

# Refugee Worldbuilding in Broken Times: (Re)Creating Self-Location in South(east) Asian Canadian Narratives

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on interpreting the way in which twenty-first-century refugee writing in Canada is currently approached critically and theoretically. It proposes new reading strategies that contest the influence of nation-state powers over literary production deployed with an aesthetics of cosmopolitanism. In particular, this article takes up refugee writing by Kim Thúy and Sharon Bala, respectively, in order to show how its search for a "Good Life" leads to the transformation of the characters' subjectivity. This transformation responds to an epistemological shift which confronts issues of Western complicity in foreign human rights abuses and poses questions about alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of healing and trauma recovery in the aftermath of mass violence.

## Keywords

Refugeetude; Borderscapes; Hospitality; Relocation; Worldbuilding; Kim Thúy; Sharon Bala

## 1. Introduction

(Po)ethics is what surrounds you like your house, it's where you live.

–Fred Wah, *Faking It*

Border imagery and “borderscapes” have moved from “third-space” stasis to a mobility discourse that tries to understand new interpretations of cultural memory and border aesthetics. This “border turn” entails a dynamic conception of social and cultural constructions which have cross-pollinated with a parallel liminality turn, threshold studies and liminality studies (Freedman; Benito and Manzanar; Gatrell; Nail; Schimanski and Nyman). This border aesthetics “turn” revolves around the notion of the borderscape, which I will call *homeSpace*, a performative space where new forms of political agency and affective participation can be developed. Y-Dang Troeung’s *Refugee Lifeworlds* and Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman’s *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings* are, in this regard, two of the most relevant contributions to the understanding of how refugee voices are changing borderscapes. This shift reveals the new notion of *cripistemology* to humanize the marginalized subaltern subjects, combat compassion fatigue, and counteract negative stereotypes which have been recurrent in migrancy literatures for thirty years (Piepzna-Samarasinha; Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*). In this epistemological shift “democratic iterations” (Benhabib) come through among collectivities who complain through different art expressions and institutions, knock on doors and defy the marginal resilience that searching for a “Good Life” implies (Brambilla; Ahmed, *Complaint!*). In other words, new voices appear to turn away “from readily available discourses of victimhood and commonplace knowledge of refugees to highlight how refugee subjects gain awareness, create meaning, and imagine futures” (Nguyen, “Refugeetude” 111).

This article attempts to deconstruct the current use of the concept of refugeehood and explore the “borderscape turn” that revolves around a new space of “subjecthood,” reenacted as a knowledgeable experience that is both psychic and affective (Freedman; Puar; Nguyen, “Refugeetude”; Troeung, “Refugee Race-Ability”). This re-location of border subjectivity creates a new space of dissension and agency in order to contest previous attitudes of assimilative resilience to national policies (Rancière). In this *homeSpace* migrancy narratives fight against the notion of refugees as invisible forces of production “subjected to biopolitical structures that obliterate their very existence by turning them into a paradigmatic example of alienated subjectivity, radical alterity and vulnerable embodiment” (García-Zarranz 119). In turn, as Ana María Fraile-Marcos

contends, there are “potential new paths to (self)understanding, knowledge, hope, and positive agency opened by contemporary resilience narratives and the nascent field of critical resilience studies” (2-3). My essay is divided into three central notions, “Negotiating Unsettlement,” “Relocating Refugee-ethic,” and “Parenting Optimism” which explore questions of *cripistemology* and affective worldmaking in the search for a “Good Life” in the voices of Kim Thúy and Sharon Bala. Through their narratives, these writers mobilize the misguided assumption that the South(east) Asian genocide is a foreign trauma, an event that happened solely “over there” and that has nothing to do with the lives of Canadians (Troeng, “Witnessing”).

## 2. Negotiating Unsettlement

We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its inter-relations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism... There has always been resistance to all forms of oppression, as we know through our bones that there have simultaneously been disabled people envisioning a world where we flourish, that values and celebrates us in all our myriad beauty.

