

**“SMALL, UNMENDABLE PIECES”: RECENTERING RESILIENCE AND AGENCY IN  
IMMIGRANT CHILD NARRATIVES WITH EPISTOLARY FICTION**

by

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## **Abstract**

Immigrants make up almost a quarter of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2017), but the emphasis on success and integration in immigration discourse overshadows the difficult aftermath of relocation for many immigrant families, especially on immigrant children. After all, “if the promise of citizenship is offered as a promise of happiness, then you have to demonstrate that you are a worthy recipient of its promise” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 133). However, many factors make it challenging for even families to discuss these complexities with each other. In this thesis, I will first outline the intricate nuances of the changes in immigrant family dynamics, then illustrate the importance of establishing a space where immigrant children can fully express and process their experiences and emotions in order to write a narrative that transcends their identities as ones solely defined by the hardships and trauma of immigration. Then, I will discuss why the epistolary form, with its intimate and candid nature, can provide this space for migrant children, and how its representation of consciousness can be an effective tool in constructing truth and identity when it comes to narrating migrant child experiences.

## **Lay Summary**

The complexities of immigration cause complications to occur between families that often hinder authentic communication and connection. In this thesis, I argue that the intimate and reflective nature of epistolary forms in literature provide a space for migrant children to share their experiences in a way that allows them to process past experiences while building a hopeful future in the community they wish to live in.

## **Preface**

This Master of Arts thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Jieun Lee.

This is the academic portion only of a hybrid academic/creative thesis. The creative portion is a middle grade novel titled *Sunny Park and the Seoul Corner*, written exclusively by Jieun Lee.

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## **Dedication**

To my family, who knows every aspect of the immigrant experience and has supported me every step of the way.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1: The challenges of immigration**

Although the concept of “immigrant” is a complicated one in this country of colonial settlers, in this thesis it describes a person who was born outside of Canada before they were either a landed immigrant or permanent resident. However, capturing the complexities and nuances of the immigrant experience is challenging, as it is often filled with trauma and difficult family dynamics. Parents usually leave jobs, support networks, and extended families to rebuild a life in a new country where they have none of those important elements of social capital (Falicov, 2007, p.164). Children face similar yet different challenges but are more entrenched in the new social aspects of the country, often experiencing discrimination at school (Qin, 2008, p. 163). Even so, the one common theme that arises in these stories is resilience: kids discover new aspects of themselves and are active agents in building their identities in this new context.

### **1.2: Components of this thesis**

In this thesis, I wish to illuminate aspects of immigrant children’s experiences that focus on this resilience, and how it is formed and illustrated in children’s literature. I will discuss how children’s literature can and does feature positive examples of immigrant children learning to form their own selfhood by building supportive communities, writing, and creating art. Specifically, I will use the epistolary form, and its intimate nature, to illustrate how it can be a safe space for migrant children to process complicated experiences and build a new type of community. In this way, their resilience becomes a type of agency as they carve out their own space in their new environment, separate from their families. This is important as representing the experiences of immigration in children’s literature means that children can begin to process and understand that although their stories are valuable, they do not have to experience them

alone. I will use Kelly Yang's middle grade novel *Front Desk* as an example of epistolary fiction being an ideal format for telling stories of immigrant child experiences.

### **1.3: My positionality and the importance of representing lived experiences**

My interest in this topic stems from my own lived experiences as an immigrant. I have immigrated twice: the first time to the U.S. as a child, and the second time to Canada when I was a teenager. Moving to a new country brought many new experiences but also its challenges. Navigating a whole new culture without any extended family or social network can be an isolating process, and reading novels, memoirs, and even journal articles about those who have had similar experiences can be immensely validating. When I read Kelly Yang's debut novel *Front Desk* (2018) a few years ago, it captured many of my own memories—both painful and joyful—that I wished I had read as a child. Reading Mia's attempts to support her family and build her own community reminded me that my own immigration story is important, but not singular. Although many may have felt isolated, novels like *Front Desk* can show them that many others have felt the same loneliness—and that is the real power of seeing your own experiences reflected in literature. As Vinh Nguyen (2014) states in the article “Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance,” “It is a desire to see myself and those like me represented in narratives that push us outside their frames” (p. 469). Seeing themselves reflected in external sources can also help immigrants fight against the layers of secrecy and shame that often surrounds these experiences of immigration. More specifically, depicting these difficult and complicated experiences in children's literature is important for kids to both see themselves represented but also to illustrate the nuanced, complex nature of immigration and its impacts on children for a larger audience.

