. Corrigan also recognizes the necessity of re-framing which social problems are truly threatening the United States, which is why he moves to low-income housing projects in the first place. Though he does not participate in organized politics like more conservative instantiations of Christianity – or even activist Daniel Berrigan, the inspiration for Corrigan’s character – he does tacitly embrace what Connolly notes as an important feature of pluralism: the acknowledgement that there are “multiple *sites* of potential

⁹⁴ The Southern Baptists refused racial integration in their schools during the civil rights actions of the 1960s, leading to a schism in evangelicalism.

citizen action, within and above the state” (7). Corrigan tells Ciaran, “I sit there thinking about how much courage it takes to live an ordinary life” (66).

Juxtaposed with Corrigan’s religious seriousness and social consciousness stands a mysterious tightrope walker who traverses the World Trade Centers – then under construction – on August 7, 1974, using only a narrow cable and a long, thin pole. Modelled on actual tightrope walker Philippe Petit, the novel’s walker appears publicly at a moment of political turmoil. The Vietnam War is winding down with its mounting death toll coming to light, and Richard Nixon is on the verge of resigning as American president after the Watergate scandal. At this moment of intense national pain and friction, the walker becomes an optimistic image of play and vitality emblazoned across the sky. He writes a new story for the city of New York through his walk between the Towers, one that encourages his watchers to pause for a moment in their quotidian routine and encounter strangers in unexpected and often surprising ways. Moreover, by centering on Philippe Petit’s historic walk between the Twin Towers – those icons of American capitalism and technology destroyed in 9/11 – McCann draws a comparison between 1970s America and post-9/11 American life. Other commentators have foregrounded this connection, highlighting the many social and political parallels between the two eras.⁹⁵ Sandra Singer suggests that Janice – one of Jazzlyn’s daughters adopted by Gloria – “imagines she escapes the 1970s past [but as a soldier] she falls into a role in America’s post-millennium wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that the novel casts in the shadow of the

⁹⁵ Eóin Flannery, “Internationalizing 9/11: Hope and Redemption in Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009).” *English* vol. 62, no. 238 (2013), pp. 294-315.

earlier Vietnam conflict" (214). Through Jaslyn, the concluding voice of the novel (as well as Jazzlyn's other daughter and Janice's sister), a direct line is drawn from the events of 1974 into post-9/11 moral, religious, and political turmoil. After 9/11, heated discussions over public morality, sex work, civil rights, foreign policy, and racial equality feel like they are re-treading similar ground as in the 1970s.

Narratively, Corrigan and the walker bind together the novel's many narrators, providing a tenuous, but significant, point of contact for the other characters. They offer different visions of connection and intimacy in the midst of personal and national grief: both Corrigan and the walker have been interpreted as Christ-like figures, but one dies after having served the poor and the marginalized and the other becomes a "positive, redeeming image[]" floating above New York City (Singer 206). Given the centrality of these two characters in the events of the novel, I'm interested in how *Let the Great World Spin* poses the question of what happens when a Messiah-figure dies – what kinds of relationships and bonds can be forged through that moment of death? When the Messiah dies, what becomes of the messianic? The novel holds together questions of death, God, and the messianic in productive tension in order to respond to global entanglements and cosmopolitan ethics. Corrigan's death can be read as engaging with postsecular questions about the shift away from authoritative forms of doctrine, belief, or institutional belonging to a less grounded – but no less vibrant – experience of the spiritual, as represented in the vision of the tightrope walker.

In the first chapter of the book, Corrigan struggles with God, prompting his brother Ciaran's reflection on what Corrigan's faith means as both men traverse the relentless

challenges of living in New York City in the early 1970s. After experiencing a bombing during the Irish Troubles, Ciaran travels to New York to reconnect with Corrigan. Though Ciaran knows that Corrigan has always devoted himself to the poor and the marginalized, he is nonetheless surprised to find that Corrigan has opened his apartment to several local sex workers so that they can use the bathroom and wash up. What follows for Ciaran is a gradual softening of his assumptions and prejudices, but only after he offers a blisteringly ungenerous assessment of Corrigan's religious and personal motives.

Corrigan is the only self-confessed Christian in the novel, which is perhaps why he receives so much moral scrutiny in the first chapter. Ciaran focuses on how Corrigan wrestles with what faith means and what kind of God his brother actually believes in:

What Corrigan wanted was a fully believable God, one you could find in the grime of the everyday. The comfort he got from the hard, cold truth – the filth, the war, the poverty – was that life could be capable of small beauties. He wasn't interested in the glorious tales of the afterlife or the notions of a honey-soaked heaven. To him that was a dressing room for hell. Rather he consoled himself with the fact that, in the real world, when he looked closely into the darkness he might find the presence of a light, damaged and bruised, but a little light all the same. (20)

A large part of the impetus for Corrigan's faith rests on how it offers a way of comprehending the challenges of everyday life. Theology provides conceptual resources, texts, and traditions that honour the light – however damaged it is – which can be

glimpsed in the darkness. Corrigan's faith is therefore neither an opiate nor an escape, as it helps him face the intensity of human evil: "Even the worst of what men did to one another didn't dampen Corrigan's beliefs. He might have been naïve, but he didn't care; he said he'd rather die with his heart on his sleeve than end up another cynic" (21). Though Corrigan remains committed to his mission of helping the poor, especially the predominantly African American sex workers in his low-income housing complex, he desperately desires confirmation of the presence of God to reassure him of mystery and his own sense of purpose. The beliefs and rituals of his faith, "The glorias, the psalms, the gospel readings," give "a rigor to his faith," and "stak[e] him to a purpose" (21).⁹⁶ These practices tether him in the moments of his doubt, as when he begins to fall in love with Adelita, the Guatemalan nurse. In those moments, he is terrified of the "prospect of losing [his faith in God]" (50), of the sexual, embodied part of his identity conflicting with his desire for the sacred presence of God.

Despite – or perhaps as a direct result of – Corrigan's own faith in God, he becomes a mobilizing figure in the novel. He practices a weak theology in which his mission centers on the physical care of others rather than a more direct evangelism. Ciaran notes that "[f]ew of the people who came across him ever knew of his religious ties and...he was seldom known for his beliefs" (21). Corrigan never tries to convert anyone – a person's faith may come after they are fed and clothed and can use the bathroom, but not necessarily before. His theology is very much an embodied one, lived to the point where

⁹⁶ For Corrigan, rigor functions as an anchor for his faith, unlike Marilynne Robinson, who thinks that rigor holds the potential for faith to become deadened and lack grace.

it leaves bruises on his body via a medical condition he vaguely calls TTP. Ciaran thinks he's a drug user, but later comes to see that perhaps "Corrigan was right, that there was something here, something to be recognized and rescued, some joy. I wanted to tell him that I was beginning to understand it, or at least get an inkling" (46).

Ciaran does not get a chance to tell his brother how his perspective has changed, but his shifting views point to how Corrigan exerts a magnetic pull on the other characters. Both Corrigan and the unnamed funambulist function as centrifugal points pushing outwards into the lives of others. His death in the first section of the novel – along with that of the African American sex worker Jazzlyn, who also dies in the car crash – initiates a profound dislocation in the lives of the many other narrators. After Ciaran's narration in the first chapter, the novel splits into a multitude of voices, all of whom have some point of contact with Corrigan and the tightrope walker. Though – or perhaps because – he himself needed an anchor in faith, Corrigan operated as a stabilizing ethical force in the lives of those he helps. While sitting at Corrigan's hospital bed, Ciaran hazily begs his brother, "[t]each me who I might be. Teach me what I can become. Teach me" (72). Though not all the narrators meet Corrigan in person, his death provides the impetus for the very structure of the novel. The other characters struggle with their own versions of faith, a struggle made more difficult because of the absence of Corrigan's steady resilience. Their difficulties in large part stem from the harsh realities they face on a daily basis: the Vietnam War, the persistence of racial discrimination, the burgeoning development of mass computer technologies, drug addiction, class hierarchies, and an

over-burdened and legalistic justice system are all major issues with which the characters contend.