—Piepzna-Samarasinha,  
*Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*

In these mobile borderscapes migrancy narratives can gain glimpses of a better future, provide safety and hope, if not happiness, and an opportunity to be heard. There, boundary and threshold art expressions provide a new interpretation of contemporary refugee narratives and give different responses to calls for interdisciplinarity in border studies, where humanities perspectives have been underrepresented. One result of this has been the development of a field of “border aesthetics,” closely connected with thinking around the borderscape concept, and offering a new sense of relocation towards “an alternative spatiality” (Amilhat Szary). In these threshold/liminal places the diasporic subject is allowed to refashion their identity and rebuild their future in places of cultural polyphony and creativity. This principle of hope and agency applies not only to border-crossers, but also to borderland dwellers (Gatrell; Nail; Mani).

This productive understanding of migrancy reaches back to the focus on margins and transgression in thinkers such as Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle and is strengthened by postcolonial theories of the uncanny in Latin American Studies (Llarena-Ascanio, “Another Way”;

“Bodies Becoming Pain”). It goes beyond the current political categories where borders and borderlands are recognized as spaces of exception and beyond nation states rather than just between them (Agamben). In 1951 the Refugee Convention provided a clear definition of the term “refugee” and a legal basis for protection claims; individual refugee determination procedures, however, are the exception rather than the rule.<sup>1</sup> Those fleeing South(east) Asia, many of them by boat, were held in detention centers where officials decided who qualified as refugees. UNHCR participated in this deterrent regime, securing the agreement of these countries to a “Comprehensive Plan of Action” which denied refugee status to “boat people” unless they could prove persecution (Gatrell 204). Those who were able to flee communism or war were doubly victimized, not just by communist regimes but by being forced to spend years in camps prior to resettlement. Refugees now belong to the mainstream of history rather than the margins, “the migrant remains the constitutive dimension of social motion upon which society divides, organizes, and circulates” (Nail 14). This society, however, has been misguided by assumptions about refugees’ incapacity to give a credible account of their experience. They are muted, traumatized or silenced by officials or misinterpreted by nonprofessional interlocutors in long hearings. In this respect, silence has become a kind of defiance, a deliberate refusal to confess one’s private thoughts or, why not, a calculated decision to wait until the time is right (Gatrell; Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*). The refugee’s urgency to recover agency is key to understanding the physical and emotional distress that comes with unsettlement, locating it at the intersection of languages and spaces of translatability. This unsettlement makes national states accountable and should be addressed regarding the difficult reconciliation of intersectional identities (Mani 33).

Kim Thúy’s *Ru* (2012) and Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People* (2018) contain these affective manifestations in their protagonists’ fantasies about the possibility of living what Sara Ahmed calls “the Good Life” (*The Promise* 6). While being trapped geographically and linguistically, the narrators struggle to be attached to conventional good life fantasies and imagine a lifeworld that might be possible (Nussbaum 5). The refugee, however, enters a complex fabric that cannot escape the pressure towards “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality” (Berlant 2-3). As a result, they become a figure who “comes into being only through arrival in the asylum state, [when] whiteness enters the frame as an adjudicator of the refugee humanity” (Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds* ix). In order to elude Eurocentric definitions of disability and aphasia, Troeung distinguishes three key terms in refugee life: debility, maiming, and

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1. See <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr>.

*cripistemology*, viewed as physical and psychological conditions where “the force of muteness, the amplitude of silence, and the force of performative blindness and deafness, [are] strategic tactics to safeguard one’s self and loved ones against further death and debilitation” (109). I agree with Troeung in that refugee subjecthood demands a form of relocation from the current victimization, or static trauma, to that of collective disability or *cripistemology*, understood as “both a lived embodiment and system of differential impairment of racialized and gendered bodies” (13). This alternative paradigm of impairment interrogates the very system that makes the refugee vulnerable and analyses the “multivalent ways in which refugee life and disability come together in the afterlife of war” (279).<sup>2</sup>

