

**Feeling Sideways:
Shani Mootoo and Kai Cheng Thom's Sustainable Affects**

History grows itself from the side, from what is
to the side of it—often in fictions—before it
takes this sideways growth...to itself.
—Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009)

There's something very, very powerful about
feeling through art, being made to feel through art.
—Shani Mootoo in Tara-Michelle Ziniuk (2015)

*love me for my anger...love me for my need.
love me for my jealousy, my weakness, my
greed, my cruelty, my viciousness, my shame.*
—Kai Cheng Thom, "inside voice" (2017)

Affects are unruly: like adventurous children, they play hide and seek, always moving in multidirectional ways; like fleshy ghosts, we feel their presence and their absence, but they escape mapping, so any attempt to theorize affect necessarily entails pauses, delays, and breaks. Following transgender theorist Lucas Crawford (2015), I do not seek to locate affect inside the subject. Instead, I propose to read affects as dislocated transtemporal assemblages of intensities and forces caught in endless circuits of power and thus, of political, cultural, and ethical relevance. As Eve K. Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed, and many other queer and anti-racist theorists have taught us, affects such as happiness, love, and joy can become normative when they are imposed to sustain official narratives of whiteness, compulsory heterosexuality, national affiliation, or belonging. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed contends that "[l]oves that depart from the scripts of normative existence can be seen as a 'source' of shame. One may be shamed, for example, by queer desires, which depart from the 'form' of the loving nuclear family. Queer desires become an injury to the family, and to the bodily form of the

social norm” (107). Affect can also be racist, as Achille Mbembe poignantly puts it in his denunciation of systematic instances of racial profiling at the borders of Europe against bodies that are rendered strange and different. Mbembe claims that “the work racist affect does is to isolate such bodies, to tear them apart from other bodies until a point where this separation and this tearing apart reaches a moment of maximal intensity” (par. 6). Having to follow, or being subjected to, these myriad normative racist affects makes the everyday life of minoritized populations unsustainable. In a time of growing racism, feminist backlash, and increasing transphobia, it is then crucial to forge sustainable affective *reorientations*; a project that queer and trans writers of colour such as Shani Mootoo and Kai Cheng Thom are firmly committed to, as I claim in this article. Mootoo’s and Thom’s transCanadian fictions illustrate how racialized subjects and communities, such as queer and trans migrants, resist these unviable normative scripts, thus opening spaces for the decolonization of such affects¹.

The crucial task of decolonizing affect theory comes through the hand of feminist scholar of (post)multiculturalism Sneja Gunew, who has been preoccupied with this topic for the last decade². Influenced by traditions in India, Gunew poses an open, ongoing question: “[t]o what extent can we think meaningfully about affect outside the concepts and terms of European psychoanalysis?” (“Guest” par. 3). From the perspective of social theory, feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan also discusses the multiple and heterogeneous ways in which different modalities of affect are transmitted between bodies in the influential study, *The*

¹ I am indebted to the work of Indigenous scholars such as Eve Tuck and Leanne B. Simpson who have written extensively about the impact of colonialism and the need to discuss the decolonization of Indigenous land beyond metaphor. While acknowledging the limits of representation in my analysis, Mootoo’s initial rendering of Jonathan as a transphobic white settler problematizes easy moves to innocence and redemption. In the novel, the (always unfinished) labour of the decolonization of gender lies in the hands of a trans community in the Caribbean, which, in my view, resists domesticated attempts to “reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck and Wayne Yang, 3).

² Sneja Gunew has organized a number of initiatives on the topic of decolonizing affect theory. These include a conference in BC, Canada (2006), a DVD titled *Feeling Multicultural: Decolonizing Affect Theory Colloquium* (2007), an article in *Concentric* (2009), an international seminar in Kerala, India (2015), and the guest edition of an open-access special issue of the journal, *Samyukta* (2016) <http://www.samyukta.info/samyukta-a-journal-of-womens-studies-january-2016/>

Transmission of Affect (2004). Focusing on human subjects, Brennan aptly claims that “the taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking, the last outpost of the subject’s belief in the superiority of its own worldview over that of other cultures” (2). Instead, Brennan’s theory of affect discusses more permeable, indeed decolonized, ways of being and becoming, whereby the boundaries of the body unavoidably remain open and porous.

Following these lines of enquiry, this article reflects on the transmission of affect between queer and trans racialized subjects and communities as a mode of what I call *feeling sideways*. With this formulation, I seek to spark a discussion about the need to dislodge affect not only from gender and racial normative systems of power but also from linear understandings of growth and temporality. I here further draw on Kathryn Bond Stockton’s queer theories of sideways growth and Heather Love’s notion of backward feelings in an attempt to unravel modes of *feeling sideways* as a potential form of sustainable affect. As case studies, I will put two transCanadian writers side by side, in lateral relation with each other: queer Indo-Caribbean Canadian writer and visual artist Shani Mootoo and Chinese Canadian trans woman poet, performer, and social worker, Kai Cheng Thom. Mootoo’s novel, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* (2014), problematizes the transmission of affect and sideways feelings between Jonathan, a white straight cisgender Canadian man, and Sid, his Trinidadian adoptive mother, now a transgender man called Sydney. In different but related ways, Thom’s poetry collection, *a place called No Homeland* (2017), further illustrates how racialized trans subjects navigate feeling sideways in their everyday life as a result of violent histories of colonization, rape, and destitution. Mootoo’s and Thom’s transCanadian fictions unravel the various ways in which shame, anger, and empathy, always understood in their multidirectionality and transtemporality, can become sustainable affects through touch and storytelling, with important ethical repercussions.

