

CANADIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY, DISILLUSIONMENT, AND  
ISOLATION IN CONTEMPORARY REALISTIC CANADIAN YOUNG  
ADULT FICTION

by

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B.A., Trent University, 2007

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
(Children's Literature)

The University of British Columbia  
(Vancouver)

April 2010

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## Abstract

This study explores Canadian cultural identity in a selection of contemporary realistic dark-themed Canadian Young Adult (YA) fiction: *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie, *The Space Between* by Don Aker, *The Beckoners* by Carrie Mac, and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai. Using close reading, these adolescent novels are analyzed for the “bleak” themes of disillusionment and isolation. The themes are compared to corresponding trends in American YA literature, including self-reflection, ambiguous endings, the role of violence, absent parents, and the forms of the socially and psychologically abject characters. The novels are then analyzed using Canadian critical lenses adapted from John Ralston Saul’s theory of false myths and Daniel Coleman’s theory of wry civility. The critical lenses are also linked to Dennis Lee’s theory of inauthenticity and authenticity in Canadian culture and Northrop Frye’s definitions of unity and uniformity. The analysis concludes that the themes of isolation and disillusionment reflect deep engagement with authentic Canadian cultural theories.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Children's Literature offered by the University of British Columbia's multidisciplinary Master of Arts in Children's Literature Program. This program is offered jointly by the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, the Department of English, the Department of Language and Literacy Education, and the Creative Writing Program.

Thank you to my thesis supervisor, Judith Saltman, for her insight, suggestions, and many emails. Thank you to the members of my thesis committee, Judy Brown and Gail Edwards, for their guidance.

Thank you to my parents, John and Mary-Lynn Wilcox; my grandma, Enid Wilcox; Douglas Kehoe and Heather McIntosh for their invaluable support, understanding, and encouragement.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In this introductory chapter, I locate the inspiration for my study and introduce my area of research. I provide a summary of the research questions that I will be investigating. I locate my research in the larger field of children's literature, Young Adult literature, Canadian nationalism and cultural identity. I then introduce the four contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels which are the subjects of my analysis: *The Space Between* by Don Aker, *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai, and *The Beckoners* by Carrie Mac. Finally, I provide a basic outline of the direction of the study and the contents of the following chapters.

### Origins of Interest

My interest in Canadian Young Adult (YA) literature started when I began to read a wide variety of YA fiction as a pre-adolescent. As a reader, I continue to enjoy the intense emotion, humour, and fast-paced plots found in many YA texts. At the same time, YA fiction appeals to my academic interests because it is a relatively new genre full of ambiguities and, in the best works of YA literature, can be very effective in challenging the reader to think about his or her self and society in different ways.

Like my interest in YA fiction, my fascination with Canadian culture comes primarily through my lived experiences and my introduction to the concept as a child. My strong interest developed gradually as I became increasingly aware of the various manifestations of Canadian culture exhibited in the communities where I grew up. As the eldest daughter of a Canadian naval chaplain, I was fortunate to grow up all over Canada. I spent my childhood in Calgary, Victoria, Halifax, Kingston, and Ottawa, in addition to living for many years on the Canadian Forces Base at Lahr, Germany. Living on bases felt like living in a very condensed version of Canada, one that emphasized bilingualism, the various geographic regions and the hardworking, caring people.

Defining my own Canadian identity became very important early in my childhood when I moved to Lahr, Germany. My community in Lahr was primarily composed of German civilians and displaced Canadian Armed Forces families. I lived in Lahr from the age of four until just before my ninth birthday. While the Canadians there were members of the German culture in many ways, we also held on to our Canadian nationality, attending Canadian-Forces-run schools, churches, and community activities. In Germany I grew to be a proud Canadian while only really

knowing my German home. Understanding Canadian culture became very important to me because I had to consciously construct what it meant for me to be Canadian while being removed from the geographic base.

Since many of the younger Canadian children at Lahr could barely remember Canada, my parents and other adults tried to familiarize us with Canada and make us children conscious Canadians. Hence, Canadian mythology became a large part of my deliberately constructed Canadian identity from an early age. My parents and teachers fostered my Canadian identity with literature. I realize now that as a young child I was exposed to more Canadian children's literature than most of my peers who spent their entire childhood in Canada. This literature helped prepare me for the closing of the Lahr base in 1994 and my subsequent move to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Moving to Canada, I experienced minor culture shock, but the children's literature I had read helped prepare me for my Canadian 'home.' Hence, the effect of literature on the development of my Canadian identity was what made me interested in studying Canadian culture in children's literature. Taking my own roots from so many of Canada's regions and as a Canadian abroad, I know there is not one simple and homogenous Canadian identity, but my experiences also tell me there are underlying commonalities, values, and beliefs that unite Canadians. My interest in studying the complexities of Canadian culture and my love of children's and YA literatures are rooted in my experiences of trying to understand my own Canadian identity. They are the origins of this study.

## **Research Statement Discussion**

The central subject of my thesis is the expression of Canadian culture in works of dark-themed, contemporary, realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction for older adolescent readers. My focus is on books which depict characters that experience extreme disillusionment and isolation, often through violence and bullying. It is my intention to look at my primary texts using Canadian cultural theories to analyze if the dark themes could be interpreted as representations of issues and themes that are specifically Canadian, and therefore, expressions of Canadian culture, or if they are simply reflective of the North American YA genre.

It should be noted that in this study I examine only primary works that were originally published in English. I realize that, by doing so, I am falling into the popular critical fallacy of equating "Canadian" literature with anglophone cultural production, while ignoring francophone cultural production. I have chosen to limit my focus to English language texts to trace the connections among dark-themed American YA fiction and English Canadian culture. I believe



that French language texts would probably show a different relationship to the dark-themed American YA publishing, as several Canadian literature critics have pointed to the significant differences in the literature produced by English and French Canadians. Although beyond the scope of this study, I acknowledge that further research in this subject, looking at Canadian culture from a comparative literary perspective that examines both French and English language Young Adult texts would be valuable.

In looking at English Canadian theories and culture, I will explore the theories of dismantling false myths of identity and the dangers of uniformity versus unity in the construction of identity. Specifically, I analyze the first two Canadian YA novels using a critical perspective adapted from John Ralston Saul's discussion of the false myths in Canadian society, which I have taken from Saul's 2008 book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*. I situate Saul's theoretical perspective in the tradition of Canadian cultural criticism by suggesting that his argument can be understood as a modern reimagining of Dennis Lee's definition of authentic Canadian writing found in Lee's 1974 article, "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space," and then apply his theories to the analysis of two Canadian YA novels: *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie and *The Space Between* by Don Aker. I next analyze the second pair of novels—*Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai and *The Beckoners* by Carrie Mac—using Daniel Coleman's theory of wry civility in Canadian literature, found in his 2006 text, *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* and in his 2007 article "From Canadian Trance to TransCanada: White Civility to Wry Civility in the CanLit Project," and consider how Coleman's theories regarding Canadian civility share a similar theoretical basis with Northrop Frye's distinction between unity, uniformity and identity. This should allow me to thoroughly explore my research questions.

## **Research Questions**

In this study, I will be examining a number of questions, specifically:

1. How is Canadian cultural identity transmitted in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels?
2. How is the theme of isolation constructed in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels, and what connections are evident between this theme and Canadian culture? Is this theme simply a characteristic of contemporary realistic Young Adult fiction in North America?

3. How is the theme of disillusionment constructed in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels, and what connections are evident between this theme and Canadian culture? Is this theme simply a characteristic of contemporary realistic Young Adult fiction in North America?
4. Does the reoccurring presence of false myths and wry civility in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult works indicate important issues in Canadian culture?
5. How does a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult works reflect the theories of John Ralston Saul, Dennis Lee, Daniel Coleman, and Northrop Frye?

### **Significance of This Study**

Since Young Adult (YA) literature in Canada is a fairly new genre, there is very little existing scholarship that applies Canadian cultural theory to the analysis of YA texts. My research will situate Canadian YA literature (specifically Canadian contemporary realistic YA fiction) within broader Canadian literary and cultural fields. I will draw on the writings of cultural theorists like John Ralston Saul and on literary theorists like Daniel Coleman, Northrop Frye, and Dennis Lee to inform my analysis of the construction of the Canadian culture and psyche in Young Adult literature.

While my focus is on Canadian cultural theory, I will also discuss postmodern, psychological, feminist, and postcolonial approaches to literary criticism in my literature review. I show the deep roots of the ideas presented by contemporary theorists John Ralston Saul and Daniel Coleman, as I connect their works to older texts by Northrop Frye and Dennis Lee, and apply those theories to my analysis of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction. I use these critical lenses to explore the connection between the dark themes found in contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction as it relates to contemporary Canadian culture and literature, and to the cultural theories of the previous generation of Canadian critics.

My analysis and close reading of the primary texts will engage with and add to existing scholarship as I analyze dark-themed Canadian YA fiction and explore how its gritty realism is related to the trends that have been observed separately in both North American YA dark-themed fiction and Canadian cultural criticism.

## Synopses of the Primary Texts

**Aker, Don. *The Space Between*. Toronto: Harper Canada, 2007.**

This novel chronicles the literal journey of Jace, an 18-year-old Greek-Canadian from Halifax, as he vacations with his family on the Mayan Riviera. Recently betrayed by his now ex-girlfriend, Jace is on a mission to lose his virginity. He is also trying to forget his older brother Stefan's recent suicide. He is accompanied on the trip by family members absorbed in their own worlds: his younger brother Lucas, who has an autism spectrum disorder, his aunt, who is dealing with her husband's infidelity, and his mother, who, like Jace is distracted by her grief over Stefan's death. While trying to forget his problems, Jace forms an unlikely friendship with Connor, a handsome Dalhousie Torrents hockey star, and meets Kate, a promising new love interest. As Conner and Jace grow closer, Jace tells Conner about his brother's death. In a graphic and emotionally charged flashback, Jace remembers finding his brother's body after he shot himself.

Later, when Jace wakes up to find Conner naked in his bed, Conner tells Jace his own closely guarded secret: he is gay. Conner mistakenly thought Jace was also gay. Conner's seemingly perfect life turns out to be a facade. He reveals how his closeted lifestyle has led to depression and alcohol abuse. At the same time, Conner refuses to publicly acknowledge his sexuality because he fears that it would shatter his dreams of playing in the NHL. Conner's struggle with keeping his sexuality a secret brings Jace back to the secret that has been the undercurrent of the book: his older brother Stefan's suicide. Like Conner, Stefan was an excellent hockey player. Jace feels he should have realized that Stefan was going to kill himself, because the night before he committed suicide, Stefan uncharacteristically gave Jace all of his hockey equipment. When Jace decides to tell his secret to his mother, he learns she too is battling her own guilt. Ironically, Jace's mother discloses to him that Stefan had come to her before he killed himself and told her he was gay. She reacted poorly and told Stefan he was confused and to forget about it.

As Jace returns to Halifax, his relationship with his parents is improving, and his aunt has decided to leave her husband. However, some problems have no happy resolution. Stefan is still dead, Conner is still depressed, an alcoholic, and closeted, and it looks as if his friendship with Jace has probably ended. Hence, in its treatment of adolescent relationships, family dynamics, suicide, and homophobia, this book clearly qualifies as a dark-themed Young Adult novel.

**Goobie, Beth. *The Lottery*. Victoria: Orca, 2004.**

In Saskatoon Collegiate high school there is a secret “Shadow Council,” an elite group of chosen students, who rule the school through fear and intimidation. Every year, Shadow Council holds a lottery, in which a student victim is chosen to act as the council’s slave and to be shunned by the entire student population. The students accept the role of the lottery winner because it provides them with the security of knowing that there is always someone below them on the school hierarchy. When grade ten student Sally (Sal) Hanson is chosen as the year’s lottery winner, she tries to resist, refusing to take on the role of scapegoat. Sal quickly realizes the difficulty of resisting Shadow Council as her closest friends begin acting as if she does not exist.

The novel is full of disturbing acts of violence and abuse that are orchestrated by Shadow Council. As part of the victim’s duties, Sal must facilitate Shadow Council’s bullying by delivering their instructions to chosen students. Using the students as their puppets, Shadow Council exerts its power by organizing a terror campaign and ordering selected students to perform abusive or humiliating tasks.

In addition to the emotional trauma of being the lottery winner, Sal is haunted by the suicide of her father, which occurred when she was eight years old. In numerous vivid flashbacks, Sal remembers being with her father when he drove his car into a tree, smearing his brains over the windshield. The stress of being a social outcast and the school victim triggers Sal to recover the repressed memories of her father’s suicide. She remembers that immediately before he drove the car into the tree, she told her father that she hated him. Sal felt responsible for her father’s death. Later, she learns that her father had serious personal problems and he had planned on killing himself long before Sal said she hated him. Sal realizes that she is only the school victim and her father’s murderer if she accepts the roles. She comes to understand that the greater question she is being asked is “Who could I be if I wasn’t always so afraid?” The defined roles of Shadow Council, its subjects, and the victim are often horrific and cruel, but they provide each student with an escape from the need to choose his or her own course of action and define his or her own life.

Luckily, Sal’s isolation ends as a boy named Brydan and a high-functioning autistic girl named Tauni decide to befriend Sal in defiance of Shadow Council’s dictatorship. While Shadow Council remains, for the most part, intact, and there is the expectation that a new lottery winner will be chosen next year, Sal and her friends have chosen to remove themselves from its dictates. The once totalitarian power of Shadow Council appears to have weakened because, although Sal

and her friends will be relegated to the lowest rung on the school's social ladder, it seems that Shadow Council will have to leave them alone.

**Mac, Carrie. *The Beckoners*. Victoria: Orca, 2004.**

When fifteen-year-old Zoe moves to Abbotsford B.C. with her dysfunctional mother Alice and preschool-aged sister Cassey, she is prepared for another short stay. Her mother, too consumed with the dramas of her love life, hands off most of the responsibility of raising her younger daughter to Zoe. In her new school, Zoe falls into a dangerous clique of girls called the Beckoners, named after its leader Beck. The group's members—Beck, Heather, Jazz, Lindsay and Janika—violently bully other students. Their primary target is April, whom they have called 'Dog' since kindergarten. April does not fit into the norms of the youth culture with her fundamentalist evangelical Christian values, her homophobia, and her old dog "Shadow" that has been her constant companion since she was young. The Beckoners is a volatile group that respects cruelty. Before Zoe can distance herself from the clique, she is violently initiated into the gang with a branding ceremony. While she is morally against the cruel behaviour of the Beckoners, she chooses not to stand up to them, at first out of a desire to appease the social gods at her new school, and then out of fear of how they will react. When Zoe witnesses a Beckoner's rape by one of the gang's male friends, and then sees the group cover up the crime, she finds a way out.

As Zoe develops a friendship with April, and her classmates, Simon, Theo, and Leaf, she increasingly fears for her safety. She begins to comprehend the danger of the gang when she realizes the branding ritual that initiates the Beckoners is a reenactment of the violence shown by Beck's father. Beck is creating a violent new family using the tools given to her by her abusive relationship with her father.

The novel is inspired by the 1997 murder of Reena Virk in Victoria, B.C. The murder is referenced in the text, when Leaf tells April "They could've killed you! You want to be another Reena Virk?" (Mac 198). The events of the murder are also alluded to in a terrifying scene when the Beckoners attack April and almost kill her. Zoe saves April but the violence does not end. As a warning to April to keep her attackers' identities secret, the Beckoners kill Shadow and hang him from a tree in her backyard. April, Zoe, Leaf, Simon and Theo decide they must put a stop to the violence before April is killed. With the help of April's family, the group fakes April's death and spreads the word that she left a note blaming the Beckoners. The plan works, and the

Beckoners turn themselves in to the police. It is assumed that they are no longer a threat to Zoe, April or anyone else.

**Selvadurai, Shyam. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005.**

At the beginning of monsoon season in 1980 Sri Lanka, fourteen-year-old Amrith is looking forward to a boring summer holiday, working for his Uncle and practising for his boys' school production of *Othello*. Amrith's estranged uncle and cousin Niresh arrive from Canada. The visit from his family forces Amrith to confront his homosexuality, his relationship with his adopted family, and the truth regarding his biological parents' abusive marriage and tragic deaths.

Amrith comes to understand his homosexuality when he shares a room with his older, attractive cousin. This is crystallized for the reader in explicit passages regarding Niresh's body and Amrith's sexual arousal. His confused love for his cousin grows out of control when Niresh and Mala, Amrith's adoptive sister, become romantically involved. Enraged by jealousy and confused about his relationships with his cousin and adopted family, Amrith tries to drown Mala in the Monsoon sea.

Interwoven in the plot are themes of belonging and the mixing of cultures. There are numerous subtle references to the lasting effects of British and Dutch colonization on Sri Lanka, from the architectural style of the buildings in Colombo to the social organization based on race. At the same time, as Amrith's infatuation with Niresh grows, the reader learns more about Niresh's own story through Amrith's eyes. For Canadian readers, Niresh becomes a lens to reflect on contemporary Canadian society. Niresh's experiences draw critical attention towards the difficulties of multiculturalism in Canada. When Amrith first meets Niresh, his older cousin capitalizes on his exoticism as a westerner in his relationships with females and implies that he lives a privileged life back in Toronto. Amrith sees flaws in Niresh's story that suggest he is not truthfully representing his life in Canada. Amrith eventually discovers Niresh wanted to go to Sri Lanka in an attempt to find somewhere he belonged. In Canada, Niresh has a troubled life. His mother has remarried a man whom he does not get along with, he has a difficult relationship with his father, and he is bullied because of his race.

**A Note on the “Canadianness” of the Chosen Texts Set Outside of Canada**

Many Canadian children's literature scholars and critics agree with Donn Kushner's statement: “the story [in Canadian children's literature] should be able to take place in this

country and probably not in another one” (qtd. in Nodelman, “What’s Canadian” 31). As suggested by my selection of two primary titles, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *The Space Between*, which are set almost entirely in countries outside of Canada, I do not agree with this viewpoint. I believe that the fact that the authors of these novels are Canadian citizens makes their creative output identifiably Canadian, regardless of their settings. However, as cultural identity extends beyond an author’s citizenship, it is helpful to examine some of the other ways that these books can be described as Canadian in order to later examine the interplay between international trends in Young Adult publishing and in Canadian culture and literature.

The two novels with male protagonists, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *The Space Between*, are set in locations outside of Canada. In *The Space Between*, Canadian settings occur only in flashbacks and in Jace’s reflection at the end of the novel. However, although its characters are physically located in Mexico, they are only visitors. All of the primary and secondary characters, including Jace and his family, Conner and his friends, and Kate are Canadians living in Nova Scotia, where they return at the end of the novel. The author, Don Aker, lives in Nova Scotia. Furthermore, all the primary issues that are dealt with in the book are not organic to Mexico. Instead, Mexico is a neutral middle ground where the characters confront issues that are shaping their lives in Canada, such as Jace’s breakup with his girlfriend and his desire to lose his virginity, Stefan’s suicide, the homophobia and pressure to conform to stereotypes that men (and especially male athletes) face in Canadian society, the impact of Luke’s autism spectrum disorder on the family relationship, the unique role of Jace and his brothers as Greek-Canadians and the first generation of their family born in Canada, and Jace’s strained relationship with his parents. Hence, there are many defining elements that make *The Space Between* a Canadian novel.

Defining the Canadianness of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is more problematic. The novel is set entirely in Sri Lanka, with a Sri Lankan focal character. Despite these elements, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* won the 2006 Canadian Library Association Young Adult Canadian Book Award and was a finalist for the Governor General’s Literary Award for Children’s Literature text, one of the most prestigious Canadian literary prizes. This recognition shows that Canadian literary critics and librarians who participated in the award juries, and who play vital roles in creating the canon of Canadian YA fiction, believe this book to be an exemplary work of Canadian YA literature.

Thematically, aside from the issues of wry civility, which I will examine in Chapter 5, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is an excellent example of Canadian Young Adult literature

because it alludes to the important issues surrounding Canada's 'mosaic' multiculturalism through the vehicle of international experiences. In its construction, the novel reflects Canada's multicultural society in the background of the author and the implied reader. Selvadurai is a Canadian citizen who emigrated from Sri Lanka, and his novel has an implied Canadian audience. The implied Canadian reader is suggested by in-text glossing and explanatory information about Sri Lanka, such as the reference to "the Tamil capital of Jaffna, in the north of Sri Lanka" (Selvadurai 30). The implied Canadian reader is also revealed through the dramatic irony in international misconceptions of Canada. Hence, it is clear that *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, like *The Space Between*, is an example of Canadian literature.

## Overview of the Thesis Chapters

"Chapter 1: Introduction," sets out my origins of interest, discusses the research statement of this study, lists the research questions, explains the significance of this study, provides synopses of the primary texts, and includes this overview of the thesis chapters.

"Chapter 2: Literature Review," provides a background of important critical and theoretical literatures with a focus on three main sub-sections: Young Adult literature, Canadian (postcolonial) literary theories, and the abject.

In the following chapter—"Chapter 3: Methodology"—definitions are provided for key terms in this study. There is an explanation of the methodology used to define the sample pool for the selection of the primary texts. Chapter 3 also details the critical framework used in this study and explains the structure of the analysis in the subsequent chapters.

"Chapter 4: Disillusionment and Confronting False Myths in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*" begins by showing how disillusionment is constructed in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*. Then, the associations between these examples of disillusionment and trends and characteristics of contemporary dark-themed American YA fiction are explored. The disillusionment in the primary texts is then reexamined using the Canadian critical lens of false myths.

"Chapter 5: Isolation and Wry Civility in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*," follows a similar structure of analysis as Chapter 4. It begins with an exploration of how isolation is constructed in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, followed by an interrogation of how these examples of isolation relate to contemporary dark-themed American YA Fiction, and the application of the Canadian critical lens of wry civility to the isolation in the primary texts.



In “Chapter 6: Conclusions,” the research questions are restated and the conclusions are presented and discussed. This chapter also contains a discussion on the limitations of this study and implications for further research.

Following Chapter 6, there is the bibliography, divided into primary and secondary works. Finally, there is an attached appendix, listing the works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction considered for the primary texts.

## **Summary**

This introductory chapter has outlined the inspiration for my study and introduced the focus of my research, including my research questions, and the primary texts I will be analyzing. In the next chapter, “Chapter 2: Literature Review,” I provide the theoretical background for my study, focusing on Young Adult literature and Canadian postcolonial theories.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I introduce the theoretical background for my study. I begin by providing an overview of Young Adult (YA) literature in which I describe the current critical opinion regarding how YA literature is identified and mention the debate between defining YA as a literary genre or an age-based classification. I then explore the subgenres of realistic YA fiction and dark-themed fiction, followed by a brief discussion of Canadian YA literature. In the second major subject area of my literature review, I examine postcolonial Canadian literary theories. I begin this section by describing Atwood's survival theory and Atwood and Frye's discussion of the garrison mentality. Although I do not directly use Atwood's survival theory or the garrison mentality in my later textual analysis, they are relevant to this literature review because they provide the ideological foundations for many contemporary Canadian Postcolonial theories. I then outline Frye's concepts of unity and uniformity, as well as the role of scapegoats in literature, and consider recent theories of White civility and wry civility within the context of Frye's literary theory. Next, I consider the concepts of inauthenticity and authenticity, focusing on Dennis Lee's understanding of authentic Canadian writing, and explore how his ideas have been treated in recent work by John Ralston Saul. Finally, I end my literature review by bringing together my discussion of YA fiction and aspects of Canadian postcolonial theories through an examination of the psychoanalytical concept of the abject in literature, which theorists such as Karen Coats have used to examine identity, unity and civility in YA literature.

### Young Adult Literature

#### Identifying Young Adult Literature

Defining Young Adult (YA) literature is difficult. Although almost all Young Adult novels have an adolescent protagonist, YA literature cannot be judged by this criterion alone. As Shelia Egoff and Judith Saltman note, "If the young-adult novel were to be defined only by the ages of its protagonists, then most Canadian fiction for the young (especially the early works) would fall into this category" (70). For instance, the tradition of outdoor survival stories in children's literature, even those meant for younger children, often required the protagonist be an adolescent in order to have the skills necessary to survive (Egoff and Saltman 70). Furthermore, many of the early Canadian family stories that are read by child readers, such as *Anne of Green Gables* usually span several years of the child protagonist's life, as the heroine grows from a pre-

pubescent girl to maturity, with the adolescent years being the core of the story (Egoff and Saltman 70). Moreover, adolescent protagonists are not unique to children's and YA literatures: they also feature widely in many adult novels (Egoff and Saltman 70-71).

When considering a definition of Young Adult literature, a second possibility is to look at the age of the readership. This too poses problems. Many canonical "adult" books, like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are read most widely in modern society by adolescents in high school English courses (Egoff and Saltman 71). Many other popular fiction writers for adults, such as Stephen King, George Orwell, and V.C. Andrews, also draw a large adolescent readership. When Young Adult fiction appeared in the 1970s, its readers were primarily adolescents in high school (Brown and Di Marzo 121). This has since changed (Brown and Di Marzo 121). Today, children often choose to read above their age designation; many YA novels with older teen protagonists are being read by tween (pre-adolescent) readers. Some publishers have even revealed that YA books are intentionally being marketed to children younger than twelve years of age (Brown and Di Marzo 121).

The author's intended audience does not help with the definition of contemporary YA literature. Many authors write with an adult audience in mind and are surprised when their publishers decide to market the book as Young Adult literature. In her article, "I'm Y.A., and I'm O.K.," Margo Rabb quotes Michael Cart, the former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, who says "The line between Y.A. and adult had become almost transparent," adding, "These days, what makes a book Y.A. is not so much what makes it as who makes it – and the 'who' is the marketing department" (n.pag.).

Overall, it seems YA fiction is best defined by the adolescent age of the intended reader as determined by publishers and marketing. While this may not be the age of the average reader, in reality this designation does seem to hold the most popular authority because it is one of the main factors that determine where the books are shelved in libraries and bookstores. While Young Adult literature can be somewhat recognized by the age of the protagonist or reader, Adam Bradford notes that YA books do share common characteristics that make young adult fiction more of a recognizable "genre" than a "classification" based arbitrarily on the age of the audience (508). Mark Vogels describes some structural commonalities in YA fiction, such as a "concise plot with a time span of 2 months or less, as well as a focus on the present and future in the life of one central character" (qtd. in Bucher and Manning 10). This adolescent protagonist usually narrates his or her own story in first person, and character development often occurs through a swiftly moving plot (Bucher and Manning 31).

Katherine Bucher and M. Lee Manning provide several criteria for what they consider to be successful YA literature (9). They argue that it “should reflect young adults’ age and development by addressing their reading abilities, thinking levels, and interest levels,” “deal with contemporary issues, problems, and experiences with characters to whom adolescents can relate” such as relationships with adults, illness and death, peer pressure, drugs, alcohol and sexual experimentation as well as “facing the realities of addiction and pregnancy” (Bucher and Manning 9). In addition, YA fiction “should consider contemporary world perspectives including cultural, social, and gender diversity; environmental issues; global politics; and international interdependence” (Bucher and Manning 9). While some of these criteria imply the didacticism that has emerged in discussion about what should be included in YA novels, Bucher and Manning’s criteria do reflect some of the contemporary standards for evaluating YA literature.

Within the various subgenres of Young Adult literature, realism (which includes the “problem novel”) is the most relevant to my research. Bucher and Manning contend, “Although young adult fiction no longer shies away from plots that center on topics once considered only for adults, authors of young adult literature use less graphic details while still conveying the reality of the situation” (Bucher and Manning 9-10). While this may hold true for YA literature in general, recent fiction, such as many of the primary texts discussed in this study, is pushing these boundaries by incorporating increasingly graphic sexuality and violence.

### **Realistic Young Adult Literature**

Young adult “new realism” or the “problem novel” was the first widely recognized subgenre of Young Adult fiction. Dealing with harsh social realities, these books began to appear in the United States in the early 1960s, but were not really published in Canada until the late 1970s (Egoff and Saltman 15). Realistic YA fiction is often discussed by critics and theorists in relation to its bibliotherapeutic potential. For instance, Cynthia A. Tyson notes, “By creating a fictional story that is true-to-life, realistic fiction helps young adults explore socially significant themes and events, empathize with others, and examine complex human interactions” (qtd. in Bucher and Manning 87).

Bucher and Manning identify several characteristics of realistic young adult fiction that make the books “feel real” (87). They state that it is very important that good realistic YA fiction should “exhibit the literary qualities . . . of good fiction” (Bucher and Manning 89). A characteristic of realistic YA fiction is that the settings, characters, and plots of these books come from the real world; however, the randomness of the world is changed into meaningful patterns

(Bucher and Manning 89). According to Bucher and Manning, realistic YA books should be believable; they should mirror reality, portray the issues young people face and comment on the human condition (89).

Realistic YA fiction's focus on the lives of modern adolescents has made it difficult to develop the canon of YA fiction. YA books tend to go out of date faster than other genres because material markers of status, such as clothing and electronics, are important in the lives and identity formation of adolescents, but quickly fall out of fashion (Hunt, "Young" 6). Language, including slang and other types of dialogue, can also date YA books. As Caroline Hunt notes, "ironically, the more accurate the portrayal of adolescent speech patterns, the shorter will be the life span of that particular book's 'relevance' to the present experience of teenaged readers" (6). While some lucky books may outlive the popularity of the fashion and language they depict, the readers' interpretation of the dated material will probably not recognize its original intended response and attached meanings. This raises questions regarding whether the issue of canon is relevant to some types of ephemeral genre fiction, such as Harlequin Romances, which would merit future study.

In their criteria of characteristics of realistic YA fiction, Bucher and Manning also note that the books are usually "direct and [are] often intense or extreme" (89). The intensity and extreme nature of a great deal of recent YA fiction has drawn the focus of those concerned with YA literature away from theoretical criticism towards a debate that centres on the existence of a perceived publishing trend in dark-themed books (Hunt, "Young" 8). The debate focuses on what is being called the "dark," "bleak," "grim," "gritty" and "hopeless" themes. These books deal with alienated youth and their endings are often ambiguous, reflecting real life where there are no definitive endings apart from death (Brown and Di Marzo 120).

Many adults, including parents, librarians, and critics, are disturbed by what have become characteristics of YA publishing in the United States. However, there is some debate as to whether or not dark-themed YA books are really a new trend. Some argue that these books have been around for as long as YA fiction has been published. They argue that the trend in dark-themed books only seems more prevalent because as YA literature gets more recognition among literary critics, booksellers, publishers, and the general public, so too do its darker themes. According to Hazel Rochman, dark-themed YA books "are not as dramatically different as it might seem" (qtd. in Brown and Di Marzo 120). She believes these books follow a tradition that started in the 1960s, when "[t]he era of happily-ever-after was shaken up" (qtd. in Brown and Di Marzo 120). Beverly Horowitz agrees that the trend in dark-themed YA literature actually started

in the 1960s, arguing that “exposing teens to the gritty realities of life first became an issue” with the publication of books like Hinton’s *The Outsiders* in 1967 (qtd. in Brown and Di Marzo 120). At the same time, Robert Cormier, a well-known American author of dark-themed YA fiction, says, “I think there *are* more books that deal with tough subjects, more honesty and more willingness to face reality. I also think books reflect the times we’re in [sic]” (qtd. in Brown and Di Marzo 120; emphasis in orig.).

While the debate about the possible trend in dark-themed YA literature appears fairly polarized, it seems that the parties may actually be arguing over different aspects of the same phenomenon. For instance, some critics are looking at the mere existence of dark-themed books since the beginnings of YA literature, while others view the debate in terms of the total number of dark-themed books published each year or the overall percentage of dark-themed books in YA literature over the decades. This debate is further tied into debates regarding the age-appropriateness, content, and increasing levels of violence in YA literature. While violence is common in works of realistic dark-themed YA fiction, it is generally a necessary plot element that authors employ as a vehicle to represent the darker and more troubling aspects of the society. Typically, in dark-themed YA novels of literary quality, violence is neither sensationalized nor exploited as a marketing ploy. Nonetheless, Karen Jameyson notes many adults (especially parents) are concerned about the presence of violence based on moral grounds (n.pag.). To date, it appears no comprehensive analysis of the dark-themed YA literature trend has examined the content of dark-themed books, the percentage of dark-themed books compared to other genres of YA fiction, and the total number of dark-themed books published each year. While the history of dark-themed books has yet to be fully mapped out, it can be safely concluded that YA literature with the characteristics of contemporary dark-themed books was first published in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s.

