

# “But the Good Feelings Were There Too”<sup>1</sup>: Care and Hospitality in Adele Wiseman’s *Crackpot*

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ADELE WISEMAN’S SECOND NOVEL, *Crackpot*, is renowned for using parodic and comic strategies to portray its protagonist’s private and public relational struggles and to complicate her traumatic life with absurd, naive, and at times disillusioned responses and expectations. Drawing on existing literature in the field of care ethics, I want to suggest that Hoda’s struggles are also entwined with Canada’s dominant colonial model of care and the myth of hospitality for immigrants. Despite Hoda’s experiences being set in a hostile world, the narrative reads like a celebration of her singular life shaped by her nurturing, hospitable, strong personality and self-will, her constant undermining of conventions in her Jewish community of North Winnipeg, and her refusal to be a passive woman in a rigid patriarchal environment. As caregiver, sex worker, and cleaning woman, Hoda’s unique expression of hospitality and care practices disrupts a national myth of hospitality that tries to police and render immigrants and unruly bodies invisible. Beyond this celebrated protagonist and her remarkable, long-lasting impact on women’s literature, the novel’s moral and political discourses on categories of social and individual difference such as gender, class, and race shape the novel’s important critique of the myth of Canada as a caring, welcoming nation. Accordingly, it is important to examine *Crackpot*’s double focus on care as a manifestation of relationality between individual subjects and on the limits of care as a social and cultural system through which communities perpetuate violence, discrimination, and injustice.

To examine these issues further, this analysis provides a contemporary reading of the novel as an expression of careful, cautious love. More precisely, drawing on care ethics and vulnerability studies, I argue that the text imagines a moral moment that builds on the value and articulations of interdependence, on what care *does*, and on a subversion of disability

that somehow negotiates — in an attempt to breach colonial, economic, and patriarchal power dynamics — relational wounds and belonging in Canada, both at individual and societal levels. I thus suggest that Wiseman's novel zeroes in on a life-affirming perspective that defies normative behaviours (Panofsky, "From Complicity" 63) and displaces, if not rejects, the politics of hospitality in what I interpret as an attempt to imagine a new form of justice for embodied subjects like Hoda.

Using the ethics of care, which relies heavily on a relational configuration of vulnerability as its core conceptual framework, in the three following sections I weave together Wiseman's discourse on trauma with a discourse on hope, responsibility, and relational life-affirmation to show the moral and political significance of care in the novel. A first section provides a more theoretical discussion of vulnerability in line with Wiseman's dramatization of fragile bodies and precarious living conditions, stressing how care ethics can be useful to analyze literary representations of relationality and dependency that seek to break interrelated patterns of patriarchal, cultural, and symbolic oppression. A second section investigates how the novel's representation of caring bodies shows that care is not inherently good and can at times be harmful, despite the protagonist, Hoda's, tireless searching for "good feelings" and acceptance. Finally, a third section explores the novel's use of storytelling and rejection of a national myth of hospitality. This last section shows that *Crackpot* configures care as narrative gesture even before theories of care ethics had emerged, and paves the way for contemporary literary texts by Canadian and Québécois feminist women writers invested in reclaiming narratives of fatness and sex work.

### Representing and Rethinking Vulnerability

Marie Garrau and Alice Le Goff argue that the ethics of care offers a different framework for thinking relations of dependence that develop with people regarded as vulnerable or labeled with disability: "l'éthique du *care* fournirait des clés pour penser les relations de dépendance qui s'instaurent avec des personnes dont la capacité d'agir, sinon l'autonomie morale, apparaît comme précaire et déficiente, que ce soit de manière temporaire ou chronique"<sup>22</sup> (7). Some of these keys for thinking about relationships of dependency and vulnerability differently are listed in Carol Gilligan's definition of care ethics:

an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect. An ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others. Its logic is inductive, contextual, psychological, rather than deductive or mathematical. (Interview)

Gilligan's emphasis on "being listened to carefully" and "heard with respect" echoes the novel's reclamation of unheard voices and disrespected marginalized subjects rendered invisible at both the family and interpersonal relationship level and the sociocultural and national level. Hoda, big, loud, and unapologetic, reclaims this voice. Rahel's care work, along with her nurturing and protective care for her daughter and husband and her refusal to hide, silence, or shame her daughter, also mobilizes a care ethics strategy of resistance towards homogenizing and marginalizing practices in their community.