I here use the designation transCanadian following scholars Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki, who have written at length about the shortcomings of Canadian literature as an institution that resists to understand how Indigenous, diasporic, and transnational voices constitute the very core of its foundation. In turn, these scholars have insisted on complicating the white genealogies of CanLit through a number of initiatives³. In my book *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions* (2017), I attempt to expand the formulation “transCanadian” by prioritizing feminist and queer racialized voices as integral to the complex assemblage of transnational writing in Canada today. Seeking to further problematize my own queering of CanLit, I now urge us to reflect upon the following vital question: where is the transgender in the transCanadian?⁴ This article proposes to begin to shape an answer to this question by reorienting discussions of TransCanLit to focus directly on trans writing, trans poetics, and trans genealogies. An avid advocate for social justice, Kai Cheng Thom’s interventions as a spoken word poet, together with her numerous interviews and essays on social media, become a perfect example of how the transnational and the transgender speak to each other in ethical and affective ways in the every day life of many communities in Canada.

Terminology around affect can be slippery, so it is crucial to differentiate between complacent affects, which often become allies to market-oriented culture and normative ways of being, and sustainable affects, which I have described elsewhere (“Love” 2017) as modes of action that may offer an alternative politico-ethical path, particularly for the development of feminist anti-racist methodologies. Mbembe warns us against the perverse function of racist affect, which, by nature, leads to actions that are irrational, compulsive, and destructive: “racist affect is about the disrupting encounter with a body that is not mine, a face that is not mine,

³ Among others, these initiatives include the creation of the TransCanada Institute at Guelph, which ran from 2007 to 2013, a series of international conferences, a new edition of Roy Kiyooka’s *TransCanada Letters* (2005), and the ongoing *TransCanada Series*, edited by Kamboureli through Wilfrid Laurier UP.

⁴ See my forthcoming article “Where is the TransGender in the TransCanadian?” for the special issue of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 78 on “Canadian Fictions of Globality” (2019).

[...]; a face and a body which profoundly disturbs me, even shocks me, to the point where in relation to it, I am likely to always act irrationally, I am likely to always act compulsively and in a destructive manner” (par. 8). Sustainable affects, in contrast, emerge after that first moment of disturbance and shock, becoming an ethical compass from which to learn to act in an accountable and response-able manner at the sight of difference. In this sense, sustainable affects work as counter-normative affects. Feminist killjoys such as Ahmed encourage us to be suspicious of commodified, and often unsustainable, versions of happiness that compulsively advance forward towards an end goal: call it marriage, reproduction, or economic gain. These normative feelings, which are sustained by exclusions and cuts, remain firmly located outside the reach of minoritized subjects that are, in turn, rendered backwards, unproductive, or unproductive. In the influential book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), gender theorist Heather Love resists what she terms the affirmative turn in queer studies and traces instead “a repertoire of queer modernist melancholia” (5). Love advocates a turn backward, stressing the need to trace the past and recover an archive of queer histories, especially as an exercise in responsibility and justice. In doing so, she maps a number of what she calls “backward feelings,” including shame, depression, and regret. I here seek to build upon and expand Love’s arguments and consider the ethical implications of feeling multiple temporalities simultaneously, as the title of Mootoo’s novel suggests. The idea of advancing forward towards a future, while simultaneously moving sideways, implies a detour, inviting readers to consider pauses, discontinuities, and interruptions as integral elements in the subject’s formation. This strange model of forward movement thus differs from chrononormative histories (Freeman 2010), with their exclusions and violences. When we begin to think about these lateral orientations and oblique emotions, we enter queer territory; the unmapped land of sideway feelings which I conceptualize as disobedient flows that resist linearity, that deviate; lingering sustainable affects that simultaneously deterritorialize and

reterritorialize subjects, places, and temporality. In my formulation, as we shall see in Mootoo's and Thom's texts, these sideways feelings are oriented and reoriented through different forms of ethical encounters and modes of relationality.