I think Troeung’s strategic breakdown in the refugee language and psyche, in their bodily communication, means an alternative way of “race-ability” to know and be attuned to the afterlife of loss. As Ahmed has explained regarding the duty of happiness of the migrant, the process of understanding the wretched implies a deprioritization of compassion. When we listen to those who are cast as wretched, perhaps their wretchedness would no longer belong to them. The sorrow of the migrant or refugee might give us a different angle on happiness because it might estrange us from the happiness of the familiar and make us complicit (Ahmed, “Happiness”). It is with this epistemological shift in mind when Vinh Nguyen formulates the concept of “refugeetude” that dialogues with Ahmed and Troeung in its deconstruction of the notion of refugeeness and offers a dynamic negotiation of unsettlement (“Refugeetude”). Refugeetude then becomes an experiential resource of developing significant and durable ways of being in and moving through the world. These subjects no longer “strive for resilience (often critiqued as being closely knitted to neoliberal, late-capitalist ideas of success) but opt for resistance (more closely connected to subaltern subjectivities) (Romero and Cuder). There are possible ways of challenging the borderscape in current biopolitics and settle in a new imaginary *homeSpace* that resists Eurocentric structures. Thúy’s *Ru*, and her more recent novel *Em* (2021), contain some of these affective manifestations of territorial and emotional displacements. They uncover selves, here and there,

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2. Troeung’s foundational work, *Refugee Lifeworlds*, is concerned with making sense of the long-lasting legacies of disability and debility that mass bombing, war-making, genocide, and displacement leave in the lives of ordinary people, and provides us with a rich set of vocabularies and concepts to push beyond the standard lenses of trauma, memory, and loss so prevalent in the existing literature, forging unexplored paths in blending autotheory, critical disability studies, transpacific studies, and critical refugee studies relocating subjecthood in refugee knowledge production. The purpose is to move beyond trauma and models of wartime damage that see refugees as suffering victims.

who are trapped geographically and linguistically, and focus on collective relocations to reverse the effects of epistemic violence.

### 3. Relocating Refugeetude

My name is Nguyễn An Tĩnh, my mother's name is Nguyễn An Tĩnh. My name is simply a variation on hers because a single dot under the i differentiates, distinguishes, dissociates me from her. I was an extension of her, even in the meaning of my name. In Vietnamese, hers means "peaceful environment" and mine "peaceful interior." With those almost interchangeable names, my mother confirmed that I was the sequel to her, that I would continue her story.

–Kim Thúy, *Ru*

Refugeetude moves the subject from static debility to "cognitive self-experience" (Eakin 100) and this unpacks the construction of the self as relational, as it offers new routes to narrate refugee life as an experiential and collective practice of adaptation and repair. It is in this context that Thúy's *Ru* investigates the various linguistic and cultural displacements Vietnamese people have suffered both in a camp in Malaysia and later in Quebec after fleeing communism in Vietnam. An Tĩnh, the protagonist, displays a broken narrative to disentangle the double unsettlement she has suffered as a child in a refugee camp. This is done in a "paratactic narrative of resistance, solidarity and sociality" and in the face of the traumatic silencing of both North American and international audiences (James 46):

The History of Vietnam, written with a capital H, thwarted my mother's plans. History flung the accents on our names into the water when it took us across the Gulf of Siam thirty years ago. It also stripped our names of their meaning, reducing them to sounds at once strange, and strange to the French language. In particular, when I was ten years old it ended my role as an extension of my mother. (Thúy, *Ru* 9)

The novel's parataxis reflects the contradictions, interruptions and open-endedness of moving between spaces, languages and histories where fear and muteness become, for herself and thousands of boat people, the only protective shield to articulate the unspeakable. This strategy of political muteness is the answer to the "inclusive exclusion" for the abject cosmopolitan

who, maimed collectively by violent dislocation and haunting loss, suffers a suspension of subjectivity (Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism"; *Rethinking Refugees*): "We were frozen in fear, by fear. We no longer closed our eyes when the scabious little boy's pee sprayed us. We no longer pinched our noses against our neighbours' vomit. We were numb, imprisoned by the shoulders of some, the legs of others, the fear of everyone. We were paralyzed" (Thúy, *Ru* 11). In this borderscape, the self is petrified in a physical, psychological and affective hold (Nguyen, "Refugee Gratitude") and An Tình resorts to hope as the necessary frame to project herself, discovering that her corporeal vulnerability can extend beyond the time-space of the camp and opt for collective resistance.