In this sense, the characters all face the anxieties and uncertainties of globalization within the granular realities of their everyday lives – but without someone like Corrigan to offer any guidance for how to enact care and compassion in this spinning world. Their issue is how to navigate personal struggles alongside an ethical commitment to those beyond the borders of their own selfhood and community. Two narrators in particular foreground this effort: Lara is a semi-successful artist pulled into a haze of fame, drugs, and alcohol before she was a passenger in the car that pushed Corrigan and Jazzlyn to their deaths. Her sense of guilt and shame at her role in the accident prompts her to re-think her own identity as well as her relationship to people she has never met, including Corrigan's and Jazzlyn's families. Similarly, Claire, a wealthy white woman, struggles with how to break out of her tower of privilege and wealth to form a friendship with Gloria, a poor black woman, through shared grief over the loss of their sons. Claire strains to understand the implications of her son's computer programming work in Vietnam, which included the development of software that will count the dead. She tries to conceive of a world in which the world wide web and its dizzying implications for communication and daily life is just on the horizon. However, she has difficulty reconciling her privileged life in New York City with the new realities of movement and technology: her wealth, exemplified by her penthouse apartment, has heretofore insulated her spatially and ethically from dealing with the implications of a globalizing world, including the poverty in her own city. She has at most experienced embarrassment at her privilege, worried

that when the other women in her grief group come to her home that they might think “she might be trying to show off. Rubbing their noses in it” (77). Grief, rather than the technology her son believed in, becomes her attempt to connect to others outside her tower of affluence.

Lara and Claire both must acknowledge the “intimate recognitions that link the ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘she,’ and ‘we’ in global contexts so entangled that no one can any longer claim innocence with any kind of good faith” (Brydon 992). They each painfully confront the limits of their own innocence in order to forge new relationships – Lara marries Ciaran, Corrigan’s brother, and Claire becomes best friends with Gloria, even helping Gloria raise Jazzlyn’s two daughters. Lara eventually moves to Ireland with Ciaran, while Claire remains in New York City until her death. Both women’s awakened responsibility to others involves a widening of their ethical imaginations as well as their sense of place in a world connected as much by war as by technology.⁹⁷

Carmen Zamorano Llena highlights how *Let the Great World Spin*, especially the image of the funambulist’s walk, considers the question of cosmopolitanism in the face of such transnational realities. She suggests that the novel

evokes necessary interconnectivity between locations and realities rather than separation. In this sense, mobility in *Let the Great World Spin* is

⁹⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah acknowledges one’s simultaneous location in multiple communities as well as one’s obligations towards those communities in the pursuit of “habits of coexistence” (xix). He also notes that cosmopolitanism – the navigation of both one’s local and global ties – is an ongoing project of discovery rather than a prescriptive program. He remarks, “There’s a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge” (xv).

characteristically a twenty-first century phenomenon in its emphasis on how interconnectivity beyond differences, especially in the form of transnational exchanges, characterizes contemporary societies and shapes individual realities and identities. (360)

Claire and Lara offer two examples of how the novel engages such interconnectivity beyond differences, as do the more recognizable figures of Corrigan and the funambulist on which Zamorano Llena focuses. Corrigan and the tightrope walker visibly enact transnational exchange: as a monk, Corrigan has travelled around Europe seeking locations and communities in which he can help. Though he settles in New York for a few years, he remains a figure on the move, even in the projects. The tightrope walker is also a person constantly in motion, as he constantly searches for new locations in which to practice his skills and to set up his ropes. Neither Corrigan nor the walker can be tied to one place or group: instead, each man circulates amongst multiple locations and communities. They both enjoy this movement because it presents them with new spiritual and physical challenges – at least until Corrigan falls in love with Adelita, at which point his affective attachment to her makes the prospect of further displacement difficult.

As Zamorano Llena notes, “McCann’s characters are, like their creator, displaced individuals whose identity formation is often marked by border crossings and global multilocality,” and they often experience “ideological, spiritual, or geographical displacement” necessitating what she calls their flight into “alternative realities” (359). In the case of *Let the Great World Spin*, these alternative realities become attempts to forge intimacies after Corrigan and Jazzlyn’s deaths or across seemingly insurmountable class

and racial borders. This endeavour becomes a crucial part of what Zamorano Llena envisions as the novel's cosmopolitan sensibility: she argues that the novel explores how individuals become enmeshed in wider global networks of connection, often unintentionally and unconsciously, but also sometimes destructively, as with the Vietnam War and the 9/11 attacks.

Through the characters' interactions with each other and with New York City itself, *Let the Great World Spin* evokes the larger transnational realities of movement, connection, and solidarity that substantially influence their daily lives. Similarly, in her discussion of Dionne Brand's poem *Inventory*, Diana Brydon highlights the "kinds of global intimacies" that inform Brand's ethical sensibility. Brydon asks "what these practices imply for the political projects of citizenship and community in contemporary times" (990). She focuses on *affective* citizenship as a way to re-frame discussions of citizenship from a focus on legal rights and protections. Questions of state citizenship, for example, have become highly charged over the last several decades given issues of migration and the stringent regulation of national borders. For Brydon, affective citizenship possesses an "emotional register" that points to how injustice becomes "lodge[d]" in the body of the poet, who becomes a "special kind of witness" (991). The poet's body traverses its local situatedness by emotionally participating in world events which have been mediated through technology. Though Brydon focuses on Brand's image of the poet, anyone can become a witness to these events via technology and the globalized consciousness it engenders. The notion of global intimacies signals the emotional and technological entanglements of contemporary life: it acknowledges the "apparent contradictions

between the large and the small, the abstract and the particular” in attempting to “convey[] the quality of this lived experience” (991). Brydon’s focus on affect and intimacy foregrounds an alternate way of conceptualizing both citizenship and global connectivity – one that reflects the multiplicity of ways people relate to each other, to nation-states, and to broader, transnational commitments in the 21st century.

While the material and technological dimensions of a globalized world emphasize the irreducible diversity of contemporary life, they also introduce a struggle to situate oneself amid such fast-paced flows. If Corrigan provided an ethical touchstone for others via his quiet, but resolutely ethical beliefs, the other characters struggle with how to navigate their responsibilities to others – with how to be a witness when events like the Vietnam War are happening far from home. Before he died in that conflict, Claire’s son was enthusiastic about the internet and its potential to re-shape communication, re-structure society, and initiate global connection. Once he is gone, Claire questions how to communicate her own mourning and be a witness to his death – how does she make space for her grieving while forming new relationships? She decides to take an emotional risk by attending a grief group with other women who also lost sons in the war; she invites these women – who are complete strangers – to her apartment. The women are from different parts of the city, different races, and different classes, but they are all united by grief and bereavement. However, as part of this group, Claire must confront her own racialized assumptions about Gloria, such as when she asks Gloria to be ‘the help,’ even though she wants to become the latter’s friend. Granted, the substantial difference of wealth between Claire, who lives in a penthouse on Park Avenue in one of the wealthiest

areas of New York City, and Gloria, who lives amidst the poverty of the projects, will not be overcome by their friendship alone. That would require a level of organized political will that the novel does not discuss. However, *Let the Great World Spin* honours intimacy and friendship as one means of navigating the geographical, class, and racial divide between Gloria and Claire, and thus of cultivating a cosmopolitan sensibility. The formation of this friendship implies a kind of movement on the part of both Gloria and Claire – a willingness to meet and communicate, even after Claire’s blunder of offering to pay Gloria for cleaning and companionship. They seek their own ways of navigating the material and racial inequality of their relationship without ignoring the conditions that structure such inequality.