When it came to dealing with harsh social realities, Canadian YA novels were almost a decade behind their American counterparts (Egoff and Saltman 72). Meanwhile, Canadian “adult” writers had been dealing with dark and violent stories of alienation for over fifty years. Hence, the gritty subject matter of YA books in Canada will be valuable to investigate as it relates to North American trends in YA publishing and to Canadian literature and literary criticism as a whole. This will help determine if the dark subject matter and alienation in the Canadian YA novels are the result of the influence of the global English-language YA genre or if they indicate something specifically Canadian.

## Canadian Young Adult Literature

While Jean Stringam has argued that Canadian Young Adult literature started with the Canadian adventure stories for adolescent readers published in periodicals in the nineteenth-century (Stringam 135-52), English Canadian Young Adult novels only really appeared beginning in the mid 1970s (Egoff and Saltman 18). Like other YA literatures in English, Canadian YA literature came into prominence “concentrating on adolescents in conflict with themselves and those around them, or caught in a traumatic moment in their lives” (Egoff and Saltman 18). Now, “[l]ike the readers it targets, young adult literature itself is coming of age in Canada” (Fitzpatrick 9).

Shelia Egoff and Judith Saltman point to a few characteristics of Canadian YA literature that differ slightly from its American and British counterparts. In terms of dark-themed realistic YA fiction, Egoff and Saltman declared in 1990 that overall, Canadian writers “are more optimistic, and provide their characters with a broader view of life than their American counterparts, whose protagonists are very self-absorbed. The young Canadians may experience crises on their way to adulthood, but they will enter it with a *persona* of their own making” (Egoff and Saltman 73; emphasis in orig.). In describing the protagonists in Canadian YA literature, Egoff and Saltman declare, “whether the protagonists are childlike teenagers or adolescents on the brink of adulthood, they are more like Huck Finn, in their ability to control their destiny, rather than the emotionally lost Holden Caulfield” (73). Writing fifteen years after Egoff and Saltman, Betty Fitzpatrick finds the same phenomenon, saying that in Canadian YA, “The issues are gritty and real, but unlike the American bleak books, there is hope at the end” (9). Dark-themed YA literature has come to Canada, but perhaps without the ability to stir up controversy like its American equivalent (Fitzpatrick 9).

Beyond the much-debated trend of dark-themed books, Egoff and Saltman also notice that American and Canadian YA fictions take different approaches to certain popular themes, such as peer pressure and homosexuality. They determine that these themes in Canadian YA fiction “are treated with a psychological subtlety missing from the majority of American young-adult novels on these topics” (Egoff and Saltman 76). However, Egoff and Saltman do conclude that “[t]he most noticeable themes in Canadian fiction for adolescents are basically similar to the American ones: alienation, a quest for independence, burgeoning sexuality, rebellion against authority, and latterly, the more painful and controversial subjects of suicide, rape, abortion, and homosexuality” (86). Like the Americans, Canadian YA fiction also shows less concern than the British regarding “themes of intellectual growth and class conflict” (Egoff and Saltman 86). This

description is somewhat problematic and it may be considered dated because the treatment of subjects such as homosexuality are not “controversial” in the same ways they were twenty years ago. Nonetheless, as clear in the YA novels I analyze, these subjects all remain important in Canadian YA fiction.

While North American YA books published in America and Canada share many similarities, the Canadian books have a greater tendency to emphasize region and local colour (Egoff and Saltman 86). This “strong sense of place [that] still dominates our best realistic fiction” for young adults has been a characteristic of the literature since its inception (Egoff and Saltman 19). Egoff and Saltman conclude that by virtue of being “[f]irmly placed in their own background, our young protagonists are therefore more individualized than those in American novels for adolescents” (86). More recent Canadian YA critics have also noted this trend, saying “unlike much of YA fiction coming out of the Untied [sic] States, Canadian young adult literature emphasized region” (Fitzpatrick 8).

Although Canadian YA literature often deals with many of the same issues as YA fiction worldwide, such as homosexuality and friendship, this does not exclude the issues from reflecting a unique Canadian culture. As Cornelia Hoogland notes, “None of these topics [such as hockey, friendship, and homosexuality in the book *Bad Boy*] is necessarily Canadian but they are cultural and suggest concepts of community of which sexuality, sports and issues of violence are a part” (36). Hoogland quotes Edward Said to support her argument: “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (qtd. in Hoogland 36). She believes that “our continual absorption in considerations of what constitutes a national identity” is one of the various patterns that assert themselves in Canadian realistic YA fiction: “Even books which do not seem to deal directly with Canadian identity nevertheless deal with the pressure to reconcile dichotomies, to choose one amongst competing identities, paths, parents, or lifestyles” (Hoogland 28).

## **Canadian (Postcolonial) Literary Theories**

In my literature review of Canadian postcolonial theories, I outline some seminal theories from the study of Canadian literature, followed by an exploration of the concepts of unity, uniformity, and scapegoats. I explore how unity and uniformity relate to theories of White and wry civilities, before moving my focus to inauthenticity and authenticity in Canadian culture and cultural production.



## Postcolonial Theory in Canada

After the Canadian centennial in 1967, there was a rapid increase in both the production and criticism of Canadian literature. Most of the theory produced since this period can be described as postcolonial as it explicitly addresses Canada's history as a British colony. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin describe it, postcolonialism "cover[s] all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). Postcolonial theory is a method of theorizing the relationships between colonialism and various aspects of culture, society, identity, and nationalism. Postcolonialism focuses on relations of power, typically between the colonizer and the colonial subject. Postcolonial theorists and literatures are often concerned with "dismantling colonialism's signifying system and exposing its operation in the silencing and oppressing of the colonial subject," by creating a space for the "subaltern" to speak (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 175). The postcolonial project reexamines colonial ideas of maturity, civilization, and the cultural "standard" whereby the cultural production of the colony (e.g. Canada) is measured against the standard set by the colonizer (in Canada's case this is the British, and, arguably the American cultures) and is always found wanting.

In the past, Canadian postcolonial criticism and theory studied Canada by looking outward in a comparative context (Moss, "Is Canada" 3). This has since changed; current postcolonial discussions in Canada are "more often concentrated inward to look at the complexities within Canada itself" (Moss, "Is Canada" 3). This inward reflection is seen in Canadian texts that demonstrate "a desire to validate the local in terms of its own history in response to the familiar notion that history happened elsewhere" (Moss, "Is Canada" 9).

Many Canadian literary theorists and critics were influenced by Margaret Atwood's 1972 book *Survival*, particularly in the immediate decades after its publication. According to Atwood, "every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core" that "functions like a system of beliefs (it *is* a system of beliefs, though not always a formal one) which holds the country together and helps the people in it to co-operate for common ends" (31; emphasis in orig.). This central symbol in the United States is the Frontier; in Britain it is the Island (Atwood 32). Atwood argues that the central symbol in Canadian literature is "Survival" (32). She believes that "[a] preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival" (Atwood 33). This symbol comes from early Canadian writers, who focused on external obstacles, such as the land and climate, and from early explorers and settlers, who were preoccupied with "bare survival in the face of 'hostile' elements and/or natives:

carving out a place and a way of keeping alive” (Atwood 32). In general, Atwood finds there are no happy endings in Canadian literature, only survival.

Atwood identifies what she believes to be the key characteristics of the colonial mentality in Canadian literature, highlighting its overwhelming emphasis on victims (32). She defines four basic victim stances that she uses to describe the literary construction of the Canadian psyche. She says that most Canadian authors, prior to when *Survival* was published in 1972, write from what she describes as “Basic Victim Stance Two”: they acknowledge their victim status but explain the victimization as the result of a more powerful and unalterable force, such as God, fate, or nature (Atwood 37). This stance shows a refusal to acknowledge the real sources of power and oppression in the victimization and dismisses the victim’s agency (Atwood 37).

Atwood also discusses the concept of the garrison mentality, which she borrows from Northrop Frye. She believes the Canadian psyche was molded by this ‘us against them’ mentality, where walls were built up to protect the community from the outside and the unknown, from the harsh weather and the hostile ‘savages.’ Frye argues that the garrison mentality was a sustained attack on the liberal individualism found in the United States (Frye, *Bush* 226). Hence “terror is not for the common enemy . . . The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil” (Frye, *Bush* 226). While the objective of the garrison is the protection and survival of the group, to achieve this objective it promotes collective action that may at times repress individual freedom (Atwood 173). Hence, the success of the garrison mentality and the group’s survival relies wholly on the idea of uniformity.

### **Unity, Uniformity, and Scapegoats**

In *The Bush Garden*, Northrop Frye discusses the differences between the concepts of uniformity and unity and how each concept relates to identity (i-x). According to Frye, “uniformity” is “where everyone ‘belongs,’ . . . thinks alike and behaves alike” (*Bush* vi). Uniformity, as demonstrated by the garrison mentality, “produces a society which seems comfortable at first but is totally lacking in human dignity” (vi). It relies on the division between the collective and the Other. This division implies it is acceptable to treat individuals differently if they are not one of ‘us’ in order to preserve the integrity and supremacy of the uniform group. This mindset is reflected in the practice of scapegoating. Sylvia Söderlind notes that the scapegoat “represents the borderline between same and other, inside and outside;” it is “both

beneficial and evil, . . . healing and expiating” (121). Although the scapegoat often embodies a failure in the uniformity of the group, the figure also allows the collective to prove its power and to reassert the importance of conformity. In many cases, the scapegoat is able to play a redemptive role as it assumes the failures and sins of others (Söderlind 66).

Uniformity’s implied approval of the use of scapegoats and second-class citizens has received attention in the criticism of Young Adult literature. This concept is important in YA literature because the appeal of uniformity is arguably the strongest during adolescence.

In contrast to uniformity, “[r]eal unity tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition, recognizes that it is man’s destiny to unite and not divide, and understands that creating proletariats and scapegoats and second-class citizens is a mean and contemptible activity” (Frye, *Bush* vi). Hence, “a sense of unity is the opposite of a sense of uniformity” (Frye, *Bush* vi). Unity “is the extra dimension that raises the sense of belonging into genuine human life” by simultaneously promoting both the individual and collective interests (Frye, *Bush* vi). At the same time, Frye argues that “unity and identity are quite different things to be promoting, and . . . in Canada they are perhaps more different than they are anywhere else” (*Bush* ii). “Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling” (Frye, *Bush* ii). Frye argues that attempting to assimilate identity to unity will produce “the empty gestures of cultural nationalism” while “assimilating unity to identity produces the kind of provincial isolation which is now called separatism” (*Bush* iii). In other words, identity and unity are two separate entities; although they are deeply intertwined and cannot be divided, one cannot be subsumed by the other.

Unity’s delicate balance between the individual and the collective is similar to the Aboriginal concept of egalitarianism described by John Ralston Saul. Saul proposes Canada was founded on Aboriginal traditions where unity was achieved through a deep belief in the value of ongoing discussion, negotiation and consensus (54). Rather than being a linear decision making process, consensus in this philosophy is a spatial concept that is based on the belief that there is “an interrelated place for continuing differences inside the great circle” (Saul 71). According to Saul, Aboriginal egalitarianism “included a clearly defined sense of individual responsibility—a meritocratic individualism tied to a fierce sense of independence” (57). This egalitarianism promoted a type of unity where people were given “the time and the space to work out how to maintain or develop relationships” (Saul 71). When achieved, “all sides should be able to benefit” from the unity found in egalitarianism (Saul 59).

Canadians' interest in the concepts of uniformity, unity, and identity has continued to grow as the country tries to define itself as an officially multicultural nation. While uniformity is supposed to be the antithesis of multiculturalism, Neil Bissoondath argues that multiculturalism in Canada has become a sort of orthodoxy where people who question it are quickly dismissed as racists (6). Will Ferguson critiques this argument, saying Bissoondath "enters the land of hyperbole" when he "accuses supporters of multiculturalism of being 'zealots' intent on perpetuating 'cultural apartheid'" (282). Ferguson says, "It's like calling traffic cops 'Nazis.' It doesn't get you out of a ticket and all it does is make you look a bit hysterical" (282). However, Bissoondath does draw attention to the importance of continued critical reflection when it comes to multiculturalism in Canada. Regardless, the ideal of the multicultural mosaic complicates Frye's division between identity and unity because it promotes using international origins to partially define an individual's local identity through a hyphenated label, such as "Greek-Canadian." Hence, multiculturalism is a good example of the complexities of the concepts of unity, uniformity, and identity in Canadian culture. My investigation into how these concepts are treated in Canadian YA literature highlights the interesting tensions and ideas regarding the balance between the individual and the collective in Canadian society.

### **White Civility and Wry Civility**

Daniel Coleman's formulation of White civility and wry civility is a more contemporary analysis of unity and uniformity and one that explicitly considers Trans-Canadian culture and identity. Coleman describes White and wry civilities in his book *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* and also in his article "From Canadian Trance to TransCanada: White Civility to Wry Civility in the CanLit Project." Coleman's central argument is that Canadians must move away from the "*Canadian trance*" which has been created by White civility's "static and reified idea[s] of civility . . . found[ed] in White, British gentlemanliness," in favour of "a *TransCanadian*, dynamic, self-questioning concept of civility," which he terms "wry civility" ("From Canadian" 26-27; emphasis in orig.).

Coleman's critique of White civility appears to have roots in Frye's description of uniformity, while his concept of wry civility can be linked to Frye's understanding of unity. In *White Civility*, Coleman looks at Canadian literature and other written cultural products produced from approximately 1850 to 1950 to describe the "genealogy of White civility" and how it "has repeatedly figured Canadian values" (239). Like uniformity, White civility constructs a social hierarchy where minority or so-called ethnic groups are scapegoated and considered less than

fully Canadian. Coleman focuses on four oft-repeated images that are meant to unite the Canadian White British civility: “the loyalist brother,” “the enterprising Scottish orphan whose prudent, good character produces his economic success, the muscular Christian who meets out justice on behalf of oppressed people, and the maturing colonial son who demonstrates his independence from Britain and America by altruism towards his minority beneficiaries” (239). Coleman demonstrates how these images of White civility formed “during the nation-building years,” and have “survived numerous challenges to their capacity to present a normative ideal for Canadian citizenship,” in order to “continue to have enormous influence in popular understandings of Canadian identity” (239). Hence, it can be argued that White civility draws from the same ideas as uniformity in its attempts to construct a unitary national cultural identity.

At first glance, wry civility also seems to draw from the same ideological base as uniformity. Coleman notes that all forms of civility, like uniformity, “usually understand[ed] itself to have an inside and an outside, as well as a hierarchy from top to bottom” (“From Canadian” 31). Hence, Canadian civility generally “operates . . . by comparison with outsiders, as well as with what we might call internal outsiders, who are seen as less civil than we are” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 31). In addition to the hierarchical structure of belonging that is implied in both uniformity and civility, the two concepts can also operate “as a mode of internal management” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 29). In uniformity, this is seen when the individual represses feelings of dissent or opposition towards the group in order to remain accepted by the collective. In civility, internal management usually occurs when “the subjects of the civil order discipline their conduct in order to participate in the civil realm, and they themselves gain or lose legitimacy in an internally striated civil society depending on the degrees to which they conform to its ideals” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 29). However, to conclude that wry civility, like all other forms of civility, is a manifestation of Frye’s uniformity, is to misinterpret Coleman’s argument. Although wry civility operates as a method of internal management and judges its subjects based on the degree to which they adopt civil ideals, it also strives to promote critical reflection on the forms and messages found in Canadian civility.

Coleman’s wry civility is a “self-conscious critical positioning” that encourages a “critical engagement with the social norms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationalism” so that we may “recognize them not as norms but as pedagogical projects that produce our own governmentality” (45). He uses the term “wry” to emphasize a “critical reflexivity towards the existing social order” and “civility” to emphasize “the collective . . . investment in the public, social realm” (“From Canadian” 38; emphasis in orig.).

Coleman's discussion of the relationship between education and civility shows how the basis of wry civility engages with the difficulties of distinguishing between unity and uniformity. Both wry civility and White civility use education to promote certain civil ideals in the hope that all citizens will internalize these values and beliefs. According to Coleman, "education in civility shepherds people onto the path of progress because it names a future ideal as if it were a present norm" and it "projects an ideal of social interaction . . . as something to which individuals should aspire" (11). For instance, if the culture presents an ideal where "all members of society should be freely included and accorded equal respect" as the present norm (which has been done in Canada), then subjects wishing "to join the egalitarian progressive company . . . must be willing to improve [themselves], to become worthy of the respect that characterizes the civil group" (Coleman 11). Education does not force quick ideological changes, but it guides civil society in the desired direction. The difference between wry and White civilities' use of education is the degree to which conformity is maintained and constructed as natural, inevitable, and, therefore, invisible. White civility promotes the internalized and naturalized acceptance of its beliefs regarding White belonging, while wry civility wants citizens to internalize the value of critical thinking, and an understanding that the project of civility must be consciously and continuously constructed.

While civility promotes certain social ideals among all its subjects, it is not necessarily closer to uniformity than unity. Like unity, wry civility resists the homogenous quality of uniformity by promoting critical thinking and encouraging its subjects to question the structures of Canadian society, including wry civility itself. Coleman explicitly uses the term wry civility "to emphasize the importance of a dynamic, ever-renewed alertness to this fundamental paradox of the repressive violence that haunts the borders and stratifies the layers of civility" ("From Canadian" 37). Hence, wry civility is a new understanding of unity that continues to promote critical thinking, as well as respect for both the individual and collective autonomy.

### **Inauthenticity and Authenticity**

Theoretical understanding of Canadian cultural authenticity and colonialism was and continues to be influenced by Dennis Lee's 1974 article, "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space." Lee evocatively describes Canada's postcolonial condition by drawing on the difficulties he experienced while trying to write authentic Canadian poetry. Although Lee is careful not to claim all Canadian artists share his problems with authenticity, he generalizes his experiences to a large degree when he uses them to construct his theory.

Writing at a time when the term postcolonial had not yet been applied to Canadian literature, Lee refers to Canadians as “colonial” (154). However, contemporary scholars often categorize Lee’s writing under the theoretical heading of Canadian postcolonial (Sugars 38). Lee believes that the official severance of many colonial ties between Canada and Britain has not put an end to Canada’s role as a colony. Canada is still affected by colonialism in its relationship to the United States and its lingering ties to Britain. Drawing from George Grant’s *Technology and Empire*, Lee considers how Canadians are deluded by dreams of the imperial homeland while being internally colonized by American liberalism (157-61).

According to Lee, the words Canadians use do not reflect their Canadian experiences and environment because the words were given to Canadians by their colonial masters. When trying to write authentic Canadian poetry, Lee found himself falling mute as he realized “there was no way I could speak [the words] directly” because the words “said Britain, and they said America, but they did not say my home” (156, 162). Lee defines words as “all the resources of the verbal imagination” (155). It can be assumed that he did not believe appropriating Aboriginal words in mainstream Canada was a solution to this problem because non-Aboriginal Canadians would still be claiming another history and another set of native connotations in a changed and non-native environment. This is found in the way Lee defines “us” Canadians, and “our ancestors” as separate from “indigenous peoples and Europe” (159). Hence, Lee went silent because “Writing had become a full-fledged problem to itself; it had grown into a search for authenticity, but all it could manage to be was a symptom of inauthenticity” (158). Eventually, Lee came to the realization that Canadian writers should embrace silence as the legitimate subject matter. Lee believes silence is echoed in words like “nothingness . . . absence, nonbeing” (166). Canadian writing “arises from the tough, delicate, heartbreaking rooting of what-is in its own nonbeing. Out of our participation in that rooting, there rises an elemental movement of being—of celebration, of desire, of grief, of anger, of play, of dying” (Lee 168). Lee states, “Nonbeing and what is: we cannot know either authentically by itself” (167).

Canadians do not, according to Lee, have a “privileged authentic space just waiting for words” because they have “made an alien inauthenticity their own” (163). Canadians “live in space which is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking a problem to itself” (Lee 154). For writers to be authentic, they must write from what they know: their home (Lee 163). However, “if you are Canadian, home is a place that is not home to you” (Lee 163). Therefore, Lee proposed that the task of postcolonial Canadian writers “was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our spacelessness. Perhaps that *was*

home” (163; emphasis in orig.). In short, Lee believes “the voice of being alive here and now must include the inauthenticity of our lives here and now” in order “to be authentic” (165).

An important criticism of Lee’s essay is that his application of the term Canadian explicitly excludes Aboriginal peoples and Québécois. Furthermore, Lee also omits descendants of non-western European immigrants in his assumptions about Canadian consciousness and the imperial homeland. Cynthia Sugars’ 2004 introduction to Lee’s essay alludes to this problem when she writes, “Dennis Lee’s diagnosis of a Canadian dis-ease is perhaps as applicable now as it was then. The difference in the ways this dis-ease is articulated today, however, is in its multiple locations *intra*-nationally” (xiii; emphasis in orig.). This dis-ease is “no longer understood as a singular conceptualization of *the* Canadian psyche;” instead, “dis-ease within the real and/or textual space of the Canadian nation-state can take numerous forms” (Sugars xiii; emphasis in orig.).

In his book, *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul describes the problems he finds in Canadian culture in a way that is reminiscent of Lee’s argument. Like Lee, Saul finds the words Canadians use do not authentically describe their home and experiences. He believes the Canadian psyche has been crippled by false myths regarding our society. For instance, Canada’s sense of self is being damaged by the founding myth that we are a nation built on “peace, order, and good government.”<sup>1</sup> Saul proposes that “what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of Canadian mythology,” is that “[w]e are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government” (xi-xii). By constructing our identity out of false myths, we are restrained from knowing ourselves. Hence, “[a]t the core of these difficulties is our incapacity to accept who we are” (Saul xii). He believes “If we can embrace a language that expresses that story, we will feel a great release. We will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel we are true to ourselves” (xi-xii).

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<sup>1</sup> Saul is alluding to the definition of “peace, order and good government” found in Section 91 of the Constitution Act 1867. He interprets this as a false imported European ideal and observes that this exact phrasing only appears twice in Canada’s legal and constitutional documents (Saul 114). In other documents using this phrasing, such as the Royal Proclamation 1763, “order” is usually changed to “welfare” (114). He believes the word “order” entered consciousness as a myth created by “a tiny, empire-besotted elite—English or pretend-English—late in the nineteenth century” (112). As a European myth, “order . . . insist[s] on a narrow concept of power” (114). Saul believes, “if you want to understand the intent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canadian legal documents, read the French version” (123). Comparing the English to the French versions of constitutional documents such as the Royal Proclamation 1763, in which the word “welfare” is translated as “*le bien-être*,” Saul believes he is able to go beyond the many possible meanings of the word to discover its exact connotation: fairness, the “well-being of the individual within a society” (115-124).



Saul proposes Canada is socially, culturally, and politically a Métis nation that was founded as much on Aboriginal principles and philosophies as on imported European ideals. The Aboriginal influence created an acceptance of diversity, a preoccupation with fairness, and a balance between individual and collective good that was unseen in Europe at the time. Canadian society has since forgotten or deliberately erased the relationships between Aboriginal and settler society. Saul believes Canadian society denies its true identity when it accepts the European myths that suggest Canada was a submissive colony founded by rich white men and British loyalists in a linear and elitist fashion. He proposes that these myths were propagated by the Canadian elite and the Family Compact to serve their own interests. He points out that ethnic diversity has always been a core of Canadian civilization because minority groups (while often discriminated against and treated horrifically) have consistently made up a large segment of Canadian society. Saul proposes coming to terms with the nonmonolithic, nonlinear nature of Canadian culture and society by exposing the homogenous and linear false myths. In Lee's terms, he believes that we need to acknowledge the inauthenticity of trying to duplicate European culture in Canada and of explaining our foundations using the Eurocentric myths. In recognizing that inauthenticity we will reveal our true authenticity: the Métis nation and the Canadian psyche that form the core of our creative impulses.

## **The Abject**

The concept of abjection, taken from psychological literary theories, complements the previous discussion of the scapegoat and uniformity. According to Linda Wedwick and Roberta Seelinger Trites, "Abjection represents the rejection of the unclean, . . . the impure or the unacceptable" (130). In their analysis, Wedwick and Trites draw from Karen Coats' and Julia Kristeva's work on abjection in children's literature where "abject characters . . . come in two forms . . . : the socially abject character, who is effectively scapegoated by other people; and the psychologically abject character, who embraces his (gender specifically intended) own abjection as a way to escape from social pressures" (Wedwick and Trites 130).

Coats describes psychologically abject characters as "ordinary people who refuse to reintegrate into society under its terms but instead haunt and disrupt its borders" (149). On the other hand, "[s]ocially abject characters experience some sort of separation from others, followed by 'a liminal experience of individuation' and a reintegration into society" (Wedwick and Trites 130). Often, socially abject characters are forcibly made abject due to their perceived mental or physical difference (Wedwick and Trites 130). In Young Adult literature, socially abject

characters are often youth who do not fit into mainstream society's image of normal because of physical or psychological difference or disability. These characters "are made abject against their will and without a choice in the matter, but they are responsible for choosing to reintegrate themselves back into the appropriate social sphere by [making] adjustments to their bodies or their attitudes. Indeed, they all overcome their abjection by asserting their own agency, advancing the ideology that we all have 'choices' about our social positions and how we are viewed by others" (Wedwick and Trites 130). Like Kristeva and Coats, Wedwick and Trites also draw feminism into their discussion of the psychology of abjection. They note that in children's and YA fiction the socially abject are usually female and the psychologically abject are male (Wedwick and Trites 130). This is significant because "[d]iscursively constructed female characters rarely choose their own abjection in children's literature—but the discourse surrounding the female body in children's literature almost always defines the physical as being a matter of choice" (Wedwick and Trites 130).

Wedwick and Trites conclude that in YA fiction, "characters whose embodiment marks them as different, as imperfect, and as Other are presented as having either physical choices or psychological choices that allow them to reintegrate themselves into society as nonabject characters" (130). In a message that emphasizes liberalism, these characters must "employ their agency to redefine their biology and change the structures of society. They are portrayed as being fortunate to have choices" (Wedwick and Trites 130). Although Wedwick and Trites studied American YA fiction, their analysis of abjection and the corresponding messages of liberalism in fiction for adolescents are interesting to apply to Canadian YA fiction in light of Lee's and Saul's partial refusal of liberalism in their discussions of the authentic Canadian psyche.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have provided a literature review that explores the theoretical background of my study. I have discussed the history and trends of Young Adult literature and publishing, as well as Canadian postcolonial theories and ideas of the abject. In the next chapter, "Chapter 3: Methodology," I provide definitions for key terms in this study, describe how I selected my primary texts and present my critical framework and the structure of my analysis.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I begin by providing definitions for important terms and concepts that will appear throughout this study. Next, I describe how I selected my primary texts in relation to my critical framework. I created this Canadian critical framework from the theories described by John Ralston Saul, Dennis Lee, Daniel Coleman, and Northrop Frye. I explain how I will apply this framework to my primary texts. I lay out the structure for my analysis, describing how I will perform a close reading of the primary texts in order to analyze their themes and content. I describe in detail the structure of my critical framework, in which I will first examine the primary texts for general themes in Young Adult (YA) literature and connect them to characteristics of the dark-themed book trend found in American YA publishing. Then, I describe how I will apply my Canadian critical lenses in Chapters 4 and 5 to the primary texts to ascertain how the works engage with contemporary Canadian cultural and literary theories, as well as how these theories and themes from YA literature might be a continuation of decades-long discussions in Canadian culture.

### Definitions of Terms

**Abject/Abjection:** In psychological literary theories, “[a]bjection represents the rejection of the unclean” (Wedwick and Trites 130). In YA literature, there are two major categories of abject characters: the socially abject and the psychologically abject. The socially abject characters are often scapegoats; they “experience some sort of separation from others,” which is followed by what Karen Coats calls “a liminal experience of individuation” (150) and finally “a reintegration into society” (Wedwick and Trites 130). These characters “are made abject against their will and without a choice in the matter, but they are responsible for choosing to reintegrate themselves back into the appropriate social sphere by [making] adjustments to their bodies or their attitudes” (Wedwick and Trites 130). These characters may “overcome their abjection” if they are able to assert their agency by conforming to society’s demands and making the necessary changes to fit in, such as an overweight child losing weight (Wedwick and Trites 130). Stories that promote this concept of the socially abject are “advancing the ideology that we all have ‘choices’ about our social positions and how we are viewed by others” (Wedwick and Trites 130).

On the other hand, the psychologically abject character “embraces his . . . own abjection as a way to escape from social pressures” (Wedwick and Trites 130). Coats describes psychologically abject characters as “ordinary people who refuse to reintegrate into society under

its terms but instead haunt and disrupt its borders” (Coats 149). In YA fiction, the socially abject are usually gendered female, while the psychologically abject are male (Wedwick and Trites 130).

**Canadian Psyche:** This term refers to a generalization about the archetypal mind, soul or spirit of the Canadian as it is shaped by cultural and historical forces. As it is founded in sweeping generalizations and promotes some form of homogeneity, this can easily become a problematic construct.

**Canadian Young Adult Literature:** Canadian Young Adult literature is Young Adult literature written (or written and illustrated, in the case of graphic novels) by Canadians. For the purposes of this paper, a Canadian will be defined according to the eligibility criteria set forth by the Canadian Children’s Book Centre (CCBC), as “a citizen of Canada or a landed immigrant who has lived in Canada for at least two years” (CCBC, “Eligibility Criteria” 1). The Canadian Young Adult literature being discussed in this study will be originally published in the English language.

**Civility:** In this study I will consider the term civility in the same manner as Daniel Coleman. Coleman’s interpretation of civility draws from the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s various definitions of the term, which “extend from 'a community of citizens collectively,' 'good polity; orderly state,' and 'conformity to the principles of social order' to 'the state of being civilized; freedom from barbarity' and 'polite or liberal education ... good breeding’” (qtd. in Coleman, *White Civility* 10). Coleman believes that, taken together, these meanings show that civility is a “concept . . . that combines *the temporal notion* of civilization as progress that was central to the idea of modernity and the colonial mission with *the moral-ethical concept* of a (relatively) peaceful public order—that is to say, the orderly regulation between individual liberty and collective equality that has been fundamental to the politics of the modern nation-state” (“From Canadian” 29; emphasis in orig.). Civil in this sense is “the contradictory or ambivalent project that purports to provide a public space of equality and liberty for all at the same time as it attempts to protect this freedom and equality from threats within and without” (Coleman, *White Civility* 43). I agree with Daniel Coleman that “civility operates as a mode of internal management: the subjects of the civil order discipline their conduct in order to participate in the civil realm, and they themselves gain or lose legitimacy in an internally striated civil society depending on the degrees to which they conform to its ideals” (“From Canadian” 29). Drawing from Étienne Balibar, Coleman explores the “paradox of exclusive egalitarianism” that is at “the heart of civility” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 36). Like Balibar, Coleman believes that “if civil

society exists when people of different identifications have equal access to and agency within a public sphere . . . then they must allow their identification with that shared public entity (for example, the nation-state) to displace or subsume their other (regional, domestic, or tribal) identifications” (qtd. in Coleman, “From Canadian” 36-7). Hence, “[c]ivility, in this sense, involves a violent marginalization of non-centralizing identifications” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 37).