This speechless vulnerability of the caged refugee has historically been deployed to discursively establish an animal quality to the refugee narration in their effort to assimilate into the new location. A location that adds a physical maiming to the linguistic disability the subject suffers and this journey is traversed by the paradox and ambivalence of being an abject refugee long before arriving in Canada, crippled by the embodied scars and racial marks at the hands of the state:

I forget that I'm one of the Asians who lack the dehydrogenase enzyme for metabolizing alcohol. I forget that I'm marked with a blue spot on my backside, like the Inuit, like my sons, like all those with Asian blood. I forget the mongoloid spot that reveals the genetic memory because it vanished during the early years of childhood, and my emotional memory has been lost, dissolving, snarling with time. (Thúy, *Ru* 128)

In their attempt at fleeing political abuse in the refugee camps of Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia or Cambodia, room is made for a naked life at your native land or in a detention camp in between (Troeng, *Refugee Lifeworlds*). There, they

rubbed [their] shoulders with flies in the refugee camps for months. They clung to the branches of a dead tree near the septic tanks, next to our cabin. They positioned themselves around the branches like the berries of a pepper plant or currants. They were so numerous, so enormous, that they didn't need to fly to be in front of our eyes, in our lives. We didn't need to be silent to hear them. (Thúy, *Ru* 29)

Then, upon arrival in Canada the guest is allowed to enter the host's maimed space. In this intersection of language and space translatability the child narrator in *Ru* tries to reconcile her parents' static resilience who, being "[u]nable to look ahead of themselves, they looked ahead of us, for us, their children" (16). Refugee parenthood, maimed and disabled, is narrated with the focus

on this physical and psychic debility, a differential vulnerability which leads to premature death in ways that have yet to be addressed, especially in women, the ones

who carried Vietnam on their backs while their husbands and sons carried weapons on theirs... They were so weighed down by all their grief that they couldn't pull themselves up, couldn't straighten their hunched backs, bowed under the weight of their sorrow... the women continued to bear the weight of Vietnam's inaudible history on their backs. Very often they passed away under that weight, in silence. (41-42)

Moving towards a new hopeful but conscious spatiality despite her parents' debility, the young An Tịch dreams of Canadian citizenship as a medium of healing and repair where

the scent of a newly blown poppy is no longer a perfume but a blossoming; where the deep red of a maple leaf in autumn is no longer a colour but a grace; where a country is no longer a place but a lullaby. And also, where an outstretched hand is no longer a gesture but a moment of love, lasting until sleep, until waking, until everyday life. (Thúy, *Ru* 140-141)

Thúy's narrator, then, opts for a collective optimism that resists the maiming qualities of her parents' static resilience in its cruel demand of a "happy life" here and now in Canada. Instead, An Tịch attests to the possibilities of reinvention through a collective resistance in the face of the struggle of peer survivors who have made a *homeSpace* of the Vietnamese refugee success story: "The young waiter reminded me that I couldn't have everything, that I no longer had the right to declare I was Vietnamese because I no longer had their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears. And he was right to remind me" (78). This collective success in *Ru* also manifests through the expression of the "grateful refugee" (Nguyen, "Refugee Gratitude"), a recurrent stance in Kim Thúy's work; a refugee who lives a conscious relocation, a transformative process of survival and subject formation to make sense of the traumatic past. An Tịch, after months of suffering and deprivation in the refugee camp anticipates her moving forward: "I was unable to talk or to listen, even though I was neither deaf or mute. I now had no points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project myself into the future, to be able to experience the present, in the present" (*Ru* 8). Upon arrival in Quebec An Tịch is only grateful for a new life to start over, an affect—as theorized by Ahmed—produced in moments of contact between the refugee and the state, "it was thanks to that gift that I was allowed to dream my own dreams" (76). I agree with Nguyen's notion of gratitude in *Ru*, whose



main interest lies in its lack of the ideological burden of debt towards the host country but consists in a potential model of subjectivity based on relationality, connectivity and sociality, a gratitude to other peer survivors and their parents' sacrifice to create a post-subject, a future self in a less devastating way, "by distancing ourselves from our condition as stateless refugees, from the empty space of an identity crisis" (Thúy, *Ru* 137).

#### 4. Parenting Optimism

In time this would be his language too. English. A new language for a new home.