One way of thinking about the cosmopolitan sensibility in *Let the Great World Spin* lies in the notion of pluralism and how it sustains the image of postsecular community in the novel. Political philosopher William Connolly calls for “the *expansion* of diversity in faith, within and across states” (2005, 6) as a crucial starting point for thinking about pluralism “in multiple zones of life [in which] the expansion of diversity in one domain ventilates life in others as well” (2005, 6). Connolly works from the proposition that citizens are capable of what he calls a bicameral orientation to public life, in which faith – one major component of many citizens’ lives – can be “expressed in ways conducive to negotiating a positive ethos of engagement between multiple faiths” (2005, 7). Connolly defines faith as “composed of a creed or philosophy plus the sensibility mixed into it” (2005, 7), but that is open to positive engagement with other (i.e. political) commitments. Corrigan radically illustrates this idea through his actions towards Tillie, Jazzlyn, the other

sex workers, and the elderly people from a seniors' centre he takes on outings. Though never condoning Tillie's and Jazzlyn's drug use or sex work, neither does he chastise them. Instead, he opens his apartment – even taking the locks off the door – so that the women can access the bathroom to change their tampons and take a breather during the day. He often takes them beverages on the street after they have been working in the heat all day; he does so at great personal risk as their pimps often beat him. He also helps them with their court cases, and he even arranges for one of the seniors to visit Tillie and the others, despite his own embarrassment at organizing the excursion. Corrigan lives a mission of acceptance and uncompromising love in which his own faith catalyzes his “positive ethos of engagement” with very different communities. He doesn't see his faith as something to impose on others – in fact, Tillie only finds out through someone else that he is a Catholic monk long after she met him – but as a motivation for serving others and reducing injustice and inequality. In other words, he enacts a grounded form of pluralism that is dedicated to helping others flourish in a diverse local community.

Corrigan models a cosmopolitan sensibility as well as highlights the challenges of embracing a multiplicitous selfhood. He walks literally and figuratively into people's lives as a way of instantiating his own presence. Ciaran once thinks that Corrigan “wanted to hear his own footsteps to prove that he trod the ground” (42). The act of walking, of inscribing himself into the ground, continuously calls him into being: his very sense of self identity hinges on motion, which is perhaps why he longs for an anchor in a stable notion of God and why spiritual doubt troubles him so profoundly. Corrigan's constant motion presages Michel de Certeau's idea of “walking as a space of enunciation” (98). de Certeau

highlights two particular characteristics of walking as enunciatory: a “spatial acting-out of the place” and the implication of “*relations* among differentiated positions” (98). The walker exemplifies the first characteristic – walking across the tightrope, he becomes a temporary monument to New York City and its inhabitants. Corrigan, on the other hand, barely rests, perhaps fearing that both he and God will cease to exist as a result of his own inaction. Despite his personal wrestling with God, Corrigan acted as a moral beacon in the lives of all whom he met. He is a jarring presence: his brother Ciaran refuses to understand Corrigan’s giving, thinking instead that he is being taken advantage of; the pimps frequently beat him for helping Tillie and the other women; and even some of the seniors berate him for weakness. Yet, his death initiates a profound dislocation in how the other characters move through the world and find solace: he had provided material and spiritual comfort and his apartment functioned as a central space for Tillie and the other women “on the stroll” to access basic bathroom facilities. The cessation of his own existence – the stillness of his body in death – sets adrift a different kind of motion in the lives of the other characters. He had functioned, to paraphrase de Certeau, as a literal “linking act[] and footstep[]” (105) for many of the novel’s narrators, acting as an important point of connection for the people in the various communities to which he contributed.

Corrigan operates under the basic assumption that there are multiple faiths and diverse ways of being in the world, even if he cannot reconcile that multiplicity with a

more generous understanding of his own faith and selfhood.⁹⁸ But when he dies, his insistence on ethical obligation becomes a tremendous challenge for the other characters to bear. Corrigan is, in many senses, a hard act to follow – he gives his entire body and soul for the wellbeing of those around him, and the others don't necessarily have his time, emotional resources, or physical assets to pursue a similar plan of radical pluralism. Gloria, for example, is tired of the people she meets assuming she is 'the help' because she is a black woman, which contributes to her initial rejection of Claire, a wealthy, privileged white woman who is also part of Gloria's group for grieving Vietnam mothers. Gloria has already had to give so much to the world – including her three sons – that she is exhausted by the continual, racialized demands people make of her.

Part of the difficulty faced by characters such as Tillie, a sex worker, and Ciaran, Corrigan's brother, lies in dislike of conventional religion. As a sex worker, Tillie faces the brunt of the moral reform advocated by the religious right. She feels strongly about the injustices wrought by traditional religious beliefs. After her daughter Jazzlyn dies in the car crash with Corrigan, Tillie rejects religion based on her experiences of suffering, and she voices a profound question of theodicy. She uses religious forms of discourse to critique ideas of God's goodness:

I don't know who God is but if I meet Him anytime soon I'm going to get him in the corner until He tells me the truth. I'm going to slap Him stupid and push Him around until he can't run away. Until He's looking up at me

⁹⁸ Corrigan sees his faith in binary terms: **either** he is a monk fully devoted to God, **or** he is fallen into lust, which to him signals that his faith has weakened.

and then I'll get Him to tell me why He done what He done to me and what He done to Corrie and why do all the good ones die and where is Jazzlyn now and why she ended up there and how He allowed me to do what I done to her. He's going to come along on His pretty white cloud with all His pretty little angels flapping their pretty white wings and I'm gonna out and say it formal: Why the fuck did you let me do it God? (230)

Tillie's understanding of God relies on a mixture of popular culture renderings (God and angels on a white cloud), vague notions of God's relationship to evil in the world, and a sense that God has abandoned her. God didn't help her permanently break the cycle of her sex work and drug use, nor did God protect her daughter – or at least help *her* protect Jazzlyn. Tillie wants to hold God physically and morally accountable on a very personal level, and her anger at God points at how her ideas of God are inseparably knotted to her own personal failings and to her resentment of a society that exploited her and her daughter.

In contrast, Gloria, who describes herself as uninterested in religion, approaches hardship without any reference to theodicy or a deity, dispensing altogether with religious ideas. Despite two marriages and the deaths of her three sons in the Vietnam war, she holds a pragmatic view of life that nonetheless appreciates the beauty of living: "The only thing worth grieving over, [Gloria] said, was that sometimes there was more beauty in this life than the world could bear" (339). Like the tightrope walker who glories in the gorgeousness and freedom of his own movement, Gloria articulates her own doxology of wonder and awe. The evening that Corrigan and Jazzlyn die, Gloria returns

home to the projects to see Jazzlyn's daughters – "two darling little girls coming through the globes of lamplight" (321) – being taken away by a social worker. She steps in, thinking, "Some things in life just become very clear and we don't need a reason for them at all" (322), and she adopts the girls, Jaslyn and Janice. This action provides her with new motivation and purpose, things she'd thought were gone after two husbands and the deaths of her sons. Gloria embraces mystery as an important part of life, but she roots this vision in a humble belief in some kind of basic goodness in the world, a notion not tied to any specific religious framework.