The centrality of the ethical and the affective realms in connection to queer and trans racialized bodies has been at the core of Mootoo's work, from earlier novels, such as the award-winning *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), to post-2000 works, such as the poetry collection *The Predicament of Or* (2002) and the novel *Valmiki's Daughter* (2008). As Gunew claims, Mootoo "anchor[s] [her] meditations in the sensorium—the manner in which particular ways of being are embodied—scripted in and on bodies" (*Post-Multicultural* 59-60). Shortlisted for a Lambda Award in the category of Transgender Fiction, Mootoo's 2014 novel, *Moving Forward Sideways like a Crab*, follows, to borrow Crawford's suggestive words, "a temporality of feeling rather than order" (170-171). In a confessional tone, Mootoo's novel opens up with a glimpse of one of Sydney's notebooks, where he intimately shares his longing to offer his adoptive son, Jonathan, a snapshot of his life. He briefly refers to his earlier life as Sid, a lesbian immigrant living in Toronto, the progressive deterioration of her relationship with Jonathan's mother, India, the negative feelings that saturated her body, and, consequently, her decision to go back to Trinidad only to return to Canada some years later to transition. In these first few pages, the novel raises some of the key concerns that I want to look at in this article regarding the transmission of affect in relation to temporality: "Surely it is a failure of our human design that it takes not an hour, not a day, but much, much longer to relay what flashes through the mind with the speed of a hummingbird's wing. There is so little time left now..." (2). It is this form of delayed knowledge that Sydney now feels pressed to share with Jonathan in the last days of his life.

Readers learn how Sydney left Canada without saying goodbye to his son, who then remains unaware of the family history. In his mind, his adoptive mother vanished, deserting

him, and thus generating an overflow of negative feelings: “Resentment at having been dropped so flatly had plagued me since that time. In junior high school I had attempted to register my unhappiness” by becoming a bad student, among other things (15). It is at the same time that Jonathan begins to write these unsustainable feelings in a notebook, which in time, becomes “a passion” (15), as he explains. The act of writing hence becomes entangled with the longing for his missing mother, since he is moved by the hope that it could facilitate a “reconciliation” (16), as he phrases it. Sid’s failure to appear, however, prompts further bitterness in Jonathan, who continues to blame her for his failures as a writer: “When I realized I couldn’t write any more, or so it appeared, I sank into a long depression during which there were periods when I pointed squarely at Sid’s cold-hearted departure for what I saw as my failures” (17). The vanished parent becomes a haunting presence in Jonathan’s life; a ghostly figure that shapes his emotional growth and his perception of temporality.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), the sociologist Avery F. Gordon offers an intriguing examination of those enforced disappeared populations as a result of historical violences and terrors. Using examples such as the thousands of *desaparecidos* in Argentina, Gordon proposes haunting and other ghostly tropes to think about those material and historical processes. The figure of the ghost is for Gordon intimately intertwined with affective and temporal processes too: “the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope” (63-4). I would argue that Sid, now Sydney, has functioned as a ghostly figure for Jonathan, haunting his perception of the past while simultaneously invoking the potential for a future reappearance and reconciliation.

Sydney's ghostliness thus resists linear temporalities and, with them, normative feelings that fall through ruptures in time. As media and culture theorist Lisa Blackman puts it, in reference to Gordon's work, we need to look at "those aspects of historical continuity that are passed and transmitted through silences, gaps, omissions, echoes and murmurs" (xx). How do these continuities and ruptures materialize in the bodies of queer and transgender bodies? How are these scars not only historical but also the result of affective processes? I want to think carefully about the role of these missing stories and lingering affects in relation to what I call *feeling sideways*. In the controversial book *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), Kathryn Bond Stockton seeks "to prick (deflate, or just delay) the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up...as a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved" (11). Focusing on figures such as the ghostly gay child, Stockton proposes instead an alternative model to linear accounts of growth (literal and figurative) where delay, lingering, and irregularity prevail. Growing sideways, as Stockton puts it, "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (11). Following Stockton, I argue that Jonathan "hangs suspended in an intensity that is a motion, an emotion, and a growth" (Stockton 113). The reader finds an adult who is trapped in his childhood, suffering from arrested development and abandonment issues. His growth has been delayed and this is illustrated by the numerous metaphors in the narrative where he is compared to a child: "our relationship was still predicated on the original one in which he had parented me, and surely there are things that a child [...] does not need, does not want to know about his parent. I wanted our original relationship preserved" (44). Notice the repetition of the adjective "original" in this passage, which exacerbates Jonathan's symbolic infantilization; he is stuck

in a kind of pre-Oedipal fantasy of pleasurable existence with Sid as a mother; from the perspective of the adult, this ghostly child continues to haunt him.