#### **1.4: *Sunny Park and the Seoul Corner* and the role of middle grade fiction in telling immigrant child narratives**

The novel I completed for the creative portion of my thesis, *Sunny Park and the Seoul Corner*, is a middle-grade novel that features many of these themes of immigration and kids using creativity and art as forms of resilience and resistance. The novel's main character Sunny Park lives with her mother, who runs a cafe that is beloved in the community. When gentrification and racial discrimination cause their rent prices to go up, Sunny, her friends, and community members must find a way to save the cafe from the hands of the greedy landlord, Mr. Rannelly. With help from her friends, Sunny proves that many members of the community were subject to racist policies and unethical rent increases. Although people keep telling Sunny that she is just a kid, she never loses her determination to save her mom's beloved cafe. As an aspiring writer, Sunny decides to write letters to process the various changes in her life and to come up with a way to outsmart the bigoted landlord.

I decided that middle grade would be the appropriate age group for this novel's readership, as middle childhood is a crucial period when children begin to become their own independent agents, develop opinions separate from their parents, and increase awareness of their own racial identities (Coll et al., 2009). In addition, the family dynamic begins to shift from one of dependency (children on their parents) to one of interdependency (Taylor et al., 2013). I also find the middle grade age to be especially joyful. Without the pressure and self-consciousness of young adulthood but increased awareness from early childhood, middle grade characters really start coming into their own identities, developing real friendships, and diving headfirst into something they care about.

## **1.5: Summary**

The following chapter will provide more in-depth details about these intricacies of the immigrant child experience and elucidate the necessity for immigrant children to have a form like the epistolary to process and narrate their experiences. Chapter Three will illustrate how epistolary fiction can provide immigrant child characters the opportunity to write their own narratives and be an active part of building the community they wish to live in. Chapter Four provides *Front Desk* as an exemplar of how immigrant child characters use epistles to shape their identities and build communities, and finally, the last chapter will provide some resources to best support immigrant families in Toronto that are experiencing many of the factors that have been discussed in this thesis.

## **Chapter 2: Immigrant Children's Experiences**

### **2.1: Canada's Immigration Policy**

According to the 2016 Canadian census, 21.6 percent of the population reported “they were or had ever been a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada” (Statistics Canada, 2017). Canada's process of immigration began as an effort to increase their source of labour, and with the Immigration Act of 1967, the introduction of the point system continued to favour applicants who possessed the desired education, language, and occupation (Pon et al, 2017, p. 8). This type of entry system emphasized skill and positive contribution as the golden ticket to entry, to ensure that anyone voluntarily entering the country would provide the country with social and economic benefits. This also implies that immigrants must prove that they are worthy of being in Canada, and a failure to do so means a failure to integrate successfully (Li, 2003, p. 316). In “Deconstructing Canada's discourse of immigrant integration,” (2003) Li further states, “Economically, immigrants who can match or outperform native-born Canadians' performance are viewed as well integrated, whereas those who fall behind are seen as social burdens” (p. 324) and ultimately, “the underlying assumption is that the value of immigrants lies in their ability to enrich Canadians, and in order to do this they must at least perform as well as the native-born” (p. 324). This exchange of skills is deemed as fair, because as Sara Ahmed (2010) says, “if the promise of citizenship is offered as a promise of happiness, then you have to demonstrate that you are a worthy recipient of its promise” (p. 133). And for many immigrant families, immigration is seen as their only option to secure a better life for their kids.

### **2.2: Challenges in the Immigration Process**

Regardless of these promises of happiness, immigration is a highly disruptive experience that causes significant changes within the family structure, even altering child-parent dynamics

(Foner & Dreby, 2011, p. 546). Family members face different challenges depending on their role. Parents often experience downward social mobility due to difficulties finding work, learning the language, and a lack of social support (Qin, 2008a, p. 24). Children are usually struggling to establish themselves amongst their peer groups while navigating discrimination, new languages, and cultures, while also managing their parents' expectations for success (Qin, 2008b, p. 163). Because the children are more immersed in the social aspects of their new culture, parents begin depending on them to manage their communication difficulties and other more adult responsibilities (Suarez-Orozco, 2015, p. 11). This results in a reversal of parental roles that can cause distress in their children, who are then dealing with a lack of guidance and parental support (Suarez-Orozco, 2015, p. 11).