Gloria's belief in goodness and beauty offer one example of the postsecular possibilities that are open to the characters after Corrigan's death. Despite his own doubt, Corrigan remains within the fold of a visible religious framework. The other characters seek alternatives to help them deal with the challenges of fast-paced global changes mediated in large part by new technologies. On the very day Corrigan dies, the tightrope walker heralds one such new possibility as he temporarily inscribes himself on the skyline of the city. Like Tillie who walks the streets and the young Fernando Marcano who rides the subway looking for tags, the tightrope walker develops a spatial practice that becomes imprinted on the city itself as well as its inhabitants. de Certeau describes walking as "a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation" (97), and the funambulist revels in the movement of his body and the kinds of new knowledge it makes possible. The walker heralds a new kind of embodied myth amidst the flow of the city beneath his feet: his presence in the sky prompts thousands of New Yorkers to stop and watch him while they are on their way to work in the morning. They wait in "longing" and

“awe” in which “the waiting had been made magical” (7). As he walks across the rope, “The watchers below pulled in their breath all at once. The air felt suddenly shared” (7). He unites all of the strangers below him in a moment of sacred mystery: they become poetic witnesses to a momentous event. The event’s ephemerality does not lessen its importance, as the walker becomes, in Judge Soderberg’s words, “a living monument” to the possibility of enchantment and wonder amid the grind of daily life. While Judge Soderberg views the Twin Towers as “beacons high in the clouds [their] glass reflect[ing] the sky, the night, the colors: progress, beauty, capitalism” (248), he also thinks that the tightrope walker “was such a stroke of genius. A monument in himself. He had made himself into a statue, but a perfect New York one, a temporary one, up in the air, high above the city. A statue that had no regard for the past” (248).⁹⁹ The walker believes in nothing but the capacity of his own body and the communal power of spectacular events, even as the possibility of death looms over his passage. His walk becomes a source of myth and wonder long after he has completed it, inciting belief in the viewers in the capacity for awe and transient relationality.

The walker doesn’t replace Corrigan as a postsecular successor to religion: rather, both present different aspects of the importance of the spiritual and the sacred in the context of Brydon’s understanding of global intimacies. The novel considers how the sacred can be cultivated in relationships deeply divided in a historical moment riven by

⁹⁹ While Judge Soderberg thinks of New York City as having no regard for the past, the novel’s emphasis on the connections between 1970s America and post-9/11 America make it clear that McCann is very much interested in how current generations respond to the past, in Benjamin’s sense, and embody a weak messianism.

the social, religious, and political turmoil of the 1970s. While Corrigan provides material care to those around him, the image of the funambulist walking between the Twin Towers becomes a potent metaphor for the fragile, yet vibrant faith that connects characters who are navigating their own tenuous journeys across racial and class lines. Most of the characters see, discuss, or come into contact with the funambulist on the day of his tightrope walk: the walk functions as a device to link these disparate people and create a sense of fleeting connection among them – a connection brought about by wonder and surprise. He calls people to attention and response; the sharing of this moment initiates an ephemeral, but nonetheless imaginative, point of relationship for them amid the diversity of their lives. Where Corrigan is a very grounded Christian figure rooted in material forms of care, the walker signals the sense of hope and transitory community that is possible among strangers.

Though Sandra Singer notes the redemptive images in the novel, including the funambulist's walk, she also suggests that the novel "appealed to a post 9/11 mindset where readers are trying to make sense of the destruction or simply wishing to 'move on' or forward to different future times" (207). However, while McCann writes about the 1970s with comfortable historical hindsight and considerable hope, he nonetheless maps his worries about the securitization, racial profiling, and the sway of the religious right post-9/11 onto similar trajectories and events of the early 1970s in New York City. Jaslyn's experiences, for example, highlight the ongoing patterns of racism still faced by African Americans. Where Gloria is mistaken by Judge Soderberg as the housemaid rather than his wife's friend, thirty years later Jaslyn "has grown tired of the people who tell her that

she's not a normal African-American, as if there were only one great big normal box that everyone had to pop out of" (327).

Though of course the two eras cannot be collapsed, nor their differences flattened, the parallels between the 1970s and post-9/11 are noteworthy. Through them, McCann sounds a warning bell: "As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories" (325). Time and space merge in the stories he tells about characters seeking to reconcile with their own pasts. He explores his not-so-hidden concerns about post-9/11 America, including its relationship to faith and secularism, through an attention to a moment similarly riven by national grief as well as rapid and dramatic moral policy shifts. He tells a story (or, rather, multiple stories) about survival and human flourishing in the midst of divided times, giving a temporal lineage for recent events. The difference that distinguishes his approach from the coercive – and militant – Christian nationalism that follows 9/11 is his postsecular sensibility. That sensibility is infused with a cosmopolitan outlook that is equally visible in his 2013 novel *TransAtlantic* and his 2015 short story collection *Thirteen Ways of Looking*. His fiction is full of a plurality of voices and characters who are often on the move or are displaced in various ways, but they are nonetheless all "looking for a home" (Lennon 100) and seeking ways to build it together despite their substantial differences.

McCann's deft ventriloquism of such distinct and different voices illustrates the often surprising, but equally beautiful, connections that bind people together. It doesn't matter that these connections are often tenuous and short-lasting; they nonetheless offer

insight into the manifold intimacies that connect people in their everyday lives. The novel considers how postsecular moments of wonder can catalyze relationships deeply divided in a historical moment riven by the social, religious, and political turmoil of the 1970s. While Corrigan provides physical care to those around him, the image of the funambulist walking across the Twin Towers becomes a potent metaphor for the fragile, yet vibrant faith that connects characters who are navigating their own tenuous journeys across racial and class lines. Both Corrigan and the tightrope walker invite reflection about how to cultivate spiritual and material connection amid contemporary's life's constant flow and multiplicity.

In the final chapter – occurring thirty years after Corrigan's death and Petit's walk – Jaslyn has broken the family cycle of prostitution. Unfortunately, she catches herself moving in the reverse direction towards a closed down, tightened existence in which she shows little receptivity to the warmth of the world. Faced with Claire's imminent death, Jaslyn re-evaluates her approach to relationships and enjoys a brief couple of days with an itinerant doctor from Genoa when she visits Claire one last time. With Jaslyn as the final narrator, *Let the Great World Spin* concludes with a kind of benediction: "We stumble on, thinks Jaslyn, bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. It is almost enough...The world spins. We stumble on. It is enough" (349). Jaslyn holds on to her photo of Petit on the wire as proof that people are "still capable of myth in the face of all other evidence" (326). Like her foster mother Gloria, Jaslyn does not adhere to Corrigan's version of belief, but she still clutches glimpses of beauty and

possibility that can enliven everyday life and offer forms of community in a spinning world.

Open Doors and Postsecular Mobility in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Coming to global attention through his 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which deals with American foreign imperialism and economic fundamentalism, Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid uses his fourth novel *Exit West* to directly engage with forced mobility, political instability, and xenophobia. Like the earlier *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Exit West* demonstrates a willingness to play with narrative possibility, though this time Hamid employs a dash of magical realism to prompt questions about how people cross borders and what impact it has on their relationships and spiritual identities. Saeed and Nadia become friends and then a couple in a nameless city in a similarly nameless country. However, the political situation in that country grows more tenuous by the day, especially after rebels overtake the city and institute strict, fundamentalist moral codes. The threat of violence remains high, and after Saeed's mother is killed, Saeed and Nadia think about leaving the country through one of the many mysterious doors that randomly appear. They do so at great risk: once found, the doors are subject to regulation by the government on whose territory they are located. The migrants who attempt to travel through the doors are likewise often in peril if they are discovered in passage. Moreover, Saeed's father wishes to remain behind, leaving Saeed in the position of choosing one difficult future over another.