**Culture:** As Tony Watkins notes, “Culture is an ambiguous term” (56). Various writers, such as Neil Bissoondath, Daniel Coleman, and Edward Said, have tried to define culture. I find the clearest and most concise definition comes from Ronald Jobe, who defines culture as “a term used to describe a unique set of customs, languages, religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours shared by a group of people and passed on from generation to generation. These collective beliefs and values provide members with a sense of identity” (*Cultural Connections* 13). Don Mitchell identifies various ways of understanding the term culture that rely heavily on oppositions. First, culture defines humanity and is the antithesis of nature (Mitchell qtd. in Watkins 58). Culture “is the actual, perhaps unexamined, patterns and differentiations of a people (as in . . . ‘German culture’ – culture is a way of life)” and “the processes by which these patterns developed” (Mitchell qtd. in Watkins 58). The term also “indicates a set of markers that set one people off from another and which indicate to us our membership in a group,” as well as how the processes, patterns, and markers are represented in a way that produces meaning (Mitchell qtd. in Watkins 58). Finally, Mitchell states that culture can also be understood as an idea that “often indicates a hierarchical ordering of all these processes, activities, ways of life, and cultural production (as when people compare cultures or cultural activities against each other)” (Mitchell qtd. in Watkins 58). In this study, I will rely primarily on Jobe’s concept of culture, while amending it to recognize Edward Said’s argument that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (qtd. in Hoogland 36).

**Cultural Identity:** In my research I use Jim Zuccherro’s definition of cultural identity, which is “a sort of psychic space, a mental framework that combines the intellectual and emotional orientations to events and encompasses both conscious and unconscious influences and motivations” (267). I use this term to refer to how individuals define themselves based on their various cultural affiliations. Note: see definition entries for “Identity” and “National Identity.”

**Dark-Themed Young Adult Literature:** Also referred to as the contemporary writing and publishing trend in “downer,” “bleak,” “gritty,” “grim,” and “hopeless” themed books, these

Young Adult stories often deal with alienated youth in ways many adults find disturbing. In the books, “the issues are tough” including painful topics such as isolation, graphic violence, and suicide (Brown and Di Marzo 120). The endings are often “ambiguous at best” where “frequently, hope means little more than surviving dangerous circumstances” (Brown and Di Marzo 120). Roberta Seelinger Trites draws parallels to traditional narratives, calling these books the “Desillusionsroman” or “Anti-Bildungsroman” (Trites, “Hope” 11).

**Disillusionment:** According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “disillusionment” is “[t]he action of disillusioning, or fact of being disillusioned.” This comes from the verb “disillusion,” which is “[t]o free from illusion; to disenchant, undeceive, disillusionize.” While this term is often understood as a negative event, implying that the illusion is more positive than the reality, I am not confining my use of the concept of disillusionment to this interpretation. I use the term “disillusionment” and “disillusion” in a way that emphasizes the process of “undeceiving.” I am exploring the overall process of uncovering significant previous deceptions and illusions. While my analysis generally focuses on uncovering a negative truth, as is the case when the protagonist realizes her or his own faults, it also includes major instances where the disillusionment reveals a more positive reality, which is the case when the adolescents come to understand that they have deceived themselves by thinking they were responsible for another person’s suicide.

Regardless of whether or not the reality that replaces the deception or illusion is positive or negative, all major cases of disillusionment are, in some form, a spiritual crisis, as the adolescents realize they have misunderstood the world and the repercussions of this deception. They are exposed to the “gritty realities of life” as they realize their world is radically different from what they once believed (Brown and Di Marzo 120). Hence, disillusionment is used here to reflect Marc Aronson’s belief that “realistic fiction must go beneath the surface to explore discontinuities, examine the subconscious, and investigate unsettling truths” (qtd. in Bucher and Manning 90).

An emphasis on disillusionment is popular in Young Adult literature when the adolescent characters (and often the adolescent readers) have their naive beliefs from childhood challenged, and it is often portrayed negatively, as the “era of happily-ever-after” is “shaken up” (Rochman qtd. in Brown and Di Marzo 120).

**Garrison Mentality:** Originated by Northrop Frye and developed by Margaret Atwood, this is an important concept in the Canadian postcolonial discussions of the 1970s. The garrison mentality is an interpretation of the Canadian psyche based on fear and collective survival. A garrison is a “small and isolated” community that is surrounded by a physical and/or

psychological wilderness (Frye, *Bush* 225). The community within the garrison is “a closely knit and beleaguered society;” “its moral and social values” are those of the group and are “unquestionable” (Frye, *Bush* 226). The supremacy of the community means that “collective action may repress individual growth while being necessary for survival” (Atwood 173). There is a constant presence of terror within the community, but the “terror is not for the common enemy. . . . The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil” (Frye, *Bush* 226).

As Canadians become more metropolitan and the centre of Canada moves from small isolated communities to larger cities, the walls of the garrison mentality do not break down. Instead, the garrisons multiply. Frye notes that the garrison mentality can be a positive source of creative power: “as society gets more complicated and more in control of its environment, it becomes more of a revolutionary garrison within a metropolitan society” and “it changes from a defence of to an attack on what society accepts as conventional standards” (Frye, *Bush* 231). Thus, the garrison mentality “help[s] to unify the mind of the writer by externalizing his enemy, the enemy being the anti-creative elements in life as he sees life” (Frye, *Bush* 231). However, even if the garrison mentality moves from defence to attack, “the literature it produces, at every stage, tends to be rhetorical, an illustration or allegory of certain social attitudes” (Frye, *Bush* 231).

**Identity:** An important concept in Young Adult literature and culture, identity always relies on defining oneself in opposition to others. As Laura Moss notes, “[i]dentity is a shifting, slithering concept, one of the words we use to distinguish ourselves from others and then to confirm each self as unique and unified” (“Preface” viii). For Frye, “[i]dentity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture” (*Bush* ii). Note: see definition entry for “National Identity.”

**Isolation:** In this study, I will use isolation as a general heading under which I will discuss the feeling of not ‘fitting in.’ This concept includes abjection, scapegoats, marginality, and the use of alienated characters in Young Adult fiction. While isolation in Young Adult fiction is primarily psychological, it can be reinforced physically. Isolation can also occur when those who are Othered do not conform to uniformity.

**Marginality:** In postcolonial theory and criticism there is a “privileging of the ‘margins’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 40). The cultures and voices that were pushed to the periphery or margins by the centre of (imperial) power are examined in postcolonial criticism in the belief

that “the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the ‘margin’ [has] turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 12). The discourses by which hierarchies are created, where power is centred and the Other is marginalized, are also examined in this aspect of postcolonial criticism.

**Myth:** For Frye, myth “creates an autonomous world that gives us an imaginative perspective on the actual one” (*Bush* 235). “Myths are expressions of concern, of man’s care for his own destiny and heritage, his sense of the supreme importance of preserving his community, his constant interest in questions about his ultimate coming and going” (Frye, *Bush* 194). Myth “is a narrative that suggests two inconsistent responses: first, ‘this is what is said to have happened,’ and second, ‘this almost certainly is not what happened, at least in precisely the way described’” (Frye, “Koine” 4). Myth condenses the concept of time, because it “does not say so much ‘this happened long ago’ as ‘what you are about to see, or have just seen, *is* what happened long ago’” so “[t]he present becomes a moment in which . . . the past and future are gathered” (Frye, “Koine” 7; emphasis in orig.).

Frye looks at the concept of myth in literary criticism as “first and primarily, *mythos*, story, plot, narrative” (“Koine” 3; emphasis in orig.). He states that “[l]iterature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of story-telling, [and] its mythical concepts . . . become habits of metaphorical thought” (Frye, *Bush* 232-33). Then, “[i]n a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images” (Frye, *Bush* 232-33). John Ralston Saul also points out that language, like literature, is intricately tied into myth. Saul quotes Tomson Highway, saying “[l]anguages are given form by mythologies” (qtd. in Saul xi). This is important because, as Saul notes, “To accept a language that expresses neither our true selves nor our true mythologies is to disarm our civilization” (xi).

**National Identity:** In this study, I will use Carol Fox’s definition of national identity, which is “whatever cultural characteristics a society (or nation) feels its members share that distinguish it from other groups” (44). Nations primarily define their national identity in contrast to others; however, national identity does not have to be monocultural (Fox 44-46). Nonetheless, “[n]ational identities are generalisations, and, inevitably, stereotypical characterisations of histories, people and settings” (Fox 50). Note: see definitions entries for “Cultural Identity” and “Identity.”



**Postcolonial (Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Theory):** There are two ways of understanding the term postcolonial: as “a chronological marker” or “as a reading strategy or a set of issues” (Moss, “Is Canada” 11). Postcolonial as a chronological marker refers to countries that were former colonies. Laura Moss notes, “there has been a widespread shift from a chronologically or geographically based approach to an ‘issue’-based approach to literature produced around the globe in ‘e’nglishes” (*Infinity* 4). The primary issues explored through postcolonial theory include “marginality; ambivalence; hybridity; negotiating history; decolonization; hierarchies of power and oppression; censorship; race and ethnicity; appropriation of voice; canon revision; and language” (Moss, *Infinity* 4). In my analysis, I use the issue-based approach of postcolonialism while considering the chronological and geographical impact on the issues.

**Problem Novel:** In the first quarter of his article, “Agency, Belonging, Citizenship,” Benjamin Lefebvre defines the problem novel as a “subgenre of adolescent realistic fiction that not only advocates a clear solution to a clearly identified social problem (such as peer pressure and divorce) but offers resolutions that . . . ‘usually suggest that the protagonist is only beginning to come to terms with the problem and that a difficult period of adjustment and/or recovery still lies ahead’” (n.pag.). Originally referred to as “new realism,” this is the most recognizable subgenre of Young Adult literature (Egoff and Saltman 15).

**Realistic Fiction/ Realism:** Laura Moss distinguishes between two types of realism. The first type “refers to the realistic documentation of a series of events that are part of a historical reality” where the “concentration is on the ‘realistic’ nature of the narrative as it attempts to approximate the ‘real’ or even copy reality” (Moss, *Infinity* 14). The second type “refers to the specific genre with its attendant, and varied, formal properties and literary history” and it is “concerned with the ‘process’ of fictional narration, or diegesis, as well as representation” (Moss, *Infinity* 14). This second type is concerned with celebrating, analyzing and being constrained by reality, instead of imitating or mirroring the real (Moss, *Infinity* 14-15). It is this second form, focusing on the restriction and celebration of reality, in which I am interested. It is in this sense that I use the terms realism and realistic fiction.

**Uniformity:** Frye defines uniformity as the concept “where everyone ‘belongs,’ uses the same clichés, thinks alike and behaves alike, produces a society which seems comfortable at first but is totally lacking in human dignity” (*Bush* vi). He states, “a sense of unity is the opposite of a sense of uniformity” (Frye, *Bush* vi).

**Unity:** According to Frye, “Real unity tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition, recognizes that it is man’s destiny to unite and not divide, and understands that creating

proletariats and scapegoats and second-class citizens is a mean and contemptible activity” (*Bush* vi). Unity “is the extra dimension that raises the sense of belonging into genuine human life” (Frye, *Bush* vi). Unity “is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling” (Frye, *Bush* ii).

**White Civility:** Daniel Coleman proposes that Canadians are in a trance of “White civility,” which is a “static and reified idea of civility, which has its foundations in White, British gentlemanliness” (“From Canadian” 26-27). Based on ideas of social Darwinism, White civility sees the Canadian White British race as the most advanced. Other groups are marginalized and considered in need of moral support and guidance because they are lower on this civil hierarchy. Note: see definitions entry for “Wry Civility.”

**Wry Civility:** As it is developed by Coleman, wry civility is “a reflexive mode of civility that works towards awareness of the contradictory, dynamic structures of civility itself in our ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive society” (“From Canadian” 36). Wry civility “emphasize[s] the paradoxical structure of civility itself” along with “the importance of a dynamic, ever-renewed alertness to this fundamental paradox of the repressive violence that haunts the borders and stratifies the layers of civility” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 36-37). Note: see definitions entry for “White Civility.”

**Young Adult (YA) Literature:** The 2009 Canadian Children’s Book Centre’s *Best Books* defines Young Adult fiction as books that are “[i]deal for Teens Ages 12-18” (21), and the Canadian Library Association Young Adult Book Award defines YA literature as books that appeal primarily to youth ages thirteen to eighteen. For the purposes of this study, I define YA literature as books that are intended to appeal to youth between the ages of twelve and eighteen. However, in an effort to look at the older end of the spectrum, I have chosen to exclude from my study of YA books those that are judged by the Canadian Children’s Book Centre to appeal primarily to youth ages twelve to fourteen.

## Selection of Primary Texts

I am interested in novels for older adolescents because I find many of these books introduce young adults to the major issues in adult society with honesty, directness, and intensity.

I selected my primary texts from a large sample pool of potential texts using specific criteria. All of the primary texts in my sample pool are works of realistic fiction written in English and originally published after 2000. Graphic novels, high interest/low vocabulary books,

and collections of short stories were not included. I based a great deal of my selection criteria on the reviews and bibliographic information provided by the Canadian Children's Book Centre. The Canadian Children's Book Centre publishes this information in its annual catalogue, *Our Choice*, which in 2008 was renamed *Best Books For Kids and Teens*. I compiled my preliminary sample pool of primary texts based on the books' documented age levels. I found these age levels by examining the *Our Choice/Best Books* catalogues from 2000-2009 for all of the titles that were given an Interest Level of at least 12 years of age. I found over 300 books. To minimize the amount of younger teen fiction, I excluded books where the Interest Level age ended before age 15 (i.e. books with the recommended age range 12-14 were not included). This narrowed my sample pool down to 298 texts. To condense the sample pool to reflect literary quality and strong professional recommendations, I further limited my selection to those works of realistic fiction that received starred reviews in the *Our Choice* and *Best Books* catalogues. In doing so, my sample pool was reduced to 61 texts.

As a further indicator of each book's recognition in the publishing, library, and education communities, I refined the sample pool to books that were also short-listed for the Canadian Library Association (CLA) Young Adult Book of the Year Award. Despite contacting the committees involved, I was unable to locate the shortlist for the years 2000 and 2001. Hence, I read each of the works of realistic fiction published in 2000 or 2001, given starred reviews and the appropriate Interest Levels in the *Our Choice* and *Best Books* catalogues. Since the *Our Choice/Best Books* catalogues may not review a book until a few years after its publication, I examined the 2000 to 2009 catalogues looking for texts that fit my criteria and were published in 2000 or 2001. I now had a total of 30 books in my sample pool. I read each of these books and made notes regarding the age of the implied reader and any occurrences of dark or difficult content. From these thirty books, I determined to choose primary texts that seemed directed to an older adolescent reader due to their "gritty" or difficult content and their depictions of disillusionment and isolation. I was searching for books that conveyed a dark, emotionally intense portrayal of society and characters. I was also interested in texts that emphasized themes of emotional survival, alienation, and victimization. I chose books by Canadian authors, and did not limit the books to Canadian-only settings.

In my sample pool, I included works of historical fiction under the heading of contemporary realistic Young Adult fiction. While some literary critics consider historical fiction and realistic fiction to be separate genres, I disagree with this division. I have based my decision on the arguments proposed by M.H. Abrams, who considers historical novels to be a part of

realistic fiction. He states, “The realistic novel is characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of *realism*, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience” (Abrams 192; emphasis in orig.). According to Abrams, historical fiction is defined when “realistic novels make use of events and personages from the historical past to add interest and picturesqueness to the narrative” (Abrams 193). A historical setting in a contemporary novel does not impede its relevance to contemporary culture. The current belief among some literary scholars is that “historical fiction could be regarded as proposals for understanding the present” (Watkins 52). Indeed, Evans believes that contemporary works of historical fiction in Canada “are not historical novels in the sense that their main purpose is to re-create a past world through the exercise of the fictional imagination; rather, they are novels which find it easiest to address present-day concerns by putting them in a past context” (Evans qtd. in Watkins 52). Hence, I determined that a novel in my sample pool was contemporary based on its date of publication, rather than the time period in which it was set.

I found many books from the sample pool fit my criteria and, to varying degrees, dealt with the themes I had chosen to explore. I narrowed the number of potential titles once more by choosing the 10 primary texts that I believed were the darkest and the most emotionally intense. Finally, I arrived at my final four primary texts by choosing two books for each of the two critical lenses of my research: false myths and wry civility. For each pair of books, I took into account the gender of the protagonists and ensured there was an even balance of male and female protagonists.

As previously stated, my sample pool of contemporary realistic YA fiction, based on starred reviews in *Our Choice/Best Books*, Interest Level recommendations, and award nominations, contained 30 titles. The two texts from that sample pool which I felt best highlighted the difficulty of forming an identity (personal or social) based on false myths were *The Lottery* (2002) by Beth Goobie and *The Space Between* (2007) by Don Aker. The two works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction that best reflected wry civility’s tensions between unity and uniformity were *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005) by Shyam Selvadurai and *The Beckoners* (2004) by Carrie Mac. Of the four primary texts, only *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* could be considered historical fiction. It is set in 1980. The two books with female protagonists, *The Lottery* and *The Beckoners*, are set entirely in Canada, while of the two novels with male protagonists, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *The Space Between*, are set in Sri Lanka and Mexico/Nova Scotia respectively. For a complete list of the 30 titles that were

considered, and from which the primary texts were chosen based on the implied older adolescent reader and their relevance to the themes and critical lenses considered in this study, see the Appendix.

## **The Critical Framework**

I have chosen to interrogate my primary texts using a critical framework that explores two separate critical lenses regarding Canadian culture: false myths and wry civility. Under the lens of false myths, I focus on the belief that an individual or society will struggle to develop its authentic self as long as its identity is founded on false myths. This theme draws heavily on ideas of authenticity and inauthenticity. When I refer to the lens of wry civility, I am studying the values that denote belonging in Canadian culture. This concept places the emphasis on social belonging and appropriate behaviour for citizenry. Wry civility, and the opposing concept of White civility, are heavily influenced by the tensions between uniformity and unity.

In my analysis, I have divided my four primary texts for viewing through one of two critical lenses. Two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult (YA) fiction (one with a male protagonist and one with a female) are examined under each critical lens. Furthermore, for each pairing of primary texts, I also look at the books' relationships to overlapping themes found in dark-themed YA fiction.

I have paired my Canadian critical framework with two prominent themes in YA fiction: disillusionment and isolation. When discussing disillusionment, I am considering the spiritual crisis that often occurs during adolescence when the subject's understanding of his or herself and society, as formed in childhood, is challenged. I investigate how disillusionment, as a theme in YA literature, may relate to Canadian theories that describe the importance of confronting false myths, and the relationship between authentic and inauthentic definitions of identity. I have paired the second theme from YA literature—extreme isolation—with Canadian theories regarding wry civility and its association with White civility, uniformity, and unity.

## **The Structure of the Analysis**

I have grouped my analysis of each pair of primary texts into a separate chapter. In each chapter, I engage in a close reading that explores how the books' themes relate to the trends in Young Adult (YA) dark-themed books published in the United States and apply the Canadian theories to study the texts' relationships with Canadian culture.

Chapters 4 and 5 are structured into three major areas of analysis. In each chapter, I begin by identifying the theme from YA fiction that I will be analyzing and the ways in which that theme occurs in the two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction. Secondly, I compare how my primary texts have approached this theme with how the theme is associated with characteristics of dark-themed American YA publishing. Thirdly, I analyze the theme through the critical lens provided by contemporary Canadian theories.

In Chapter 4, employing this critical framework means that I begin by identifying the theme of disillusionment in *The Space Between* and *The Lottery*. I then explore how their use of this theme relates to the characteristics of the dark-themed books in American YA publishing. Then, I examine how the application of this theme in *The Space Between* and *The Lottery* relates to John Ralston Saul's contemporary Canadian theory on the importance of addressing false myths in the search for the authentic self. I use Dennis Lee's earlier work regarding authentic Canadian cultural production to explore how Saul's theory on false myths and its association with the theme of disillusionment in contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction may be connected to ongoing issues in Canadian culture and literature.

In Chapter 5, I begin by identifying how each book contains the common Young Adult theme of social isolation. I explore how this theme is integral to *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *The Beckoners*. I then analyze how this theme relates to the predominance of intense social exclusion and the treatment of the abject that characterize many of the Young Adult books published in the United States. I further examine the occurrence of this theme in each primary text to see how it may reflect Canadian cultural and literary theories. I look at Daniel Coleman's contemporary formulation of wry and White civilities, and analyze how the exploration of isolation in these novels may be interpreted as engaging with questions relating to how we define belonging as Canadians. Finally, I examine how the ideas and questions raised in the texts' treatments of isolation and in Coleman's theory of wry civility may be related to Northrop Frye's pioneering critical work on the issues of unity and uniformity in Canadian society.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have provided definitions for terms and concepts that are important to this study. I have described the process I undertook for the selection of my primary texts, and set out my critical framework. By examining my primary texts using the critical framework I have described in this chapter, I can investigate how dark themes from Young Adult literature are manifested in these examples of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction. I have

established a methodology that enables me to apply the theories of false myths and wry civility as critical lenses to interrogate how Canadian theories may interpret the thematic emphasis on disillusionment and isolation in contemporary realistic YA fiction. In summary, my analysis will consider how the presence of these themes in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction relates to both the American Young Adult fiction and authentic traditions in the Canadian literary canon. In the next chapter, “Chapter 4: Disillusionment and Confronting False Myths in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*,” I look at the theme of disillusionment and apply the critical lens of false myths to analyze my first pair of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels.

## Chapter 4: Disillusionment and Confronting False Myths in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*

In this chapter, I analyze two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult (YA) fiction: *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie and *The Space Between* by Don Aker. I conduct a close reading of the texts. I begin by investigating three significant ways that the theme of disillusionment is constructed in the two books: 1) when the adolescents are confronted by their own unacknowledged flaws, 2) when the adolescents realize that there are festering systems of oppression in their society that they are powerless to overturn alone, 3) when the adolescents realize that they are not responsible for another person's suicide and that their guilt regarding the event is unfounded.

After identifying how the theme of disillusionment is constructed in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*, I look at the relationship between this construction and the characteristics of dark-themed American YA fiction. Specifically, I focus on the protagonists' growing self-awareness, the ambiguous endings, and the treatment of violence.

In the final section of this chapter, I apply my Canadian critical lens as I examine how the occurrences of disillusionment in the two works may relate to John Ralston Saul's theory of false myths, which in turn draws from Dennis Lee's discussion of authenticity and inauthenticity. In particular, I focus on how the disillusionment that occurs when the adolescents realize their own unacknowledged flaws relates to the notion that Canadian society must confront the false myths regarding its own identity in order to develop authentically. Using the theory that Canadians are stunting their growth by allowing elites and European ideals to obscure their authentic reality, I reexamine the systems of oppression that the adolescent protagonists find themselves unable to change.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I investigate the responsibilities of the collective and the individual in the tragedy that leads to a character attempting suicide, applying Saul's concept of how the false myths of liberalism obscure the egalitarianism and diversity that form the authentic core of Canadian society.

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<sup>2</sup> Positioning European ideals as antithetical to Canadian ideals is a problematic construct. While Saul does distinguish between the two, he also notes that French and English cultures are two of the three pillars upon which Canadian civilization was built (24). Consequently, European ideals have undoubtedly influenced Canadian ideals (24). It is when European ideals are in direct conflict with Aboriginal-inspired ideals of peace and fairness in Canadian culture that they become detrimental to our authenticity and destabilize our society (xi-xii).



As I have stated in my definition of disillusionment found in Chapter 3, my use of this term reflects the concept of “undeceiving.” While disillusionment often has negative connotations that imply it is a negative reality masked by a positive illusion, I am not confining my use of this term to this interpretation. I use the term disillusionment to refer to the resulting psychological state following the protagonists’ uncovering of a significant deception in their understanding of themselves and their reality. In my analysis of disillusionment, I examine instances when the protagonists realize significant illusions or deceptions have misguided their understanding of themselves and reality. This inevitably leads to a spiritual crisis, regardless of whether or not the truth the protagonists uncover is positive or negative, because the very act challenges the reliability of the adolescents’ interpretation of reality. Furthermore, when the deception is significant, the adolescents are confronted with the repercussions of their former acceptance of the illusion. Hence, as I use the term disillusionment, I am encompassing both the instances when protagonists realize that positive illusions have obscured the harsh reality, and examples when the protagonists realize they have deceived themselves by believing a negative illusion.

### **Disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between***

In *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*, the theme of disillusionment is constructed throughout the protagonists’ internal journey towards emotional maturity and their growing understanding of the reality of their lives and society. In these two works, this theme is constructed over various events, three of which show noticeable similarities. It is these three prominent areas in which disillusionment appears that I will interrogate. First, disillusionment occurs when the adolescents realize aspects of themselves they had previously refused to acknowledge: that they have played important roles in supporting what they now realize are horrific systems of oppression. Secondly, the adolescents face disillusionment as they realize that the system of oppression is difficult, if not impossible, to change or end without the participation of the entire community in which it has become entrenched. Finally, the adolescents are disillusioned as they realize that their actions were not responsible for the suicide of a family member, and that the guilt they have experienced since the tragedy was unwarranted.

### **The Adolescents’ Discovery of Flaws**

As a theme in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*, the protagonists experience disillusionment when they are confronted with their own previously unacknowledged flaws,

namely, their participation in supporting a system of oppression. In *The Lottery*, the most striking moment occurs when Sal realizes that her compliance with Shadow Council's authority and the lottery supports the system of oppression. In *The Space Between* this arises through Jace's relationship with Conner when he realizes his assumptions about people reflect internalized gender stereotypes and prejudices.

In *The Lottery*, Sal becomes disillusioned when she realizes that by refusing to stand against Shadow Council, she has actually supported its system of oppression. Prior to being chosen as the lottery victim, Sal had obeyed Shadow Council's dominance, where the "Lottery winners became lepers, social outcasts" (Goobie 9). Once Sal herself is chosen as the lottery victim, she realizes that the system is unfair and initially protests her mistreatment (45). However, "[k]nowing descended upon [Sal]" when Willis, the Shadow Council president, asks if she has ever talked to Jenny Weaver, the victim the previous year (45). Sal remembers her reaction when Jenny made eye contact with her: Jenny was "desperately sure of herself, resolutely carrying a flag for the possibilities of human nature – and . . . [Sal's] own gaze had dribbled away, leaving the lottery winner to stumble on to the next pair of eyes" (49).

Willis forces Sal to confront the nature of the system, saying, "Everyone cooperates. Everyone wants a victim, Sally – even you. So how can you complain? Did you protest when it was someone else? No, you watched, you enjoyed, and now it's your turn. Now you're Shadow's victim" (45). Disillusioned, Sal realizes her own complacency in Shadow Council's system of abuse and wonders "after the way she herself had treated Jenny Weaver last year, did she have the right to say anything to anyone else?" (72). Sal mistakenly resigns herself to the punishment of being the lottery victim, as part of "[a] system in which everyone played a part. And that part . . . was defined by the people around you. In a system, you didn't think or choose, you just tried to fit in" (252-253).

As Sal takes on the role of the victim, she still finds that "[s]omewhere deep within, a calm voice kept repeating, *You don't deserve this*" (72; emphasis in orig.). Eventually, Sal realizes the best way to stand against Shadow Council's abuse is to refuse to continue to support the system by performing the role of victim. Sal realizes she must reject the lottery, and her victim position, even if this means she is at the bottom rung of the social ladder. Luckily, by the time Sal reaches this decision, there are two other students, Brydan and Tauni, who will also stand against the lottery and be her allies. Thus Sal's disillusionment with her own role in the victimization of the lottery winner and the Shadow Council system compels her first to accept her role as the victim, and later to reject all compliance with Shadow Council.

In *The Space Between*, Jace is also disillusioned when he realizes that he has internalized norms regarding gender and sexuality, which function as a system of oppression. This is primarily uncovered through Jace's relationship with Conner.

Initially, Jace dislikes Conner because of his reputation as a star hockey player and his loud, cocky attitude. Before speaking with Conner, Jace has dismissed him as "[a] world-class athlete, . . . And, apparently, a world-class asshole" (Aker 6). Having already judged Conner, Jace rudely rebuffs all of Conner's attempts at friendship. For instance, when Conner offers to help him retrieve his lost notebook, Jace does not even turn around, thinking, "The smirk I imagine on that jerk's face probably pales beside the real thing. I just shrug and keep walking. *Asshole!*" (56; emphasis in orig.). Jace begins to acknowledge he may have misjudged Conner after the two sit together during a day trip to Mayan ruins and realize they have a shared passion for history. Jace admits, "It's weird how people can totally surprise you" (72). Jace reflects that, "I could really hate the guy if he hadn't turned out to be so decent. It's like he's this completely different person, so *not* the asshole I saw at the airport. He can still be a jerk when he's drinking, but there aren't many people I know . . . who would have gotten down on their knees and dug in the sand with my little brother" (105; emphasis in orig.).

Jace's relationship with Conner is hampered by Jace's insecurities regarding his own male identity. He is constantly comparing himself to Conner's physique and falling short. When Jace looks at Conner, "he appears seven feet tall, and he's got the kind of abs you see on the covers of fitness magazines. I'm in pretty good shape, but this guy's got a six pack you could scrub clothes on" (47). Comparing himself to Conner's sex appeal, his massive muscular body and athletic prowess, Jace becomes defensive. For example, when Conner asks if Jace's notebook is a diary, Jace inwardly replies, "Leave it to Tony Testosterone to assume I keep a diary. When I'm not baking cookies and bottling jam" (67). Jace clearly has stereotypical gender ideas of masculinity, and feels defensive that some aspects of his identity do not fit with those ideas. While some YA fiction explores homophobia and its relationship to homoeroticism, I believe Aker intends Jace's responses to the binary of masculinity and homosexuality to be understood as clearly homophobic, and without elements of homoeroticism.

When Conner tells Jace that he is gay, Jace's internalized ideas regarding gender norms are challenged. Jace is shocked because he finds it difficult to imagine someone as masculine as Conner could be homosexual. Jace's experience with homosexuals shows he considers himself to be fairly open-minded; after all, he doesn't mind serving the "two aging queens" who frequent

his parents' restaurant (137).<sup>3</sup> But when Conner says he is homosexual, Jace thinks, "I find it impossible to believe he could like guys the way I like girls" (209). Jace's reason for this belief is "I can't understand how someone that testosterone-driven doesn't like sex with women" (209).

Conner has forced Jace to acknowledge some of the unexamined stereotypes he has internalized. Jace realizes he has had a prejudiced view of the world around him and notes, "I'm suddenly struck by how much we miss, how much happens around us without our knowledge. And by how much unfolds inside us without our ever knowing it's there" (220). Hence, in his relationship with Conner, Jace is confronted with his own tendency to misjudge others based partially on his own insecurities, as well as his own stereotypical homophobic thinking. The tragic consequences of individuals and society perpetuating this type of gender myth are later explored when Jace learns about the circumstances surrounding Stefan's suicide.

### **The Adolescents' Realization That They Are Unable to End Systems of Oppression Alone**

The second way in which disillusionment is manifested in *The Space Between* and *The Lottery* occurs when the protagonists realize that, acting alone, they are powerless to end the systems of oppression in their society. For Jace, this occurs upon his realization that his stereotypical notions of homosexuality and masculinity have supported exclusive ideas of gender norms that are unjust and do not reflect reality. For Sal, this takes place when she realizes she cannot stop the injustice of Shadow Council by herself.

In *The Space Between*, Jace becomes disillusioned when he realizes the oppressive grip that gender norms have on his society, which is most striking in the oppression of homosexuals in professional sports. Once Jace learns that Conner's happy, partying, womanizing persona is a mask to cover the alcoholism and depression that stem from his repressed sexuality, Jace naively assumes that there is an obvious solution to Conner's problems. Jace tells Conner, "you can't spend the rest of your life worrying about people finding out. You need to deal with this. It's not going away" (Aker 205). Conner quickly points out the problems with Jace's naive solution. Conner is an excellent hockey player, who is well on his way to achieving his dream of playing in the NHL. Conner asks Jace, "You ever heard of fan clubs for homo hockey players? People lining up to see fags on the offensive line?" (206). Optimistically, Jace tries to believe it's just a

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<sup>3</sup> Jace's use of hateful speech to demonstrate his tolerance may be questioned as to whether it reinforces homophobic notions. However, as the hateful speech is clearly ironic, based on Jace's growing realization of his own stereotypical thinking, this dissonance is used to provoke critical reflection in readers.

matter of courage and precedent, responding, “Maybe you’ll be the first” (206). But Jace immediately realizes that “even as I say these words, I don’t believe them” (206).