### **2.3: Immigration, Family Dynamics, and the Model Minority**

Despite these difficulties, Sara Ahmed (2010) states that “Migrants are increasingly subject to what I am calling the happiness duty, in a way that is continuous with the happiness duty of the natives in the colonial mission . . . citizenship now requires a test: we might speculate that this test is a happiness test” (p. 130). This is particularly poignant since Asian diaspora are often labelled as the model minority: a racialized group characterized by their so-called ability to adapt successfully into the white-dominated hierarchy (Eng, 2019, p. 41). Asian diaspora “are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order to be, in order to be seen at all” (p. 45). In addition to the discourse around immigration, the implications of being the model minority means that in order to be legitimized in their new society, they must be externally successful: contributing to the economy and not causing any trouble. Qin (2008a) notes that “a particular detrimental effect of the ‘model minority’ label for Asian American students is that they are often seen as problem free and well-

adjusted because on the most observable measure of adjustment, they indeed seem to adjust well” (p. 23). This emphasis on the model minority on Asian American youth means that “empirical and theoretical research on Asian American children has focused predominantly on their educational achievement” (p. 22). Therefore, if children are seen mostly in terms of their academic and societal achievements, it becomes difficult for children to discuss other topics with their parents. In “Living through our children: exploring the education and career choices’ of racialized immigrant youth in Canada,” Taylor (2013) states that because children are “acutely aware of the sacrifices made for them” (p. 1011), their sense of obligation and responsibility increases, making it more difficult to discuss their own struggles. This is particularly the case since children’s academic success is often thought to be linked to the family’s overall upward mobility (Foner & Dreby, 2011, p. 552). Children and their parents may interpret this as their success or lack thereof, being the cause of their family’s failure (p. 552). This then, furthers the growing disparity between parents and their children, but these feelings of estrangement can have a long-term impact (p. 552).

This distancing is made even more challenging due to what Qin (2008b) describes as the “parallel dual frames of reference” (p. 162), where the gap between parents’ experiences and their children widens. This is also referred to as “generational dissonance,” when children’s knowledge of the new culture grows much more quickly than their parents (Foner & Dreby, 2011, p. 547). Parents compare their experiences to the ones they grew up with, while children compare it to these new experiences, particularly as it concerns their peers (Qin, 2008b, p. 163). This diversion of reference is particularly painful as it is the point in the families’ experiences where support is often needed the most. These various elements can lead to emotional detachment amongst the family members, and can even lead to the destabilization of roles, and



imbalance of parent-child relationships (p. 164). In an immigrant family, many points of reference for children are no longer present, including friends and extended family. This is often the case for parents as well, as they usually leave their jobs and other community links from their existing homes (Suarez-Orozco, 2015, p. 9). Therefore, the family unit becomes even more important and influential for children. This can often be in the form of increased responsibility as the children feel they are responsible for helping their parents navigate this new culture, sometimes being burdened by these new expectations (p. 11). Children are seen as the “experts” guiding their families (p. 9) to success despite their own difficulties. This can cause feelings of resentment or discomfort on both sides, as parents’ self-esteem may deteriorate as they depend on their children for everyday matters (Foner & Dreby, 2011, p. 548), and children may feel uncomfortable as they learn about “family secrets in the process of translating and advocating for their parents” (p. 548). This reversal of parental-child roles further destabilizes the family unit, affecting children’s development (Qin, 2008a, p.13). Children can also harbour feelings of guilt as they increase their awareness of their parents’ unhappiness and their “own apparent selfishness in wanting them to stay rather than return to their homeland” (Yi, 2013, p. 139).

#### **2.4: Immigrant Children’s Sense of Identity**

In Taylor’s (2013) “Living through our children: exploring the education and career ‘choices’ of racialized immigrant youth in Canada,” she notes that “Canadian researchers suggest that the social integration for racialized immigrants and their children is slower than those of European origins” (p. 1010). Part of this appears to be the increasing burden on children that Suarez-Orozco discusses above, where children view their parents’ difficulties as a sense of shared struggle and therefore increased familial obligations. According to Rhee, Chang, and Rhee in “Acculturation, Communication Patterns, and Self-Esteem among Asian and Caucasian

American Adolescents” (2003), transitioning to a new culture also takes a toll on children’s self-esteem (p. 750). They state that the most common and perhaps effective way to cope with lower self-esteem is to develop social networks with others (p. 752), which is challenging when simultaneously, they noted that Asian American adolescents also reported greater social isolation compared to their peers (p. 763). This study noted that the reasons for this may be the emphasis within these children’s families on internal cohesiveness rather than forming external social networks, as well as the discrimination that they face outside the home. In conclusion, the researchers emphasized the significance of effective family communication to improve Asian American children’s self-esteem.

When communication and connection within families become fraught, it is important for children to have a space of their own: a place where they can share their experiences, memories, and emotions freely as they figure out their place in their new environment. This allows them to build their own identities, and for children and child characters navigating circumstances that are often out of their control, the way they cope and manage their situations can be something they do control. In Savsar’s ““Mother Tells Me to Forget’: Nostalgic Re-presentations, Remembering, and Re-telling the Child Migrant’s Identity and Agency in Children’s Literature” (2018), she asserts that it is crucial to position the migrant character, particularly the child migrant character, in a position of agency (p. 395). Child narratives are especially important because they are navigating their identities in a geography that is constructed by adults and their institutions (p. 395). Along this point, Savsar transforms this idea of the parallel dual frames of reference by suggesting that this provides children with the ability to reflect and observe two different kinds of identities and perspectives, which in turn, gives them a unique opportunity for building a new type of narrative (p. 410).