Saeed and Nadia decide to go through a door, paying an exorbitant sum to a black market group to smuggle them through quickly. However, that passage marks only the beginning of their journey together, as they end up in various refugee camps and abandoned houses in Mykonos, Greece; London, England; and Marin, California. They face different challenges in each place, including lack of resources and increasing xenophobia and even violence from Londoners. They also must come to terms with shifts in their own relationship and spiritual identities, as they gradually grow apart and then separate at the end of the novel.

In focusing on Nadia and Saeed's personal relationship against the backdrop of their refugee experiences, Hamid explores a postsecular cosmopolitanism that responds to contemporary social and political concerns. Where McCann looks at postsecular cosmopolitanism from the micropolitics of pluralism amid personal relationships in New York City, Hamid imagines how asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants negotiate faith and relationships under conditions of highly vulnerable transnational mobility. Both authors examine the tensions of cosmopolitan ethics, especially the notion of responsibility for one's neighbour be they local or global, though Hamid explicitly takes up the issue of borders and community via the appearance of the doors that can quickly transport people elsewhere in the world.

While the idea of borders – be they physical boundaries like a wall, customs boundaries between nation states, or geographical boundaries like oceans and deserts – animates much conversation about migration, *Exit West* decentres such conventional notions of borders and how people cross them in favor of the mysterious and ultimately

symbolic image of the doors. When Nadia first approaches the door that will lead her and Saeed into an unknown location away from the escalating danger in their home city, she considers both its obscurity and its implications:

[she] approached the door, and drawing close she was struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end...It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born. (103-4)

Neither Nadia nor Saeed know what location is on the other side, or even what kinds of resources might be available or dangerous situations might be happening. Their choice to go through the door is motivated both by an increasing sense of desperation at the circumstances in their home country and an unknowability about the consequences of their choice.

The doors introduce a magical realist element to the novel, perhaps suggesting that, while the novel is ultimately hopeful, a radical event is necessary to challenge the world's current system of borders. They signify Derrida's messianic openness, portals that hinge on unexpectedness and therefore offer horizons without expectation, but still encouraging a sense of hope. In a novel with a palpable absence of Messiah figures, the doors function as a messianic opportunity for those like Nadia and Saeed to seek a better life, or at least one without the growing levels of violence they have been experiencing in their own city. Even so, the doors end up becoming tightly regulated by governments and

militant groups shortly after they are discovered; they also become commodified as human traffickers charge for access to doors that haven't yet been controlled. Their radical openness and disruption of traditional borders must be contained by those in political power because of the potential they have for the unprecedented mobility of people around the globe. Nonetheless, the sheer unpredictability of the doors' appearance in time and space means that they can never fully be controlled, and they therefore imply that a country's borders will always hold a degree of porosity, despite the wishes of governments.

Nadia and Saeed go to three separate locations via the doors: a refugee camp in Greece; a massive, but empty, house in London; and a shack in Marin, California. The novel follows the escalation of tensions about the migrants moving through the doors, acknowledging the hatred and fear that build over time and then get expressed in atrocious actions of violence. In London, the natives cut electricity to the quarters housing the majority of migrants, hold protests, and plan a forceful removal of the migrants. The migrants legitimately worry about the shape of that forced removal and the constant threat of violence. However, at the flashpoint of the conflict, Hamid envisions a de-escalation that transforms the situation and provides an ethico-political model of negotiation for similar circumstances elsewhere:

And then the natives and their forces stepped back from the brink. Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants, and had determined that some other way would have to be

found. Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one...the electricity and water came on again, and negotiations ensued. (166)

Hamid's use of the term 'natives' to describe the Londoners recasts centuries of colonial discourse that stereotyped colonized peoples as barbarian others. It also underscores his premise that we are *all* migrants – be it temporally or geographically – but that we tend to forget this facet of our own existence. The Londoners view time in terms of how long they have lived in this particular place; they see generational time as something that confers ownership over the space of the city. The novel, however, encodes a long view of time in the very structure of its sentences – long, sweeping sentences built on clause after clause and often occupying large parts of a single paragraph. Hamid offers an example in the quotation above: he ponders the future implications of the Londoners' potential actions by dwelling on their developing awareness over the course of the paragraph. The emotional – and ethical – tension intensifies with each clause until the Londoners consider how they would not be able to look their children in the eye or hold their head high in speaking of their own generation's actions. Hamid's repetition of the

term 'natives,' his characterization of their fear and aggression, and their narrow definition of time demonstrates the reactionary nature of their positions as well as their unimaginative recourse to threats of violence. However, despite such strong feelings of fear and violence, Hamid envisions the 'natives' as being able to grasp the ethical implications of their actions as well as being capable of shame – he demonstrates hope that they can step back from the brink and find another, more peaceable way to live with the newcomers emerging through the doors. He also upholds the importance of reconceiving temporality in order to challenge visions of citizenship that would exclude newcomers.

In constructing the terms of the ceasefire, Hamid also presents the doors as a new, inevitable reality. Regardless of how the native Londoners wish to control the doors, the doors resist any long-term containment and will continue to appear unpredictably. Hamid suggests the necessity of imaginatively and compassionately working with the people coming through the doors rather than fighting unavoidable circumstances. At this point in the novel, the solution involves a building project that will house the migrants in low-cost, efficient blocks. Both migrants and natives work together to build this housing at the edge of the city, easing congestion pressures on the city's centre as well as providing migrants with purposeful work. The housing project is called "the Halo," situating it as a postsecular space of both reconciliation and opportunity.

Hamid discusses the tense situation in London with a willingness to understand the position of the Londoners. Despite being in the geographical centre of the conflict, Nadia says that she understands why the natives are afraid of so many people arriving,

even when Saeed counters with the claim that their own country has historically taken in many migrants and refugees without such backlash. She states, “That was different. Our country was poor. We didn’t feel we had as much to lose” (164). Nadia links economic issues to the racism and xenophobia she sees in London, but she also senses the disorientation produced by the sudden displacement of so many people: “Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived” (164). The conversation between them is followed by their individual reflections on their relationship and their own desires to protect each other, even if the idea of love “is to enter into the inevitability of one day not being able to protect what is most valuable to you” (165). Nadia uses her empathetic imagination to understand the fear that the native Londoners possess; yet, she also realizes that love – be it of a particular place or another person – cannot protect from the inevitability of risk. People and places change, and she decides throughout the novel to embrace that risk in the name of falling in love with Saeed and seeking a better future through different doors.

The chapter concludes with the meditation that “decency on this occasion won out, and bravery, for courage is demanded not to attack when afraid, and the electricity and water came on again, and negotiations ensued” (166). The de-escalation in this situation represents Hamid’s fundamental hope that there are imaginative ways to work through crises. For Hamid, the relentless negativity and pessimism recounted in the news form only a part of the realities of daily life. His hope is not a denial of the world’s capacity for cruelty and suffering, but an acknowledgement of the many unreported acts of love and goodness that continue amidst the horror – the “16 million mothers [in Pakistan who]

kissed their kids goodnight, 5 million musicians [who] practiced their musical instruments, and 833,000 people [who] fell in love for the first time” (Chandler). Storytelling incorporates the spectrum of human experiences, while imagining a future that breaks out of a narrow focus on the negative. *Exit West* reclaims hope and love as crucial parts of the stories that are told about daily tragedies and writes the power of human bonds into an abstracted news cycle that focuses on devastation. The novel’s cycle of movement from door to door to door underscores the vibrant possibilities for healing in each place the characters stay.