Daniel Engster argues that vulnerability, when placed at the core of care ethics, enlarges the scope of accountability from private and domestic to include social, cultural, and political frameworks that keep subjects in situations of vulnerability:

Our vulnerabilities arise not only from our bodies but also from our social environment, social institutions, and cultural norms. . . . Narrow care networks may be able to fulfill most of our dependency needs but they cannot mitigate many of our vulnerabilities. Because our vulnerability arises in large part from our social environment, mitigating it necessarily entails making claims on all capable others. A "duty of beneficence" rooted in vulnerability necessarily involves public "caring with" as opposed to only dyadic dependency care. (12)

*Crackpot* epitomizes this important tenet of contemporary care ethics in its revitalization of vulnerability as shared human condition rather than as expression of weakness, dependence, and neglect. The novel does not strictly reduce vulnerability to a negative configuration, but reframes it as a constitutive, empowering element of subjectivity and of a more inclusive, responsible feminist ethics that is useful for challenging national myths of womanhood, hospitality, and care. As Estelle Ferrarese suggests, "[t]he concept of care therefore encourages reflections on vulnerability,

and the obligations felt towards it, which are already involved in social and political arrangements; indeed, it then appeals for changes to be made to the latter" (238).

A pivotal notion of care ethics, vulnerability has gained attention in contemporary moral and political philosophy. Care ethicists revalorize vulnerability as "une disponibilité à la blessure"<sup>3</sup> inherent to the human condition (Laugier 12) and suggest that corporeal vulnerability and psycho-emotional vulnerability "invitent à concevoir une exigence de préservation de l'intégrité psychique de manière analogue à la préservation de l'intégrité physique"<sup>4</sup> (135). Thinking vulnerability as an ontological condition challenges dominant configurations of autonomy and independence by reclaiming dependence and responsibility as fundamental characteristics of human life, a life that is thus inherently relational.<sup>5</sup> Care ethics operates a shift from traditional Western moral philosophy by placing the relation rather than the individual at the center of moral life, hence making care ethics a relational approach rather than an individualistic approach to moral philosophy and ethics. As a notion that reinforces the shared, dependent value of autonomy and singularity and thus the necessity, for everyone, to rely on certain forms of care, care as a relational approach is useful for understanding the representation of vulnerability in *Crackpot* and Hoda's complicated negotiation of marginalization, abuse, and enthusiasm for people and for the world: what she calls "big feelings" throughout the text.

Hoda's big body and big voice belie her vulnerability, even as they mark her for rejection, hurt, and mockery. Furthermore, Hoda is fed by her mother to keep her quiet, less disruptive. Her body is awkwardly dressed, and her emotions are awkwardly expressed. Other characters, too, show an emotional, psychological vulnerability mediated by the body: Rahel's hunched back embodies the weight of care work and the toll of the extreme physical pain she endures for months, along with financial stress, while Danile's blindness symbolizes his naiveté and ignorance (LoVerso, n. pag.). The novel's discourse on vulnerability suggests it is both a strength and weakness, a constant negotiation between difference (class, gender, disability, race) and the subject's agency and singular voice.