To build this narrative, an ideal form would be one that allows child migrant characters to be vulnerable and honest about their experiences in a way that they are not always able to within families or their social structures due to the different aspects discussed previously. The form would also be one where the children could choose whom they chose to share these thoughts and experiences with, and allowed them to process past experiences, and help build identities. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the epistolary form, with its intimate and candid nature, can provide this space for migrant children, and how its representation of consciousness can be an effective tool in constructing truth and identity when it comes to narrating migrant child experiences.

## **2.5: Summary**

The immensely disruptive immigration experience has several different effects on families. The most significant one is the shifting in roles between parents and children, and the growing difficulty in voicing these shared difficulties with one another. This is due to the pressure that parents and children have in maintaining a narrative of success in their new country, in order to make the struggles and sacrifices worthwhile. Unfortunately, this often leads to a deterioration in social structures and mental health in children, who are more linked to the social aspects of the new community (Rhee et al., 2003, p. 763). Therefore, creating a space for immigrant children to fully express and process their emotions is essential for their sense of identity and belonging in their new culture.

## **Chapter 3: Epistolary Fiction in Immigrant Child Narratives**

### **3.1: Intimacy and Consciousness in Epistolary Fiction**

The epistolary form is defined by its use of letters and other communication methods to depict the narrative (Oregon State University). The reader is beholden to the main character—the scribe and narrator—to inform them of all the events and dialogue that are occurring. Perhaps because of this limited point of view, and the assumption of an unrefined, stream-of-consciousness narrative, the epistolary form was often viewed as inferior to other forms of fiction, due to the fact that it was “often thought to present a relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as its letter-writers apparently jot down whatever is passing through their heads at the moment of writing” (Bray, 2003, p. 8). The perceived intimacy and privacy of letters, and by extension epistolary texts, cause readers to expect both authenticity and an extreme closeness that distinguishes it from other narrative forms. This perception assumes an uninhibited frankness on the character, without considering what their motivation and intended readership are. This recognition on the character’s part will be referred to as their consciousness. Bray discusses at length about the concept of consciousness (p. 3), and how this state of awareness occurs on a number of different levels in epistolary works: awareness within the characters themselves but also within their positionality in their larger society. However, this intimacy and ability on the character’s part to fully control their narrative makes epistolary forms ideal for narratives featuring migrant children. In turn, the form allows characters to process their experiences as they narrate them, which helps to build their identities, as separate from what is happening externally in their lives.

### **3.2: Using Epistolary Fiction to Process Events and Build a New Narrative**

One defining aspect of epistolary works is its potential to allow characters to have insight and reflect on what has happened in their past, something that Bray calls “a focalization through a past self” (p. 18). This allows characters to revisit their positionality but also shape their future narrative. Going back to the previous chapter, this narrativization of past events is a key aspect to shaping memory, and therefore, identity and subjectivity. This allows migrant children to have the space in a form like the epistolary to both process their experiences but also form it in a way that incorporates their interpretation of the events.

The potential for epistolary fiction in depicting rich narratives lies not in its so-called documentation of the truth, but rather in its ability to allow characters to have the space to make sense of past events. At its heart, the letter is an intensely private one: its intended readership is limited and the fact that it is placed in the public nature of a fictional book, means that the readers are part of this exclusive club. Therefore, the narrator is deliberately choosing what to share and what not to—the essence of the letter is not that it contains only the most truthful and “purest” version of the character’s thoughts, but the version that they have chosen to reveal (p. 58).

Revisiting the idea of the “parallel dual frames of reference” (Qin, 2008a, p. 162) and how children and their parents begin forming separate yet related memories of their new environment, the epistolary form could act as an important way for children to document and subsequently, make sense of their experiences. By having a space that is entirely their own, even if it may just be in a notebook, they are able to maintain their individual identity despite potential pressures to assimilate or to be aligned with their parents’ interpretations. Being able to choose their narrative in this way, and therefore articulate the kind of positionality and narrative they

wish to remember and tell, is a key aspect to forming a new identity. This type of intimacy in the form of writing and telling stories provides an anchor in a constantly changing external environment. I would also argue that this type of honesty may be difficult for children in certain immigrant families, as discussed previously—children often take up the role of parental figures in the family, and may be feeling pressures to conceal or disregard their emotions (Taylor, 2013, p. 1011).