For Hamid, acceptance of the inevitability of migration, in all of its diverse manifestations, becomes key: “I think that if we can recognize the universality of the migration experience and the universality of the refugee experience – that those of us who have never moved are also migrants and refugees – then the space for empathy opens up” (Chandler). He speaks of migrancy in broad terms as both a geographical movement from place to place, but also as a temporal mobility that inflects space as well as one’s spirituality, emotional states, and psychological relations. No one remains in childhood, nor do physical spaces and things and people stay the same. He notes that “If you never leave the home you’re born in, the experience of life as you get older is a migration,” and that these are experiences for which he seeks a language “that speaks to the universality of these things [so that] we’re much more likely to do what I think is important, which is to move toward accepting the equality of people.”

Exit West explores these various migrations and mobilities. Nadia and Saeed physically move from city to city through the doors, but they also undergo shifts in their

relationship over time as well as in their respective sense of self. They fall in love and support each other through the intensifying conflict in their homeland. They travel to Greece, England, and then finally to California, all the while sharing labour, resources, and a bed together. But they both gradually drift apart emotionally and spiritually until they finally agree to go their separate ways without resentment or bitterness. In allowing them to separate slowly from each other, in letting them realize that they want different things for themselves and for each other, Hamid challenges the idea of romantic love as possession. He suggests that romance is a form of love that concentrates on the self and mitigation of the self's fears about loneliness and transience, whereas a focus on others diminishes attention to the self and the self's concomitant terror at its own temporality: in this love, he states, "I desire that *you* be less lonely" (Chandler). He further says, "We've come to recognize we are not all that matters" (Chandler).

Hamid depicts temporal migration and its ties to a more expansive attention to the self's relation to others as an important part of thinking through fears about migration in other forms. To return to Nadia's comment about the native Londoners, she thinks that they are motivated by a fear of loss and of their own vulnerability, something they haven't yet had to face because of their history of colonial privilege.¹⁰⁰ In identifying love as a focus on the wellbeing of others despite our own fears, Hamid articulates a vision of postsecular cosmopolitanism that challenges the basis of Londoners' fears and racist

¹⁰⁰ In referring to the "native" Londoners, Nadia chiefly focuses on people who have been established in the city for a period of time, which means that second generation immigrants from a former colony could be included in her categorization. However, she recognizes that established Londoners, especially white Londoners, are fearful of unpredictable mass migration happening on a scale that eclipses any migration either from the European Union or from former colonies.

xenophobia. Like *Let the Great World Spin*, *Exit West* explores how sustaining communities can be formed amid constant flux and movement. In the house in London, Nadia becomes part of a group of migrants intent on setting up a form of democratic decision-making that embraces the faiths and nationalities of all people in the area. The group formulates rules and organizes a kind of judicial body to resolve complaints. In the midst of daily threats from the xenophobia of native Londoners, this small council models communal governance that works for a highly diverse community of people. It gives structure to everyday life amid external tensions and offers an example of pluralistic politics in action. Nadia looks around at this group and the other members of the house and sees

all these people of all these different colors in all these different attires and she was relieved...it occurred to her that she had been stifled in the place of her birth...that its time for her had passed, and a new time was here, and fraught or not, she relished this like the wind in her face on a hot day when she rode her motorcycle...and embraced the dust and the pollution...and grin[ned] with a wildness. (159)

The migrants' house, molded from contingency and unpredictability, becomes a site for a community that holds a new potential despite the threats outside their door.

In her home country, Nadia had moved away from her family and became estranged from them after her "constant questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith upset [her father] and frightened him" (22). The organized religion of her

childhood, with its symbols, and verses, and holy sites – most likely Islam, though it is never directly named – had become a limitation on her freedom and sense of selfhood, constraining her sense of her own future possibilities as an unmarried woman. The house community in London offers a different version of belonging that enables possibility for her rather than restricts it: the community becomes her release from the old expectations of her home country as well as a relief from the dangers and the waiting she endures. This community is as close as Nadia gets to a sense of the sacred, and she anchors this sense in the beauty of others. Her vision resonates with John McClure’s account of postsecular cosmopolitanism in his discussion of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. McClure suggests that Ondaatje’s novel “rejects the promise of imperial citizenship that draws its protagonists together on the field of war and offers a counterimage of participation in a cosmopolitan spiritual community of all saints” (170). Given the failures of nation-state citizenship on the battlefield and in the refugee camps and detainment centres, the saintly community McClure describes encompasses a more generous understanding of community membership wherein neither faith nor creed nor nationality matter for full inclusion in that community. Even length of time does not dictate who can belong – a stranger can participate just as much as someone who has been there for a longer period of time. The very nature of the places in which Nadia and Saeed find themselves – refugee camps, houses populated by migrants, and makeshift

communities made of shacks – herald new postsecular sites of communal possibility amid the transience that marks migrants’ lives.¹⁰¹

Nadia embraces the pluralist mode of self-governance in the house community, whereas Saeed turns to a more recognizable religious community made up of devout men. At first, he was “drawn by the familiar languages and accents and the familiar scent of the cooking” (151), all of which marked the community as men from his own home country. He joins them in prayer – something he has rarely done throughout his experiences – because “he felt praying was different here, somehow...with these men. It made him feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of this group” (152). The spiritual aspects of prayer become entangled with Saeed’s desire for community – a sacred sense of belonging emerges in the act of communal prayer. He has previously only prayed as a matter of rite or acknowledgement of a family member’s passing. Indeed, his most spiritual experience had come after he takes hallucinogenic mushrooms with Nadia weeks before they step through their first door. The experience “filled [him] with love...and a desire for peace, that peace should come for them all...for we are so fragile, and so beautiful, and surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this” (47). It is an almost mystical moment for him – one in which he sees the connections between love, peace, and each person’s fragile beauty and a possibility for universal connection.

¹⁰¹ This capacity for community in the midst of transience is not unlike that offered by the tightrope walker in *Let the Great World Spin*.

In lieu of recreational drug use in the migrant house in London, Saeed seeks a way to connect with others, partially to manage his own fear. Part of the draw of the group with which he shares religious prayer lies in the leader's assertion of strength and conviction. As a man of colour, Saeed faces racialized assumptions as political tensions rise and he feels the potential violence of being out on the streets. He seeks security, even procuring a gun at one point before giving it up, and the leader of the religious group offers a cohesive vision of community that can defend itself against the threats posed by the Londoners. The religious leader "advocated a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation, for what did those divisions matter now in a world full of doors" (155). This white-bearded leader sanctions them as the "right-minded" who may have to take the path of martyrdom because of intensifying pressures. Yet, Saeed notes even here how the leader's religious rhetoric of the righteous faintly echoes the militants who destroyed his home nation despite its ostensible embrace of all people. Even as Saeed finds comfort and security in the small religious community made up of his "own kind" (153), he remains wary of the ideological underpinnings of groups that proclaim its members as righteous.

Paradoxically, Nadia's way of dealing with the gendered and racialized assumptions about her body is to embrace the black robe associated with the religion of her home country. Nadia's and Saeed's ways of moving through space and entering relationships are substantially different. Nadia demonstrates a highly gendered consciousness of her location – she constantly thinks about her body in relation to the spaces, people, and geography around her. She carefully plots the route to her apartment

when she is out in her home city so that she minimizes threats, and she similarly assesses the clubs, stores, and offices she goes to. Perhaps the most decisive action she takes to protect herself in public is the long black robe she wears. Saeed struggles to understand her motivations for wearing it even after they go to Mykonos and London, partly because he doesn't see her continued need for it and partly because he associates this practice with a religion to which he knows she doesn't adhere. For Nadia, however, the robe provides a way of managing how her body appears in public spaces and thus how other people will look at her. Crucially, it becomes a way to control her sexuality and to ward off unwanted sexual attention. It therefore offers her a mobility and a kind of freedom that Saeed does not have to worry about because of his gender.