Stockton discusses alternative models to linear growth and development by focusing on different versions of queer children—children queered by color, by innocence, by money, and by Freud. In this discussion, this theorist establishes an intriguing connection between relationality and intrusion in the context of the family. As Stockton boldly puts it, “Connection...is a form of intrusion. It’s a human door to someone’s guarded hearth. Intrusion, moreover, can force new connections” (184). Kai Cheng Thom’s work is populated by such intruders⁵. Her first novel, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir* (2017), crosses generic boundaries (YA fiction, poetry, biography, and memoir) to weave the multilayered stories and sideways feelings of a group of trans girls of colour. Infused with wonder and magic, *Fierce Femmes* also depicts the unsustainable reality of violence for racialized trans women like Thom, permeating private and public life in the family, at school, with friends, and in relationships. These themes recur in Thom’s poetry collection *a place called No Homeland* (2017), which is the focus of my analysis. The opening poem, “diaspora babies,” introduces a fitting example of sideways growth:

diaspora babies, we
are born of pregnant pauses/spilled
from unwanted wombs/squalling invisible-ink poems/written in the margins
of a map of a place
called No Homeland

Diaspora babies are born at the intersection of histories of colonization, displacement, and white imperialism. As such, diaspora babies are born through interruptions, gaps, delays, and,

⁵ Miu Lan, the trans child of colour in Kai Cheng Thom’s picturebook, *From the stars in the sky to the fish in the sea* (2017), can be read as yet another example of a child growing and feeling sideways.

consequently, they grow to the side of official scripts of History. Following a politicized cultural logic of trauma, the poem is told in the first-person plural, which reinforces a sense of collective diasporic dislocation, together with shared genealogies of sideways feelings. And yet, Thom's poetic interventions contribute to the project of decolonizing trauma studies (Visser 2015) in that her focus is on situated *herstories* of violence against racialized trans communities, together with an ethico-affective lens that problematizes normative scripts and orientations. Simultaneously, as the title of Thom's poem clearly states, "trauma is not sacred" and storytelling can open up available routes for healing: "all bodies know how to heal themselves given enough time all demons carry a map of heaven in their scars beneath their skin of every history of trauma [pause] / there is a love poem waiting deep below" (80).

In my view, Thom assembles a collective archive of affect where haunting stories of diasporic traumas can only begin to be traced, without fully known, through pauses, gaps and omissions:

there are some stories that are never told/but known

[...]

some bodies can't be touched/some poems

cannot be written/just felt ("diaspora babies" 8)

These genealogies impregnate the body of the narrator, generating multiple sideways feelings. Referred to as "ghost children" (8) by the narrative voice, these strange children are intruders and thus invisibilized, relegated to the margins of received versions of nation and citizenship. These racialized babies are portrayed as unloved, coming from "unwanted yellow wombs" (8) and "unwanted bodies" (7), while simultaneously being told not to talk about feelings (8) as they grow up. This saturation of negative racist affect develops into a constant craving, an insatiable longing for sustainable stories that grow sideways, through untold gaps and meaningful pauses.

In Mootoo's novel, Jonathan also functions as a different kind of intruder. With tremors of encountering Sid's "real son" (20), Jonathan nonetheless decides to travel to Trinidad in search of his lost parent. He phrases it as some kind of intuitive knowledge, a Spinozist call: "Sometimes there are elaborate calculations that lead to action, and sometimes there is no cognition, just action" (19). Jonathan is an intruder in Trinidad too. As a white Canadian man, he is a visitor to Trinidad, an external presence who observes the rhythms of the island and its difference. His initial responses to Trinidad contribute to his depiction as a tourist who is eager to consume the pleasures of the island even as he distances himself from it through his superiority and arrogance. Jonathan's white privilege is reinforced when he keeps commenting on the "constant chaos...the heat and the bugs, or the sugary, oily and fiery foods" (23), together with the non-standard English of the people working for Sydney (24). Jonathan's misrecognition of the place he now occupies can be read as one of racist affect, following Mbembe, in that he immediately identifies strangeness as a source of negative emotion. This affective reaction, as we shall see, is also initially reproduced in his encounter with his missing parent.

I would argue, however, that the relationship that develops between Jonathan and Sydney, which stretches and expands for nine years, activates a slow process of emotional decolonization. In the case of Jonathan, anger and doubt initially occupy his body, affecting his everyday life, and making him keep physical boundaries and thus making him remain out of touch with others. "So much happens in a touch," queer theorist and physicist Karen Barad provocatively states: "an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused" (206). It is through touching that Jonathan begins such process of affective transformation: "Sydney Mahale did not shake my extended hand, but pulled me to him. I went like a child, and although I was a great deal taller than I had been when I was ten, I pressed my head to the shoulder of this person, once a mother to me, and I cried, like a child" (21). The repetition of

the simile reinforces the narrator's identification with the figure of a ghostly child who appears and vanishes throughout the text. Sydney's exposure to homophobic and transphobic structures, on the other hand, have led to self-containment; he has been living with shame and fear, normative feelings that have colonized his life, making it unsustainable, and further disallowing the forging of a relationship with his estranged son.