–Sharon Bala, *The Boat People*

The first act of violence towards the asylum seeker is the language imposed by the master of the house, the host, who demands translation by a third party (Derrida 16). Apparently, the foreigner is given the right to hospitality but, inept at speaking the language, is maimed by the law of the country: "Sovereignty. That word again. Pitched high, like a dog whistle" (Bala, *The Boat People* 66). In *The Boat People* Bala delves into the muteness of the refugee arriving in Canada who, with the pretext of remaining nameless to ensure their safety and anonymity, is stripped of any identity and thus becomes a faceless mass labelled as "terrorists" (391). In this linguistic struggle for self-location, Bala tries to "question the notion of free will" (392) and connects Mahindan's debility to other maimed characters whose free will is also broken. This constitutes, as Jasbir Puar argues, a field of "southern disability," which has, as a result, "a constituent and capacitating absence" (16) which pervades the characters both collectively and in their differential and uneven precarity, a disabling process of *cripistemology*.

This identity relocation affects different communities, from the collective to the transnational and the planetary in their "refusal to conform to the scripts of normative personhood" (Troeung, "Refugee Race-Ability" 281). Here lies the characters' resistance to the nature of Canadian sovereignty, to what "these people, the Canadian authorities, believe is true and false. What they want to believe" (Bala, *The Boat People* 297). Bala's asylum seekers are sent to a prison in Prince George, British Columbia, where they depend on "the legal and social systems of Canada represented by individuals who think in terms only of right and wrong" (van Herk 5). There, they are deprived of agency and humanity, fed by moulded food whose "flavours were muted, like the colors outside" (Bala, *The Boat People* 52). This precarity in the premises mirrors a country with a

detrimental socio-political atmosphere at the time, where migrants “are criminalised and subject to the imaging which is part of surveillance regimes either at the border or within the state, or they are imaged in the media as anonymous, brown masses” (Schimanski and Nyman 244). This surveillance regime is embodied by the character of the minister of Public Safety, Fred Blair who, mirroring Prime Minister Stephen Harper, declares that “Canada is a sovereign nation... We will protect our borders from thugs and foreign criminals and those who seek to abuse our generosity” (Bala, *The Boat People* 46).

A Tamil refugee, Mahindan, intentionally named on the first page, believes Canada is a country of justice and fairness and expects immediate refuge when he flees the Sinhalese violent abuse of the refugee camps north of Sri Lanka. There is no “happy life” under the Sinhalese rule, only “[e]xhaustion whenever he thought of the future; terror when he remembered the past... The roll call of the dead lull[ing] him to sleep” (Bala, *The Boat People* 3). Mahindan manages to survive warfare and violence, hunger and the intimidation of Sinhalese hatred. Widowed and maimed, he and his son Sellian board on an illegal cargo ship, convinced that he has fled violence and precarity for good, and fantasizing about the possibility of a good life. Mahindan’s motto “learn English, get a job, find a small place to live” (86) foreshadows Lauren Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism and is reflected in Mahindan’s obsession that “there [is] nothing to be scared of” (15). This becomes, as Aritha van Herk argues, “a recitation of desire, a hope for some future, however precarious” (8) even if, as Berlant warns, “there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built” (192). Mahindan’s static resilience, and his own debility, is this “cruel optimism,” this “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic” (Berlant 24). Mahindan, however, lacks the agency or transformation Berlant presupposes and feels he is nothing, “just a cockroach she would stamp under her heel” (Bala, *The Boat People* 174). Despite his lack of agency, he tries to hold onto this optimistic hope, this “moral code” of being resilient (Bracke 62) and, in this whitewashed environment of safety and promise, he “camouflag[es] his tears, his frustration at being trapped, the growing dread he’d made an irreparable mistake, his homesickness and grief for every person he’d ever known and loved, the pain of the water raining down like a thousand knives, all of it mixing together” (Bala, *The Boat People* 322-323).

Both critics Darias-Beautell and van Herk critically underscore the joy of arriving, leaving behind dead bodies, relying on Canada’s “reputation of being a soft touch” (Bala, *The Boat People* 40) and underline how Mahindan meets suspicion, misunderstanding, and a deliberate slow immigration system. Infantilized, shackled and animalized, both in the refugee camp and in the detention camp, he is encouraged to adapt to the bureaucratic system in a detention

camp for almost a year (Bala, Interview). I agree with Sara Casco-Solís in that “Bala’s literary rendering of socio-ecological resilience is a government strategy to deal with refugee arrivals and its current alignment with neoliberal discourses” (67). This is deployed in the narrative aesthetics that reflects the stress, chaos and debility that make Mahindan’s frustration unbearable:

language was exhausting, all the irregular verbs, the slow, tedious work of conjugation. He laboured over every consonant and vowel, stumbled over the silent k’s, acutely conscious of how awkward and tongue-tied he must sound, how different his pronunciation was from that of Canadians. (Bala, *The Boat People* 251)