Of course, the meanings other people attach to her robe change when Nadia and Saeed move to other locations, and she cannot limit their interpretations of her clothing. The robe assumes distinct symbolic meanings in her home city vs. London, where its relationship with religion is overdetermined in both cases. In the former city, it acts as a sign of political necessity when the rebels take over and dictate public moral codes. In the latter, it becomes a signifier of fundamental religiosity for the Londoners who associate the migrants with a particular religion – most probably Islam, although Hamid never mentions it by name in the novel.

The religious overdetermination of certain symbols like Saeed's praying and Nadia's robes means that their religion is quickly read as Muslim. Hamid is from Pakistan, after all, a country with a Muslim majority. However, I suggest that the lack of direct naming – either of place or religion – indicates Hamid's openness to postsecular questions

of spirituality. In an interview with Caitlin Chandler, he distills the idea of spirituality down to the issue of the temporary nature of human beings. Religion has historically functioned as one way of thinking – or coping, as he puts it – with the transience of humanity. He says:

I think that there have been, since the beginnings of human culture, many different approaches that make us less crippled by the fact that we are temporary. Part of the challenge we face is that we're living in a world where those forms of wisdom and those forms of human coping with mortality are being dismantled. I think it's important actually to reengage with these quote-unquote spiritual questions, whether or not you're religious. (Chandler)

The element of human temporariness hasn't necessarily changed, but for Hamid the approaches to such questions are being reconsidered out of contemporary necessity. Moreover, they are being pondered outside of very localized, institutionalized forms of religion that have often been fastened to nation-states. By not directly stating that Saeed is a Muslim – though it is mentioned later that he becomes involved with a church in California – Hamid elicits discussion of how religion is carried with a person throughout their lifetime. Saeed likes to pray with his fellow countrymen in London because the community comforts him and the leader reminds him of his father. The religious invocation of his prayer taps into mourning for his parents as well as his desire for communal stability as he faces deep uncertainty about what is going to happen to the migrants in London.

At the same time, Hamid's deliberate non-naming of specific religions in the novel invites questions about postsecular spirituality and how it can flourish amid other forms of religiosity. Perhaps it is not so much a specific religion or its creeds that matter for Saeed – rather, the spiritual practice of prayer enables him to reflect on human mortality. Saeed starts praying more in Marin, California (the final place to which he and Nadia travel together), thinking about love and loss and how

this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow, the heartache we each carry and yet too often refuse to acknowledge in one another, and out of this Saeed felt it might be possible, in the face of death, to believe in humanity's potential for building a better world, and so he prayed as a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope. (203)

Though he doesn't feel he can share this idea with Nadia – an example of how they become distant the longer they are together – Saeed's thoughts encapsulate his sense of mortality as a unifying condition of human relations. Even after the loss of his parents, the numbing experiences of indefinite waiting in the refugee camp in Mykonos and then the fear in London, he nonetheless carries his experiences as a grounding for hope. His prayers become a postsecular meditation on death, transience, and possibilities for the future in which the content of a particular religion matters less than how it helps people cope with death and imagine a better future. Though he doesn't know it, he shares this feeling with Nadia, who, though she doesn't adhere to any traditionally recognizable religious practice or beliefs, identifies a powerful spiritual and democratic current in

diverse communities like the one in which she participates in London. Saeed eventually finds this hope in the church community in Marin, where the preacher's daughter, with whom he falls in love, "was among the local campaign leaders of the plebiscite movement, which sought a ballot on the question of the creation of a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from" (220). He, too, finds hope in the creation of a democratic, pluralist political movement that is founded on inclusivity and the embrace of difference. Even if the details and pragmatic workings of this community are yet to be established, it represents a cosmopolitan collectivity that is grounded in hope and imaginative possibilities for the future.

In *Let the Great World Spin* and *Exit West*, McCann and Hamid explore a cosmopolitan sensibility that exceeds the bounds of the nation state and recognizes how people navigate attachments to multiple places, people, and values that often conflict. Perhaps not surprisingly, they are writers who have personally embraced cosmopolitanism in their own lives. McCann, born in Dublin and now living in New York, has also lived in Japan and spent years travelling across the United States. Hamid currently resides in his birthplace of Lahore but has lived in London, California, and New York in addition to regular travel. Both retain important links to their places of birth, and they are often critically situated in relation to Irish literature and South Asian literature. In other words, their cosmopolitanism does not necessitate an erasure of certain kinds of national bonds, but it does make room to think about the plurality of ties that constitute human subjects.

Their fiction points to the necessity of reconceiving citizenship outside of the nation state, and therefore moving it away from notions of possession, as something to be owned or as a right that is only available to the few (a scarcity model of citizenship). Instead, both authors explore the question of belonging through the prism of what Diana Brydon calls global intimacies, which defuses the false opposition between the global and the local. The characters in both novels gradually come to realize that they are inextricably bound up with others – even those they may not know – in unpredictable, yet significant ways. Both Hamid and McCann remain hopeful about the potential for creating forms of community that honour the multiplicity of ties in which we are all enfolded. They insist that hope is not a luxury affect, nor are they naïve or ignorant of present challenges and struggles. Instead, they are necessary to politically and ethically imagine alternative possibilities and vibrant futures. Hamid and McCann explore these affects through a focus on intimacy and how, even under tremendous strain, it helps people survive dark times and emerge, as Jaslyn symbolically does at the end of *Let the Great World Spin*, into the light. While xenophobia, racism, prejudice, and poverty impact the lives of characters in each novel, both authors ask similar questions – how do we forge a kind of unifying intimacy in the wake of cultural and religious fragmentation? Is it even possible in a constant state of dislocation?

Let the Great World Spin approaches these questions through the death of Corrigan, a messiah-figure who embodies a Christian ethical consciousness and commitment to the wellbeing of others. After his death, the many people whose lives he influenced – even tangentially – attempt to relationally negotiate their grief and their fear

of being overwhelmed by a fractious world. They become a weak, dispersed form of community in Benjamin's sense, in which healing in the future must come from a collective reckoning with guilt and privilege. Speaking with Jackie Goodall (2013), McCann makes a comment very much in line with Benjamin's view of the past: "We are built and created from the accumulation of the past." *Let the Great World Spin* connects the past in 1974 to a post-9/11 present that is struggling with similar issues in an attempt to learn and create new possibilities instead of commit old mistakes. In his short-lived but iconic walk across the Twin Towers, the tightrope walker – the other figure connecting the novel's many narrators – becomes a symbol for a contemporary postsecular form of community that is possible and meaningful despite its ephemerality.

In contrast, *Exit West* possesses a palpable absence of Messiah figures (perhaps hinting at a wariness of populist leaders propping up nationalist sentiment against migrants) and instead focuses on human adaptability and the necessity of making home and relationships in the midst of instability, precarity, and fluid circumstances. The novel pushes readers to re-think attachments to strong leaders in favour of more dispersed forms of weak messianism. Nadia and Saeed make a life together regardless of where they are, just as the migrants and the native Londoners construct a solution out of the fear engendered by the doors and their initiation of mass migration. Saeed relies on a sense of the sacred to come to terms with the brevity of life, whereas Nadia finds comfort in her participation in other communities. Both confront the racialized conditions of mobility and citizenship and seek communities which embrace spiritual and racial

diversity and thrive because of their inclusivity without borders. They need no Messiah because they enact their own collective forms of care and spiritual belonging.