Touch, as Barad aptly claims, "moves and affects what it effects" (208). Following this line of enquiry, touching both activates and deactivates a web of sideways feelings in *a place called No Homeland*. The narrative voice in the poem "good communication," for instance, longs for the day when they "have totally perfected the art of touching without causing pain" (16). In Thom's poetics, touch is thus intimately intertwined with various forms of violence: sexual, racial, and emotional. The constant cravings and longings invoked in her poetry can thus be interpreted as an effect of having been deprived of positive affective kinships. This lack can also develop internalized feelings of hatred and shame, the poem "in your mouth" suggests. The narrative voice seems to write in dialogue with that diaspora baby who develops into a boy who struggles to find a space in a society that is racist, sexist, and transphobic. As Ahmed claims, "[t]he difficulty of moving beyond shame is a sign of the power of the normative, and the role of loving others in enforcing social ideals" (107). The second person narrator suggests a split identity where the narrator addresses a child from the past, a ghost child: "there's a pen between your thighs...and a poem in sticky ink....that says, you always lie/ you're a bad ugly boy and your lips will always lie" (9). Similarly, in the poem "its name was the Boy Without A Penis," the narrator explains how this boy was rendered abject, backwards, and monstrous because of its difference. In turn, the boy craved for knowledge but also joy: "it wanted to laugh loud and long and raucously without fear or shame. [...] it craved the sensations of touching and heart-pounding and shivering in the rain" (13). This objectified boy becomes the source of terrifying stories and legends; a sort of cautionary tale for children to conform to

normative standards of beauty, development, and growth. As Love contends, “[w]hether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race” (6). The queer ghostly child in Thom’s poem, however, resists by waiting for his time to come; waiting for the time to tell his story.

In *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, it is also when Jonathan and Sydney’s bodies open up through storytelling that affect begins to circulate forward sideways between them, actively but in a delayed form, establishing more sustainable forms of relationality. In an intriguing interview with Kai Cheng Thom, African American studies scholar Claire Schwartz comments on the idea of endless deferral contending how “the concept of delayed satisfaction [...] is so fundamental to the structure of capitalism in general” (par. 9). Mootoo’s novel, in contrast, extracts the potential of delayed forms of knowledge and storytelling to challenge this neoliberal pattern. Jonathan is trapped in delay, a feeling that is mirrored by the reader who is systematically caught in a web of flashbacks, gaps, and pauses. These braided forms of delay are in no way gratuitous. To Jonathan’s initial dismay, Sydney’s story progresses through repetitions, silences, and interruptions: “he had an astonishing capacity for recall and for detail, and in his penchant for digression he would often follow to great depth seemingly tangential threads that would be suddenly dropped, left hanging loose and frayed” (31). This narrative mode of moving forward sideways disrupts Western accounts of storytelling that privilege linearity, chronology, and order as integral elements in the creation of myth, narrative, and history. Sydney’s dilated storytelling generates negative feelings in his son, who is anxious, irritated, and frustrated at the lack of definite answers. As Sydney puts it, however, “[c]ontradictions are inevitable, ... You listening to my story is yet another angle; my story is incomplete, you see, Jonathan, without your interpretation—over which I have little control” (33). Sydney’s transtemporal narrative becomes a collective assemblage of voices and

silences that can only begin to make sense when put in touch with Jonathan's participation in the story; this ethico-affective act of reciprocity is crucial in the transformation of negative emotions into sustainable affects in the novel.

Along similar lines, Thom's poems unravel collective "queer herstor[ies]" (68) of loss, abuse, and trauma, together with the imperative to sustain "femme future[s]" (68) as an exercise of aesthetic creativity and ethical responsibility. In the poem "hunger p(h)antoum," it is the trans—transnational and transgender—body that starves and longs for sources of energy:

hormone therapy makes me hungry

i am wracked with violent and mysterious cravings.

my body demands furious consumption

to fuel its furious growth.

i am wracked with violent and mysterious cravings.

an infestation of phantoms roams my body, ravening

to fuel their furious growth.

the memory of famine is devouring me.

[...]

i am a (trans)woman out to taste the world,

and my body demands furious consumption. (63)

In these stanzas, the reader witnesses a scarred body that bears the traces of starvation through histories of diaspora, violence, and dispossession. As Thom explains for *The Rumpus*,

My ancestors came to this country, colonized Indigenous land, because of famine. My family grew out of hunger and poverty. It permeated all of my parents' stories about their childhoods. My hunger is the child of theirs—one in a lineage of hungry ghosts stretching across the ocean's belly. All my work is hunger's voice, telling its story. (in Siemsen, par. 4).

Thus, the poem both speaks to and simultaneously complicates famine narratives in that it is now a trans woman who longs for food, literally and symbolically. I would argue that she is hungry for a sustainable life; hungry for her own narrative; starving for care, love, and hope in a society that remains indifferent to her pleas. The haunted body in the poem reacts to this erasure by demanding to grow furiously, that is, affectively. This “furious growth” echoes Stockton’s term “sideways growth” in that both refer to “something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive” (13).