Being able to have agency in constructing their own narrative through the epistolary form is not only important for children within their families, but also as a way of resistance in their worlds outside of the family. Savsar in “Mother Tells Me to Forget”: Nostalgic Re-presentations, Re-membering, and Re-telling the Child Migrant’s Identity and Agency in Children’s Literature” (2018) writes, “The immigrant must be central, not marginal, to the historic processes, free to assemble, remember, speak, and rewrite his or her story—acts that are essential to the possibility of resistance in the face of colonial subjugation or neocolonial exploitation” (p. 395). Having agency in forming narratives is a key aspect to dismantling hegemonic and discriminatory structures because it allows migrant children to share their real lived experiences and also to have these experiences validated. Seyser even states that migrant children hold the unique position to be able to invent culture, rather than merely conform to existing power paradigms (p. 396): “ I argue that when subjected to the disruptive and cataclysmic experience of migration, representations of displaced children who are forced to balance multiple identities can act as counter-hegemonic subject” (p. 396). Children in these contexts have the awareness of multiple different perspectives and sides, allowing them to “imagine nations and construct identities within particular cultural contexts and geographies of power, namely memory and nostalgic representations of the past” (p. 396).

### **3.3 Using Epistolary Fiction in Depictions of Migrant Child Narratives as a Method of Resistance**

This concept of consciousness of course, directly relates to the definition of the epistolary form that was first introduced in this chapter: characters in epistolary fiction often hold multiple different levels of consciousness: understanding of the past, and how it affects their future. Similarly, migrant children are constantly having to balance multiple identities, which allows them the opportunity to be a counterpoint in the status quo: “Counter-hegemonic portrayals in children’s literature can therefore challenge the biased portrayal of subjugated childhoods. This analysis considers the role of child immigrants as agents capable of resisting exploitation and re-conceptualizing their identities through an autobiographical self-distancing, which grants them self-awareness in addition to an awareness of the ‘trouble spots’ of history” (Seyser, 2018, p. 397). For Seyser, memory is a key aspect for migrant child characters to transform their identities, as “actions corroborate how re-remembering and re-writing make sense of experience, locating the self within history to gain accountability” (p. 403). She does, however, distinguish “reflective nostalgia” from “restorative nostalgia” (p. 407), where restorative nostalgia idealizes past events and reflective nostalgia helps shed light on the problematic aspects. By giving migrant child characters space to interpret and make sense of their history, “children are ideally re-born as subjects with agency, where they are free to re-member, re-imagine, and re-write individual and national identities in the eyes of the ‘other’” (p. 410). After all, Bray (2003) writes that “without reserve, intimacy is not possible, for intimacy is known when reserve is laid aside” (p. 73). This allows characters in epistolary fiction the agency to choose what they share and what they keep to themselves, and by extension, decide which memories and experiences they will use to construct their identities.

### **3.4: Contemporary Epistolary Forms**

Despite its continued usage in modern texts, the appearance of the epistolary form has changed since the days of novels like *Clarissa*. Robyn Schiffman (2008) claims in “*Werther* and the epistolary novel” that “epistolarity constitutes more of a mode in the twentieth century rather than a genre. . . . Epistolarity is now a style and manner of writing, with letters or other communicative acts foregrounded or even attempted, rather than a set of prescriptive conditions, and is no longer limited to the traditional early-modern communique of the letter” (p. 423). This is certainly the case in contemporary works that include communication like text messages, email, and even diary entries, that still contain the intimacy of letters but offer a variety of formats. Another aspect to epistolary forms is the exchange: the success or lack thereof, of communication between different characters. Although contemporary novels are not as dependent on post offices as early epistolary works may have, the key question of what happens if the communication is lost is still a key consideration and point of dramatic tension in contemporary novels involving the epistolary form (p. 430). In the following examples depicted in the novel *Front Desk*, an important aspect to the character’s use of the epistolary form is the method of communication, and the ways in which she uses the form to initially conform to the status quo, then learns to use it as a form of resistance, and finally as a way to share her difficult experiences in order to move forward.

### **3.5: Summary**

The epistolary form was originally defined by its use of letters, but the essence of the form is still prevalent in modern texts in different communication formats, along with the portrayal of characters’ consciousness, thought process, and inner dialogue. The intimacy allowed in these texts makes it particularly appropriate for marginalized characters like



immigrant children, who are often not able to express themselves fully or honestly in other contexts. The process of transcribing their thoughts also helps them shape their narrative in positive and constructive ways, recentering their position as an agent of hopeful change, rather than a victim of circumstance.

## **Chapter 4: *Front Desk* and Using the Epistolary Form in Children’s Literature**

### **4.1: The Use of Epistles in *Front Desk***

Kelly Yang’s middle grade novel *Front Desk* (2018) depicts both the harsh realities of being Asian immigrants in the United States but also the immense resilience shown by children who thrive in these realities. The protagonist, ten-year-old Mia, helps her parents run a motel, supporting them as they face racism, poverty, and potential eviction. Despite her initial difficulties with writing in English, Mia finds solace in documenting her experiences through letters and in essays at school. Although she does not always mail these letters, the process of outlining her emotions is a way of processing them, allowing control over her narrative and memories. Eventually, her writing also becomes a way for Mia to actively build the community that she wants to live in, and therefore, a method of building her identity and resilience. I will also examine the tone and construction of these letters, and how they change throughout the novel.