In a discussion about openly homosexual professional athletes, Conner exposes both the lack of popular homosexual athletes, and the ostracized men who had been brave enough to be open about their homosexuality. “Now I get it,” thinks Jace (206). He understands the implications of homophobic stereotyping, which position masculinity and homosexuality as mutually exclusive qualities. Within the constraints of contemporary society, Conner cannot easily live as an openly gay man and be a professional hockey player. Jace writes, “I remember what he said last night during his crying jag: *Never thought my life would turn out like this*. Only now do I think I understand what he meant” (206; emphasis in orig.).

Prior to meeting Conner, Jace was aware of homophobia in his Canadian society. For example, Jace knows his father’s motto, “Live and let live,” is good business practice in the dining area of his restaurant, the Parthenon (137). But once he is in his restaurant’s kitchen, “Pop isn’t so liberal-minded, his pasted-on smile evaporates the minute the door closes behind him” (137). Jace notes, “Pop doesn’t use the word ‘faggot,’ he doesn’t need to. He says it with his eyes” (137). Jace feels he is more open-minded than his father, until he recognizes his notions of homosexuality that make it difficult for him to accept individuals when they do not fit his internalized stereotypes. This is seen in Jace’s reaction when Conner asks, “Do *I* look gay to *you*?” (194; emphasis in orig.). Jace narrates, “I shake my head, thinking of those two old queens at the Parthenon,” and he tells Conner, “There was this guy in one of my classes last year. . . . Definitely gay. A real flamer. *That* guy I could tell. But not you” (194; emphasis in orig.). Conner tells Jace about the homophobic attitudes of his teammates, who have said, “queers were sick, [and] that anyone who’d choose to be gay *deserved* a good bashing now and then,” and about Conner’s father, who believes homosexuals are “Nothin’ but perverts and child molesters” (195-196; emphasis in orig.). Jace realizes that his support for Conner cannot fix his friend’s dilemma; the society that oppresses him with its ideas of the masculine athletic heterosexual hero cannot be easily changed without challenging the core of the culture’s construction of gender norms.

Jace is shown realizing his inability to find a solution for Conner’s difficulties that will allow him to be both open about his sexuality, and have the career he wants and maintain his relationships with friends and family members. He realizes that Conner needs his support, “You need someone to talk to, Conner. That’s why you’re here. You need someone to know what you are. *Who* you are” (232; emphasis in orig.). Jace also realizes that Conner’s fear of being open

about his sexuality is something Jace cannot fix. Jace thinks, “I don’t know why I’m continually surprised that so much of what’s important in our lives we need to do alone. I used to think when I turned eighteen that I’d understand everything. No such luck” (237). Conner needs to accept the difficulties he will face being open about his sexuality. Jace and Conner cannot force society to reject its oppressive view about manliness and homosexuality; by being open about it, perhaps they could promote change but at a great deal of expense to Conner. When Jace suggests that Conner should let a reporter write his story because “[m]aybe it would help somebody,” Conner responds negatively, saying, “Like a public service announcement, right? No thanks. I got enough problems living my own life. Let everyone else worry about theirs” (179). Conner has decided not to publicize the inauthentic categories of the masculine athletic hero that function as a system of oppression because he cannot be open about his sexuality and retain the close relationships that are important to him and his dream of being a typical professional athlete.

When Jace sees Conner continuing to pretend he is heterosexual, he thinks of the lyrics of a Leah Delaney song, “*There are stories in our silences / The things that don’t get said / speak louder than we ever dream they can / They echo through the space between / the place I long to be / and this never-ending empty where I am*” (169; emphasis in orig.). Jace thinks, “After the last eleven months, I can’t imagine anything harder than choosing to live with those silences” (243). However, while Jace may disagree with Conner’s decision to remain closeted, he understands his motives and realizes that under the current oppressive ideas of gender and sexuality norms, Conner cannot have the “normal” career of a professional athlete and be open about his sexuality.

In *The Lottery*, Sal experiences disillusionment at her inability to individually dismantle Shadow Council’s oppressive rule. Although Sal decides to risk being ignored, tormented, and isolated for the rest of her high school career by rejecting Shadow Council’s ability to define her as its victim, she cannot force her new attitude on the rest of the school. Sal quickly realizes that everyone in the school plays a part in keeping Shadow Council in power and supporting its mistreatment of students.

Sal comes to understand that a mentality of fear is fueling the lottery, thinking, “There was so much strength in numbers. Who would risk stepping outside the safety of a crowd the size of the S.C. student body to stand beside a single fated lottery victim?” (Goobie 97). She realizes that Shadow Council is a symbol supported by the students it rules because it functions to define their roles. With Shadow Council in power, every student but the victim gets the “relative social security, the guarantee that for now, at least, you weren’t on the bottom rung, that for one school

year you got to step on someone else's fingers because destiny had selected her name instead of yours" (97).

When Sal realizes that even her closest friends are too afraid to risk the wrath of Shadow Council by maintaining their friendship with her once she is chosen as the victim, she is overwhelmed with disillusionment. This is clear in the imagery of the passage where the "air peeled back on itself . . . , tearing away the surface reality Sal had always known and leaving her with something entirely different. Everything still looked the same, the surface appeared intact, but she knew it was gone, completely gone" (68-69). Sal's disillusionment leaves her with "a world of strangers who looked like friends – friends she used to believe in" (68-69). This image of peeling away the surface reoccurs as Sal's disillusionment remains "constantly" with her, like "a pale sick feeling that clung like a half-peeled skin," which "attached to her like a phantom understanding, the kind that told her things about people she didn't want to know" (152). Sal is clearly troubled by this new harsh reality as she realizes that the fear of being outcast has overturned past bonds of friendship and respect for the victim's humanity.

As Sal thinks critically, she realizes the extent to which Shadow Council and its victim are part of a system that is supported by the entire student body. This altered understanding is expressed as she thinks, "Last year she'd been aware of Shadow Council's reach – who wasn't – but only as an ugly kind of vibe, vague and undefinable. The closer she looked, the more tangled its tentacles became, and they were everywhere" (110). Like Sal, the students support Shadow Council by simply refusing to think critically about the system and choosing to live under its control. Sal realizes that "everyone at S.C. is living both sides of the same coin," because "[w]e all support Shadow, run off and stomp on some victim whenever they tell us to. At the same time, we're all victims-in-waiting, and any one of us could become the next target" (184).

Once Sal realizes the horrific extent of Shadow Council's abusive system, she is forced to acknowledge the possibility that students both want and accept the system, as she had the year before. She realizes that, alone, she is powerless to stop or change the system, because "You couldn't make choices for other people – wasn't that how a democracy worked?" (107). Sal's horrible realization that Shadow Council is only in power because the students give it their support is confirmed by her older brother Dusty's experiences. Dusty tells Sal that he "gave Shadow some flack" while he was at Saskatoon Collegiate, but he says it "[d]idn't last long, there wasn't any point to it. No one else gave a damn. I couldn't believe the way everyone seemed to get off on obeying them. . . . What's the point if you're the only one? Can't be a revolution on your own" (183). Hence, Sal comes to realize that the majority of students may

desire this system of oppression, and without their support she could never bring down the council.

However, as Sal realizes that she cannot force the student body to change its minds about supporting the council, she also comprehends that as long as she sees herself as the victim, she is still supporting the system. She rejects the Shadow Council's authority over her, exposing them as cowards, distributing their secret codes to the student body, and refusing the tasks they assign her. Sal's disillusionment has forced her to acknowledge "[f]or the rest of her life, people would be trying to define her, close her in with their thoughts and expectations. But . . . it was *her* perspective that mattered the most. Ultimately, it was her own fear or desire that would lock her in or allow her to open to the utter possibility of herself" (253; emphasis in orig.). At the same time, when the vast majority of the students continue to ignore her existence, she faces the possibility that "[j]ust because she'd stepped into another place inside her own head didn't mean everyone else saw things from her new perspective" (255). With the understanding that there is nothing she can do to change their perspectives, she resigns herself to being a social outcast in exchange for privileging her own authentic identity over the role assigned to her.

Although Sal cannot force change, her acts of rebellion impact other students (221). This occurs in the epilogue, when Sal is wordlessly reincorporated into the classroom note-passing network. Sal realizes, "The wall was alive. It could think, breathe, learn. Brick by brick, it could change and choose, just as she'd changed and chosen" (264). The wall is a metaphor for the school's student body. While Sal has become disillusioned about the integrity of her friendships, the student body's complacency with Shadow Council's system, and her own ability to dismantle the system by herself, she also witnesses how her own public resistance to the Shadow Council may challenge other students to think critically about the council's system of oppression, and that some students may change their patterns of obedience.

### **The Adolescents' Realization That They Are Not Responsible for Another Person's Suicide**

The third way in which disillusionment manifests in these two novels occurs when the protagonists realize they are not ultimately responsible for the suicide of another person. The adolescents must realize that their actions and behaviour towards the person who has taken his own life are not as significant as they believed and had no bearing on the suicide. In *The Lottery*, Sal is haunted by her guilt after speaking harshly to her father immediately before he drove his



car into a tree. In *The Space Between*, Jace is under the illusion that he is responsible for his brother's suicide because he knew something was wrong but did nothing about it.

Sal's guilt over her father's suicide and her sadly egotistical belief that her words led him to kill himself, has left a lasting impact on her opinion of herself. When Sal was eight years old, her father intentionally drove his car into a tree while Sal was a passenger. The accident "ingrained itself deep into her consciousness where it lurked, hidden and waiting" (28). Before her father hit the tree, Sal had yelled, "*I hate you, I hate you*" (232; emphasis in orig.). Those words "controlled her life . . . causing such tremendous guilt she'd blocked them entirely from her memory. Only the guilt had remained, vague and undefined, affecting every aspect of her life" (232-233). Sal believed she had killed her father and is terrified of people discovering this secret (232).

The emotional stress of being the lottery victim causes Sal to recall the moments before her father's death, and she believes "she finally understood what happened" (227). Sal tells Dusty, "It was my fault, . . . I killed my daddy, I killed him" (227). Dusty has additional information about their father's death that helps ease Sal's sense of guilt. He tells her that their dad was an alcoholic, and he "was drunk when he killed himself" (228). Dusty also reveals their father had financial problems and their parents' marriage was in trouble (228-229). Unbeknownst to Sal, their father had left a suicide note indicating that he had planned on killing himself long before his conversation with Sal in the car (229). Dusty tells Sal, "it was *his* decision to make. You were just a kid – you didn't control him" (230). Sal comes to the harsh realization that she has punished herself for years when she was not actually responsible for her father's death. This revelation cleanses Sal of the guilt she has carried for years and provides her with a deep relief.

Sal is changed by this revelation: "Her entire body felt different, no longer the prison of guilt it had been" (232-233). When Sal realizes she is not responsible for her father's actions, the blame she had been shouldering for years dissolves, as "[t]he inner wall had crumbled, and she was no longer staggering under seven years of inexplicable guilt. She didn't have to feel unworthy" (237). Sal realizes she had falsely taken on the role of her father's murderer and must let it go. She realizes her mistake, in that "[s]he needed to be more than what happened to her. She wanted to be made up of her own choosing" (230). Hence, when Sal confronts the difficult truth—that her father was a troubled man and her actions did not trigger his suicide—she is freed to define herself in her own terms.

In *The Space Between*, Jace suffers from misplaced guilt regarding his responsibility for Stefan's suicide. Jace believes that, as his brother, he should have known Stefan was deeply troubled. He is haunted by Stefan's voice, which he imagines inside his head, saying, "*How does a guy get to the point of killing himself without his own brother knowing something is wrong?*" (Aker 151; emphasis in orig.). Jace's struggle with his guilt is clear as he reflects on the suicide, "I didn't see *that* coming . . . I *should* have, though. Despite the fact that no one else did. I was his brother. I *should* have seen it coming. And now, my own private Everest: I *did*. Not what it led to, not that. But I knew something wasn't right. I knew. And I didn't say anything. Didn't know *what* to say. Like always" (109; emphasis in orig.).

Jace believes he knew Stefan was suicidal because on the eve of his death, Stefan had given Jace his hockey equipment, saying, "Someone might as well use this stuff. I won't be needing it any more" (227). Jace recalls seeing a "*finality*" in Stefan that made him "uncomfortable" (227; emphasis in orig.). Although Stefan was an excellent hockey player, Jace did not play the sport. Jace "knew there was something wrong" and he tells his mother "I should have said something. Done something. But I didn't" (228). Although, in hindsight, Jace could have responded to his sense that something was wrong, he could not have imagined that Stefan intended to commit suicide (116-117).

Like Sal, Jace is terrified that people will discover what he perceives to be his responsibility in Stefan's suicide. Likewise, by being ruled by this fear, Jace has unnecessarily harmed himself. Through his conversations with Conner about leading a false life, Jace finally understands that he needs to be open about what occurred before Stefan died. When Jace tells Conner "*You can't spend the rest of your life worrying about people finding out. You need to deal with this. It's not going away,*" he realizes, "It's only now that I understand who I was really saying this to" (224; emphasis in orig.). Jace tells himself to be truthful about his role in his brother's death.

When Jace admits his guilt to his mother, she shocks him by offering him a glimpse into the issues that were troubling Stefan, issues of which Jace was completely ignorant. Jace's mother allows Jace to transfer the blame he has placed on himself by explaining a much more significant and obvious way that she was responsible for what happened, saying, "You didn't know. . . . But I did" (228). Jace's mother tells him that Stefan spoke with her before that night and revealed he was gay. She reacted poorly, telling Stefan "You should be ashamed for saying such a thing to me," and dismissing his feelings saying, "You're confused. Overtired. . . . It *will* go away. You need to forget about it. Erase it from your mind" (238-239; emphasis in orig.).

Unlike his conversation with Jace, Stefan openly tells his mother “not a day goes by when I don’t wish I was dead” (239). Hearing what Stefan told their mother helps Jace understand that he was not responsible for Stefan’s suicide; Stefan had “already made his decision, . . . there was nothing I could have said that would have stopped him from putting that gun to his mouth” (241). Jace must also realize that he is the only one to blame for the unfounded guilt burdening him since Stefan’s death. He thinks, “It’s not easy admitting that the hell I’ve made out of my life is my own invention” (230). Hence, it can be concluded that after speaking with his mother, Jace becomes disillusioned as he realizes that he had no idea about the extent of Stefan’s depression and that he has burdened himself with a guilt that he did not deserve.

While Jace’s conversation with his mother allows him to accept that he is not to blame in Stefan’s death, it has not eradicated all blame for the tragedy. Instead, Jace has transferred the blame to another person. He has replaced his guilt by blaming his mother. When she tells Jace what happened, Jace writes, “I wanted to reach out to my mother, wanted to tell her what she needed me to say: that she wasn’t to blame for what happened . . . But I couldn’t. All I could think about was how much it must have cost Stefan to tell her his secret” (240-241). Although Jace now blames his mother, his anger is gone as he sees how much she suffers. This is clear when Jace considers his mother, who is “an arm’s length and a world away,” and he knows she is reliving the moment Stefan came to her, but “[a]ctually listening to him this time. And responding with all the things she now wishes she’d told him” as Jace had been doing for the past year (238, 240; emphasis in orig.). The anger and guilt Jace had been living with since the suicide dissolves and “[n]ow all [he] felt was loss” (245). Jace has come to accept that he is not to blame for Stefan’s suicide and that he had no idea about the issues that were burdening Stefan. Therefore, supported by his ability to transfer the blame to his mother, Jace is disillusioned to discover the burden of guilt he had felt for so long was unfounded.

Hence, in the two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult literature—*The Space Between* and *The Lottery*—the theme of disillusionment is constructed as the adolescent protagonists realize their own acquiescence to a system of oppression, their inability to end the oppression on their own, and their realization that they were not responsible for the suicide of another and the intense guilt they have felt over the suicide of a loved one was unfounded.

## **The Theme of Disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* in Relation to Contemporary Dark-Themed American Young Adult Fiction**

The three areas in which the theme of disillusionment is constructed in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* can be associated with trends occurring in contemporary dark-themed Young Adult (YA) fiction published in the United States. Firstly, the disillusionment that occurs when the protagonists realize their own unacknowledged flaws can be related to the emphasis on self-discovery found in the majority of the English-language YA fiction published worldwide. Secondly, when the adolescent protagonists in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* become disillusioned at their inability to end an injustice in their society, these works demonstrate the affinity for ambiguous endings found in dark-themed American YA fiction, where the issues are often left unresolved. Finally, when the trauma of a family member's suicide helps the adolescents come to a better understanding of themselves and the difficult world they live in, these two primary texts demonstrate an approach to graphic violence that is similar to its treatment in dark-themed American YA fiction.

### **The Importance of Self-Discovery**

In *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*, the emphasis on the adolescent protagonists' disillusionment as they confront their unacknowledged flaws is very similar to the theme of self-discovery that characterizes most YA fiction published in the United States and worldwide. In the two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction, this self-discovery occurs when Sal and Jace realize that they have contributed to the existence of systems of oppression through their unquestioning acceptance of these institutions. Sal and Jace confront their role in the systems of oppression, and uncover the fears and insecurities that motivated their acquiescence.

The adolescent protagonists' growing understanding of themselves and their role in society is a popular subject in YA fiction. As YA literature specialist Patty Campbell notes, "[t]he central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question 'Who am I and what am I going to do about it?'" (qtd. in Nilsen and Donelson 4). Campbell finds that "[n]o matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that helps shape an adult identity" (4).

In YA fiction, the task of self-discovery can vary in intensity and focus. For instance, YA fiction with a more positive tone often shows the adolescents learning uplifting things about

themselves in generally positive ways. On the other hand, dark-themed YA literature in the United States often has adolescents in difficult situations learning about themselves through their experiences. This darker approach to self-discovery seems to be the result of a desire to accurately represent the difficulties of growing up. According to Marc Aronson, dark-themed YA fiction is replete with stories that deal with the negative disillusionment adolescent protagonists encounter on their journey to self discovery because “[y]oung adults do not want ‘predigested morals and fake realities’” (qtd. in Bucher and Manning 101). The prevalence of disillusionment as a literary element in YA literature can be seen as a confirmation of Aronson’s belief that “realistic fiction must go beneath the surface to explore discontinuities, examine the subconscious, and investigate unsettling truths” (qtd. in Bucher and Manning 90).

Bucher and Manning agree with Aronson’s statement, arguing that adolescents want books “that will force them to confront their own beliefs, to identify their own messages in the story, and to grow in their own way” (Bucher and Manning 101). Hence, the disillusionment that is often catalyzed by the adolescent’s growing self-awareness is a recurring theme in dark-themed YA fiction because it comments on the life conditions of most adolescent readers and the daily realities they face. This construction of adolescence is somewhat problematic, as it contains underlying assumptions as to the degree and the inevitability of the “darkness” adolescents face in their daily lives. However, North American adolescents who may not face the horrors of abuse, violence, isolation, and victimization, are undoubtedly aware of its presence elsewhere in their society.

As the investigation into the themes of disillusionment at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, both the adolescent protagonists in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* are tackling Campbell’s central question, “Who am I and what am I going to do about it” in difficult ways (qtd. in Nilsen and Donelson 4). In *The Lottery*, this occurs as Sal realizes her role as both victim and victimizer in the Shadow Council system. In the novel’s final climactic moments, Sal decides to end her involvement with the Shadow Council system by wholly rejecting its authority to shape her identity (253). Jace struggles with Campbell’s identity question when he is forced to confront the stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality that he has internalized and normalized. With his new understanding regarding “how much it costs any of us to show others who we really are,” Jace decides to further examine his assumptions and to acknowledge the complexity in others that he once ignored (241). For instance, while returning to Halifax, Jace writes, “I thought of Alex Praeger and how he must have felt coming home from school each day to hear from his own family the same things that were snickered in the hallway” (241). This comment

shows a noticeable change in Jace's stereotypical thinking when it is contrasted with how Jace used to blame Alex for the discrimination he faced as an openly homosexual teenager, believing that "it certainly wouldn't hurt him to tone it down, make himself less flamboyant, less a target" (210). As he comes to understand the inauthenticity of relying on gender and sexuality stereotypes to define himself and the people around him, Jace opens to the possibility of experiencing the complexity of human beings beyond the categories in which they have been socially placed. Hence, it can easily be concluded that these two works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction share the emphasis of a difficult journey of self-discovery that characterizes dark-themed YA fiction in the United States.

It is not surprising that these two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction and dark-themed American YA fiction share an emphasis on the disillusionment that occurs with the adolescent's growing understanding of his or herself. The growing understanding of oneself is one of the primary features of adolescence and an important step in the movement out of childhood. This subject resonates with adolescents, thus making it a popular characteristic of YA fiction. Therefore, while *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* are similar to dark-themed American YA fiction in their focus on the adolescent protagonists' growing awareness of themselves, this commonality is not sufficiently unique to conclude that these works of Canadian YA fiction are actually following American YA trends.

### **Ambiguous Endings**

The preference for ambiguous endings, which is a common characteristic of dark-themed American YA fiction, is connected to the theme of disillusionment found in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*. This is evident in the ambiguous endings that are created in the two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction when the disillusioned adolescent protagonists realize that there are no easy remedies for the deep-rooted systems of oppression in their society and the problems explored in the novel are left unresolved.

According to Brown and Di Marzo, in dark-themed American YA fiction "the endings are ambiguous at best. There are no happy conclusions and, frequently, hope means little more than surviving dangerous circumstances" (120). This uncertainty is popular in realistic American YA fiction, as it "mirror[s] the real world and the moral and ethnical dilemmas that young people face" and "comment[s] on the human condition" (Bucher and Manning 89). These ambiguous endings, characterized by a lack of happy endings, and where survival is the greatest hope, can be seen in both *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*.

In *The Lottery*, an ambiguous ending is created as Sal realizes she cannot dismantle the Shadow Council system as long as the student body allows it to feed on their fear. Sal thinks, “It was simply easier to hate someone on the bottom rung than to take on the gods directly” and that “[a]s long as there was someone as tangible as a lottery victim to hate, Shadow Council could get away with anything. . . . the selection of another lottery victim would ensure that there was always someone to absorb the fear and hatred the . . . student body actually felt for Shadow Council” (253). Sal’s random acts of intelligence and her refusal to be the victim has not ended Shadow Council’s reign, as she knows they will pick a new victim (261). Sal thinks Shadow Council will leave her and her new allies, Brydan and Tauni, alone but the uncertainty of the ending is clear when Dusty asks if Shadow Council has punished Brydan for resuming their friendship and Sal replies, “[n]ot yet,” indicating the possibility of something happening in the future (260). Sal thinks Shadow Council will leave her alone, but the book concludes with ambiguous uncertainty.

Although Sal cannot dismantle Shadow Council alone, there is some hope that she may be able to convince other students to join in her rebellion. This is seen in the epilogue when Sal’s classmates acknowledge her existence by unceremoniously reintegrating her into the classroom note-passing network. Sal realizes, “They could change and choose, just as she’d changed and chosen” (Goobie 264). Through this event, Goobie is providing hope that, although Shadow Council has not been eliminated, Sal’s resistance has motivated the student body to reconsider their obedience. At the same time, the reader has no idea how Shadow Council will respond to this resistance or if it will last. While the ending is hopeful it is still open and ambiguous.

In *The Space Between* the ending is bleaker. The system of oppression that keeps Conner closeted is still in place, although Jace is no longer supporting it. Homophobia is still a problem in the society where stereotypes create a false binary between masculinity and homosexuality, and this attitude will complicate Conner’s ambitions of playing professional hockey. Conner is also inhibited by his fear of rejection from his homophobic father and friends. Furthermore, Conner is still depressed and has expressed suicidal thoughts (186). The reader is left with an uncomfortable feeling regarding the “tragically ironic” situation, where Conner’s story parallels Stefan’s in so many ways (242). With no obvious solution for Conner in sight, his depression and his fear of having his homosexuality exposed are extremely worrisome, and as the novel ends, Conner’s future is still extremely ambiguous, and with the parallel of Stefan’s suicide, threatening.

The persistent depiction of homosexual figures in *The Space Between* as individuals who are depressed, alienated, and abused by society is generally left unresolved and may be problematic in terms of its implied messages. The homosexual characters Stefan, Conner, and Alex, are all miserable and/or pitied because of their sexuality. The only happy homosexuals appear to be the “queens” from the restaurant and the lesbian couple Jace and Kate observe. However, Jace’s reaction to these homosexual characters denies them full-scale acceptance. Jace is surprised when the women kiss, stating, “I’ve seen lesbians before, but none of them as old as these two. I’m used to the lesbians that come into the Parthenon sometimes, the obvious ones, anyway—hair buzzed off, wearing baggy fatigues and army boots. Real butch” (136). Interestingly, the miserable, alienated, and isolated homosexual characters are all young and single, while those that appear content while continuing to face discrimination are “aging” or “elderly” and in relationships. There are no positive role models for queer youth, which again raises an important debate in YA literary criticism: is the YA author responsible for providing role models and hope to his or her reader?

Like the ambiguous endings in American Young Adult literature, the conclusions of *The Space Between* and *The Lottery* “suggest that the protagonist is only beginning to come to terms with the problem and that a difficult period of adjustment and/or recovery still lies ahead” (Fuoss 161). These ambiguous resolutions in dark-themed YA literature “imply that some problems cannot be overcome” (Trites, “Hope” 11). Hence, the disillusionment that occurs in these works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction when the protagonists realize “their inability to change [the] situation” (Trites, “Hope” 11), gives these novels the ambiguous endings that are characteristic of dark-themed American Young Adult literature.

### **The Role of Violence**

The third manner in which the construction of disillusionment in the two works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction may be associated with characteristics of dark-themed American YA fiction is in the treatment of violence. This is seen in the role violence plays in the adolescent protagonists’ disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* when they are forced to confront their guilt over the suicide of a family member.

According to Eliza Dresang, American Young Adult novels have long dealt with “[s]ociety’s ills . . . with books that focused on . . . suicide, and other family disruptions” (32). In terms of how suicide, as an element of plot, relates to characteristics of dark-themed American



YA fiction, what is most striking in these two works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction is not the presence of suicide, but rather the way this violence is dealt with in the novels.

In her investigation of radical change in children's literature, Dresang provides a detailed analysis of the treatment of violence in contemporary American YA literature. She lists various ways in which violence is characterized in what she refers to as "radically changed" YA literature. It is "(1) real-life rather than fantasy, or a combination of real life and fantasy; (2) presented with the focus more on the characters' reactions than on the act of violence itself; (3) a part of the character's home/immediate community if the story is realistic; (4) encountered without the character being 'naughty,' although in some cases the protagonist has broken societal rules" (184).

All of Dresang's characteristics of violence in contemporary dark-themed American YA fiction apply to the two works of Canadian YA fiction. *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* show violence that is very far removed from fantasy and presented as "real-life."<sup>4</sup> It is clear that in these books, Sal and Jace's reactions are much more the focus than the act of violence. The violence in the books is extremely close to home; Sal's father kills himself while driving the family car, and Jace's brother commits suicide in the family garage. Finally, the violence occurs "without the character being 'naughty'" (Dresang 184). This aspect of the portrayal of violence in the two books is very important, as the characters who are haunted by the violence mistakenly believe they have done something to cause the violence. Sal thinks she was bad or "naughty" when she told her father she hated him, and Jace sees a failure in his lack of response to his brother's abnormal behaviour. They come to accept that this guilt is misplaced. Hence, it can be concluded that in the treatment of violence, the two works of Canadian YA fiction seem to exhibit the same radical approach to violence as dark-themed American YA fiction because the focus is not on the violence itself, but rather the lasting effect of the violence on the life of the adolescent protagonist.

Overall, the manner in which *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* portray the theme of disillusionment shows connections to the characteristics of dark-themed American YA fiction. To determine if these two Canadian novels conform to the trends in dark-themed American YA fiction requires the same occurrences of disillusionment be examined under the Canadian critical lens of false myths. This will indicate whether or not the treatment of this theme in these books

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<sup>4</sup> This point raises the question as to whether this degree of violence realistically reflects the level of violence found in contemporary Canadian or North American society. While not all youth may experience violence, the coverage of violence they encounter everyday in the mass media makes incidences of violence appear common in their society and part of "real-life."

has more or less in common with Canadian theories than it does with the characteristics of American YA fiction.

## **Disillusionment and the Canadian Critical Lens of False Myths**

The construction of the theme of disillusionment in the two works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction—*The Lottery* and *The Space Between*—has been examined for its connections with the characteristics of dark-themed American YA fiction. However, in order to ascertain if the use of this theme in the two texts primarily follows American trends, the occurrences of disillusionment will be comparatively analyzed under the critical lens of Canadian cultural and literary theories. I use John Ralston Saul's theory of false myths, found in his book *A Fair Country*. Furthermore, to examine how false myths reflect a broader Canadian cultural tradition, I incorporate aspects of Dennis Lee's earlier theories on Canadian authenticity and inauthenticity, found in his article "Cadence, Country, Silence."

Employing the critical lens of false myths, I reexamine the three instances where the theme of disillusionment is constructed in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*. First, I look at the adolescents' realizations that they have been unintentionally supporting a system of oppression and compare this instance of disillusionment to the theory that Canadians are hiding their authentic identity behind false myths. Next, I examine the disillusionment that occurs when the protagonists realize the existence of powerful oppressive systems in their society. I investigate how this relates to the way Canadians have allowed themselves to be misled by incompetent elites and inauthentic imported mythologies. Finally, I reinterpret the disillusionment that occurs when the protagonists reconsider their guilt regarding another individual's suicide. I relate this shift in responsibility to the positive balance between the individual and the group, which is the foundation of the authentic Canadian understanding of egalitarianism.

## **The Debilitating Effect of False Myths**

In the investigation of *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* conducted earlier in this chapter, I demonstrate that both Sal and Jace are disillusioned when they realize their acquiescence to a system of oppression. For Sal, this occurs when she reflects on the group mentality and the climate of fear that fuels Shadow Council. For Jace, this takes place when he thinks critically about the gender stereotypes that have made homosexuality and masculinity mutually exclusive categories.

Sal and Jace have internalized false myths that have shaped their understanding of themselves. These myths need to be challenged in order for them to recognize their authentic identities. This reflects the theory of false myths, which proposes that “[a]t the core of [Canada’s] difficulties is our incapacity to accept who we are” (Saul xii). In Canadian society, false myths obscure the fact that we are a nation built on three pillars: British, French, and Aboriginal. While Aboriginal philosophy and worldview contributed a great deal to the values and beliefs that created the authentic Canadian culture, false myths have obscured this fact. As Saul states, “To insist on describing ourselves as something we are not is to embrace existential illiteracy. We are not a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. We never have been. . . . To accept and even believe such fundamental misrepresentations of Canada and Canadians is to sever our mythologies from our reality” (xi). According to Saul, Canadians need to face the false myths that have denied our Aboriginal inspiration in order to find our authentic identity: “We are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government. That is what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of Canadian mythology . . . If we can embrace a language that expresses that story, we will feel a great release” (xii). Sal and Jace’s stories echo this important critical reflection as the characters come to understand that they must confront the false myths which they have allowed to dictate their identity in order to recognize their authentic self. It is here that the theme of disillusionment is important. To embrace their authentic identity, the protagonists have to recognize that they have been guided by false myths and external ideas.