In a thought-provoking interview for the magazine *Guernica*, Thom positions relationality and ethics at the heart of her work, while using a metaphor of sideways growth:

I’m not trying to give birth to a world. I’m trying to give birth to myself. I’m trying, in my work, to construct and deconstruct, to examine, imagine, explore, dream into being a way to have relationships with people that is revolutionary; that is healing and consensual; that is honest, untraumatized, generative, and sustainable. (Schwartz 2016)

As Thom’s ethico-poetic⁶ interventions illustrate, we need to move from indifference to response-ability, which involves finding alternative ways of responding, while holding yourself accountable (Barad 2012). In the poem “what the moon saw,” the narrator remembers an episode in her childhood: when she was ten, she liked to touch her mother’s scars in her face and trace them as if they were a map. Touching here opened up routes for love and understanding between mother and child, radically clashing with the violent touch of the father, which stands for the reality of domestic abuse and its normalization. When the narrator is older, she experiences his violence in her own body:

sound of *baba*’s fist against my face

⁶ See Joan Retallack’s foundational work on poethics in the collection of essays, *The Poethical Wager* (2004). Retallack’s description of poethics as “poetics pregnant with street noises (silences), feminine strains (stains) (contagions), the thickened plots of communitarian ethics” (106) certainly resonates with Thom’s ethico-poetic assemblages. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this valuable reference.

if you want to be my son
sound of knuckles
against bone
[...]
i saw all the love
and terror
and bitterness and rage
and love once again in my father's heart [...] (11)

The child's transgender identity has no room, no words, in this space, so touch becomes the law of the father in its most lethal ways. His transphobia leaves permanent emotional scars in his child. The narrator's response, however, is intriguing from an ethico-affective perspective: she is able to develop some form of sideways empathy with him; to analyze her father's irresponsible feelings, while physically enduring the effects of those abusive emotions in her body. A mode of radical empathy, sociologist Carolyn Pedwell claims, might be understood "not as a 'positive' emotion that could be cultivated to overpower 'negative' emotions, but rather as a critical receptivity to being affected by ways of seeing, being and feeling that do not simply confirm what we think we already know" (36). I claim that Thom's poetry is also calling for sideways ways of seeing and feeling, encouraging us to look for sustainable modes of love, affection, and fear that can be visible and invisible.

Significantly, transgender feelings, often considered "wrong" feelings (Crawford 166), cannot be displayed in the household. Instead, the poem shows the violence of normative forms of conduct regarding compulsory heterosexuality and cisgender identity as the natural ways of being. Meanwhile, the narrator seeks to unravel the gaps, the untold stories, the fractured trajectories that have made love and violence inseparable:

i want you to see, to listen between the lines

to notice not only the four letters that set *love* and *violence* apart
but also the four they have in common
see my history, the lines on my face
there is more to us that we can say an invisible thread
a force of gravity, a storyline binding us all together:
my father, his fist, my mother, the scar. me and moon and you, my love
and you. (12)

There are intricate, hidden genealogies that the poem desperately seeks to excavate. It is important to pause here to look at how the pronouns are used in these lines: “I want *you* to see” (12, my emphasis), the narrative voice begs. Who is this person? The reader? The lover in the poem? The narrator wants others to take an active role in understanding the nuances and subtleties between emotions and action, loving and hitting, and this needs to be a collective ethical act as this is “a storyline binding us all together” (12). The development of more response-able modes of feeling, the poem seems to imply, needs to be conceived in communities of sustainable affects.

In *Sexual Feelings: Reading Anglophone Caribbean Women’s Writing through Affect* (2014), literary scholar Elina Valovirta stresses how “affectivity is central to the meanings readers gain from textual encounters: the ways in which how we *feel* as readers impacts on the ethical and political choices we make, the way we *do things*” (5). Textuality and affectivity become inseparable in Motoo’s novel. The acts of writing and reading are saturated with feelings and emotions that move in multidirectional ways. Jonathan’s quest to find his disappeared parent entails a non-linear process of affective transformation and knowledge that occurs primarily through the practice of the senses. As Brennan claims, “[i]n political as well as personal cases, changing the disposition of the affects (from passivity-inducing and raging judgements of the other to love or affection) requires practice and knowledge” (139). It is

mainly through listening to Sydney's stories that Jonathan begins to develop a kind of "somatic intimacy" (115), reorienting his feelings of anger and frustration into ones of empathy and care. This onto-epistemological break requires a renewed sense of ethical conduct: "all that I had learned about how to conduct myself in the world fell away and had to be reinvented. Time and habits and ways shifted forwards and backwards and sideways, without reason" (28-9). Sydney and Jonathan need to work together, affectively, to make their stories collide, touch each other, as a required step into a process of developing sideway feelings that traverse temporal, spatial, and bodily boundaries.