### **4.2: The Epistolary Form Is Initially Used as a Way to Conform**

In the earlier parts of the novel, Mia views writing and being a good writer as a way to conform to what she sees others doing, despite the encouragement from her teacher that they should write what they are actually feeling: “‘Remember, show, not tell! Write what you feel, kids,’ Mrs. Douglas announced to the class. ‘If you’re mad, write mad. If you’re sad or you’re worried, write sad and worried.’ I was all of those things. I thought about Uncle Ming and his black eye and the way his voice rose and fell like a curtain when he said, ‘What do I do, buddy? They’re going to kill me . . .’ But when I put my pencil down onto the paper, do you know what marched onto the page? Puppies and houses.” (p. 54). Mia initially sees being a good writer as a way to meet others’ expectations and match what they are doing: “In school that week, Mrs.

Douglas asked us to write a short story. I really wanted to write about the loan sharks, but I didn't know if that was too out there, so I tried to look around to see what other people were writing" (p. 54). Although her instinct is to share her real, difficult experiences, Mia initially censors herself, thinking that it is not what she should be writing about. At this stage, writing is also a way to achieve the American idealization of success. When Mia learns about an essay contest that could win her parents their own motel, she sees it as a method of escaping their hardships: "Over and over again, I read the words. A couple in Vermont wanted to give their motel away. They'd been running it for years and now they were both in their seventies. Instead of selling it, they were holding an essay contest. . . .*This was it!* This was our ticket onto the good roller coaster" (p. 86). But harsh criticism from her teacher on her writing skills makes Mia feel like she will never belong with her peers: "I stared at my classmates, drinking in their glee as they proudly waved their stories around. I couldn't stop looking at them, showing off their grades, grinning from ear to ear. I envied them with every bone in my body" (p. 122). In the beginning of the novel, Mia sees writing as a series of obstacles she must complete in order to be like her peers: she must write about things that are acceptable in her social group, and she must write them like a native English speaker. At this stage, we also don't see excerpts of Mia's writing, only what she tells us. Mia's lack of confidence in her writing abilities is reflected in the fact that she does not share any of it with the reader. Until Mia acknowledges that she does not need to conquer these obstacles, she is not fully able to create a safe space in her writing to start building her narrative, community, and identity.

#### **4.3: The Epistolary Form is Used to Process Emotions and Construct New Narratives**

Mia soon realizes that writing can help her process her emotions. When she faces bullies at school, she writes a letter to them in her notebook, and even though she does not give it to

them, the act of writing supports her. This is also when we finally begin to read snippets of her writing “‘Dear mean girls . . .’ It was so satisfying writing the letter that, for a full second, I actually thought about putting it into my backpack and giving it to the girls at school. But I didn’t” (p. 135). She begins to do this whenever something difficult occurs between another person, and it becomes a grounding exercise, giving Mia the opportunity to narrate the experience in her own words. Although a few misspelled words are crossed out in the letter, the tone of these letters are uninhibited—Mia is writing them for herself, and she does not tone down her anger or frustration: “Now do you know what I think? I think I’d rather never go on vacation than be like you” (p. 136). They flow in the manner of her thoughts, and although they are written in a letter format, they sound like a response that Mia could verbally retort at her bullies.

Although her mother worries that Mia will not ever catch up to the other kids, her father encourages her to keep writing: “He reached down, took my small hand, and opened it. He put the new, expensive pencil in it. . . . ‘Use this to write down everything that happens,’ he said. ‘Who knows, maybe someday, it’ll all seem funny to you’” (p. 149). In this moment, Mia receives validation from her family that she can change her narrative with writing. With this affirmative interaction, writing does not seem like something that excludes her, but instead that something she can work on and get better at. Therefore, when another bully Jason steals her pencil, Mia is absolutely incensed and writes another pretend letter to him outlining that although to him, the pencil is nothing, it means everything to her. The process of writing out her feelings helps Mia construct a revenge plan, where she puts an extra minty ointment on the pencil, making Jason’s eyes sting. A little harsh perhaps, but similarly to the letter she wrote to the other bullies, it allows Mia to feel like she has taken active steps to regain agency over her narrative, instead of being a victim.