Sal’s story shows both the inauthenticity of allowing oneself to be ruled by false myths and the self-realization that comes from rejecting the myths. The core of *The Lottery* deals with Sal’s journey as she begins to understand how she has allowed “fundamental misrepresentations” about herself to “sever [her] mythologies from [her] reality” (Saul xi). This is first seen when she realizes how she has supported Shadow Council’s oppressive rule. Before she was the lottery victim, Sal had “mentally ducked the . . . details” of Shadow Council (2). When Sal becomes the victim she is confronted by her own participation in the system. Sal realizes that by ostracizing the lottery victim the year before, she has helped perpetuate the abuse. Sal begins to understand that “there was no one to point the finger at but herself” (97). As Sal begins to uncover the extent of the false myths surrounding the origins of Shadow Council’s power, she realizes her role as abuser and victim extends to the entire student body, where “*We* keep the whole thing going, we’re doing this to ourselves. Every year, the entire student body holds its breath until one kid gets chosen to be the symbol for what’s happening inside everyone else” (184; emphasis in

orig.). Ruled by the fear of being an outcast, each member of the student body is too afraid to confront the injustice and is willing to let Shadow Council dictate the conditions of his or her existence.

Sal must overcome her fear of determining her own identity and reject the roles assigned to her in order to realize her authentic identity. This is clear when Sal acknowledges, “She needed to be more than what happened to her. She wanted to be made up of her own choosing” (Goobie 230). This realization of her authentic self parallels Saul’s statement that “the ability of a civilization to survive and grow lies in its ability to describe itself” (21). Confronting the false myths that had previously dictated her existence, Sal becomes self-reflective. She “was finally realizing, it was *her* perspective that mattered the most. Ultimately, it was her own fear or desire that would lock her in or allow her to open to the utter possibility of herself” (253; emphasis in orig.). This mirrors the theory of false myths, which proposes that when Canadians reject false myths “[w]e will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel we are true to ourselves” (Saul xii).

In *The Space Between*, Jace’s deepening understanding of himself and his complacency with a system of oppression relates to false myths in a different way than in *The Lottery*. Instead of focusing on the moment of confronting false myths and the reconciliatory process of finding the authentic self, Jace’s realization that he has been supporting false myths in society is more important when viewed as a criticism of imaginative blockage caused by preserving false myths.

As Jace confronts how he has internalized false myths regarding gender norms, Aker seems to be using the process of disillusionment to delve into the difficulty of resisting the inauthentic myths. This is seen when Jace is unable to bring himself to completely reject the full implications of the false myth. Jace’s struggle to reject the false myths created by stereotypes and gender norms can be interpreted as an exploration of the difficulty of reintegrating an authentically “horizontal, inclusive approach to thought” into Canadian society (Saul 37). This approach would allow Canadians “to see what we have trained ourselves not to see” (Saul 37). However, adopting this approach is hindered by our “imaginative blockage,” which “is all about generations of tightly argued assumptions” (Saul 37). When Jace is disillusioned and recognizes his own stereotypical thinking, he reveals the “tightly argued assumptions” that have formed the basis of these myths and blocked him from imagining the true diversity of the people that inhabit his reality (Saul 37). At the same time, Jace cannot fully relinquish the myths and adopt the horizontal approach (Saul 37).

Jace recognizes that his reliance on norms and stereotypes is leading him to misinterpret reality, but he is not prepared to entirely forfeit these norms and stereotypes entirely. This is seen when Jace states, “I have zero trouble picturing [Conner] surfing ten-metre waves off Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, hunting big game on some African savannah, even hiking the Himalayas, but I can’t understand how someone that testosterone-driven doesn’t like sex with women” (209). Jace admits he is unable to bring himself to reject the myths that support the supposed binary between masculinity and homosexuality. This description hints at gender stereotypes regarding notions of ‘pure’ or ‘rugged’ masculinity, with an emphasis on the primal, brave, powerful man, who is lord over nature and the ultimate predator. The ease with which Jace can picture Conner in these exotic natural settings shows how he has come to see Conner as the definition of raw manliness. In the stereotype of raw manliness there is no room for homosexuality. Jace acknowledges the flaws in this way of thinking, saying it “probably makes me a candidate for Stereotyper of the Week” (209). However, Jace is unable to completely reject the false myths of stereotypes that help him make sense of the ambiguities of reality. While Jace retains the stereotypes, the story does not reinscribe the false myths because it is clear to the reader that the homophobic structures are destructive, and the reader is left with the unsettling conclusion that Conner has not received the support he needed. Hence, it is clear that under the critical lens of false myths, *The Space Between* shows an authentic engagement with Canadian society as it explores how Jace, and the culture that produced him, “suffer from an imaginative blockage” due to “generations of tightly argued assumptions” (Saul 37). These assumptions foster false myths instead of supporting a “horizontal, inclusive approach to thought that will allow us to see what we have trained ourselves not to see” (Saul 37).

Canadian theories describing imaginative blockages caused by false myths, like the gender norms explored in *The Space Between*, have a long history in Canadian cultural criticism. This is evident in Dennis Lee’s description of the difficulties of interpreting and reflecting authentic Canadian experiences using inauthentic imported tools. When Lee tried to write authentic Canadian poetry, he discovered “nothing [he] wrote felt real” because any words he tried to use were “deadened, numb, inert in the same peculiar way” (Lee 158). Lee found his attempts to reflect Canadian reality had “grown into a search for authenticity, but all it could manage to be was a symptom of inauthenticity” (158).

In *The Space Between*, Jace’s disillusionment regarding the authenticity of the stereotypes and norms, which he has used to interpret the reality around him, is similar to the struggle with inauthenticity described by Lee. Like Lee, Jace finds that the only tools he has

available to him to interpret his reality are inauthentic. Similar to Lee's realization that the words he had to describe his Canadian experience "set [him] boggling at their palpable inauthenticity" (Lee 156), Jace realizes that the stereotypes he draws from provide him with a faulty picture of his world. Jace states, "There appear to be a few things that I don't understand as well as I thought I did" (167).

Although Jace cannot rid himself of his tendency to judge other people based on norms and stereotypes, his friendship with Conner has made him critically aware of the flaws in this approach. Although Jace does not confront the false myths at their roots or propose a radical open-mindedness, his continued but increasingly critical use of these stereotypes and norms shows what Lee considers an authentically Canadian solution. According to Lee, "to be authentic, the voice of being alive here and now must include the inauthenticity of our lives here and now" (Lee 165). Aker is exploring "the inauthenticity of our lives here and now" as he describes Jace's disillusionment with the false myths that he has internalized and his inability to fully free himself of these assumptions (Lee 165). Hence, under the lens of false myths, Jace's disillusionment with his own role in the system of oppression caused by the stereotypes and gender norms shows an authentically Canadian investigation of the difficulty of confronting false myths.

Overall, applying the critical lens of false myths to incidents in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* in which the protagonists are disillusioned as they realize their own unacknowledged flaws shows that the treatment of this theme in the primary texts has strong connections to theories regarding authentic Canadian identity and culture. Therefore, it can be argued that the disillusionment and self-discovery that occurs in these works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction demonstrate a uniquely Canadian exploration of a typical subject matter in YA fiction.

### **The Failed Elite and Imported Myths Reflected in the System of Oppression**

The disillusionment that Jace and Sal face when they realize that they are powerless to stop a system of oppression without the help of their community parallels how Canadians will continue to "feel ourselves adrift" until false myths are confronted by society as a whole (Saul xii). In *The Lottery*, this similarity is seen when Sal becomes disillusioned by both the failure of the elites on Shadow Council, as well as the role of the students in supporting their own victimization. In *The Space Between*, this parallel can be found in the continued existence of

false European myths of masculinity, which Canadians use to mask the ambiguity and diversity of authentic Canadian culture.

In *The Lottery*, Sal becomes disillusioned with the Shadow Council elite, and with the student body that willingly victimizes itself. It is possible to apply to these major developments in the novel Saul's theories on the failure of the elite in Canadian society and the failure of Canadians to challenge their elites and demand more reflective representation. One can postulate that in the novel, Sal's disillusionment with the failure of the elite and the willing victimization of the student body reflects both the interrogation of the failed elite in Canadian society and the call for the Canadian citizenry to reflect on this failure found in Canadian theories. The elite in Canadian society, as in Saskatoon Collegiate, is defined by its leadership role (Saul 174). While the elite is a diverse group in Canadian society, it is simplified in *The Lottery* where the elite is Shadow Council.

Like Canadian elites in general, Shadow Council's primary failure is its inability "to digest [the] expressions of fairness, inclusivity and effectiveness" that are the "fundamental themes" of Canadian society (Saul 173). While all three of these fundamental themes factor into the failure of the elites on Shadow Council, Goobie emphasizes the failure of "inclusivity." Shadow Council is a failed elite because it is unable to authentically "digest" the fundamental theme of inclusivity, which forms the core of the students' needs and desires. The students are primarily motivated by their desire to belong and they need a strong inclusive society in order to combat their "deepest fear, the realization that when everything was stripped away – all those personal quirks and peculiarities – you as an individual had no meaning, were nothing more than a face in a crowd with needs that could be completely and absolutely denied" (106-107). Shadow Council has misled the students by exploiting the desire to belong and transforming it into a protectionist move for exclusivity.

Instead of supporting inclusivity and a community of belonging, Shadow Council approaches this fear by providing a scapegoat who will always be more of a social outcast than everyone else. This exclusionary response to a need for inclusivity is implied when Sal states, "*We keep the whole thing going, we're doing this to ourselves. Every year, the entire student body holds its breath until one kid gets chosen to be the symbol for what's happening inside everyone else*" (184; emphasis in orig.). What is happening inside everyone else is a fear of being rejected, of being isolated and of being alone. The victim is a tangible reassurance to all other students that in some way, they belong. Therefore, the obvious victimization and abuse

from this system shows strong similarities to Canadian cultural theories as it indicates a criticism of the elite's failure to acknowledge the fundamental theme of inclusivity.

Lee's article shows how this issue of a failed Canadian elite has deep roots in Canadian society. Lee criticizes Canadians and their elite for fostering an inauthentic identity and becoming a colony of the United States. Lee wrote his critique after reflecting on a period during which he had observed Canadian reactions to the Viet Nam war, and realized that "the American government had been lying about Viet Nam" and that "the Canadian media, from which I had learnt all I knew about the war, were helping to spread its lies" (157). Following this realization, Lee turned to the work of George Grant, who argued "we have replaced our forebears' tentative, dissenting North American space with a wholehearted and colonial American space" (qtd. in Lee 160). Instead of authentically reflecting Canadian culture, Canadians and their elite "were by definition people who looked over the fence and through windows at America, un-self-consciously learning from its movies, comics, magazines and TV shows how to go about being alive" (Lee 156). Being detached from the authentic principles that founded our country fostered "self-hatred and [a] sense of inferiority" as we ignored the fundamental themes of our culture in favour of those that had "come north from the States unexamined" (Lee 158). Hence, Lee's work shows that the criticisms of a failed elite, one detached from the fundamental themes of Canadian society, which are found in *The Lottery*, has a long history in Canadian culture.

Shadow Council also parallels Canadian elites in its failure to promote critical thinking among its citizenry. According to the theory of false myths, an elite is successful when it "is able to think about the direction of its society and about its own role in helping society as a whole to think about itself" (Saul 175). The Canadian elite have failed at this task because they are "afraid of ideas, afraid to talk with the citizenry through ideas," and "afraid to encourage the wide discussion of ideas in order to find the basis for its actions" (Saul 176). Shadow Council exhibits this failure to the extreme, as it demands obedience and punishes any hint of critical thinking. The students obey Shadow Council out of a fear of the ambiguity that comes from living outside of the system. This is clear when Sal notes, "[a]s long as Shadow keeps you in your place, you don't have to think about who you could be if you were *choosing*" (259; emphasis in orig.). This comment leads to the second parallel between the construction of elite in *The Lottery* and the Canadian cultural theory of false myths: the need for citizenry to critically reflect on the failure of their elites.

While Shadow Council has failed to promote critical thinking, its subjects are also at fault for letting their fear of not belonging and their anxieties surrounding self-definition motivate



them to obey their elite without reflection. As Willis notes, Shadow Council must somehow be “giving [the student body] what they want, or they wouldn’t be going along with it” (77). The students’ willingness to allow Shadow Council to oppress them by exploiting their fears of non-belonging makes the system of oppression impossible for Sal to end on her own. Until the student body thinks critically about the role of its elite and how their own fears feed their oppression, the system cannot be overthrown or changed. Through Sal’s revelation, Goobie’s text mirrors Saul’s theory that it is “[o]nly by judging the actions of their elite can Canadians judge themselves and measure what might be done” (Saul 188). This parallel is confirmed when Sal realizes, “The victim and the assassin are living inside each one of us, we all play both parts” (184). Sal realizes that the only way to “bring her back to her truest self” is to define herself from outside Shadow Council’s system and refuse to let her fear rule her life (221). The students of Saskatoon Collegiate, like the members of Canadian society as a whole, must judge the actions of their elite in order to better understand themselves and confront the inauthentic oppressive system they have created. This diagnosis is obvious in the epilogue, as Sal realizes, “The wall was alive. It could think, breathe, learn. Brick by brick, it could change and choose, just as she’d changed and chosen. . . . Anything could happen” (264). Through critical reflection the failed elite and the myths it promotes must be challenged by society as a whole, and society’s authentic identity reclaimed.

It can be concluded that, using the critical lens of false myths, parallels are apparent between Saul’s explorations of the failure of Canadian elites, and the interrogation of the role of Shadow Council in *The Lottery*. In the construction of disillusionment, *The Lottery* appears to be continuing a long discussion in Canadian culture relating to the failure of the elites to promote the authentic fundamental themes of Canadian culture, as well as in their failure to promote critical thinking and reflection in their society. Echoing Canadian cultural theorists who call on Canadians to reflect on the failure of their elite, Goobie’s text explores the importance of critical reflection and the need to judge the actions of the elites.

In *The Space Between*, applying the critical lens of false myths to the disillusionment Jace faces when confronted by society’s adherence to oppressive systems of stereotypes reflects how false imported European myths of masculinity have masked the diversity in authentic Canadian culture. While it is not possible to determine that hegemonic masculinity is particularly European or that Canadians’ concept of gender is more inclusive, it is possible to view the fiction through this lens and explore the outcomes. At the centre of the theory of false myths is the notion that “[w]e are not a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. . . . To

accept and even believe such fundamental misrepresentations of Canada and Canadians is to sever our mythologies from our reality. . . . It is to cripple our capacity to talk and to act in a way that reflects both our collective unconscious and our ethical standards” (Saul xi). In *The Space Between*, this can be seen in the way that the European myths of masculinity do not reflect the authentic Canadian emphasis on inclusion and diversity.

Mythologies, including the stereotypes of masculinity, have “become a straightjacket” on Canada’s ability to express its authentic identity (Saul xi). In *The Space Between*, the myth of the binary between masculinity and homosexuality is the most important example of a false myth that oppresses authentic Canadian culture. The oppression created by the false myths of masculinity, and its binary relationship with homosexuality, is an example of the failure that occurs when Canadians attempt “to fit our non-monolithic culture into a revised version of our European liberal monolithic inheritance,” which “requires twisting ourselves into a knot in search of Western justifications for non-Western actions” (Saul 63). As Saul notes, “our intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European or African or Asian, even though we have created elaborate theatrical screens of language, reference and mythology to misrepresent ourselves to ourselves” (3). In the authentic aboriginal-inspired Canadian culture, “[t]he idea of difference is central” (107).

Myths such as the binary between masculinity and homosexuality show an “artificial Europeanization of Canada” (Saul 42). This is based on colonial efforts to describe ourselves, our values and ideals, “principally via a language, the shape of which is set elsewhere” (42). By language, Saul refers to the “practical . . . philosophical, ethical and metaphysical” use of language (40). This is similar to Lee’s earlier theory regarding the paradox of using inauthentic words to describe the Canadian reality. Like Saul, Lee’s investigation of the inauthentic words that mask the authentic Canadian reality considers words beyond their literal use. Lee uses the term “words” to refer to “all the resources of the verbal imagination” including “characteristic versions of the hero” (Lee 155). Thus, Lee reflects the mythic or archetypal use of language, and includes the construct of the male hero. Like the false myths that Saul says Canadians imported from Europe, Lee notes, “The words I knew said Britain, and they said America, but they did not say my home. They were always and only about someone else’s life” (162). In the monolithic imported European myths, diversity is rejected in the construction of the hero and the binary between masculinity and homosexuality is supported. This myth is a key obstacle in *The Space Between* as Conner feels he must live within this inauthentic myth and not challenge the binary division of masculine athlete and homosexual.

As Jace realizes the inability of the binary between masculine and homophobic stereotypes to express his complex reality, he is confronting how “European ideas of purity and separation grind away on the surface, distracting us from ourselves” (Saul 106). Hence, it can be argued that Aker is exploring how “Canada limits itself through its addiction to imported myths and its denial of any historical originality,” as it refuses to acknowledge the complexity of its society, the individuals within it (Saul 88). When Jace confronts this false myth he says, “I’m suddenly struck by how much we miss, how much happens around us without our knowledge” (Aker 220). This reflects “[w]hat is interesting in the Canadian idea is just how multi-leveled and multi-faceted lives can be at the same time” (Saul 146).

Conner’s refusal to confront homophobic myths of masculinity in professional sports shows a parallel to Saul’s warning about continuing to accept imported false myths. Saul states: “If we go on insisting that Canada is an expression of the West and of its rational, Judeo-Christian tradition, we will be increasingly carried down a road with all that it contains” (Saul 280). This road contains “an obsession with clarity, a fear of social complexity, a horror of overlap, a constant confusing of moral rectitude and power, . . . a tendency to remove obstacles, such as minorities, minority ideas or minority languages. This linear approach makes no sense, given what Canada is. It does not help us make sense of what we have done, even when we have been successful” (Saul 280). Jace’s reaction to Conner’s decision to remain closeted parallels this rejection of preserving false myths. This is evident in Jace’s comments, “*You can’t spend the rest of your life worrying about people finding out. You need to deal with this. It’s not going away*” and “I can’t imagine anything harder than choosing to live with those silences” (Aker 224, 243; emphasis in orig.). Jace is expressing how keeping his authentic identity hidden and pretending to confirm false myths prevents both Conner and the world from recognizing the ability of someone to be homosexual and a masculine athletic role-model. While Jace acknowledges the myth of the gender stereotypes in his own mind, it is clear that society as a whole must realize this false myth does not match with the authentic inclusive reality in order end the system of oppression.

In summary, using the critical lens of false myths to examine the treatment of ongoing systems of injustice in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* reveals that these works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction can be associated with the theoretical discussions regarding Canada’s failed elite and the need to confront the incongruity of false imported European myths in the ways in which we understand our authentic culture.

## **Authentic Canadian Notions of Egalitarianism and Diversity that Challenge the Collective's Responsibility in the Suicide or Suicide Attempt of an Individual**

In the adolescent's disillusionment regarding his or her guilt in the suicide of a loved one in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*, there is an underlying tension that may reflect Canadian culture when viewed through the lens of false myths. While the overt message is that the adolescent could neither have caused nor prevented the suicide of another person, there are undercurrents that seem to contradict this conclusion. In these novels there seems to be a refusal to fully accept the notion that we are not responsible for another person's decision to end his life, which reflects the authentic Canadian foundation in egalitarianism.

It is easy to agree with the liberal view that, overall, one person cannot cause another person's suicide (except perhaps in cases of assisted suicide), and that Jace and Sal should not punish themselves for their actions or their failure to act when confronted with signs of emotional fragility or suicidal tendencies in another individual. This reflects classic American liberalism, which emphasizes individual freedom and autonomy. However, subtle tensions in both novels suggest that a wholehearted acceptance of this liberalism may not truly reflect what is occurring in these books. Rather, it may be argued that these narratives reflect the theory of confronting false myths because they subtly imply a rejection of American liberalism in favour of an authentically Canadian, Aboriginal-influenced conception of community and egalitarianism. This is evident in *The Lottery*, when Sal's father's suicide seems to promote the notion that he acted out of his own free will and that no one should be blamed, while at the same time Chris's suicide attempt seems to place the responsibility for the tragedy on the collective's actions. In *The Space Between*, responsibility for another person's suicide is also complex. As Jace lets go of his own responsibility, he seems to transfer much of the blame to his mother, who was the only person who knew about Stefan's depression. Furthermore, it is easy to draw similarities between Jace's lack of supportiveness when dealing with Conner and his mother's failure to support Stefan, which suggest some degree of hypocrisy when Jace blames his mother for Stefan's death.

In the complex treatment of the responsibility of the group in the suicide of an individual found in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between*, the authors seem to be promoting the authentic Canadian concept of egalitarianism. While individuals never have sole responsibility for the suicide of another, they are part of an interconnected web; their actions and the actions of their community are part of many factors that combine to cause the tragedy.

In *The Lottery*, Chris's suicide attempt is the outcome of the intense bullying he experiences at the hands of the group. Chris is a quiet, fragile boy, but when Shadow Council assigns him a task, Chris shows a great deal of strength by refusing to accept the order. After he rejects Shadow Council's authority, the council employs various students to harrass Chris until he tries to commit suicide. In their acquiescence to Shadow Council, the entire school is responsible for supporting the terror campaign against Chris that leads to his suicide attempt. This event reflects false myths by showing the imbalance that occurs when the power of the community rejects the rights of the individual in Canadian society.

The issue of responsibility in Chris's suicide attempt reflects how the theory of false myths rejects American liberalism. According to this theory, American liberalism is a false myth in Canadian society that masks the authentic Aboriginal-inspired philosophy of egalitarianism that is at the core of Canadian culture and identity. Saul states that the Aboriginal influence on Canada has created a culture that is "seeking egalitarianism through the balance between individualism and the community" (59). Authentic Canadian egalitarianism was founded primarily by the Aboriginal peoples; however, it also has ties to Scottish immigrants who came to Canada with the Hudson's Bay Company and as part of the British forces in 1759, and to German religious minorities who immigrated to Canada as loyalists (Saul 56). To varying degrees, it can be argued that these groups all influenced "our strange attempt at a positive tension between the individual and the group" (Saul 56). Part of this egalitarianism is the idea of minimal impairment, which Saul defines as "the obligation of those with authority to do as little damage as possible to people and to rights when exercising that authority" (55). In the Canadian philosophy of egalitarianism, Saul believes there is "tension between individual and group rights and powers" (55). This is reminiscent of Lee, who describes how Canadians "have been colonized, not just by American corporations and governments, but by the assumptions and reflexes of the liberalism they embody" (162).

While Sal is as guilty as the rest of the student body for supporting the abuse of Shadow Council by not standing against it, her responsibility in Chris's mistreatment is complex. As the victim, Sal played a direct role in Chris's abuse because she delivered the letters to Chris and his tormentors. While the other students can convince themselves that they did not know what was going on, Sal knew "[d]elivering this envelope to him would be the equivalent of telling him that he'd been born with a nuclear missile in his gut, set to go off at the first sign of happiness—something he'd always suspected would be his fate, but vaguely, like death" (170). It can be

argued that the reference to death subtly implicates Sal's delivery of the letter in Chris's decision to commit suicide.

On the other hand, blaming Sal for Chris's suicide attempt is unfair because her role as the victim makes her "*the obvious scapegoat*" (253; emphasis in orig.). Goobie makes it clear that assigning Sal too much of the blame is misguided. This is seen when Kimmie holds Sal responsible for Chris's suicide attempt. The narration states, "in her private thoughts [Kimmie] was holding the lottery victim completely responsible, exactly as Shadow wanted her to" (252). This passage implies that Shadow Council is responsible for what happened to Chris. By extension, the entire student body is guilty for Chris's victimization, since their quiet obedience to Shadow Council has made them all responsible for the council's abuse.

The responsibility for Chris's suicide attempt is constructed in a very different way from how guilt was determined in Sal's father's suicide. American liberalism, with its classic emphasis on individual freedom, would accord with the interpretation of events that proposes Sal's father was the only person responsible for his suicide. However, this philosophy of individual freedom is absent from discussions regarding who is to blame for Chris's suicide attempt. The different ways blame is understood can be observed in terms of who Sal is accusing when she says, "I hate you, you're wrecking everything" (227-228). Sal first said these words to her father immediately before he killed himself. After speaking with Dusty, Sal realizes that, although she "*didn't know how to say it properly*," she was right to blame her father for the mess he made of his life (232; emphasis in orig.). This outlook seems to support an emphasis on individual freedom similar to classic American liberalism because Dusty confirms that their father was "wrecking everything" and his poor choices were responsible for his depression and death (229).

After Sal learns about Chris's suicide attempt, she attacks the wall of Saskatoon Collegiate, screaming, "I hate you. You're wrecking everything" (227). With this phrase, Sal is once again placing blame. However, in this case the blame is on the entire student body. In this passage and many others in *The Lottery*, the school wall is a metaphor for the unthinking, uniform student body that supports Shadow Council's oppressive system (149, 264). Therefore, Sal is astutely placing the blame for Chris's suicide attempt on all the students who support Shadow Council's abuse (227).

The complex construction of guilt in Sal's father's suicide and Chris's suicide attempt show an exploration and affirmation of values which parallel "the Aboriginal roots of Canadian civilization: egalitarianism, individual and group rights and obligations, balanced complexity,

reconciliation, inclusions, continuing relationships, minority rights” (Saul 64). Blame is constructed from the authentically Canadian belief in the “balance of individualism . . . with ‘the practice of sharing,’ and the resulting belief in group interests did not fade away” (Saul 58). In this context, individualism “could be understood as constantly proving yourself” (58). Specifically, Sal’s father is responsible for his own tragic outcome because he did not live up to his individual responsibilities in society. At the same time, the entire student body of Saskatoon Collegiate, allowing themselves to be symbolized by Shadow Council, are to be blamed for Chris’s suicide attempt because they failed to respect what Saul discusses as the balance between individual rights and group interests.

Once Sal comes to fully understand that any involvement with Shadow Council’s system, even as the victim, supports its continuation, she also realizes that she has wronged Chris. She writes him a letter, where she admits, “I never should’ve done what I did to you” (252). By apologizing to Chris, Sal admits her part in supporting the system that made his life unbearable. She is also recognizing the need to balance the individual and the community, which Saul and Lee have theorized is the root of Canadian society. While she did not direct Chris to attempt suicide, she was part of a system that tried to exercise the power of the group at the expense of the individual’s rights.

Hence, applying the critical lens of false myths to explorations of blame in *The Lottery* suggests that community relationships are being constructed in a way that explores the concepts of Canadian egalitarianism. Goobie is confronting false myths in an authentically Canadian way by reconfiguring the role of the individual into a construct that reflects Canada’s Aboriginal-inspired basis in egalitarianism.

In *The Space Between*, the responsibility for the group in the suicide of an individual interacts with the theory of confronting false myths to emphasize the inclusivity in the egalitarian society that forms the core of the authentic Canadian identity. Interpreting Stefan’s suicide using Canadian Aboriginal-inspired concepts of community reveals a complex web of responsibility. According to this concept of community, differences should be fostered under a belief in consensus. In this understanding, consensus is “a spatial rather than a linear concept;” “it has to do with there being an interrelated place for continuing differences inside the great circle” (Saul 71). This authentic Canadian worldview “gives people the time and the space to work out how to maintain or develop relationships” (Saul 71). If this authentic understanding of diversity had been fostered in Canadian society, Stefan would have been accepted for who he was, and taught to embrace his differences. Ignoring the possibilities of openness in the ways that the individual,

choice, and diversity could be constructed in Canadian society caused Stefan's oppression and contributed to his suicide.

The notion that the community may be responsible for Stefan's death is never completely dismissed in *The Space Between*. Even when Jace admits he was not responsible for Stefan's tragic outcome, it is not because responsibility has been placed fully on Stefan. Instead, the other members of the community have become responsible in different and more pronounced ways. This is clear when Jace relinquishes his guilt once his mother admits she knew about Stefan's depression and failed to help him. As previously noted, Jace believes his mother was somewhat responsible for Stefan's death because of her homophobic response to Stefan and her refusal to accept an aspect of his true identity. This shows how false myths have obscured authentic Canadian concepts of tolerance, where "differences are not meant to be watertight compartments, not vessels of purity. It is all about working out how to create relationships that are mixed in various ways and designed to create balances. It is the idea of a complex society functioning like an equally complex family within an ever-enlarging circle" (Saul 107). When Jace's family fails to recognize this model they alienate Stefan and contribute to his pain. It seems that Jace does not fully comprehend how interdependency and ever-expanding inclusivity are necessary for the health of the community and for the emotional well being of its members.

When Jace blames his mother for Stefan's death he reveals his hypocrisy and his inability to understand the true depth of the situation as it relates to his relationship with Conner. After Jace's mother tells him about Stefan's secret, Jace does not understand how important it is that he supports Conner, who has already expressed suicidal thoughts (186). When Conner tries to talk to him, Jace does not want to let him in, thinking "I really don't have the energy to let him in, don't have the energy to listen to him tell me again how unhappy he is. . . . I'm still trying to make sense of what my mother told me by the pool an hour ago" (229). Once Jace relents and speaks with Conner, he says, "You need someone to talk to, Conner. That's why you're here. You need someone to know what you are. *Who* you are" (232; emphasis in orig.). Jace is right, but he does not help Conner, instead he provokes Conner, telling him "I know you're a coward" (232).

In his attempt to force Conner to be open about himself, Jace alienates him rather than providing him with emotional support. As they leave Mexico, it seems their friendship is over, Jace notes, "Conner passed me in the lobby last night and didn't even nod, all his attention directed toward a hot brunette attached to his arm, and this morning in the airport he seemed to go out of his way to avoid me. It made me think of that Leah Delaney song about silences and all



the things that people never say to each other” (243). Aker is showing the general failure of society to support difference and be fully inclusive. This reflects how Canadian society is hindered by our inability to acknowledge that our authentic Canadian society is inspired by Aboriginal cultures and “is built upon a philosophy that has interdependence at its core” (Saul 107). Unlike the extremes of liberalism, we are not alone and we have a responsibility to support and be supported by our community. When this fails, as was the case with Stefan, it is because we have ignored our authentic selves. The task is challenging, as these concepts of fairness and inclusion “express what we are, and therefore what we can do, and how. Consciously absorbed and used they would bring our perceptions of ourselves in line with our reality. That means changing the way we think and talk about ourselves. Few things can be as difficult as that” (Saul 279).

The notion that embracing differences is a founding principle of Canadian culture can be seen dating back to Lee’s work. Predicated on the work on George Grant, Lee takes the view that Canada was founded on a set of principles that were very different from American liberalism. Lee notes that Canada was founded on a worldview “which embodies a very different sense of public space” than the United States (159). The Canadian ideology, in “contrast with the liberal assumptions that gave birth to the United States, . . . taught that reverence for what is is more deeply human than conquest of what is. That men are subject to sterner civil necessities than liberty or the pursuit of happiness—that they must respond, as best they can, to the demands of the good” (Lee 159). Thus Lee, like Saul, investigates how authentic Canadian culture has a unique understanding regarding “what it meant to be a human being” (Lee 159). Like Saul, Lee argues that Canadians “were refusing . . . the doctrine of essential human freedom” because “not only did this view of an unlimited human freedom seem arrogant and suicidal; it also seemed inaccurate, wrong, a piece of self-deception. For we are not radically free, in simple fact, and to act as if we were is to behave with lethal naivete” (Lee 159). Applying this theory as part of the critical lens of false myths to examine *The Space Between*, provides an understanding that Stefan’s death was more than an individual’s choice. It represented a concrete failure of the society to realize that a “reverence for what is,” including diversity, “is more deeply human than conquest of what is” by oppressing authentic differences to create a false mask of monolithic normalcy (Lee 159).

In summary, when these works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction are examined under the critical lens of false myths, the theme of disillusionment appears to manifest in an authentically Canadian way through the preoccupation with the concepts that lie “at the

heart of their civilization: . . . fairness and inclusion” (Saul 303). These books can be seen to demonstrate Saul’s statement that, “the tension between the individual and the group [is] an essential element of our ethic of fairness and inclusion” (318). Hence, using the critical lens of false myths to analyze the theme of disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* demonstrates that these works are continuing in “the long Canadian experiment with complexity and fairness” (Saul 323).