In Western and modern approaches to mental illness, Brennan claims, the healthy body is a self-contained body. There are other methods, however, that accept that "the traffic between the biological and the social is two-way; the social or psychosocial actually gets into the flesh and is apparent in our affective and hormonal dispositions" (25). I am interested in the representation of these other bodies that are porous; bodies that leak; open bodies that interact, or intra-act (Barad 2007: 339), with other bodies and how modes of affect are transmitted in these exchanges. This discussion unavoidably makes us think about the roles that boundaries and borders play in the transmission of affect. Writing within the context of the clinic, Brennan claims that there is a paradox at work in that it has been observed that there are some affects that leak. Analysts explain how, at times, those affects get impregnated in the bodies of patients with no clear boundaries, which immediately makes their own bodies open, thus challenging the myth of self-containment. I want to think about this moment of affective transmission not only as a negative mode of contagion, exposure, and susceptibility but also as a form of sustainable becoming, intensity, and open vitality. In this sense, I wonder if the space of storytelling is actually not that different to that of the clinic in Mootoo's and Thom's texts. The roles of narrator and reader, or listener, are systematically exchanged in the narratives. In *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, the testimonial and confessional mode of the first

person narrator gets systematically blurred with that of the reader/listener who bears witness. Sydney and Jonathan's affective exchanges hence manage to disrupt the symbolic roles of analyst and patient, making both figures interchangeable through the act of storytelling. Similarly, Thom, who is herself a therapist, unsettles readers, constantly making us realize our complicity with power structures, and thus, in my view, in need of therapeutic scrutiny of our lack of response-ability towards subjects and communities who live in difference. As Thom puts it, "being a writer/performance poet and being a therapist are two halves of the same thing. Writing and performing are about storytelling. Being a therapist is about story-listening. Both are about connection across difference, narrative, and time" (in Siemsen, par. 22). At the same time, the poems' narrative voice is not innocent either: "*lying is the work/of those who have been taught that their truths have no value,*" recalls the narrator in "book fetish," honouring Amber Dawn's memoir. The truth is a notion that gets repeatedly problematized in the collection, and often substituted by modes of storytelling that move forward, sideways like a crab.

Reciprocity and care have been at the core of Mootoo's fiction, often in connection to racialized queer and trans subjectivities and affects⁷. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Mootoo's first novel, it is the narrator, Nurse Tyler, who tells the story of incest, abuse, and isolation of Mala PohPoh Ramchandin. As Valovirta explains, "[t]he caregiver-patient relationship in the novel becomes reciprocal, as it is through caring for the elderly and mentally deranged Mala at the nursing home that Tyler begins to find his/her true self as a transgendered individual" (23). *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* reverses this dynamic in that it is

⁷ Mootoo's representation of trans characters has been subject of critical debate. Indo-Caribbean literary scholar Lisa Outar sees an evolution in Mootoo's career, for instance. As Outar points out, "Whereas Mootoo can be found guilty of treating a trans person as a figure of deliverance at an earlier point in her corpus, in her presentation of female-to-male transition in *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, she shifts to a representation that is quite a bit more complex, fully fleshed, and acutely aware of being subject to erasure" (247). In contrast, trans woman poet Casey Plett includes Mootoo's latest novel as an example of what she calls "the Gender novel," a designation referring to texts that "fail to communicate what it's actually like to transition" (par. 4).

Jonathan, the almost enforced temporary caregiver, who needs to learn how to empathize with his father's transgender feelings. In his discussion of transgender empathy, Crawford contends that

The primary *benefit* of empathic affect is the necessary movement across the constructed formal boundaries between subjects and between subjects and objects, a movement that, in turn, leaves the form of the subject somewhat bereft; the subject that has felt across "its own" borders can no longer feel (or perhaps even feign) constancy or permanence. (169)

This is the case with Jonathan: his interactions with Sydney, through storytelling and touch, desubjugate his previous knowledges, normative affects, and truths as a necessary step to move from resentment into empathy; a process that moves forward, sideways, and backwards simultaneously; a disorienting path that entails obstacles, ruptures, and failures.

Towards the end of the novel, Jonathan confronts his own delayed transphobic feelings. When various trans friends of Sydney stop by to pay their respects, Jonathan's transphobia is made explicit: "Trying to come to terms with Sydney's many changes inside the privacy of the house was one thing, but I felt as if these people were being disrespectful by their public unmasking of him. They were exposing me, too, as being closely connected to such a person" (260). Notice the brutal distance that Jonathan suddenly marks with the phrase "such a person," signaling his entrenched lack of empathy. Beginning to admit his own complicit colonization of Sydney makes Jonathan physically collapse: "A wave of nausea crushed through me. I felt myself falling, and the tungsten lighting on the veranda dimmed" (262). This moment of utter abjection makes him lose consciousness only to wake up to the comforting touch of Karen, a trans woman friend of Sydney, who literally carries him "like a baby" (262). Jonathan looks for her touch, which soothes him. Touching here becomes an ethical moment in that it enables Jonathan's response-ability. I here draw on Barad when she contends that "All touching entails

an infinite alterity [...] Touching is a matter of response. Each of ‘us’ is constituted in response-ability. Each of ‘us’ is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other” (214-5). Jonathan’s response-ability for Sydney activates when he begins to respond with care and with a sense of accountability. As he finally admits, “Should I not be the one who carries the burden of guilt—for bearing prejudices you knew you had to be wary of? Oh, Sydney, the silences you had to keep, the unspoken words that tortured you. Your body lies cold in a funeral parlour, but wherever your spirit lives now, hear my words: it is not you who is guilty” (289). This reorientation of the subject is a necessary step towards the development of empathy and compassion as sustainable affects. As Mariam Pirbhai convincingly puts it, “there is always an underlying spirit of empathy and compassion in the way [Mootoo approaches] these subjects, even toward those who may be the object of critique” (230).