The characters in *Let the Great World Spin* and *Exit West* struggle with how to form communities and intimacy in the face of perpetual mobility. Many of them are like de Certeau's image of the walker who fashions a story from the debris they encounter as they move through various spaces and temporalities. The conditions of such mobility exact a heavy price – in stability, in vulnerability, and in security. Nonetheless, characters such as Claire, Gloria, Saeed, and Nadia find that their appreciation for human beauty and mortality functions as a beacon in the dark, enacting a postsecular vision of hope for the future and heralding the possibilities for enacting weak messianism across geographical, class, and racial borders.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Pluralist Hopes for Postsecular Literary Futures

In *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, philosopher Richard Kearney wrestles with both the motivation and terminology for discussing faith experiences amid the realities of contemporary secularization. “Why now?” he asks (xi)? What is the urgency that underlies the so-called religious turn in philosophy and the arts? He observes, “[v]ital disputes about theism and atheism have not disappeared, as some expected, with the Enlightenment and subsequent declarations of the death of God by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud” (xi). Instead, the “God question keeps returning again and again, compelling us to ask what we mean when we speak of God” (xi). He settles upon the term ‘anatheism’ to indicate a position that does not reiterate the antagonism between theism and atheism but which provides an alternate space to think about their complex relationship in people’s lived experience.

Kearney’s example shows the importance of signifying and responding to current debates about religion in the public sphere. I employ the term “postsecular” to think about these issues, though with full knowledge that it remains only one way to discuss the intricate entanglements of religion, secularism, and literature. I think that the postsecular asks important questions about faith in what Duane Bidwell calls a spiritually-fluid cultural moment. Institutionalized religion is undergoing substantial demographic

shifts, but religious and spiritual experiences remain important to many people's lives and thus to political organization. Postsecularism grapples with both the challenges and hopes of pluralist democracies: the desire for positive modes of relationship that embrace a multiplicity of faiths and spiritual identities. Literature, I believe, represents a crucial space for both staging and working through the encounters of postsecular life.

I have characterized postsecular literary studies as a mode of critique that hinges on an orientation of openness and generosity; in this facet, it shares an affinity with Benjamin's and Derrida's weak messianism. Benjamin and Derrida reconsider the Messiah as a figure and instead focus attention on a messianic justice that can offer possibilities of redemption and ethics in everyday life. Both philosophers contribute to conceptions of the messianic that deconstruct strong, imperialistic renderings of the Messiah in favour of a weak messianism that becomes dispersed among each new generation. Thinking about the weak messianic in terms of postsecular ideas can help respond to contemporary shifts and fluidity in spiritual experiences and negotiate the politics of pluralism in daily life. Many of the texts I have examined in this project foreground this process of negotiation and embody the characteristics of weak messianism that I outline in the first chapter.

Often, postsecular readings of literature underscore how religions are neither surpassed nor superseded amid secularizing projects, but instead those traditions provide vital ethical, philosophical, and ritual resources for understanding and honoring the complexity of a pluralist, cosmopolitan world. Marilynne Robinson, for example, grounds her critique of both secular and religious instantiations of capitalism in a genealogy of

progressive Christianity. Her concern for the poor and the vulnerable in American society directly correlates to her sacramental valuing of the human person. Christianity provides her with a language and conceptual framework with which to de-link the notion of value from economic models of labour and productivity. Though she sets out these ideas in her non-fiction, she animates these ideas in her novels *Gilead* and *Lila*. The characters John Ames and Lila emphasize the necessity of seeing the value in every human life, no matter how poor or weary they are.

Robinson is not alone in how she utilizes the resources of a faith tradition to invigorate contemporary ideas: South African writer J.M. Coetzee, now based in Australia, draws on a marginalized early Christian text, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, while melding it with a long philosophical tradition of Platonism and neo-Platonism. His most recent novels *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* meditate on the mystery of the cosmos and how the practice of dance can create a new space in which to imagine and repair embodied relationships. The character Simón, who had functioned as the voice of reason and rationality, gradually becomes more receptive to the previously strange-sounding ideas of the child David and his dance school; he finally takes slow, shuffling steps into a dance that embraces postsecular glimpses of the sacred. Simón's dance highlights ways in which embodiment is important to postsecular work, foregrounding the bodily dimensions of a postsecular imagination.

Though literary postsecularism can be prone to the Eurocentrism that mars secularization studies, I examine how Gene Luen Yang in *Boxers and Saints* and Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda in the *Monstress* series explore spiritual identities for the purposes

of anti-colonial struggle. Yang complicates Western histories of the Chinese Boxer Rebellion through his focus on the Boxers' engagement with religious and national figures. I suggest that they do not employ a violent fundamentalist religiosity in opposition to a modern Western incursion. Instead, their divinely-inspired identities must be understood as a legitimate, if complex, response to Western colonial dynamics of power and coercion instead of being assumed as simply pre-modern. Yang's inclusion of two different characters, Lee Bao and Vibiana, with vastly different spiritual identities and motivations, further complicates accounts of the Boxer Rebellion. By using comics, Yang simultaneously challenges legacies of visual racism, re-drawing the archive of Western representations of Asian people graphically and historically.

Though I argue that Liu and Takeda employ a form of visceral social realism in their fantasy series *Monstress*, I'm also interested in how they prompt postsecular questioning of human and divine incarnation via their characters Maika Halfwolf and Zinn. The gods in the series are depicted as ravenous monsters, and Maika is similarly perceived as monstrous by those around her. The merger of Maika and Zinn in Maika's body prompts a long, difficult process of wrestling with difference and figuring out how to cooperate for a collective good. Their struggles highlight issues with the representation of Asian women in popular culture as well as the challenges posed by contemporary forms of technological and gendered embodiment.

Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* consider how national and transnational turmoil necessitates postsecular thought about mobility and responsibility. How can we embrace global intimacies in local contexts? Moreover,

how does spirituality travel across borders and conflicts? *Let the Great World Spin* explores these questions by using multiple narrators to reflect on both the death of one character and the remarkable event of a man's tightrope walk between the Twin Towers in New York City in 1974. These narrators are from radically different backgrounds and circumstances, but they are united by the task of forming nourishing relationships across their situational borders. *Exit West* also explores the difficulties of cultivating a postsecular spiritual life for the migrants, Nadia and Saeed. The mysterious doors that open around the world offer them a chance to move from a dangerous situation, but the doors also prompt an examination of their own relationship and spiritual beliefs. Both novels centre questions of personal and collective ethics in a globalized world.

Each of the chapters in this dissertation focuses on a central issue for postsecular consideration: capitalism, enchantment and sacred embodiment; Eurocentric accounts of race and historical representation; and contemporary realities of mobility and migration. They are united by my interest in how the messianic can emerge as a critical concept for postsecular literary discussion. Manav Ratti speaks about the importance of literature for the postsecular, stressing the act of writing and how it "represents a form of 'faith' for writers...Writing becomes a form of sharing, of witnessing, of sustaining interest, of affirming the human forms of community that are possible or that *might* be possible through acts of writing" (208). Literature holds open a space of thinking about community that brings authors, texts, and readers together in a shared dialogue about how to live well with each other. It does so in the face of profound societal challenges such as populism, climate change, racism, and misogyny which severely restrict what it means to

imagine the conditions for a flourishing collective public life. As Kearney puts it, literature's power of poetics "makes us strangers to the earth so that we may dwell more sacramentally upon it" (Kearney 13). Postsecular literature's poetic elements make strange entrenched ways of living in order to revitalize readers' responses to contemporary ethical and political issues. This poetic imagination also reflects on how we can all enact a weak messianism by creating sacred spaces with others in our everyday lives.

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