The measures Mahindan encounters are the imprisonment of the asylum seekers and a bureaucratic process of detention reviews and admissibility hearings to gain refugee status. Grace, the Japanese-Canadian adjudicator is a key character who, as Darias-Beautell underlines, is caught between two conflicting affects towards human rights, “her own family’s traumatic experience of the internment and dispersal of Canadian citizens of Japanese origin during and after World War II, which she is reluctant to talk about, and her present role as adjudicator of justice to decide on the fate of a group of Tamil refugees whom she fears” (75). A granddaughter of Japanese immigrants, Grace is also mute, unable to communicate without the interpreters whose translations sometimes distort Mahindan’s agency when “[t]o be faced with such cruel options it [is] as if there [is] no choice at all” (194). It is Grace’s first post at the immigration office so “[i]t was up to her, as the adjudicator, to rise above the petty sparring, to keep her focus on the migrants, vigilant for any hint that betrayed their true motives” (128). Despite the character’s detachment and lack of empathy at times, Grace gradually evolves when she learns about her own history, in a collective process of parenting both her disabled mother and her privileged teenage twins, and it is in this care work where she starts revealing their debility and moves forward affectively:

These girls had been born into a country at war, in a place where children were given guns and taught to fight, where girls strapped on explosives and turned their bodies into weapons. A place where *suicide bomber* was the highest possible calling. They had lived unimaginable lives. While all the violence Meg and Brianne had ever known was confined to a video game. (166)

Her mixed-raced daughters learn the most important lesson in helping Grace move despite the bureaucratic obstacles of a state biopolitics where “the injustice reach[es] forward three generations to latch on” (Bala, *The Boat People* 235). Parenting her dehumanized mother she starts feeling maimed, “in a gloom she didn’t understand, a churning, unspecified angst upending her

usual equanimity... sobbed for no reason, the flowered counterpane clutched tight in her fist" (232). In this affective relocation, Grace's mother, Kumi, shaken with Alzheimer stage 2, also needs to reconstruct her affective ownership when, in her lucid moments, she recalls her Japanese parents who "owned that land... Now is the time to take stock of what was done to us... They took everything from us. Our dignity" (51, 53). Kumi's disability becomes a collective trope when she discloses the photographic archive and tracks her childhood home stolen in World War II in an attempt to repair the injustice perpetrated to Japanese people in British Columbia. Kumi's traumatic absence of speech parallels Mahindan's linguistic impairment, and, as we have seen above, is embodied as a parenting strategy to safeguard the loved ones, as an act of resistance to her parents' aphasia: "how carefully they controlled their emotions. Everything was quietly done—packing the suitcases, gathering all the things we had to turn over to the officials. My brother tried to hide a radio and my mother slapped him. Do what you are told, she said... If there's one thing we Japanese do well, it's following the rules" (271). Meanwhile, Grace's narrative starts debilitating in her new post at the Refugee Board: "I don't think I'm cut out for this—being judge, jury, and executioner" (307) when her family album is displayed:

The photo was dated: 1934. The same year Hiro and Aiko opened their laundromat. By 1937, they would have a daughter and a house four years later, twin sons. And then came the internment in 1942, when the family was separated and Hiro was forced to haul rocks at a labour camp. Would they have taken it back if they could, returned to Japan, if they'd known what they would lose? The business, their dignity, home, and the place where they had built it? They weren't released until war's end in 1945. And then given an impossible choice: move east of the Rockies or be repatriated to Japan. (108)

In Grace's evolution, the concepts of family and nation link the novel's circular narrative to the intergenerational conflict which is, once more, a metaphor of transnational belonging. For Grace, "[t]here was a quiet dignity in the path her grandparents had chosen. The years Aiko had toiled cleaning other people's toilets, the overnights her grandfather had spent making change at a dimly lit gas station in Ontario. Grace was proud of their stoicism. They got on with the business of living" (Bala, *The Boat People* 112). Meanwhile, Kumi's mental disability momentarily turns into resisting lucidity when she questions the notion of free will and offers Grace a lesson that is summarized in Sarkowsky's words:

This negotiation of citizenship is closely linked to an investigation of the underlying assumptions about belonging and the prerequisites for what counts as a 'good life', and thus to the second key term, recognition... Thus, the crucial point

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is the exact form in which the different groups in the novel envision this act of recognition that publicly acknowledges them not only as citizens, but as a relevant group whose past is unconditionally part of the national past—and whose present significantly contributes to the national present as well as to its future. (52, 55)

A parallel situation appears with Priya, the law student who learns how “the detention reviews, the admissibility hearing, [and] the Refugee Board hearing [become] a long series of judgements, each an opportunity for failure and deportation” (Bala, *The Boat People* 49). In parenting her father Priya, “blindsided by skin colour” (83) in her youth, affectively evolves when her family secrets are unexpectedly unveiled, and her vulnerability exposed with Mahindan’s and Kumi’s: “Don’t give up hope,” Priya tells Mahindan, “[w]e are still fighting” (346). Both Priya’s and Grace’s decision to resume their work in the refugee office will let them knock on the door again and step “over the threshold” (388). They realize they can create a new space for critical thinking towards the refugeehood around them. In a circular narrative structure, which begins and ends with Mahindan’s waiting for admissibility, there is an affective growth, and some hope, to move forward showing some resistance to Canadian governance. Priya looks ahead, “puzzled over this injustice, overwhelmed by the odds their clients had already overcome, the hurdles still in their future. It irked her, the gulf between the letter of the law and how it was executed. How could a process so influenced by public opinion and politicking have the audacity to call itself law?” (118). Other female voices like Savitri Kumuran’s and Hema Sokolingham’s, widowed refugees, are key to this relational subjecthood in their sustainable narratives of mental health and sexual abuse respectively, as they take the chance of fleeing the refugee camps at home, as women who think it is “[b]etter to die in the ocean than in that godforsaken camp” (130). Both in their thirties, “calm and well-spoken” (59) they defy a system in which children “are being led in chains like slaves” (60), claiming that “if they try to send us back, I will kill myself and my daughters. Better to die here in heaven than go back to hell” (159). Savitri and Hema finally pass the admissibility hearing, and are “proof there [is] hope to be grasped” (168). They will be key to disentangle the muteness in Priya’s parenting relations to create processes of transnational solidarity (Mohanty) and “transcend basic survival” (Rifkind).

## 5. Conclusion

*Ru* and *The Boat People* offer examples of a shift that is taking place towards alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of disability and aphasia. Through Thúy’s poetic muteness and Bala’s maimed characters other ways of

bringing about collective healing are approached. The wonderful paradox of these narratives of refugeetude is to enable a new view of refugees as ontological and epistemological subjects shaped by and shaping history. Both Schimanski and Nyman and Troeung have developed the foundational background to disentangle trauma narratives in the last decades. The “border turn” and the notion of *cripistemology* help us understand the new refugee narratives that open a new era of hope and collective resistance in the recent field of affect theory and resilience studies.

Figures such as An Tinh and Mahindan have always been “the true motive force of social history” (Nail 7) but now an important shift allows the new narratives to move “toward alternative futures” (Espiritu and Nguyen 7). This new conception of the *homeSpace* constitutes a space of collective encounter, of plurality and polyphony (Brambilla). It is precisely when these narratives talk about the hostility found in the implementation of political notions of resilience when the political is truly approached. Exposing the surveillance apparatuses, these contemporary Canadian fictions interrogate the power while they mirror the “hostipitality” of the refugee system (Derrida) and the terrible effect Berlant’s cruel optimism is exerted on subaltern subjects who remain in an “ongoing limbo” for years (van Herk 13). *Ru* and *The Boat People* are some of the first examples of the “ethical turn” which makes readers reconsider the politics of care and assume responsibility. These narrative voices assume responsibility and develop “possibilities of identifying commonalities that move beyond state violence and yet attend refuge and connections with others” (Mani 30). As Casco-Solís showcases, all these voices contribute to the interrogation of the use of resilience as a government strategy grounded in the securitization of national boundaries and, in doing so, to the deconstruction of what Darias-Beautell calls “the utopian dimensions of hospitality that characterize the Canadian imaginary” (70).

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