Moreover, the novel articulates the power struggle that impacts the relational dynamics among characters and between them and the community. Framing difference — bodily, cultural, sexual, class-related — as

relational allows the character of Hoda to prevail in violent, oppressive circumstances. And it is obvious that she suffers and is victimized because of her poverty, appearance, loud personality, and occupation. But Hoda's ability to reclaim space for herself and to confront, if not reject, a national myth of hospitality, along with a patriarchal script of womanhood, expresses vulnerability in a transformative way. Hoda's constant struggle, to find relational and social validation while repeatedly failing to have her many "swelling feelings" respected and not rejected, mobilizes in the novel a discourse on vulnerability, knowledge, and recognition. This discourse not only sheds light on a national history of violence towards the figure of the Other, but also demonstrates the need for better care "that preserves and respects the subjectivity of the other" (DeFalco 73).

For Hoda, care is thus about "world-making" (Danby 8). It is about making space for her different moral capacity, for her body and "big feelings" so that she is not "left alone" (Wiseman 393). Indeed, Hoda's strategy to excuse others who mistreat her, humiliate her, and dehumanize her — "her sympathy for everyone" (452) — is disrupted when Lazar proposes to her. The text, using a language of care with words like "attention" and "giving comfort," sheds light on the asymmetrical caring relationships that Hoda has endured:

So she had gradually learned never to draw attention while she was giving attention, never to demand comfort while she was giving comfort. And from the early pain of realizing that nobody really wanted to know her, had grown her pride that nobody did know her, not really, not who she was, underneath, not nearly as well as she knew them, even though they talked about her and laughed at her and looked down on her. (452)

Hoda's desire to prove her value, as well as her tendency to render her own needs invisible in situations of caregiving, shows how gender and power intersect and impact the labour of care. The novel dramatizes vulnerability both as an expression of Hoda's fragility and as a manifestation of her agency and relational understanding of the world. Furthermore, it questions and reimagines the role of care and vulnerability in the sustainability and ethicality of such models that rely on ideals of independence, autonomy, and individualism.

Indeed, for Naïma Hamrouni, this approach to vulnerability highlights "the fact that the relative independence of some has been built on

the denial of the independence of others who have been confined to the kind of work that underscores bodily vulnerability" (75). This bodily vulnerability appears in the very first sentences of the novel, in Rahel's "frail and ever-so-slightly humpbacked" body, "blind Danile," as well as Hoda's large, disturbing size as a baby (Wiseman 1). The novel depicts these three subjects through their relationship of physical and material dependence to community and family. Rahel relies on other Jewish families for work, while Danile, who is blind and does not speak much English, relies on Rahel and Uncle Nate, and later on, Hoda, to function beyond the house. Hoda, who, as a child, naturally depends on adults, also depends on two different education systems — the English school and the Yiddish school — to obtain knowledge and then depends on the community to find work. It becomes apparent that Hoda, even as a toddler, is the one character who defies a type of vulnerability and dependence associated with weakness and lack of ability, and that knowledge comes to her in unexpected ways.

In the first scene of the novel, Hoda, accepting the food of her mother's clients, is described as defiant by her mother, "as though in allowing them [the clients] to play their game she was not necessarily accepting their terms of reference" (2). Hoda comes of age through the sudden loss of her mother, Rahel, who has endured an abdominal tumor for too long, unable to afford medical care and time off work; the discovery and exploration of her sexuality; the struggle to make friends; and a moral and material negotiation of survival achieved mostly through sex work, as well as the same cleaning job as her mother. She emerges from these trials strong, undefeated, and assertive. She often says that "she could do what she wanted" (114) or that "she could if she felt like it" (115).

The narrative voice, speaking mostly from Hoda's perspective, adds that "More and more she knew that it had to happen soon, and those strong, dense, concentrated, persistent sensations of sweetness that waited to enwrap her with urge and promise through all those many less pleasing moments of her day, let her know, in their own way, that joyous events can commence from humble places" (118). Hoda thus refuses to abdicate and to be invisible, and her oversized body symbolizes this refusal, this proud occupation of space. She refuses to be ignored, to be made to feel as though she does not matter, and she often expresses her rage at boys, men, women, clients, and bystanders for "never really looking at her" (242). Despite difficult living conditions and a hostile com-

munity, Hoda does not stop believing that “the good feelings were there too, right under them [the bad feelings], struggling to get out” (118).