As mentioned earlier, Stockton claims that “History grows itself from the side, from what is to the side of it—often in fictions—before it takes this sideways growth...to itself” (9). I find the idea of history growing sideways and outside of itself a very persuasive one, particularly for a reflection of the current state of Canadian Literature as an institutionalized assemblage of power relations, alliances, and ruptures. I am thinking here of the stories that saturate the sides of CanLit, moving forward sideways, growing from what is to the side of it: the narratives of Indigenous, feminist, queer, trans, and migrant voices. This is shared territory with transCanadian literature, which, in the words of scholar Smaro Kamboureli, invites us to “move toward the elsewhere of CanLit” (xiv). In Mootoo’s novel, it is the untold story of a racialized trans man that we partially bear witness to through the lens of a white cis narrator. This is a fiction that sits beside history in that it is mostly through his senses that the story is reinterpreted. Jonathan explains that his intention is “first and foremost to give voice to Sydney” (52). In a thought-provoking interview, Mootoo explains how she deliberately wanted to give the voice to a privileged but emotionally broken man who is white, straight, and from

a British cultural background. Note that this decision does not entail a flight from accountability but the opposite: “In the course of inventing the story it came to me that this son would have the task of not only understanding the parent’s choices but of explaining them. The idea of explaining them would involve having to engage his capacity for compassion” (in Pirbhai 236). As Mootoo insists, Jonathan “has to tell that story responsibly” (230). With the recent debacle of the Appropriation Prize⁸ in Canada, it is more important than ever to pause and think about the stories we share, the stories we listen to, and the stories that simply do not belong to us. This is an ethical imperative that I am confronted with as a reader: is Jonathan appropriating Sydney’s story? Is he betraying his parent by doing so and, if that is the case, is this a form of revenge? Does Jonathan’s act of bearing witness then, perversely, entail a form of neocolonial intervention? If so, how could we conceptualize alternative sustainable and viable ways beyond the rhetoric of reconciliation⁹ that interdisciplinary Black studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott warns us about? These remain open questions that force us to “stay with the trouble,” to borrow a phrase from queer science studies theorist Donna Haraway’s latest work (Haraway 2016).

Insisting on the ethical imperative to attend to differences in an age of indifference, Haraway explains how “[t]he decisions and transformations so urgent in our times for learning again, or for the first time, how to become less deadly, more response-able, more attuned, more capable of surprise [...] must be made without guarantees or the expectation of harmony with those who are not oneself—and not safely other, either” (98). Thom’s poetics, in my view,

⁸ See Hal Niedzviecki’s utterly problematic editorial, “Winning the Appropriation Prize,” that appeared in the 2017 Spring Issue of *Write Magazine*: <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-may-15-2017-1.4112604/i-invoked-cultural-appropriation-in-the-context-of-literature-and-writing-only-hal-niedzviecki-1.4112618>

⁹ Critiques of the rhetoric of reconciliation abound in Indigenous writing. This discussion escapes the scope of this article, but here is an example from Oji-Cree, Two-Spirit poet, Joshua Whitehead: “I am an urban Indigequeer who rejects reconciliation. Instead, I seek to *reterroritorialize* both settler-colonial and Indigenous-cultural worlds. I hurt, but there is a type of pedagogy, a type of creative energy, in loving one’s own sadness” (11).

deeply resonate with Haraway's words. As the narrative voice in "the wounded for the healing" blatantly puts it:

[...] my
experience of violence has made me
no less likely to harm you.
history is doomed
to repeat itself
colonization and rape
are written on my bones. (46)

What does it mean, then, to suspend the possibility for harmony when we make our ethical choices? Are tension, contestation, and friction always inseparable to processes of learning, responding, and caring? If so, what role does violence play here? Perhaps an ethical development of lateral relations and sideways feelings, as Mootoo's and Thom's transCanadian fictions suggest, could be a place to start. This would entail growing to the side of problematic celebrations of Canada 150, with its unsustainable discourses of nation building, prosperity, and growth, at the expense of addressing its imperial and racist premises; it would involve taking up an ethical stance where academic practice and practitioners would be required to slow down, read between the lines, take detours, and dare to feel sideways. Let me conclude this article by saying that I find Mootoo's and Thom's ethical conundrums and artistic experimentations crucial to comprehend the complexities of the time we live in. These are times of turmoil, in the words of Indigenous cultures scholar Warren Cariou, that demand the ability to relate, while being accountable for, the work we do as we move forward sideways, striving to sustain alliances between feminist, queer, and trans literary communities. Acting response-ably will involve listening to those stories that have remained largely unheard in received versions of what Canadian literature *is*. Learning by reading attentively, and

affectively, the work of Kai Cheng Thom and Shani Mootoo, together with many other numerous transCanadian queer and trans writers and cultural producers, would be a responsible place to start.

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