## Summary

This chapter has examined two works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult fiction: *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie, and *The Space Between* by Don Aker. An investigation of the works for the theme of disillusionment has shown three major ways in which this theme appears in the content of these books: in the adolescents’ realization of their own flaws, in their understanding that the good intentions of one person is not sufficient to bring down a system of injustice, and in their own helplessness to give someone the will to live or provoke them to end their life. These instances of disillusionment have been connected to trends in American YA fiction, pointing to many similarities in the focus on self-discovery, ambiguous endings, and the treatment of violence. Finally, the examples from the theme of disillusionment have been reexamined under the critical lens of false myths to investigate how the theme of disillusionment in these primary texts is associated with Canadian cultural and literary theories. The emphasis on the need to uncover the authentic self, the dramatization of the individual and collective sustaining the oppressive system that masks their authentic identity, and the complex view of the roles and responsibilities of the individual and the collective suggest that these books have a deep connection with important Canadian issues.

In the next chapter, “Chapter 5: Isolation and Wry Civility in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*,” I examine the theme of isolation in two works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai and *The Beckoners* by Carrie Mac. I explore how this theme relates to dark-themed American Young Adult literature, focusing on the motif of absent parents and the form of the abject character. Finally, I analyze the construction of isolation in these books under the Canadian critical lens of wry civility.

## **Chapter 5: Isolation and Wry Civility in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea***

As David Van Biema notes, “Of all passages, coming of age, or reaching adolescence is the purest, in that it is the loneliest. In birth one is not truly conscious; in marriage one has a partner, even death is faced with a life’s experience by one’s side” (qtd. in Nilsen and Donelson 1). In this chapter, I explore the theme of isolation in two selected works of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult (YA) fiction: *The Beckoners* by Carrie Mac and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai. I investigate the connections between this theme and elements of dark-themed American YA fiction. I then employ the critical lens of wry civility to interrogate the relationship between the theme and treatment of isolation in these books and Canadian literary theories.

I begin by exploring how isolation is constructed through the protagonists’ experiences when they feel that they don’t fit in with their peers, and when they find themselves without a supportive parental role model. Then, I interrogate how isolation is configured in the context of alienation and bullying endured by an important secondary character.

After considering the construction of isolation, I compare this theme in the Canadian novels to dark-themed American YA fiction. I look at the absence of supportive adults in contemporary realistic American YA fiction and investigate the characteristic forms of the abject character in YA fiction as described in American criticism. Finally, I reexamine isolation in the two texts using the critical lens of wry civility, which I have adapted from Daniel Coleman’s theory of White and wry civilities and applied to Northrop Frye’s definitions of unity and uniformity. Looking at *The Beckoners*, I explore how isolation can be associated with the Canadian trance of civility, the role of the collective, and the paradox of civility. Turning to *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, I examine how the treatment of isolation relates to wry civility’s criticism of White civility, the importance of reflection and the paradox of civility.

### **Isolation in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea***

In *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, isolation is a significant and pervasive theme as the adolescent characters struggle with belonging. This theme is manifested when the protagonists are excluded by other adolescents, and when they feel disconnected in their relationships with their parents. Furthermore, isolation is also apparent in the intense marginalization and bullying experienced by important secondary characters.

## The Protagonists' Insecurity Regarding Social Belonging

Firstly, in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the protagonists experience isolation when they are marginalized by their peers. For Zoe, this isolation is part of her status as a new student at her school. For Amrith, this isolation comes from his want of school friends and the changes in his relationships with his sisters.

In *The Beckoners*, Zoe's situational engagement with the violence of the Beckoners and her involvement in ensuing events proceed from the isolation she experiences when she attends a new school. Before moving to Abbotsford, Zoe is "friendless" in Prince George (Mac 7). Zoe is always friendless in the summer because she relies on academic exchange students "to fill the rotating role of Zoe's Best Friend, otherwise she would never have any friends at all" (7). Zoe's lack of friends is at least partially attributed to the fact that her family is always moving (8).

When Zoe moves to Abbotsford at the start of grade eleven, she is faced with the daunting task of breaking into the high school's already entrenched social system without knowing its history or its cliques. On the first day of school, Zoe is "herded" into a group "with all the other new students," who are then paired with returning students (17). Of these "volunteer ambassadors," Zoe observes that the majority "looked like factory-fresh Christians, with perfect haircuts and preppy clothes" (17). Considered in conjunction with the fact that Zoe seems skeptical about the dominant Christian population, as she finds the number of churches in Abbotsford "rather alarming," this description indicates Zoe perceives herself as an outsider among the other adolescents (13-17). In addition to these "factory-fresh Christians," there are also "volunteer ambassadors" who "obviously did not want to be there" (17-18). This includes Beck, who is assigned to Zoe. When she enters her first class, Zoe's sense of alienation intensifies, as she encounters "thirty sets of who-the-hell-is-*she* eyes locked on her" (19; emphasis in orig.).

Zoe makes her first friend when Beck leaves her with Simon, an eccentric homosexual teen. However, their friendship is not sufficiently strong to mitigate her outsider status as a new student. When Simon abandons Zoe in the student smoking area, she finds herself left "out in the open to fend for herself" and "exposed" (22). Deciding that turning around and entering the school "would've been tantamount to falling to her knees and screaming, 'I'm not worthy!'" Zoe tries to hide her isolation and discomfort by walking "confidently forward, as if she knew exactly where she was going" (23). Unfortunately, this technique fails when she encounters the Beckoners who invite her to sit with them in the smoking hut. Zoe had only gone into the hut to "turn right back around and saunter out like she hadn't found who she was looking for" (24).

However, when Beck invites her to sit, Zoe complies, because, in her words, “You don’t turn your back on girls like this unless you’re prepared for them to slice you wide open” (24). When Zoe is subsequently rescued from the smoke hut by Simon and his boyfriend Teo, Teo warns Zoe to “watch out” saying, “Looks like the Beckoners got their claws in you already” (26). After this incident, Zoe begins eating her lunch with the Beckoners daily because she believes, “that had become an expectation” (37). She is beginning to be absorbed. Zoe’s deepening involvement can be interpreted as the unintended consequence of her attempt to hide her isolation. This portrayal of the protagonist not fitting in with her peers is one of the first constructions of the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners*.

In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, Amrith’s isolation from his peers is indicated by his want of school friends and the growing alienation he feels in his relationships with his sisters, Mala and Selvi. This isolation appears to be linked in part to Amrith’s homosexuality.

At school, Amrith is friendless. By virtue of an award he won the year before for representing his school in a Shakespeare competition, “he was respected for his acting talent;” however, “none of the boys had ever made overtures of friendship towards him” (Selvadurai 26). Prior to that, Amrith “had been the kind of boy that other students ignored” (50). He was completely isolated; “Nobody spoke to him and he was never included in any after-school activities, nor invited to birthday parties” (50). In response, Amrith “kept as indistinguishable as possible,” because, “[l]ike all invisible boys,” he knew “if he did get attention, it would only be negative” (50). “All that had changed” when Amrith won the award; “the entire student body had roared its approval at his winning this glory for their school” (50). Amrith continues to be isolated in the sense that “his classmates still did not include him in their various activities;” however, the severity of being marginalized is lessened as his schoolmates “greeted him with respect and often asked his opinion on matters of art and literature” (51). Amrith’s experience at school is clearly one of isolation, but the pain he experiences is eased by the respect he is accorded.

For Amrith to continue to have the respect of his peers, he must prove himself again by winning another prize at the upcoming Shakespeare competition. If he does not win an award, he knows “[h]e would return to being a nonentity in his school” (Selvadurai 61). When Amrith becomes distracted by Nireesh’s visit, and his “nerves [are] stretched to a breaking point,” he gets into a fight with the male lead of the school production and loses his role in the play and, consequently, the other students’ acceptance (218).

Amrith's isolation from his schoolmates is compounded by his deteriorating relationships with his adoptive sisters. In the past, the girls had been Amrith's closest friends. However, in the last year, Amrith had become aware of a "gulf that had opened up between him and the girls" and had "begun to grow" (38). The gulf formed as the siblings aged, and the girls began "to develop their own interests and social circles into which he did not fit" (69-70). Amrith is angry and hurt by this changing relationship because he feels they have "abandoned" him (69-70). At the same time, he is "secretly envious of their busy lives" and their friendships outside the home (69-70).

When Niresh arrives, Amrith resents his sisters' attempts to include the boys in their social circles. Amrith knows that he is only being included because the girls are fascinated with his "foreign cousin" (156). Indeed, Amrith is hurt and angry when Selvi and her friends only decide to invite Amrith on a trip they had planned "weeks ago" once Niresh is present to accompany him (156-157). Amrith refuses to go. At the same time as Niresh's presence works to widen the gap between Amrith and his sisters, having Niresh as a close friend helps ward off Amrith's isolation. At the beginning of their relationship, Niresh makes Amrith feel wanted. Niresh shows "such an eagerness to please" Amrith, and he is aware that Niresh is "keen to impress him and win his affection" (104). Amrith is flattered, as he "had never been courted in this way by anybody," and the fact that Niresh is older than Amrith makes it even more of an honour (104-105). In response, Amrith clings to Niresh, propelled first by his desire for friends and family, and later by his romantic attraction to his cousin.

When his sisters try to divert Niresh's attention, Amrith is "furious and yet desperate at the same time" (157). He worries that if his sisters "monopolized Niresh," he would be isolated again and forced to "tag along silently, largely ignored" (157). Feeling marginalized as his sisters move towards friendships that do not include him, Amrith is very protective of the one person who seems to need him (157). Niresh's infatuation with Mala significantly threatens Amrith's ability to rely on his relationship with his cousin to ward off his own marginalization and isolation. Observing this romance unfold, while suppressing the sexual nature of his jealousy, fosters Amrith's growing marginalization, frustration and anger. For instance, when Niresh, Amrith, and his sisters go to the movies, Amrith feels like "[n]obody seemed to want him here at all" (197). He becomes increasingly "angry and downcast" as Niresh "periodically leaned over him to say something to Mala" (197). Feeling excluded and jealous, "[b]y the end of the film, Amrith was livid" (197).

As Amrith becomes increasingly threatened by Niresh and Mala's relationship, he alienates Mala by calling her a "slut" and saying she is "throwing [her]self" at Niresh (193, 215). When Mala senses his irritation, she rebels against his control; "rather than withdrawing and leaving him alone with his cousin, she looked away, as if his feelings no longer mattered to her" (199). Niresh also indicates his annoyance at Amrith's possessiveness when a "fleeting look of annoyance crossed his face" after Amrith interrupts a conversation he was having with Mala (209). While Niresh's behaviour "pierce[s] Amrith's heart," he reacts with a "a bitter anger towards" Mala believing, "[s]he had betrayed him" (209). His anger and jealousy continue to mount along with his marginalization until he explodes and tries to drown Mala in the sea.

After his violent outburst, Amrith realizes that "what had spurred him on to that final act of anger" was his sexual jealousy: "He loved Niresh in the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy" (234). Amrith begins to understand "[h]e had been jealous of Mala because of this love and not because Niresh was his cousin" (234). This "realization about himself" further deepens Amrith's alienation and isolation because it creates a "great distance . . . between Amrith and everyone" (240). Amrith feels "as if he were in a pit of darkness and there, above, the world carried on with itself in the sunlight" (240). These passages demonstrate the escalation of Amrith's isolation due to his deteriorating relationships with his sisters and his unrequited love for Niresh. Hence, in his relationships with his classmates, his sisters, and Niresh, it is evident that Amrith experiences strong feelings of isolation and marginalization from other adolescents.

### **Isolation and an Absence of Adult Guidance and Support**

The isolation that Zoe and Amrith feel when they are excluded by their peers is intensified by the detachment they feel from the adults in their lives. This is most important in their relationship with their parents. Alice contributes to Zoe's sense of isolation in her struggles with the Beckoners because she seems unable or unwilling to recognize when her daughter needs advice and assistance. In contrast, while Amrith's Aunt Bundle and Uncle Lucky try to be loving and supportive parents, Amrith feels isolated because he does not consider them his 'real' family.

In *The Beckoners*, Zoe often feels lost and alone in her struggles with the gang, and this isolation is compounded by her belief that she has no adult to turn to who will help her work through her problems. The only adult Zoe really knows is her mother, Alice, who is too self-obsessed and distracted to realize what is happening to her daughter. As Zoe gets increasingly involved with the Beckoners, Alice fails to recognize anything is wrong. For instance, after Zoe

is initiated into the gang, she does not see her mother until the next night, when Alice returns home smelling of alcohol (54). The narration notes, “if Alice noticed anything different about Zoe, like how she favored the arm with the scar, or how she skulked around holding on to a secret, she didn’t mention anything” (54). Alice is oblivious to her daughter’s physical and emotional pain. This is also observed after Zoe is uninitiated. Again, Alice “floated around the house like she lived there all by herself” and fails to notice how Zoe would “walk around clutching her elbows” to stop herself from picking at her stitches (161). Alice is too absorbed in her romance to notice what is happening to Zoe, leaving her daughter isolated.

In addition to the physical indicators that something is wrong, Alice also misses Zoe’s cries for help. This is most striking after Zoe witnesses Brady raping Jazz. The day after the rape, Zoe tries to decide if she should tell Alice what happened (82). Several factors in her relationship with her mother make Zoe uneasy at the idea of confiding in her. Zoe does not know how Alice will react, thinking, “It was so hard to tell with her, she could be so self-righteous about some things and so whatever-who-the-hell-cares about others” (82). Zoe worries about disappointing her mother, wondering, “Would her face fall in defeat? . . . Would she say something like, ‘Aw, hon, did I raise you to stand by like that when someone’s being hurt? Is that what I taught you?’ Or would she tell Zoe that teenagers will be teenagers and what she saw was just real life happening as it does, whether you want it to or not?” (82). Zoe decides, “Alice wouldn’t understand,” but then changes her mind (82-83). However, when Zoe attempts to tell her mother while visiting at the homeless shelter she manages, Alice is not receptive (83).

Zoe feels increasingly isolated and detached as her mother fails to recognize hints that something is wrong. For example, when Zoe waits for her mother to answer the door of the homeless shelter, she “pretended she was a Mrs. Potato Head with a red plastic lipstick grin stuck in her mouth hole,” acting like everything is normal (83). When Alice opens the door, “Zoe’s smile was slipping, but Alice didn’t notice” (83). Instead, Alice “left Zoe alone on the landing, still trying to force a hello out of her Mrs. Potato Head grin” (83). Alice still does not notice something is wrong with Zoe, even when she remains detached from the crowd. Zoe cannot act normally: “Her mouth was open, but she made no sound. It was as if she was being quietly suffocated by the memory of the night before” (84). When Zoe finally manages to tell Alice she needs to talk about something important, Alice refuses to talk, saying she will talk to her when she is done work, even when Zoe protests and explains “If I don’t tell you now . . . I’m not sure if I’ll be able to later” (84). When Zoe distractedly burns the shelter breakfast, Alice sends her to sit in her office, further isolating her, instead of realizing Zoe is extremely troubled. When Alice



is finally ready to talk, Zoe's anger over her mother's blatant disregard for her pleas for help motivates her to change her mind about telling Alice what happened.

While Zoe no longer tries to approach Alice about the rape, she continues to provide her mother with strong hints that something is wrong and she needs to talk. For instance, Zoe tries to convince Alice to let her change schools. When Alice asks why, and Zoe says, "I just don't like this one" (91). Alice ignores Zoe's evasive answer, eventually telling Zoe "I don't have time for this crap" (91). Later, as Zoe fearfully awaits her uninitiation from the Beckoners, she again hints to Alice that she needs help after she finds her mother sobbing on the couch surrounded by empty beer cans (149). Zoe waits for her mother to explain herself, but Alice only tells her, "Don't ask me, okay? . . . Just don't" and goes upstairs (149). As she leaves, Zoe "screamed" at Alice, "Ask me! . . . Ask me for once!" (150). But Alice replies, "Not right now, hon, okay?" (150). Zoe continues to feel isolated and helpless as her mother seems blind to her pain or uninterested in hearing that anything is wrong. Zoe realizes she "couldn't remember the last time her mother actually . . . asked her . . . if she was surviving at all or was slowly dying before her very own oblivious eyes" (162).

Finally, Zoe cannot handle the isolation of dealing with the Beckoners without an adult's help. When April is attacked and badly beaten, Zoe returns home and Alice starts to lecture Zoe about being late, ignoring Zoe's attempts to explain what has happened (Mac 194). Zoe forces her mom to listen to her by erupting in rage and frustration, as she "hurled the pie against the wall. 'Okay.' Alice stared at the mess oozing down the wall. 'I'm listening'" (194-195). When Zoe tells her mother April has been assaulted, Alice finally takes the parental role her daughter needs. As she drives to where the Beckoners left April, Alice asks, "How the hell long has all this been going on?" and Zoe tells her "Since forever" (195). It is evident that Zoe's problems with the Beckoners spiraled out of control partially because she is isolated from parental guidance through Alice's neglect.

In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, Amrith's Aunty Bundle and Uncle Lucky try to be supportive parents, but Amrith feels isolated from them because they are not his biological relatives. Amrith feels alone and orphaned, even though he has been adopted by a loving family. This is suggested in the way Amrith often feels "dejected" about his mother's death (33). He feels that her "absence made him aware that he had no real family" because his "relatives on both his father's and mother's sides wanted nothing to do with him" (33). This belief haunts Amrith and he expresses it on many occasions. For example, as his Aunty Bundle reads the guest

list for his sisters' birthday party "Amrith felt depressed that not a single person on it was his friend or relative" (78).

When Amrith discovers Niresh, a biological relative willing to have a relationship with him, he is overjoyed, but worries about his sisters taking Niresh away from him. He tells Mala, "You have family and I don't. Why do you want to deny me the one person I have? Do you have any idea what it's like to be me? To grow up alone, with no family who loves you" (216). Mala is upset that he does not accept his adopted family, and asks, "How can you say that? We love you. We are your family" (216). Amrith shows his isolation and his self-imposed distance from his adoptive parents and his entire adoptive family in his reply: "No, you're not" (216). Mala is dismayed, and tells him, "I've always thought of you as my brother, Amrith. I have always loved you as my brother. I even love you a little more than I love akka [their sister Selvi]" (216). Amrith refuses to accept this, and ends the conversation saying, "you are not my sister and I have always-always thought of you, all of you, as strangers. This has never felt like my home" (216).

Like Mala, Amrith's Aunty Bundle and Uncle Lucky seem to consider Amrith a part of their family. They both address him as "Son" on numerous occasions in addition to the various other ways they claim him as their child. For example, when Aunty Bundle is questioned about Amrith's belonging, she states, "Amrith is our son now" (34). Uncle Lucky is equally direct when he tells Amrith, "I want to make you a promise, son. You will never, ever, be a stranger in my house" (31). Evidently, Amrith feels isolated from the adults in his life because of his refusal to accept his adoptive parents as his real family, as opposed to any neglect or mistreatment on their part. It can be concluded that while Zoe and Amrith have very different relationships with their parents, both protagonists intensify their isolation as they lament their perceived lack of supportive and attentive parents.

### **Isolation in the Secondary Characters**

In *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, isolation is also prominent in the lives of April and Niresh, respectively. As the primary target for the Beckoners, April has been the victim of significant social marginalization and intense bullying for years. Niresh's bullying is less graphic than that of April, nonetheless his isolation is intense as he struggles with being a "foreigner" in Sri Lanka and a "Paki" in Canada (83, 242).

In *The Beckoners*, April has been harassed and marginalized by her peers for years. The prologue focuses on her history of isolation and victimization, setting the tone for the exploration of isolation that occurs in rest of the novel. Mac describes how April is referred to as "Dog" by

the students at her school, a name that began in kindergarten when April got her dog, Shadow. The prologue states, *“When April was five, she loved being called Dog. When she was five, she was popular. . . . Not anymore. At fourteen, kids were just as likely to call her Bitch, which just naturally progressed out of Dog”* (1-2; emphasis in orig.). This sharp contrast between April as a young child and the girl referred to as “Dog” in high school is repeated in the text, emphasizing how something once innocent has warped into violent alienation. It is most striking when, *“At five, she prayed to God that she would wake up one day and be a real dog just like Shadow. At fourteen, she prayed to God she’d never wake up at all”* (2; emphasis in orig.). In her choice to begin the story with this prologue, Mac is foreshadowing and establishing the tone of violence, and the incidences of intense isolation and bullying that will be the focus of the novel so that it ominously haunts the following chapters about Zoe’s move to Abbotsford.

April’s isolation is entrenched in the numerous instances of physical and psychological torment she experiences. In the year before Zoe arrives, the Beckoners steal April’s notebook, which she uses as a diary (30). They photocopy passages in which April reveals her crush on the school counsellor, Mr. Cromwell, and plaster the school with posters showing a doctored photo of them kissing (30-31). When Zoe begins to spend time with the Beckoners, she witnesses the abuse when the Beckoners and their male accomplice, Brady, drive a truck “right up onto the sidewalk, catching Dog in the headlights as she leapt out of the way and ran for it” (42). There are also many examples of verbal abuse, such as when Lindsay and Jazz tell April that she smells “like wet dog” (43). The bullying escalates as the Beckoners hang a “mannequin with a noose around its neck” from the tree outside April’s room (125-126). The mannequin is dressed “just like April on any given day” and her “blonde hair had been made limp and stringy, just like April’s” (126). To add to the threat, there is a knife “stabbed into its chest where the heart would’ve been if it were real” (126). Stuck to the knife is a “note drenched in fake blood,” that reads, “Do us all a favor, bitch” (126).

Eventually, the Beckoners almost murder April when they attack her in a park, leaving her “so badly beaten that Zoe would’ve sworn it wasn’t April” (195). Fearing their retaliation, April refuses to identify her attackers. When Leaf informs the police that it was the Beckoners, and April’s parents press charges against her wishes, the Beckoners strike again. They kill April’s dog Shadow, her “best friend in the whole wide miserably unfriendly world,” and hang him by “a noose, tied to the same thick branch the mannequin had been hung from” (203). This is the final abusive act that compels April to get help to stop the Beckoners.

While April's torment is driven by the Beckoners, the student body colludes in April's isolation, until her ostracism becomes part of school culture. When Zoe attempts to wave at April at the beginning of the school year, Simon's reaction shows how the practice of isolating April is normalized. Simon grabs Zoe's hand, saying, "don't even go there. That's Dog" (27). Zoe is confused, responding, "April? . . . She's in my English class" and Simon corrects her, explaining, "Her name is Dog. . . . She's a total loser. Don't go anywhere near her, or she'll get on you" (27). This normalized practice of isolating April is also clear when Leaf announces she has won the position of assistant editor on the school paper. When he realizes April Donnelly is the girl they call Dog, "Leaf's expression changed from curious anticipation to sinking dread and back in less than five seconds" (66). Aware of the humiliating alienation of the moment, "Dog stared at her desktop. She'd watched Leaf's penny drop, followed immediately by his quick scramble to pick it up. The whole class had seen it" (66). After this, "the school" is shown enforcing her isolation as students started "barking at Dog with a renewed enthusiasm" (67). April's isolation has become part of the normalized school culture, and she is tormented in the extreme.

April's alienation and violent marginalization is so consistent that her peers are surprised at her survival. There are numerous instances where onlookers admit they can't believe that she has not killed herself, showing a callous attitude towards the abuse and ignoring society's responsibility to end the violence endured by the individual. For instance, when Zoe hears about the posters of April and Cromwell, she says, "I would've killed myself," to which Simon replies, "that would've been a very reasonable response. . . . People kill themselves over a lot less" (31). Teo, Simon, and Zoe seriously wonder "what would be worse. . . . Being Dog here on earth or rotting in hell?" deciding, "I don't know much about hell," and "At least hell's run by an ex-angel" (31). April is well aware that people wonder if she will commit suicide because of her alienation, but she tells Zoe, "I would never, ever kill myself. . . . Because that's exactly what they want" (31).

At the novel's climax, Zoe develops a strategy to take advantage of the widely recognized possibility that April's torment and isolation will motivate her to commit suicide. Zoe develops this plan after the Beckoners kill Shadow, and Leaf comments, "It's a miracle she hasn't killed herself already, with everything those assholes put her through" (206). When Leaf says this, Zoe realizes that the expectation of April's suicide may be the key to ending the power of the Beckoners, as "Zoe's mind cleared for a sharp, focused second, and then the idea came, complete and brilliant" (206). They decide to fake April's suicide, and tell the Beckoners that she left a note blaming them (206). April's parents agree to the plan "as though God himself had

whispered in their ears that if they didn't go along with this their precious lamb of His might just go ahead and kill herself for real" (208). The plan is successful because April's isolation and alienation, led by the Beckoners' bullying, is sufficiently extreme that it is plausible that she would kill herself.<sup>5</sup>

Some readers may criticize Mac's decision to have April fake her suicide as a validation of the belief that the ostracized individual's suicide is the only plausible way she can escape her victimization. They may judge April's plan as problematic, believing it continues the violence rather than attempting to resolve it. I disagree with this interpretation. April is very clear that she would never kill herself, if only because her mere existence defies her tormentors' efforts to dehumanize her. When April fakes her own suicide she is not confirming that self-violence is her only option, rather her act destabilizes this belief by manipulating it in an effort to force a confession from her abusers. She escapes the violence by manipulating her attackers' belief that violence was her only escape. Nonetheless, it is clear that, as a secondary character, April's violent bullying by the Beckoners and her ostracism from her peers—which is so severe that her classmates wonder why she has not committed suicide—highlight the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners*.

In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the bullying and marginalization of the secondary character Niresh also contributes to the construction of the theme of isolation. While descriptions of Niresh being bullied are less graphic than those in *The Beckoners*, he nonetheless experiences intense isolation, which stems from his outsider status as a Canadian of Sri Lankan ancestry.

In Sri Lanka, Niresh is an outsider because he is Canadian. Before he knows their identity, Amrith observes how Niresh and his father's attire "immediately marked them as foreigners. Sri Lankan foreigners in this case" (Selvadurai 80). Niresh's outsider status continues to be conveyed in Amrith's reaction to his "Canadian cousin" and the attention given to Niresh's Canadian customs, behaviour, and preferences (93-108). Language acts as a metonym of this difference. For instance, instead of ending sentence with "*nah*" like the Sri Lankan characters, Niresh says "*eh?*" (90-91, 161; emphasis in orig.). Niresh's disappointment at his inability to be an insider in Sri Lankan culture emerges as people tease him about his Canadian accent. When

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<sup>5</sup> The success April and her community experience when they work together to deceive the Beckoners may seem to some readers an unrealistic scenario. However, Mac makes the plan and the outcome believable by referencing the true story of three girls in Mission, BC (15 km outside of Abbotsford) who were criminally charged after Dawn-Marie Wesley, the girl they been bullying, committed suicide and left a note naming her tormentors (Mac 206). The novel is set one year after the Mission case, and due to its geographic proximity the Beckoners would realistically be well aware of this precedent.

Selvi and her friends tease him, “Amrith could tell that his cousin was annoyed” (169). Shortly after when some women do the same thing, Niresh is “furious” and expresses his frustration by crying out, “Shit, I hate my accent” (171). He explains to Amrith, “when people comment on my accent, it makes we [sic] aware that I’m not Sri Lankan” (172). Niresh clearly feels isolated as he realizes he is an outsider in Sri Lanka. However, his isolation in Canada is only lightly noted at this point.

The full extent of Niresh’s isolation and alienation due to his cultural hybridity is finally revealed when Niresh admits he is marginalized in Canada because of his ancestral background. When Niresh first talks about his life in Canada, he says, “Canada is great. As long as you’re not some freak or nerd in school” (116). He tells Amrith that he “had planned to attend football camp with his buddies, but his father had forced him to come here instead” (117). However, Amrith later hears Niresh’s father say in Sinhalese that he “had wanted to pack him off to camp, but Niresh had begged to come here” (118). Niresh eventually describes his isolation in Canada and admits that he lied when he described his social life there. Niresh confirms, “All that stuff I told you about Canada, it was a lie” (242). Making “contemptuous sounds,” Niresh admits, “I don’t belong on the football team, and those guys who were supposedly my best friends . . . they would have nothing to do with me. . . . In my school, I am nothing but a freak. A freak and a Paki” (242). Niresh’s sense of alienation in Canada is clear and the racial slur “Paki” suggests his isolation has to do with his ethnicity. This is confirmed when Niresh “bitterly” tells Amrith “a popular joke in [his] school,” saying, “How do you break a Paki’s neck while he’s drinking? Slam down the toilet seat” (243). It is evident when Niresh reveals the “truth about his life in Canada” that he suffers from a strong sense of alienation and feels like an outsider in both Canadian and Sri Lankan cultures (243).

It can be concluded that Niresh’s sense that he is an outsider in his Canadian culture and in Sri Lankan society, as well as April’s intense alienation and graphic bullying, indicate how secondary characters are used in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *The Beckoners* to construct the theme of isolation. These secondary characters combine with the protagonists’ experiences of marginalization by their peers and detachment from their parents to produce a complex exploration of the theme of isolation in these works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction.

## **The Theme of Isolation in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* in Relation to Contemporary Dark-Themed American Young Adult Fiction**

As it is constructed in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the theme of isolation shows notable similarities with dark-themed American YA fiction. In this section, I explore how the protagonists' isolation stemming from their (perceived) lack of supportive and attentive parents corresponds with the absence of helpful adults in realistic American YA fiction. Then I investigate how the adolescents' isolation in the primary texts may be associated with the characteristics of abjection in American YA fiction, focusing on the connection between the individual's gender and the form of his or her abjection.

### **The Absence of Supportive Parents**

In *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the isolation that stems from the adolescent protagonists' perceived lack of supportive, guiding parents, can be seen as corresponding to a traditional characteristic of YA fiction. In YA literature, and even in children's literature, absent parents are a common trope that facilitates plot development. As Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson note, "[a] look at mythology, folklore, and classical and religious literature shows that stories featuring inadequate or absent parents appeal to young readers because they provide opportunities for the protagonists to assert their independence and prove that they can take care of themselves" (126). While this statement applies to the primary texts by acknowledging the importance of absent parents, there are many important deviations between the explanation given by Nilsen and Donelson and the way isolation is explored in the Canadian novels.

Contrary to the scenario Nilsen and Donelson describe, Zoe learns she cannot solve her problems alone. She needs adult help to stand up to the Beckoners, first with her mother to rescue April after she is badly beaten, and then with April's parents to fake April's suicide. Likewise, while Amrith asserts his independence by rejecting his adoptive parents he does not prove he can take care of himself. Instead, as he isolates himself from his entire adoptive family and invests more and more into his relationship with Nireesh, he loses emotional and psychological stability and ends up trying to murder his sister. In Amrith's isolation, his refusal to acknowledge his adoptive parents extends to his attempt to dismiss the idea that their opinion of him is important. This is seen after Amrith tries to drown Mala, and, as the Monsoon approaches, Selvi tries to convince him to return home. She says, "you better come out. I mean it. Otherwise I'm telling Amma and Appa what happened" (231). Amrith's self-imposed

isolation from his parents is seen in his response, as he says, “I don’t care. What does it matter what they think? You all are not my family” (231). Selvi is “not fazed by this,” and she declares, “You’re being stupid and melodramatic” (231). Amrith has decided to focus on his biological mother’s absence instead of realizing the value of his adoptive parents’ presence. This assertion of independence actually increases his emotional isolation instead of allowing him to prove his ability to completely take care of himself.