However, it is not just vengeful letters to bullies that allow Mia to construct these narratives but also through letters of appreciation to the few people that show her family kindness. When a doctor helps her mother after she is assaulted and insists that they be allowed not to pay the exorbitant hospital fee, she decides to thank him in a letter: “Dear Doctor, Thank you for helping my mom . . . Thank you for showing us it’s not just every man for himself in America . . . I hope you will accept this letter and this picture of a tree that I drew for you. The tree represents my mom and the leaves represent all the new hope you’ve given her that people in America are kind. Sincerely, Mia Tang” (p. 181). The doctor’s compassion is the first time that Mia sees kindness in her new environment, and importantly, it’s the first time that she experiences something other than selfishness in her new environment. The tone of this letter is one of gratitude but also honesty: Mia shares some of her family’s struggles, perhaps supported by the fact that the doctor had helped them: “To be honest, I was always a little scared of you. My parents said we should never ever see you, unless we were seriously about to die, and even then, we should think about it” (p. 181). Like the letter to the bully, she has minor self-corrections, mostly for spelling, but the angry frustration that emanated from the letter to the bullies is lessened here. Mia begins to see that she can in fact, not just create her own narrative through writing, but also build a supportive community—the one that she wants to be a part of.

#### **4.4: The Epistolary Form as a Tool to Help Other Immigrants**

As Mia begins to grow in her confidence in writing in English, she realizes that she can also use it to help other immigrants around her. When her parents’ friend Uncle Fung comes to visit them after getting fired due to a number of communication mishaps, she makes him a pamphlet of American phrases and what they mean: “the pamphlet went on and on. I tried to be as detailed as possible and put in as many phrases, gestures, and idioms as I could think of. . . . I

also showed him my notebook with all the names of the restaurants the other immigrants had gotten fired from so he knew where to avoid working. . . . I smiled. I liked how my little notebook was becoming a message board for the immigrants” (p. 151). As discussed in Chapter Two, Mia is starting to take on a more adult role in the parents’ lives, as their parallel dual frames of reference diverge. Mia is more knowledgeable of socially accepted phrases and behaviours that even her parents are not aware of. Helping them navigate these different areas means that Mia is already aware that her role has changed from her parents: now, she knows things that they do not. The instruction manual is Mia’s way of showcasing her authority and expertise, calling it “Mia’s Book of American Phrases and Customs,” and the points are all direct and commanding in tone: “Don’t feel insulted when you hear the word ‘dawg’” (p. 152). Her increasing confidence is clear in this manual, and along with that, it illustrates that writing is becoming a refuge as she continues to carve out this new role and identity.

#### **4.5: The Epistolary Form Is Used to Build a Community**

In order to carve out her space and build the community she wants, Mia has to continue to use certain existing structures when writing to her advantage, like improving her grammar to sound more adult, and entering contests. When one of the immigrants Zhang gets his passport and ID held hostage due to owing some loan sharks money, Mia pretends to be his lawyer: “Dear employer, I am writing to you about your employee Zhang Xiling. Mr. Zhang has informed me that you are in possession of his passport and ID . . . I request your immediate return of Mr. Zhang’s passport and ID. Failure to do so will result in serious consequences” (p. 204).

Throughout the letter, she crosses out many words to replace with ones with a more adult tone: “I worked on the letter all night long, making sure the tone, punctuation, and syntax was all right. I read it over five times and when I was pretty sure I had corrected all the grammatical mistakes, I

copied it onto a clean sheet of white paper” (p. 205). Mia also decides to write to the different small businesses in the area, warning them of a racist security guard that had been discriminating against Black customers: “Dear stores, I know that the security guard from the Topaz Inn gave you a list of ‘bad customers.’ But it is not actually a list of bad customers. It is a list of black customers . . . Let’s treat all of our customers with kindness and respect and not judge anyone by the color of their skin” (p. 213). Although some stores are hesitant, Mia eventually manages to get everyone on board, even making one of them comment: “‘Gosh darn it, kid,’ he harrumphed, throwing his arms up. ‘You and your letters!’” (p. 216) Even from the letter on page 205, Mia already seems more at ease in her more sophisticated writing style—she hardly crosses any words out, indicating that this new, professional tone is comfortable for her.

#### **4.6: The Epistolary Form Helps Construct a Future**

Mia’s writing is also a way for her to build the life she longs for, with a stable home and income for her family. Although she does not win the motel essay competition, the act of writing the essay illuminates to her what exactly she longs for in this new environment: home and community. “If I owned a motel, I would treat every customer like family . . . If I win your motel, I promise to always treat it with love, kindness, and respect. Your motel won’t just be a business to me. It will be home” (p. 224). When the motel that her parents work at goes for sale, Mia gets the idea to have all of her new friends in the area invest in it together: “If we can’t win a motel, together, let’s buy one! No investment is too small” (p. 273). Everyone that she has written to and encountered pitches in, and the community ends up buying the motel from the villainous Mr. Yao. When the paper is signed, Mia finally jumps in the pool that she was forbidden to before and takes a picture of her friends celebrating together: “I looked around at my new family and smiled. It was a picture I’d been waiting a long, long time for” (p. 286).