The differences between the traditional motif of absent parents described by Nilsen and Donelson and the detachment from parents that increases the isolation in the primary texts can be explained as reflecting the characteristics of American YA fiction. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, “The role of parents in adolescent literature is one of the defining characteristics of the genre” (*Disturbing* 55). “Parents,” Trites argues, “constitute a more problematic presence in the adolescent novel because parent-figures in YA novels usually serve more as sources of conflict than as sources of support. They are more likely to repress than to empower” (*Disturbing* 56). This problematic association is clearly the case in Zoe’s relationship with her mother. Alice often misses cues and outright requests for help from Zoe because she is too concerned with her own affairs. The isolation Zoe feels from this reflects a common theme in YA fiction, where the adolescent “needs to separate from his or her parents in order to forge an adult identity, but a parent’s concern and approval form a necessary foundation for the child’s sense of identity and self-esteem” (Trupee 169). Instead of empowering Zoe by helping her find ways to work out her problems, Alice isolates her from adult guidance. This shows a strong affirmation of Wendy Lamb’s argument that in dark-themed American YA literature, “[a]dults’ inability or refusal to be parents has now become a real plot element in a way it never was. The feeling is one of terrible hostility and pain” (qtd. in Brown and Di Marzo 120). This hostility and pain has been demonstrated in the exploration of Zoe’s isolation that results from Alice’s inattentive and unsupportive parenting.

In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the isolation that develops from the disjuncture in the relationship between Amrith and his parents also corresponds to Trites’ description of parents in dark-themed American YA fiction. This is evident in the role Amrith’s deceased mother plays in his isolation from his adoptive family. Trites notes that in American YA fiction, “[e]ven if parent figures are absent from an adolescent novel,” as in the case of Amrith’s dead mother, “their physical absence often creates a psychological presence that is remarked upon as a sort of repression felt strongly by the adolescent character. This absence then becomes, in turn, a presence against which the adolescent character rebels” (Trites, *Disturbing* 56). Viewing



Amrith's story in terms of this description shows that Amrith's feelings towards his mother, the absent parent, have created a sense of repression, which he projects onto his relationship with his Auntie Bundle.

The absence of his mother motivates Amrith to resent and rebel against the presence of Auntie Bundle, whom he blames for his mother's death. Before his mother died, Auntie Bundle took Amrith to stay with her so that his mother could try to help his abusive father. Amrith's mother had decided to confront her husband after Auntie Bundle "pushed her to make decisions" (248). Amrith's mother died suspiciously a few days later while riding behind her husband on a motorcycle. Amrith feels that "the source of Auntie Bundle's guilt" was that "maybe, if she had let things be, at least his mother would be alive today" (248). "All his affection for Auntie Bundle died" when she took him from his mother (252). Since then, Amrith has "held such resentment against her" (273). Whenever Auntie Bundle shows affection and generosity to Amrith, he becomes "uneasy" because he believed "what she did for him, she did out of guilt" (4). Reminders of his mother and Auntie Bundle's attempts at parenting bring a "black mood" over Amrith (3, 32-33). This "black mood" can be interpreted as the "psychological presence" that Trites describes in the protagonists' reaction to an absent parent in American YA fiction (Selvadurai 3; Trites, *Disturbing* 56). Hence, Amrith's isolation resulting from the absence of his biological mother and his inability to accept his adoptive family shows strong similarities to the uneasy relationships between adolescents and their parents in American YA fiction as described by Trites. When considered with the isolation experienced as a result of Alice's inattentive parenting in *The Beckoners*, the similarities between these Canadian novels and trends in dark-themed American YA fiction are apparent.

### **Isolation and the Socially and Psychologically Abject Characters in YA fiction**

Comparing the characteristics of abjection in dark-themed American YA fiction to the treatment of the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* reveals interesting parallels. In critical explorations of dark-themed American YA fiction, isolation has often been explored by American YA theorists using the psychoanalytic theory of abjection. According to Karen Coats, "abjection has become . . . a distinctive feature of contemporary adolescent culture" (Coats 139). Abjection in American YA fiction has been described in Coats' investigation of "Abjection and Adolescent Fiction" (137-160), which is subsequently elaborated on by Linda Wedwick and Roberta Seelinger Trites when they explore adolescent abjection and extend it to fiction for tween girls. It should be noted, that psychoanalysis and abjection have

been popular analytical tools for English-language YA scholars worldwide, including many Canadians. By restricting the analysis of abjection to the way it is characterized by American YA scholars who base their conclusions almost entirely on American literature, it can confidently be argued that their findings apply foremost to American YA fiction.

When the theme of isolation is developed in the principal abject characters in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the form of their isolation seems to follow the gendered divisions between the socially and psychologically abject characters in YA fiction described by American critics. When determining the principal abject characters, I chose April and Amrith because their abjection was the most constant and pervasive. The theme of isolation developed through these characters relates to the forms of abjection described by Coats, Wedwick and Trites. Abject characters “come in two forms in literature for youth: the socially abject character, who is effectively scapegoated by other people; and the psychologically abject character, who embraces his . . . own abjection as a way to escape from social pressures” (Wedwick and Trites 130). All abject characters represent the “rejection of the impure or the unacceptable” (Wedwick and Trites 130). While April’s isolation shows many of the indicators of a socially abject character, Amrith’s has many of the traits of a psychologically abject character.

In *The Beckoners*, April is clearly an abject character, having been isolated and rejected by her peers who have effectively denied her identity by referring to her as Dog. Through the descriptions of her isolation and the motives for her bullying, the treatment of April’s abjection reveals the typically female characteristics of a socially abject character in American YA fiction (Wedwick and Trites 130). Socially abject characters in YA literature are often “forced” to “haunt the borders of their cultures . . . because of some aspect of their embodiment” (Wedwick and Trites 130). In Coats’ analysis of YA fiction she also notes, “[j]ust as we abject the unclean and improper evidences of the body’s physicality in order to constitute a clean and proper body, so in the social realm we abject the unclean and the improper, again often on the basis of physicality in order to constitute the boundaries of community and nation” (Coats 141). The physical imperfection that singles out the abject character as unclean is seen when the narrator describes April’s “dandruffy head,” “her scabby knees,” and her “lips haloed with too much Chapstick” (Mac 44, 82, 94). Zoe observes, “Dog was so flat, so drippy. Everything about her was limp: her clothes, her hair, her smell, like tired lettuce left out in the heat” (35). Furthermore, “she was awkward and arrogant and ugly. She smelled bad, like she didn’t do her laundry often enough. She never said the right thing, and her timing was terrible” (121). In these descriptions

April's abjection is connected to her embodiment, which corresponds with the socially abject characters described in American YA critical theories.

The process of April's abjection is also typical of the socially abject character when her isolation is seen as something she can change if she chooses to conform. Socially abject characters "are made abject against their will and without a choice in the matter, but they are responsible for choosing to reintegrate themselves back into the appropriate social sphere by adjustments to their bodies or their attitudes" (Wedwick and Trites 130). The socially abject character can "overcome their abjection by asserting their own agency, advancing the ideology that we all have 'choices' about our social positions and how we are viewed by others" (Wedwick and Trites 130). This description fits the isolation experienced by April.

While April is made abject against her will, in order for her to be reintegrated into the appropriate social sphere she has to change her attitude and assert her agency. This further victimizes the victim by suggesting it is her responsibility to change and end her victimization. Her need to change is important in her ability to get Zoe and Simon to help her stand against the Beckoners. Although Simon may have been open to befriending April after they begin spending time together in the school paper office, April's homophobic attitude alienates him. April calls homosexuality "unnatural," and says she would "bet the school has a policy against it" (116). Her fundamentalist Christian beliefs also form a barrier between her and Simon at Halloween, when April refuses to allow him to decorate the office with "cardboard tombstones he'd custom-made for each of them and Shadow" (118-119). Instead, she "would settle at nothing less than Simon ripping up her and Shadow's tombstones" (118-119). Simon tells her, "That's the last time I do something nice for you, April" (119). Zoe points out that April continues to be abject because of her refusal to change her attitude, declaring, "It's your own fault that you're such a loser" (122). Zoe says to April that Simon "would've been your friend if you weren't so weird and homophobic. There aren't many people in this school that would even stand being in the same room with you if they had a choice, but he's one of them, and you go all Christian Nazi on him" (122). Zoe clearly believes April's isolation is at least partially due to her own failures, and when April makes the appropriate choices to change her behaviour she begins to be reintegrated.

After arguing with Simon about homosexuality, April tells him she will pray for him, and the discussion is dropped. Zoe notices how this change in attitude has helped ease April's alienation by bringing her closer to Simon. She observes, "Something had changed between April and Simon, or maybe it was just April who'd changed. Maybe all her prayers to make Simon stop being gay were making her less freaky about it" (134). In response, Simon "was

more tolerant of her . . . and now that the two were more comfortable with each other, it became obvious that they had a wicked sense of humor in common” (134-135). April has begun to ease her abjection by forming an alliance with Simon. The relationship between the two is a step towards April’s reintegration because April now has allies, as evident when Simon defends April against Beck.

Although April’s new friends have helped ease her isolation, she still is tormented as an abject character because of her treatment by the Beckoners. She is like the socially abject characters described by American YA theorists, who must “employ their agency to . . . change the structures of society” (Wedwick and Trites 130). April can only truly overcome her abjection and be reintegrated into society when she asserts her agency (Wedwick and Trites 130). April finally does this when she decides to trick the Beckoners into confessing their guilt to the police. April asserts her agency fully after hearing Zoe’s plan to fake her suicide when she looks directly at Shadow’s body, and declares, “I’ll do it” (207). April’s decision to use Zoe’s plan to cut off the Beckoners’ power enables her to “overcome” her abjection (Wedwick and Trites 130). It is this plan, and her decision to find a way to prove the harassment of the Beckoners to the police, that is the symbolic step of reintegration into society. It is implied the Beckoners will no longer be a threat after they confess to the police because they already have assault charges pending (212). With her new friends and the threat of the Beckoners confined, April has followed the course of the socially abject character in American YA fiction, and is reintegrating into “the appropriate social sphere” (Wedwick and Trites 130).

It is interesting to note that as April is reintegrated, she no longer embodies images of the unclean. As the time comes for the Beckoners to go to the police, April sits in a coffee shop “laughing, cheeks flushed” and as “she smiled her eyes pinched up a little and she tilted her head to the side in a way that was almost cute” (215-216). This is the first instance in the novel, apart from a few comments by April’s mother, when anything positive is observed about April’s appearance. Moreover, it is not just Zoe, Teo, Simon and Leaf that welcome April’s reintegration; Zoe is “astonished to see” the barista is “definitely checking April out” (216). As April is freed from her abjection and the Beckoners, it is as if the coffee shop “was a chrysalis, and April was transforming into a new version of herself right before Zoe’s eyes” (216). Hence, the form of the socially abject character applies to April as Mac uses her to imply how “characters whose embodiment marks them as different, as imperfect, and as Other are presented as having either physical choices or psychological choices that allow them to reintegrate themselves into society as nonabject [sic] characters” (Wedwick and Trites 130). It is clear that

there are strong similarities between April's isolation and the female socially abject characters described in American YA fiction.

Like April, Amrith's isolation also indicates strong parallels with the gendered forms of abjection in YA fiction. Amrith's compatibility with the form of the psychologically abject character is implied in his reaction to his homosexuality. The concept of the psychologically abject character is "infinitely more subtle and complex" than the socially abject individual (Coats 139). For my purposes, I will refrain from analyzing associated Lacanian theories and limit my focus to the central definition of the psychologically abject character, which is one "who embraces his . . . own abjection as a way to escape from social pressures" (Wedwick and Trites 130). Wedwick and Trites show a similar emphasis (Wedwick and Trites 130). Unlike socially abject characters, who demonstrate agency by adjusting themselves to reintegrate into society, psychologically abject characters refuse to make the changes needed to conform (Wedwick and Trites 130).

Prior to his recognition of the nature of his attraction to Niresh, homosexuality had been a nameless, ambiguous concept for Amrith. In Sri Lankan society as interpreted in the novel, homosexuality is not discussed in public; it is considered illegal and immoral. Amrith is only aware of homosexuality in an undefined sense based on what he has heard about Aunty Bundle's employer Lucien. Lucien is ridiculed by Amrith's schoolmates as a "'ponnaya' – a word whose precise meaning Amrith did not understand, though he knew it disparaged the masculinity of another man, reducing him to the level of a woman" (75). The narrator claims, "There was something scandalous about Lucien Lindamulagé that Amrith did not understand;" but he knew whatever it was "had to do with his constant round of young male secretaries" (73). Amrith had heard Uncle Lucky warn Aunty Bundle that Lucien "should leave his secretaries at home" when they went away for business because "what the old man did was illegal and he could end up getting arrested" (73). Amrith knows that whatever Lucien does with his secretaries is not socially acceptable because the "heat" of Aunty Bundle's furious response to such rumors made him feel "she knew the rumors were true and was deeply saddened and troubled by whatever it was her friend did" (73). From these passages and the sexualized descriptions of the male secretaries, the reader is given enough information to assume the scandal surrounding Lucien is due to his homosexuality (75).

Amrith chooses to adopt the liminality of an abject character once he begins to recognize his own homosexuality, referring to it as the "unnatural defect in him" (234). He does not believe his family is aware of his sexual orientation (234-235). Consequently, when a "great distance"

comes “between Amrith and everyone” after he realizes he is sexually attracted to Niresh, it is of his own accord (234-235, 240). However, it is not until Amrith sees Lucien again that he realizes his sexuality makes him a member of the group socially disparaged as ponnayyas (266).

Understanding that he is “a ponnaya” is difficult for him; Amrith “did not know what to do about this thing within him, where to turn, who to appeal to for comfort. He felt the burden of his silence choking him” (266). He is forced to confront the greater social implications of his difference. He remembers how Lucien’s relationships with his male secretaries were illegal, and how his aunt was upset by the possibility that her friend was homosexual. It is implied that as Amrith realizes the root of Lucien’s scandal is his homosexuality, and that he too is homosexual, he senses his difference will not be accepted by his family and society.

Amrith’s reaction to the severe social abjection he will face if he is open about his sexuality—where he may be rejected by his family and sent to jail—compels his choice to become psychologically abject by living in silence. Amrith only shares his secret with his mother’s grave (267). Since “he did not know a decent word to describe himself,” and Amrith “refused to use ‘ponnaya,’” he tells his mother “I am . . . different” (267; ellipsis in orig.). Amrith realizes that speaking his difference aloud “was all he could do for now” (266). He accepts his liminal role as a psychologically abject character, deciding, “[h]e would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his own best friend, his own confidant and guide” (267). His decision to separate himself from society through his silence parallels what Wedwick and Trites are arguing when they quote Julia Kristeva in their interrogation of YA fiction, stating, “[p]sychologically abject characters are ‘ordinary people who refuse to reintegrate into society under its terms but instead haunt and disrupt its borders’” (qtd. in Wedwick and Trites 130).

As previously noted, homosexuality is a very difficult concept in the Sri Lankan setting of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. While this trait motivates Amrith’s abjection, it is also clear that the novel does not propose that homosexuality is a choice or that Amrith could decide to be heterosexual and be reintegrated into society. Nor does it seem to be proposing that Amrith could be open about his homosexuality and remain integrated in his society. Amrith’s decision is to align himself with no sexual preference whatsoever because he does not indicate he will pretend to be heterosexual, nor will he tell anyone about his homosexuality. He chooses to live on the outside of society in a liminal space of silence and ambiguity as an abject figure. The idea that he will try to live comfortably in his silence, without pretending he is something he is not, is suggested in Amrith’s attitude to his silent mynah bird Kuveni. In an effort to get her to speak,

Amrith had intended to get a male mynah in the hopes of making her happier (75). After Amrith decides “for now he must remain silent” he notices, “Kuveni had never resorted to feather-plucking, or any other signs of anxiety and depression” (267, 268). The bird “seemed perfectly content to be alone” and “to remain silent” (268). Amrith also realizes “he had grown to like her silence” (268). Amrith decides to “leave Kuveni as she is, for now,” just as he has decided to live alone in his silence for the immediate future (268). It can be concluded that Amrith’s decision to remain silent about his homosexuality and preserve some form of his isolation shows characteristics of the psychologically abject characters described by American YA theorists.

In summary, Amrith’s isolation shows similarities to the male psychological form of abjection, while April’s isolation may be associated with the female socially abject character as these concepts have been interpreted by American YA theorists. When this relationship is examined in conjunction with the role of parents in the Canadian novels and American YA fiction, there seems to be noticeable parallels between the Canadian texts and dark-themed American YA fiction. However, these connections are too ambiguous as to their direct relationship with American YA fiction, as they also are connected to YA fiction and critical theory worldwide. A strong connection to Canadian theory would easily overpower this association. Applying the critical lens of wry civility to the theme of isolation will provide a point of comparison and suggest the extent to which this theme relates to both Canadian culture and American YA fiction.

## **Isolation and the Canadian Critical Lens of Wry Civility**

Applying the lens of wry civility to the isolation in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* reveals many notable parallels between the novels and the critical theory. In this section, I divide my analysis into two parts, applying the critical lens to *The Beckoners* and then to *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. In my interrogation of *The Beckoners*, I explore how isolation can be associated with Coleman’s critique of the Canadian trance of civility, the role of the community, and the paradox of civility. Then, I focus on *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, examining how the treatment of isolation relates to wry civility’s criticism of White civility, the importance of reflection and the paradox of civility.

In the context of this analysis, White civility is not confined to the racial foundations Coleman has described as “White, British gentlemanliness” (“From Canadian” 26-27). Instead, White civility is primarily explored in terms of its association with the ideological basis of the Canadian theory of civility, as a structure of oppression that limits reflective thought through

sanctioned ignorance (“From Canadian” 26-27). This application of Coleman’s theory fits with his explanation regarding how and why White civility and wry civility should be engaged in Canadian literary and cultural studies. In applying the critical lens of wry civility, the analysis of the two novels focuses on the importance of “[r]eading carefully” in a mode of wry civility, which is “a reflexive mode of civility that works towards awareness of the contradictory, dynamic structures of civility itself in our ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive society” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 36). The focus is on efforts to “destabilize and expose the many forms of sanctioned ignorance . . . by working in and through these moments of quotidian rupture, when conflict and anger break through the veneer of civility long enough to reveal the limits and incommensurabilities in what we . . . do and don’t know” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 41). For readers who might wonder what wry and White civilities have “to do with the current state of Canadian literary culture and scholarship,” Coleman replies, “[e]verything” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 28). Coleman states that “literary scholarship is deeply invested in the project of civility,” and as “writers, teachers, and cultural producers, we are engaged in the production and dissemination of Canadian understandings of the civil” (“From Canadian” 28). Hence, Coleman agrees with Germaine Warkentin and Heather Murray when they suggest “that Canadian literary culture can only be read intelligently in a wide discursive realm of ‘stories and sense-making, power and persuasion’” (qtd. in Coleman, “From Canadian” 192). He is “convinced that what we do as writers, critics, teachers, and cultural producers is crucial to intervening in the Canadian trance of civility” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 41).

As I begin my exploration of wry civility, I would like to acknowledge how the construction of internal outsiders and the desire to define the borders of Canadian civility is present in this study in my justification of the primary texts written by Canadian authors but set outside of Canada. By implying the need to justify my designation that these novels are Canadian, I have indirectly “inscribe[d] them under the signs of otherness and difference” which “indicates that there is a normative *Canadian*-Canadianness still in place against which these . . . signify” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 34). While I found it necessary to my analysis of Canadian YA fiction to address this possible concern, I realize that by doing so I have suggested they deviate from the norm. By drawing reflective attention to this, I hope to destabilize its implied bias.



## **Isolation and Wry Civility in *The Beckoners***

In my application of the critical lens of wry civility to the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners*, I begin by linking Zoe's relationship with the Beckoners to the Canadian trance of civility. Then, I interrogate how isolation is overcome in this novel, investigating how it connects with the role of the community implied in wry civility, and Coleman's description of the paradox of civility in Canada.

### **Zoe's Relationship with the Beckoners and the Trance of Civility**

Firstly, Zoe's isolation can be viewed in association with Coleman's critique of the Canadian trance of civility, which is embedded in the theory of wry civility. Zoe's response to her isolation as a new student shows this parallel as she succumbs to the trance of civility and uniformity by joining the Beckoners. In other words, her decision to join the gang promotes an unreflective acceptance of the totalizing power of hegemonic discourses to erase difference. The Canadian trance is "the ongoing mantra of our own civility" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 25). This trance leads Canadians to consider themselves more civilized than other groups, and it "allows us to imagine ourselves as a community" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 25). Canadians "become extremely touchy when anyone troubles our self-hypnosis" by challenging this trance (Coleman, "From Canadian" 25).

The allure of the Beckoners is in their uniformity, which wards off isolation. Uniformity, as it has been defined by Frye, seems to provide the foundation of Coleman's theory regarding the Canadian trance of civility. According to Frye, "Uniformity, where everyone 'belongs,' uses the same clichés, thinks alike and behaves alike, produces a society which seems comfortable at first but is totally lacking in human dignity" (*Bush* vi). This is similar to how Canadians adhere to the trance of civility when they imagine themselves as a community based on uniform ideas of belonging, which suppresses dissent (Coleman, "From Canadian" 25). The Beckoners is an obvious system of uniformity as it relates to Frye's theory of the concept. In their initiation rights, they provide their members with a concrete symbol of their belonging, as Heather explains, "once it's done, there's no turning back. You're one of us, forever" (49). When Zoe is a Beckoner, she does not follow this rule perfectly, as her thoughts often disapprove of the Beckoner. However, she does subscribe to their belief in April's inferior status when she thinks of her as Dog. In their violent oppression of April and their mob mentality, the Beckoners parallel how uniformity rejects dissent and variety of outlook, and works by dividing its subjects and creating scapegoats and second-class citizens (Frye, *Bush* vi).

While Zoe's response to her isolation as a new student leads to her joining the Beckoners, her relationship with the gang also parallels the way the trance of civility works as an "ongoing mantra" that allows us to think of ourselves as more civilized than all others (Coleman, "From Canadian" 25). Zoe denies her agency in joining the Beckoners by telling herself that she had done her best to "avoid" them, but Beck had "found her and dragged her along with the Beckoners" (42). In her trance of civility, Zoe continues to see herself as more civil than the Beckoners, and considers the violence and bullying they perpetrate to be separate from her. Even when Zoe takes part in April's victimization, she continues to excuse her cruel actions as being comparatively more civil than the Beckoners. In one such case, Lindsay invites Zoe to participate in her verbal abuse of April when she asks Zoe "Do you give a shit what I do to Dog?" (43). This is an opportunity for Zoe to "prove she wasn't like the Beckoners" (44). However, remembering how the Beckoners responded to the dissent of their former member, Zoe says "No," deciding it was "safer" to side with the "the cruel backstabbing place the Beckoners infested" than inhabit "the equally terrible wasteland of the bullied" (44). When Zoe says "No" it is clear to the reader that her "veneer of civility" is cracking (Coleman, "From Canadian" 41). Zoe is beginning to realize that "she [is] sinking deeper into the bitch place, that pick-on-the-little-guy place, that ugly and competitive bullying place" (44).

At the same time, Zoe refuses to accept that by virtue of being a Beckoner she is part of the violence and hatred they embody. She excuses her betrayal of April as self-defence, and aligns herself with the other students who do nothing to stop the Beckoners. From this event, "Zoe understood why Simon hadn't done anything to stop them, why no one had. It was all about survival. Everyone had to look out for themselves. Dog was just really really bad at it" (44). By linking herself with Simon, she is changing the structure of her concept of civility to excuse her participation in the victimization. She believes she is no longer separate from the "cruel" victimization of April due to her status as the new kid; she is now part of the masses that stand idly by out of self-preservation. However, this too turns out to be a trance of civility that "insulates" Zoe "from the realities in [her] midst" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 26).

The reality is that Zoe is not a simple bystander who lacks agency to stop the Beckoners; she is a member of their gang. When she allows herself to be branded in an initiation ceremony, the "veneer of civility" cracks once more. Simon makes it clear that it is impossible for Zoe to deny she is a Beckoner when he reacts "in disgust" to her scar, confirming, "You are in so deep. I don't think there's anything left for me to even *say*" (57; emphasis in orig.). Zoe tries to deny her agency, using flimsy excuses such as, "I didn't get a chance to think" and "It just kind of

happened,” and “You would’ve done the same thing if you were me” (57). Simon dismisses Zoe’s “[b]ullshit” attempts to maintain her trance of civility, pointing out, “I don’t see any puppet strings” (57). Simon is challenging Zoe’s belief that she stands apart from the Beckoners, united with the other students.

In addition to Simon, the rest of Zoe’s classmates also see her as a Beckoner despite her belief that she is more civil. This is evident in the contrasting perception of who is a Beckoner seen in passage where Zoe is outside the school watching April. Students passing Zoe are seen “wiping the strange looks off their faces when they realized it was a Beckoner” (68). In the same paragraph, Zoe continues to see herself as separate from the Beckoners as she admits she is dreading spending lunch “fending off . . . the general inanity of the Beckoners” (68). Clearly, Zoe is under a trance of civility because she believes she is not truly a Beckoner at the same time as she has allowed herself to be initiated into the gang and is complacent with their crimes. This parallels Coleman’s thesis that “Canadian civility is contradictory and ambivalent, never consistent within itself” (10).

Zoe’s first attempts to treat April like a human, instead of the nameless school victim, are part of her efforts to prove she is more civil than the Beckoners. When April arrives to babysit, Zoe thought it was “was a perfect opportunity to show Dog that she wasn’t like the others” by acting friendly towards the other girl (71). However, Zoe continues to see April as the inferior Dog, and her good intentions are revealed as hollow when April catches Zoe making sure that no one sees them together (71). Zoe may not be as brutal as the other Beckoners, but she is still a member of the gang.

Zoe’s trance of civility is finally shattered when she witnesses Jazz’s rape, and runs away. She is confronted by the trance of civility that has allowed her to perpetuate the illusion that she belongs to the Beckoners against her will, and that she is not responsible for anything she does with the gang. As Zoe drives home, she is starting to demonstrate the reflective stance of wry civility, as she sees herself as “another Zoe—Zoe the Beckoner, Zoe the weak, Zoe the bitch” and decides to extinguish that aspect of herself (78). The combination of Zoe’s designation as a Beckoner, her flawed attempts to treat April with respect, and her desire to leave behind “Zoe the Beckoner,” are all parallels to how the theory of wry civility “call[s] attention to the *structure* of Canadian civility itself and to the way in which it operates like a trance that insulates us from the realities in our midst” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 26). The structure of civility operating as a trance is present in Zoe’s belief that, as an isolated new student, she cannot assert her agency. She lives with a “self-hypnosis,” believing she has been “dragged” along and

“had to” be initiated into the Beckoners (Coleman, “From Canadian” 25; Mac 42, 57). Mac’s development of Zoe’s character may be considered to parallel Coleman’s central argument “that we need to move from a *Canadian trance* over a static and reified idea of civility, . . . to a *TransCanadian*, dynamic, self-questioning concept of civility” (“From Canadian” 26-27; emphasis in orig.). Zoe needs to move away from the trance that she is blameless, and question her responsibility and her role in events.

### **Community in the Solution to Isolation and Wry Civility**

In an analysis of the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners*, the lens of wry civility provides some valuable insight into the relationship between the theories of Canadian culture and the ways in which isolation is overcome in the novel. Wry civility and the overcoming of isolation share similar messages that emphasize the role of the community and the paradox of civility.

In April’s isolation in *The Beckoners*, by far the most intense example in the novel, Mac conveys important messages about the need for community involvement to reconstitute the borders of civility. April is only reintegrated when she stops the Beckoners by exerting her own agency and by asking for, and receiving, help from adults and peers. Prior to Shadow’s death, April had not asked for help from her parents or the police, going so far as refusing to identify her attackers when she is badly beaten (198-199). When she does make the decision to stop the Beckoners and relies on her family, friends, and the police to help her, she appears to be successful, as she becomes more (normatively) attractive and has rid herself of her principal oppressors and the directors of her marginalization (208-217).

The importance of community involvement in successfully resisting the Beckoners parallels wry civility’s emphasis on the need for “a reflexive mode of civility that works towards awareness of the contradictory, dynamic structures of civility itself in our ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive society” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 36). April needs to reflexively consider her complicity in her victimization when she refused to identify the Beckoners as her attackers. She finally changes her inability to act when Shadow is killed and she collaborates with Zoe’s plan to fake her suicide. April approaches her parents with the plan and convinces them to help. With an elaborate plan that involves police, paramedics, April, her parents, Zoe, Simon, Leaf and Teo, the community is able to convince the Beckoners to go to confess to harassing and assaulting April. It is implied that the success of this plan has removed the threat of the Beckoners from the community and built a more inclusive society.

The importance of community in the authentically Canadian concept of wry civility comes from Coleman's discussion of autonomy. He proposes wry civility parallels what Cornelius Castoriadis has called "autonomy" (qtd. in Coleman, "From Canadian" 38). Expanding on social and individual autonomy, Castoriadis defines autonomy as "the giving of oneself to one's own law" (38). This contrasts with heteronomy, which refers to "being subjected to another's law" (38). According to Castoriadis, "autonomy is fundamental to the democratic project because it is 'the capacity, of a society or of an individual, to act deliberately and explicitly in order to modify its law— that is to say, its form'" (38). Coleman further quotes Castoriadis: "To engage in self-modification, autonomous individuals and societies must be capable of a 'regime of reflectiveness'" (38). In this regime, "one reflects and decides in common on what is going to be done, whether one is talking about the law or collective works. One also reflects in another sense. One can come back upon what one has said, thought, and decided so as to take it up again and make modifications'" (38). Coleman believes that Castoriadis' concept of autonomy shows the critical reflectivity of the "wry relation to civility," but there is a fundamental difference in emphasis (38; emphasis in orig.). Coleman explains that Castoriadis' use of the term autonomy "is too readily recuperated into the concept of the self-starting individual" (38). In comparison, "'wry civility' emphasizes in the word 'wry' Castoriadis' critical reflexivity towards the existing social order, while, in the word 'civility,' it emphasizes the collective, rather than the individual, investment in the public, social realm" to represent the need for collective reflexivity (38). Hence, Coleman's notion of wry civility emphasizes the importance of the collective reflection in deciding what needs to be done to shape the society Canadians want. This is key to the success of April's reintegration into society and the removal of the Beckoners' threat of exclusion.

### **The Paradox of Civility in the Solution to Isolation**

When April and Zoe apply the collective critical reflectivity of wry civility to work with their community to create a more inclusive society for those victimized by the Beckoners, they do so in a way that reflects the paradox of civility, which is key to wry civility. Following Étienne Balibar's conception, Coleman believes that civility "does not suppress all violence but creates a civil public sphere by removing violence to that space's borders" (192). Wry civility "emphasize[s] the paradoxical structure of civility itself" as an important part of critical reflectivity (36).

Coleman contends that “civility itself is a positive value that is structurally ambivalent,” which means that “at the same time that civility involves the creation of justice and equality, it simultaneously creates borders to the sphere in which justice and equality are maintained” (*White Civility* 9). Hence, “[c]ivility, in this sense, involves a violent marginalization of non-centralizing identifications” (37). He adds, “To note that the borders of civility are maintained by uncivil violence and unfair exclusions is not to deny the degrees of justice and equality that have been achieved within the civil sphere. Rather, it is to insist that these borders have always been, will always be, the sites where new projects of civility are under negotiation” (*White Civility* 9). Hence, as a formulation of civility, wry civility does not propose to remove all injustice and inequity. At the same time, civility is an important social ideal that should not be discarded because it represents our valid commitment to “peace, order, and good government” and provides us with “the physical conditions of our daily existence” (Coleman “From Canadian” 26). Instead, a move to wry civility would “emphasize the importance of a dynamic, ever-renewed alertness to this fundamental paradox of the repressive violence that haunts the borders and stratifies the layers of civility” (37). Wry civility encourages Canadians to “remain always aware of its contradictory structure, for civility includes even as it excludes” (38).

This paradox of civility, which excludes even as it includes, and the repressive violence at its borders is well presented in the solution to April’s isolation in *The Beckoners*. The society is unable to fully include April without finding a way of pushing the Beckoners out. This is observed when the Beckoners turn themselves in to the police. The implication is that they will now be removed from the community and unable to harm April. While this is necessary to make a more inclusive society, as the Beckoners are a symbol of repressive violence, Mac treats this event with a careful sensitivity that shows how this exclusion has also compounded older patterns of abuse and mistreatment.

Beck represents a failure of the Canadian system to address violence and injustice. When Beck was eleven, her father punished her by branding her with a hot fork. Simon witnessed the event and told his mother, who called the police. After this, Beck stayed at Heather’s house for a few days, and, according to Simon, “A social worker checked up on them after that, or that’s what they told my mom would happen anyway. I don’t really know” (61). The Beckoners burn themselves every year on the anniversary of the abuse (61). The social system did not protect Beck from her father’s abuse, and contributed to her subsequent abuse of other people (61). When Zoe learns this, she feels “a little sorry for Beck” (63). Zoe is burdened with the “added complication of having empathy for the very person she was trying to extricate herself from”

(64). When Beck and her gang continue to take the level of abuse further, Simon uses this knowledge to try to prevent Beck from abusing April. He tells Beck, “there’s counseling available for the shit you went through as a kid. You are such a cliché. There are talk shows about you on TV every day of the week. You don’t have to do to other people what your dad did to you” (139). Beck is a cliché, but that accusation is as much an indictment of the society that failed her as it is of Beck.

In the final moment of triumph, as the Beckoners turn themselves in to the police, there is a reminder of society’s failure regarding Beck and how her abuse is being ignored as she is pushed to the margins of the civil space. This is implied when outside the police station, “Beck stood still as her mother passed her, chin up, still clutching her purse, hugging the side of the building like she didn’t want to get too close to her daughter. Then Beck was alone, eyes on the ground. She looked naked despite her down jacket, her scarf, her clunky winter boots, like she was a paper doll underneath: flat, flimsy, easily stripped” (217). Beck is no longer a strong bully; she is alone, vulnerable, rejected and abused by her parents. Meanwhile, Beck’s father is described dropping his family off and leaving, “tires slashing through puddles” (217). In this scene, Mac is challenging readers to adopt the reflective stance of wry civility and consider how Beck’s abusive father remains untouched, while Beck is expelled (217).

It can be argued that Mac’s complex construction of the solution to April’s isolation, where the Beckoners are marginalized and excluded from the civil space, holds strong parallels with Coleman’s paradox of civility. In the layered portrayal of Beck, Mac promotes wry civility by suggesting that violence is being ignored as Beck is pushed to the borders of society. When combined with the critique of the trance of civility in Zoe’s relationship with the Beckoners, and the role of the community in the solution to isolation, Mac’s exploration of the paradox of civility demonstrates that the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners* has strong parallels to the Canadian literary theory of wry civility.

### **Isolation and Wry Civility in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea***

Applying the critical lens of wry civility to *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* also reveals significant connections between the Canadian literary theory and the construction of the theme of isolation. This is evident in Niresh’s isolation, which parallels Coleman’s criticism of White civility, and in Selvadurai’s use of Niresh to promote wry reflection among Canadian readers. It is also suggested in the relationship between the paradox of civility and Amrith’s solution to his isolation from his family.

## Isolation and the Criticism of White Civility

Analyzing Niresh's isolation through the lens of wry civility reveals significant connections between Niresh's exclusion based on ethnocultural identity and Coleman's criticism of White civility based on concepts of White, British gentlemanliness. Although Niresh is a Canadian citizen, having been born and raised in Canada, he says he is isolated because his peers consider him a "Paki" (242). He feels like an outsider in his own country: "I'm not Canadian and then, over here, I'm not Sri Lankan. I don't belong anywhere" (172). Niresh is representative of what Louise Saldanha, addressing the experience of cultural minorities in Canadian children's literature, calls the "experiences of estrangement *inside* Canada—that sense of being racially excluded and 'away' in the public, national space where we should, as multiculturals, be feeling 'at home'" (Saldanha, "White Picket" 132; emphasis in orig.). Although Niresh was raised in Toronto, he thinks his race marks him as a sub-Canadian "freak" in the country of his birth (242).

The isolation Niresh experiences due to his ethnocultural identity represents how White civility constructs concepts of belonging in Canada. Despite Canada's goal of multiculturalism, civility is generally layered on status of belonging and "usually understands itself to have an inside and an outside, as well as a hierarchy from top to bottom" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 31). Drawing on J.S. Woodsworth's 1909 book on Canadian immigration, *Strangers Within Our Gates*, Coleman describes how White civility "is structured paradoxically in relation to strangers who must be detained at the nation's gates—they are not full members, but remain always necessary as the beneficiaries of Canadian decency" ("From Canadian" 33).<sup>6</sup> As the trance of Canadian civility, White civility "operates usually by comparison with outsiders, as well as with what we might call internal outsiders, who are seen as less civil than we are" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 31). This is a pervasive and complex structure.

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<sup>6</sup> Woodsworth positions the strangers "within" our gates, while Coleman positions them "at" our gates. Both men use this phrase to highlight how individuals within Canada of non-British ancestry are not fully accepted as Canadians. Coleman's repositioning works figuratively with the metaphor of the gate to emphasize how, in the discourse of White civility, immigrants of non-British ancestry and their descendants are forever positioned outside of the "us" inside Canada's gates—the internal outsiders. By changing the position to "at" Coleman is also able to discuss all non-Canadians, the strangers around the world, who as a uniform group of external outsiders begin on the other side of Canada's borders and spread worldwide. Of course, these international strangers do not include our "mother(land)" Britain or our "brother" the United States (Coleman 239).



White civility's idea of the strangers at the gates can clearly be seen in Niresh's description of his isolation. As a non-white individual, Niresh is an "internal outsider," he is a born and raised Canadian, but his Canadian peers see him as a "Paki" (Selvadurai 242). The use of this ethnic slur "others" Niresh because of his skin colour and locates his belonging to an area outside of Canada, homogenizing all individuals with South Asian ancestry and maliciously denying ethnic diversity. This accords with Coleman's statement that "[i]n Canada, the sharp edges and striations of civility have been most consistently and explicitly drawn along the borders of race and ethnicity" ("From Canadian" 32). Niresh is one of the many "strangers who must be detained at the nation's gates," as he is denied his right to be a full member of Canadian society (Coleman, "From Canadian" 33). While it is clear that Niresh is not a "beneficiary[y] of Canadian decency" from his peers, the notion of Canadians as benefactors to strangers at our gates is nonetheless constructed in the bullies' use of the racial slur (Coleman, "From Canadian" 33). By denying Niresh's Canadian identity, his bullies imply he is the beneficiary of Canadian decency because "*Canadian-Canadian[s]*" allow him to live in their country (Coleman, "From Canadian" 34; emphasis in orig.). Hence, Niresh's description of his life in Canada shows how White civility stratifies and isolates Canadians by making internal outsiders. These internal outsiders are distinct from "normative *Canadian-Canadianness*," where "that normative Canadianness is White and British" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 34; emphasis in orig.). By engaging with the "sharp edges and striation" of Canadian civility, Selvadurai uses Niresh's isolation to explore the repercussions of White civility in Canada (Coleman, "From Canadian" 32).

### **Isolation to Promote Wry Reflection**

As Selvadurai presents Niresh's isolation stemming from the injustice of White civility, he is also deeply engaged in promoting Coleman's vision of wry civility. This is present in the manner in which Selvadurai uses Niresh to promote reflection among his readers. Seeing how White civility categorizes Niresh as an internal outsider in Canada is shocking and embarrassing to Canadian readers, especially as they are guided through this experience by Amrith, a non-Canadian observer.

In considering the novel's engagement with wry civility, it is important to note that the intended reader of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is Canadian. This is evident in the various forms of in-text glossing that suggest the reader is unfamiliar with many of the basics of Sri Lankan culture. For instance, the narrator describes the form of the educational system, noting

“[t]he school year, which began in January, was divided into three semesters, separated from one another by month-long holidays in April, August, and December” (25). There is also a reference to “the Tamil capital of Jaffna, in the north of Sri Lanka” (30). The implied Canadian reader is also revealed in the isolation Niresh experiences in Canada, as a Canadian reader is arguably more likely to reflect on the assessment of Canada portrayed in the text because it directly challenges the Canadian trance of civility.

Engaging in wry civility, Selvadurai is challenging the Canadian trance, whereby “Canadians think themselves more civilized than all other nations who don’t have a multiculturalism policy” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 25). Selvadurai challenges “the sedative politics of White civility” and shifts to wry civility in a confrontation of “normative *Canadian-Canadianness*” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 34; emphasis in orig.). By setting the novel in Sri Lanka, and giving it a Sri Lankan focal character, Canadian White civility is directly problematized. As previously explored, Niresh is “immediately marked” as a “foreigner” in Sri Lanka and is constantly referred to as the “Canadian cousin” (80, 93-108). It seems obvious to the Sri Lankans that Niresh is Canadian. To clarify that Niresh is more Canadian than Sri Lankan, the Sri Lankan characters act as strong foils for Niresh’s Canadian beliefs, values, habits, and behaviour. For example, there is a great deal of attention given to the difference between Amrith and Niresh’s cultural attitudes towards respect and their relationships with adults. Therefore, although White civility has kept Niresh at Canada’s gates by making him an internal outsider and defining his belonging based on his ancestral homeland, the ignorance of this belief is exposed by Niresh’s outsider status in Sri Lanka.

Selvadurai uses Niresh’s experience of isolation to promote a “reflexive mode of civility that works towards awareness of the contradictory, dynamic structures of civility itself in our ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive society” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 36). It is arguable that Selvadurai has taken up Coleman’s challenge for cultural producers to transform the Canadian trance “into something less self-insulating, less self-congratulatory, into something more dynamic and inclusive, something more truly TransCanada” (Coleman, “From Canadian” 36). Selvadurai does so by provoking his Canadian readers to reconsider how Canadian civility is constructed in our attitudes towards multiculturalism and belonging.

### **The Paradox of Civility in the Solution to Isolation**

Finally, applying the lens of wry civility to the manner in which Amrith ends his isolation from his adoptive family also suggests the paradox of civility. At the end of the novel, Amrith

comes to forgive Aunt Bundle for her role in separating him from his mother, and to accept his aunt and uncle as his parents. This resolution occurs between Amrith and Uncle Lucky more easily than it does between him and Aunt Bundle. Amrith is able to accept Uncle Lucky as his father as soon as he lets himself speak about his parents' deaths. This is due to the fact that Amrith's biological father "was a stranger to Amrith," and he "had never actually seen him" because his father was always at work or at the club until well into the night when Amrith was home (9). His father abused his mother, so "Amrith only knew his father as a sound, a voice shouting in the night" (9). When his parents die, Amrith grieves the loss of his mother and blames his father who was driving the motorcycle (254). Amrith is more willing to accept Uncle Lucky's love because, unlike Aunt Bundle, he had nothing to do with his mother's death. Amrith "loved and trusted Uncle Lucky more than anyone else in the world" from the time he was seven years old (4-5). When Amrith talks to Niresh about his parents, he becomes "aware, for the first time, of the heavy burden of silence he had carried around these past eight years" (254). Then, when Niresh asks Amrith about his deceased father, Amrith's replies, "I guess it's been too painful to think about him at all. And Uncle Lucky is my father now" (255). After discussing his family, Amrith claims his Uncle as his father; however, he does not make a similarly direct statement about his relationship with his Aunt Bundle.

Amrith's anger towards Aunt Bundle takes longer for him to work through. When Amrith is able to bring his mother's memory to consciousness and acknowledge it, dealing with his loss, he starts to understand that he has been repressing the pain by blaming Aunt Bundle and causing his own isolation. After speaking with Niresh, Amrith's progression towards accepting his relationship with Aunt Bundle is shown through his dreams. Amrith dreams he is underwater, dislodging his mother's cane chair and pushing it out to the light. For Amrith, the empty chair was a strong symbol of his mother and her death in his previous nightmares. It is a difficult task, but as he moves this symbol of his mother towards the open light, he lifts out of the "black mood" that had been haunting him throughout the novel (Selvadurai 255, 32). As explored in the discussion on parents in YA fiction, this black mood has come to stand for his hatred of Aunt Bundle and his grief over his mother. While he does not call Aunt Bundle his mother, talking about what happened allows Amrith to accept her as a parent. While Amrith is left with sadness and loss, he is no longer angry and resentful.

Amrith fully forgives Aunt Bundle when he experiences how, as Uncle Lucky once told him, "sometimes the past does offer us a gift—a way to come to terms with what has happened to us" (121). Being receptive to reconsidering the past after his discussion with Niresh, Amrith

reflects on his relationship with his aunt when he is given the gift of his ancestral property. The deed helps Amrith come to terms with what happened, and he no longer behaves as if he is struggling with his aunt for control of his mother's memory. As he looks at the deed, he sees "a real link to the past, to his mother" (271). This link helps him "come to terms" with what happened, as "[h]e found himself remembering that eucalyptus tree on which Auntie Bundle and his mother had carved their names" (121, 271-272). Amrith had seen this tree when he had visited the property with his mother and Auntie Bundle. On it, they had carved "*Asha and Bundle, Best Friends*" (125; emphasis in orig.). That day, his mother had told him, "when you think of this place, I want you to remember what fun we [Bundle, Amrith and herself] had swimming together" (125). This gift of the past reminds Amrith to consider the close relationship Bundle had had with his mother, instead of focusing on his mother's death and helps him move on. Whereas, before, Amrith had "felt a curious bitter pleasure in denying her his memories," Amrith now talks with his aunt about his mother (13, 271-272). When Amrith tells Auntie Bundle he does indeed remember his mother, she hugs him tightly, saying "I'm so glad, son, so glad" (273). As she leaves, "Amrith looked after Auntie Bundle and he wondered how he had ever held such resentment against her all these years" (273).

Amrith's reintegration, symbolized through his acceptance of Auntie Bundle and his adopted family, is confirmed at the novel's end when he joins the family party. Earlier, Amrith had "felt depressed that not a single person on it [the guest list] was his friend or relative" (78). As Amrith has now accepted his adopted family, he understands he should stop isolating himself from them, and "knew he could not stay in his room much longer" (274). In the last sentence of the novel, "Amrith, with a small smile to himself in the mirror, went out to join the party" (274).

When he allows the boundaries of his definition of family to be extended to include his adoptive family, Amrith mirrors the process of enlarging the borders of the civil sphere and demonstrates the paradox of civility. In order for Amrith to be a full member of the family, he decides that he must displace his homosexual identity and hide it from his family. This is related to Coleman's explanation of Étienne Balibar's "paradox of exclusive egalitarianism to the heart of civility," where "if civil society exists when people of different identifications have equal access to and agency within a public sphere . . . then they must allow their identification with that shared public entity . . . to displace or subsume their other . . . identifications" (qtd. in Coleman, "From Canadian" 36-37). According to Coleman, "Civility, in this sense, involves a violent marginalization of non-centralizing identifications" ("From Canadian" 37).

As analyzed in my section connecting Amrith's isolation to the psychologically abject character, I have demonstrated how Amrith decides that he must keep his homosexuality a secret. He knows that it is illegal in Sri Lanka and that his homosexuality could destroy his relationship with his family based on the way "Auntie Bundie had refused to believe her friend was depraved in that way, though it was clear she was saddened and troubled by the possibility" (265). His drama teacher had also suggested the danger of drawing attention to Amrith's homosexuality when she chastises Suraj for teasing Amrith for playing the part of Cassio, which has a scene with homosexual undertones. She tells Suraj, "I have friends in the theatre world who are *that* way inclined, and it's no laughing matter in this country" (224; emphasis in orig.).

Paralleling how civility excludes as it includes, when Amrith allows himself to belong in his adoptive family, he also pushes his homosexuality to the margins. After he admits "I am . . . different" to his mother's grave, he knows, "It was all he could do for now. He would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his own best friend, his own confidant and guide" (267; ellipsis in orig.). While Amrith holds out hope that "one day, there would be somebody else he could share this secret. . . . for now he must remain silent" (267). This need to marginalize non-centralizing identifications as part of civility is arguably rooted in Frye's theories of unity and uniformity.

Amrith's decision to hide his difference may be seen as an example of uniformity, "where everyone 'belongs,' uses the same clichés, thinks alike and behaves alike, produces a society which seems comfortable at first but is totally lacking in human dignity" (Frye, *Bush* vi). Opposed to uniformity is unity, which "tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition, recognizes that it is man's destiny to unite and not divide, and understands that creating proletariats and scapegoats and second-class citizens is a mean and contemptible activity" (Frye, *Bush* vi). *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* reflects a complex engagement with these concepts and appears to modify them according to wry civility.

Bringing Amrith's isolation from his family to closure as he recognizes the authenticity of his relationships with his guardians and marginalizes his homosexuality, Selvadurai engages with the idea of conformity that is part of uniformity. Amrith's decision is an act of self-protection, and Selvadurai suggests that his marginalization is situational and that he may not be closeted forever. It would be erroneous to interpret Amrith's decision to remain silent as promoting uniformity. I believe a more accurate interpretation of these events shows wry civility and the promotion of unity. Comparing Frye's unity to a concept of civility in which everyone belongs implies that even in a state of unity there are borders and larger affiliations to which its

members must subscribe. As civility is a form of politics and a structure of the civil public sphere, Frye's definition of unity can be understood as a form of civility (Coleman "From Canadian" 192). What wry civility proposes is that Canadians work towards the ideal of unity by trying to disrupt its borders and expand inclusivity. At the same time, there must be a realization that the overarching identity always excludes as it includes.<sup>7</sup> Wry civility is a tool to "emphasize the importance of a dynamic, ever-renewed alertness to this fundamental paradox of the repressive violence that haunts the borders and stratifies the layers of civility" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 37). It is "complicity without complacency," as its members realize that civility or unity must exclude as it includes but that the goal is to keep pushing the boundaries and becoming conscious of "the paradoxical structure of civility itself" with wry civility (Coleman, "From Canadian" 36).

Wry civility, and its reflection on the paradoxical structure of civility, is evident in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, as Selvadurai dramatizes Amrith's need to marginalize his homosexuality in order to belong in his family and Sri Lanka. It would be misleading to interpret Amrith's silence regarding his homosexuality as promoting the stratified society where civility excludes individuals based on homosexuality. Rather, analyzing this using wry civility shows Selvadurai is actually drawing attention to the "reflexive mode of civility that works towards awareness of the contradictory, dynamic structures of civility itself in our ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive society" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 36). Hence, analyzing how Amrith alters his isolation through his acceptance of his family reveals important parallels between the novel and the paradox of civility described in the theory of wry civility. Combined with the wry civility and criticism of White civility seen in Niresh's isolation, significant similarities can be documented between *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and the authentic Canadian theory of wry civility.

It can therefore be concluded that applying the critical lens of wry civility to *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* shows significant parallels between the theme of isolation in these novels and the theory of Canadian civility. Both authors have constructed texts which demonstrate that the "critical intimacy of reading imaginative texts has a remarkable power to intervene in the reproduction of sanctioned ignorance" by suggesting ways civility, with its implied notions of belonging, functions in Canadian society (Coleman, "From Canadian"

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<sup>7</sup> This point is problematic when applied to the complex and shifting concept of sexual identity. From a theoretical perspective it is possible to see that ideas of who 'belongs' in the civil space can relate to borders between sexual norms and 'deviances.'

42). These authors also connect to Frye's vision of unity and uniformity, showing a longstanding engagement with Canadian culture. It is clear these authors employ the themes of isolation, alienation, violence, and bullying in ways that are "crucial to intervening in the Canadian trance of civility" (Coleman, "From Canadian" 41).

## Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the theme of isolation in two works of contemporary realistic Canadian YA fiction: *The Beckoners* by Carrie Mac, and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai. I have identified how isolation is constructed in the protagonists' sense that they do not fit in with their peers and in their disconnected relationships with their parents. I have also analyzed how isolation is emphasized through the experiences of the important secondary characters, April and Niresh.

I have compared the theme of isolation in the primary texts with trends and characteristics in American YA fiction, which may also be generalized to English-language YA fiction worldwide. Specifically, I have looked at the motif of absent parents and the forms of the abject characters in adolescent novels as it has been explored by American YA theorists. I discovered many important similarities but they were insufficient to conclude that the theme of isolation in these novels correlates to American YA trends.

Finally, I have applied the Canadian critical lens of wry civility to the isolation in the novels. For *The Beckoners*, I have interrogated how isolation parallels the Canadian trance of civility, the role of the community in wry civility, and the paradox of civility. For *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, I have explored how the theme of isolation dramatizes critiques White civility, promotes wry civility, and suggests the paradox of civility.

In the next chapter, "Chapter 6: Conclusions," I provide my conclusions by demonstrating how my findings in the analysis of the texts answer my research questions. I explore the limitations of this study and the implications for further research.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

In this study, I investigated a number of questions, specifically:

1. How is Canadian cultural identity transmitted in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels?
2. How is the theme of isolation constructed in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels and what connections are evident between this theme and Canadian culture? Is this theme simply a characteristic of contemporary realistic Young Adult fiction in North America?
3. How is the theme of disillusionment constructed in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult novels, and what connections are evident between this theme and Canadian culture? Is this theme simply a characteristic of contemporary realistic Young Adult fiction in North America?
4. Does the reoccurring presence of false myths and wry civility in a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult works indicate important issues in Canadian culture?
5. How does a selection of contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult works reflect the theories of John Ralston Saul, Dennis Lee, Daniel Coleman, and Northrop Frye?

In this chapter, I address my findings for all of these research questions in my discussion of the results.

To explore my research questions I have analyzed four selected works of dark-themed contemporary realistic Canadian Young Adult (YA) fiction: *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie, *The Space Between* by Don Aker, *The Beckoners*, by Carrie Mac, and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* by Shyam Selvadurai. I have grouped these books into two pairs and investigated the construction of a dark theme in each pair. I explored the theme of disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* and the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*.

I interrogated the construction of these dark themes, first in terms of their association with contemporary realistic American YA fiction, and then through critical lenses adapted from Canadian cultural theories. I evaluated how the themes in the primary texts may be interpreted as conforming to American or worldwide English-language YA trends, or if the specific use of the dark themes represented something authentically Canadian.



An analysis of the theme of disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* indicated three important ways disillusionment was constructed. First, disillusionment was observed when the protagonists are confronted by their unacknowledged flaws, realizing they are part of an oppressive system. Second, disillusionment occurred when adolescents realized that they are powerless to end the entrenched systems of oppression in their society without the participation of the collective. Third, disillusionment was found when the protagonists realized they are not responsible for another individual's suicide, and that the burden of guilt they had been struggling with was unfounded. When considering the theme of disillusionment in this study, I defined it as a process of "undeceiving" or when the adolescents realize that reality is different from what they had once thought.

Connecting these instances of disillusionment to noteworthy trends and characteristics in American YA fiction revealed many similarities between the emphasis on the protagonists' growing self-awareness, the ambiguous endings, and the treatment of violence. My analysis of the presentation of these trends could not conclusively demonstrate that the authors of the primary texts employed the theme of disillusionment in a similar manner to the trends present in dark-themed American YA fiction. Instead, it seemed that many of these American characteristics reflect the 'Western' concept of adolescence as a time of transition and self-discovery. The ambiguous endings and treatment of violence could be considered a reflection of the maturing adolescent readers' desire for complex realistic fiction and distaste for patronizing or didactic texts.

When disillusionment in *The Lottery* and *The Space Between* was examined using the critical lens of false myths, adapted from the cultural theory of John Ralston Saul, there were many strong similarities that led me to conclude that the theme of disillusionment introduced an authentically Canadian worldview and theoretical stance to the novels. While not expressly dealing with Aboriginality, it is possible to conclude that the ways these texts treated the theme of disillusionment were influenced by Aboriginal concepts of egalitarianism and diversity, which Saul highlights as part of the foundation of Canadian culture. The disillusionment that the adolescents face about themselves was reminiscent of Saul's argument that Canadians are inhibiting their growth and potential by clinging to false myths about our culture. The critical lens also indicated strong parallels between the adolescents' realizations regarding their inability to dismantle the system of oppression and Saul's critique of the failed elite and the imported European false myths that have stunted authentic expressions of Canadian culture. Finally, the adolescents' disillusionment regarding their role in the suicide of another individual paralleled

how the Aboriginal-inspired concepts of egalitarianism and diversity that are the core of Canadian culture are being obscured by false myths of liberalism.

Combining this critical lens with Dennis Lee's theory of Canadian culture also proved valuable as it indicated connections between false myths and Lee's theories of inauthenticity and authenticity in Canadian culture. By applying the critical lens of false myths and Lee's theory of authenticity to the theme of disillusionment in the primary texts, I was able to show how this theme could be interpreted as an authentic engagement with Canadian culture, rather than a simple following of American YA trends.

When I analyzed the theme of isolation in *The Beckoners* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, I came to a similar conclusion. In my analysis, I identified how isolation is seen in the protagonists' feeling that they do not fit in with their peers and in their distanced relationships with their parents. I also looked at how isolation was emphasized in the experiences of the secondary characters April and Niresh.

When I investigated this construction of isolation for the ways it may be associated with American YA fiction, I found similarities between the trope of the absent parent and the gender-specific forms of the abject character. While these were very strong similarities, there were indications that most of the commonalities could be extended to English-language YA literature in general. In contrast, applying the critical lens of wry civility revealed significant parallels between the Canadian theory and the treatment of isolation in the primary texts.

In *The Beckoners*, applying the critical lens of wry civility to a close reading of the text revealed strong parallels and ideological similarities between Zoe's relationship with the Beckoners and the trance of Canadian civility, the importance of collective critical reflection, and the paradox of civility. Likewise, there were fundamental similarities between *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and the theory of wry civility. This was evident in the criticism of White civility implied in Niresh's isolation, Selvadurai's use of isolation to promote wry reflectivity among his readers, and the paradox of civility when Amrith accepts his adopted family.

A brief examination of Northrop Frye's famous descriptions of unity and uniformity in Canada disclosed a link between the isolation in these novels, the theory of wry civility, and the concepts of unity and uniformity. This association implied that the foundations of wry civility, as explored in the construction of the theme of isolation in these novels, has strong roots in Canadian literary criticism. I was, therefore, able to conclude that the manner in which the theme of isolation is used in these novels reflects longstanding ideas in authentic Canadian culture. The four authors' approach to internationally popular YA themes in uniquely Canadian ways is a

distinct example of how, “[i]t’s not that the subject matter is necessarily unique to Canadian writers but it’s the treatment. It’s the sincerity of the approach. . .” (Jeffrey Canton 13).

I would like to note that while I used John Ralston Saul’s false myths and Daniel Coleman’s wry civility as two separate critical lenses, there is overlap between these two theories. Most importantly, both Saul and Coleman emphasize diversity and a Canadian concept of inclusivity. In addition, they both draw from Frye and Lee. Saul quotes Frye’s garrison mentality and Coleman includes references to Lee’s “Cadence, Country, Silence” (Saul, 233; Coleman, “From Canadian” 34, 193). By separating these theorists using two different critical lenses, I was able to focus more clearly on each specific theory. It was beyond the scope of this study to go into a more in-depth analysis of how these theories relate to each other, Canadian cultural criticism, and the primary texts, but this topic would provide an interesting avenue for future research.

## **Limitations of Study and Implications for Further Research**

While my research concluded that the treatment of the themes of disillusionment and isolation in the selected Canadian novels were more reflective of authentic Canadian culture than of North American YA literature trends, there are limitations to my study. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, I have confined my study of Canadian YA literature to works originally published in English. I realize the fallacy of examining “Canadian” culture while ignoring the cultural output of our other official language, French. I have chosen to limit my focus based on my comfort with the English language, and to better study the trends as they relate to YA fiction in the United States. Further research in this subject looking at Canadian culture from a comparative literary perspective that examines both French and English language Young Adult texts would be valuable.

When trying to connect the Canadian novels to American YA fiction, I confronted numerous ambiguities and a lack of consistency in the scholarship of American YA fiction. Many American scholars, such as Karen Coats, Roberta Seelinger Trites, and Jennifer M. Brown and Cindi Di Marzo, do not explicitly propose that the characteristics described or the theory constructed were specific to American YA fiction. In general, most American YA scholars tend to classify their discussion of YA fiction without a national identifier. Nonetheless, the literature they critique, as indicated in their bibliographies and the books used to support their conclusions, are overwhelmingly American. This is not surprising, given the large number of American YA novels published yearly and the neo-colonialist bias towards considering American culture to be

“global” culture. Overall, theorists including Coats, Trites, Brown and Di Marzo, rely almost completely on American titles, sometimes adding a few British works and only rarely mentioning a Canadian author. As implied in my analysis, the result of this ambiguity was that it was difficult in my study to limit the American YA characteristics to American YA literature alone, and I often expanded it to include English-language YA fiction worldwide. The difficulty of separating American culture from English-language culture worldwide reflects issues of identity, globalization, and neo-colonialism which are beyond the scope of this study but would be valuable for future research to explore.

There is also ambiguity and a lack of consistency among YA researchers of dark-themed YA literature. As noted in my definitions, dark-themed literature is referred to by a number of different names. The plethora of designations, such as “bleak,” “gritty,” “downer,” and similar defining adjectives make it a challenge to explore this phenomenon. There are also many instances of critical writing in which, although critics do not use any explicit designation such as “dark-themed” or “bleak,” it was quite clear from their analysis that they focus on this aspect of YA literature. I chose the term “dark-themed” from Brown and Di Marzo, as it represents my emphasis on theme and I feel it best describes what is being discussed under the other terms.

To continue the study of cultural identity in Canadian YA fiction, future scholarship in the field of dark-themed Canadian YA fiction would benefit from a more comparative approach, both in the relationship between English and French Canadian literature, and through the comparative analysis of Canadian and American texts or other national literatures. As Saul notes, “the ability of a civilization to survive and grow lies in its ability to describe itself” (21). Continuing to reflect on cultural identity in Canadian YA literature, as a representation of how we describe and define our society and ourselves to our young citizens and readers, is fundamental to the survival and growth of our culture.

In conclusion, Young Adult fiction is an exciting, growing field in Canada and internationally. Its focus on adolescents, both as protagonists and as intended readers, makes it a dynamic vehicle to study messages of identity, society, and change. As Cornelia Hoogland notes, “A people’s sense of themselves as a nation can in part be achieved by the inward journeying which literature provides” (28). Adolescents and adults who read Canadian YA fiction for pleasure, interest, and to help them navigate their own sense of identity, will be rewarded by a diverse and engaging national literature for youth.

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## Appendix: Contemporary Realistic Canadian Young Adult Fiction Considered for the Primary Texts

This preliminary list of potential primary texts was composed of works of Canadian Young Adult realistic fiction published since 2000. The titles were short-listed for the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book of the Year award and have been given starred reviews in the Canadian Children's Book Centre *Our Choice* and *Best Books* catalogues. In the *Our Choice* and *Best Books* catalogues, each of these texts was given an Interest Level range that started at a minimum of 12 years of age and did not end before 15. Entries with an asterisk (\*) were published in the years for which the Canadian Library Association Young Adult Book of the Year award shortlist is unavailable.

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- Bell, William. *The Blue Helmet*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2006. Print.
- Brenna, Beverley. *Wild Orchid*. Calgary: Red Deer P, 2005. Print.
- Brooks, Martha. *Mistik Lake*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2007. Print.
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- Choyce, Lesley. *Shoulder the Sky*. Toronto: Dundurn P, 2003. Print.
- Friesen, Gayle. *The Isabel Factor*. Toronto: Kids Can P, 2005. Print.
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- Goobie, Beth. *The Lottery*. Victoria: Orca, 2002. Print.
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- Mac, Carrie. *The Beckoners*. Victoria: Orca, 2004. Print.
- McKay, Sharon E. *Esther*. Toronto: Penguin, 2004. Print.
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- Rivers, Karen. *Surviving Sam*. Vancouver: Raincoast, 2001. Print.\*
- Scrimger, Richard. *Into the Ravine*. Toronto: Tundra, 2007. Print.
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Sheppard, Mary C. *Seven for a Secret*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2001. Print.

Slade, Arthur. *Megiddo's Shadow*. Toronto: HarperTrophy, 2006. Print.

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Trembath, Don. *The Popsicle Journal*. Victoria: Orca, 2001. Print.\*

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