#### **4.7: The Epistolary Form Shows Vulnerability to Build a Narrative of Resilience**

By the end of the novel, Mia accepts that her narrative and story may be different from her peers, but that it also shows her strength and resilience. She realizes that vulnerability is not weakness, but a necessary aspect to moving forward: “Panic seized me. The words were so open and exposed. . . . If I wanted my life to change, I too needed to get past the itchy, wriggly feeling” (p. 220). The “itchy, wriggly feeling” is how Mia describes the discomfort in sharing her story honestly with her peers. It is only once she writes her own story that her writing is at its best: “My head was like a train station; so many stories buzzed in and out. I thought about all the things that happened these last few months, all the miracles and heartbreaks. . . . The words gushed out of me” (p. 220). Mia finally receives the validation that she had longed for from her teacher and classmates: “When I finished reading, the whole room was silent. Everyone’s eyes were on me. I stood so still, if a breeze swept through the classroom, I would have fallen. And then, amid the deafening silence, I heard a sound. The sound of clapping” (p. 250). This is the first instance of Mia writing about her past self, instead of a reaction to something that has just happened to her, providing an example of Bray’s “focalization through a past self” (Bray, 2003, p. 18), and how Mia builds her identity through her memories and experiences. In this essay, she reflects on all the important events that have happened, both painful and joyful, and narrates it back to an audience.

#### **4.8: Summary**

Epistles symbolize the various changes in Mia’s growth in *Front Desk*—how she initially wishes to integrate to American values of success by writing what she thinks she should, to using it to protect other immigrants, and then eventually using it to share all the hardships she and her family have endured. In the novel, letters represent her confidence and how they shape her



identity: Mia starts out by constantly editing her own writing and feeling inferior to her American classmates, and then eventually allows her emotions to let her writing flow out of her naturally, without any inhibitions. Writing helps Mia realize that her vulnerabilities are not something to hide, but an essential part to becoming her own type of writer. *Front Desk* exhibits how epistles and the epistolary form can be an ideal method for marginalized characters, as it highlights the intricacies of their experiences and how they construct a more positive future within their communities.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **5.1: Narratives Forms and Representing Marginalized Voices**

In this thesis, I wished to expand the narrative of immigrant stories by including the vast experiences of resilience, joy, and community that these experiences can contain. Although sharing difficult experiences is crucial to moving forward, it is also important for immigrants and their children to avoid being limited to a narrative of trauma and tragedy, especially because this invalidates their strength and resilience of immigrants. Children's literature provides several examples of these resilience and can continue to feature complicated and nuanced experiences of immigrant children. Forms like the epistolary that allow characters to disclose their emotions, thoughts, and experiences and by doing so, process these various thoughts, are essential tools for immigrant children and other marginalized groups in sharing their experiences. Allowing characters whose narratives are often erased, overlooked, or censored the space to vocalize their experiences in a way that best suits them, is a key element in the efforts to include underrepresented voices in children's literature. When we discuss representation, it is also important to consider the form and how it can best suit the stories they are telling: although one narrative format will not fit every story, thinking about how best the medium can suit the characters and stories they are sharing is key to ensuring the most accessible and nuanced approach.

### **5.2: Community Resources for Immigrants in Toronto**

As I have spoken a great deal about communities in this thesis, and I want to take some time to also include a few examples of community centres and activist groups that focus on supporting newcomer immigrant families in Toronto, and how Asian diasporic communities are carving out spaces in their new city.

Working Women Community Centre is a women-focused settlement agency that helps direct immigrant women and their families gain skills to rebuild a sense of community.

Similarly, the Newcomer Women's Services Toronto is a non-profit organization that helps immigrants of all genders gain employment and skills in Toronto, access resources, and feel more at home. Romero House provides support to refugee families by helping them find transitional housing, legal support, and community events.

The Supporting Newcomer Access Project is a program through Planned Parenthood Toronto that provides free sexual health advice for newcomer youth in the city, while also training them to be sexual health educators themselves. Asian Community AIDS Services (ACAS) is a non-profit organization that provides HIV/AIDS education, prevention and support to East and Southeast Asian Canadian communities. Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services also have various centres around the city that focuses on providing health services to new immigrants and refugees by addressing inequities.

### **5.3: Acknowledgments**

I also wish to acknowledge that in this thesis, I have focused on the experiences of East Asian immigrants in North America, and was shaped by my own points of privilege in being part of what are called "economic immigrants" in Canada—those who were admitted solely for their potential to contribute economically in the Canadian economy, and have not discussed the experiences of refugee families and children.

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