Such a configuration of vulnerability helps us to recognize the interconnections between *Crackpot*'s language of care and its discourse on work and labour, as Hoda attempts to make a living for her and her father and as vulnerable characters — Rahel, Danile, Hoda, her friend and fellow sex worker, Seraphina, and striking workers — struggle to make ends meet, to secure decent living conditions, and to find justice in a world that systematically reminds them of their inferior, powerless position. Hoda's parents deal with and interpret poverty, suffering, and social exclusion differently, being both grateful for and somehow mystified at surviving the pogrom and the plague following their arranged marriage in Russia. Danile's understanding and appreciation for his situation relies on religious knowledge and on his faith, as he finds comfort in his family life, in his daughter, and in his storytelling ability. Rahel, more clear-thinking and having to go to work to provide for the family, having to face the community and worry about her overweight, body-shamed daughter and blind husband, questions her own dissatisfaction more pragmatically: “*What more do you want from life, Rahel? She often asked herself as she went about her work, her mind not foreign to a certain private irony. You have been nurtured by the open hand of God himself. Who would have believed that even plagues can be good for somebody?*” (13). Hoda's life is inextricably woven together with these other vulnerable lives in a condition of mutual reliance and resistance; other lives are both a burden and a necessity. The text does not idealize Hoda's self-confidence and resistance to rules and norms. It is “[n]ot easy for Hoda to endear herself to people, though she tried” (128). The reader encounters a complex character who suffers, very consciously, from the loss of her mother, weight stigma, social rejection, poverty, sexual abuse, and corporeal and affective trauma when she unexpectedly gives birth to a son.

Theories of vulnerability help circumscribe, in *Crackpot*, a narrative of care that sheds light on the agency of physically and emotionally fragile subjects whose strength, voice, and moral capacity emerge through relational, shared experiences. The text does not glorify or instrumentalize the characters' pain and struggle, nor does it confine them to an identity of victims. Instead, it challenges and rewrites the moral and political significance of hospitality, belonging, and care.

## Unruly Bodies and Good Feelings

Already from childhood, Hoda is presented as a demanding, vocal, assertive character. The novel begins with Rahel's habit of feeding her baby, Hoda, while at work, cleaning houses. Rahel's nurturing strategy prevents Hoda from screaming and disturbing: "All day long, at the least sign of disquiet, she fed the child, for Hoda even then was big-voiced and forward, and sometimes said naughty things to people" (1). This gesture operates on different levels of care, situating both female characters in a complex relational dynamic within which care is both a burden and an act of love. Again, the opening scene brings together the care work, dependence, and vulnerability — such as the feeding, the cleaning, Rahel's "frail and ever-so-slightly humpbacked" (1) body — that inform the difficulty of Rahel and Hoda's experience. Such caring practices also express strength, determination, and a disregard for what others think: "Rahel misinterpreted the kindly intentions and resented these critics who wanted to deny her child. She saw in it simply another sign that it is the way of the rich to deny the poor and continued to make sure that her child was bigger and more beautiful every day. Why else does a mother crawl on her knees in the houses of strangers?" (2). In addition to situating Rahel's place as woman, caregiver, and domestic worker, the scene also sets the tone for the rest of the novel in its depiction of Hoda as a vocal, strong, and large — in personality, in appearance, in weight — female character. From childhood to her experience as sex worker, Hoda negotiates, at times grotesquely, her living conditions, her vulnerability despite a fat, imposing body, and her search for what she repeatedly calls "good feelings." This character unfolds in a complex language of care shaped and at times challenged by the effects and demands of work, knowledge and ignorance, vulnerability, and social recognition.

Drawing on Ruth Panofsky's seminal analysis of female subjectivity in the novel as unfolding on a continuum between complicity and subversion, I read Hoda's unique subjectivity as characterized by this circulation, by a relational responsibility that very concretely, ordinarily, shapes Hoda's demands and opportunities for care and knowledge. The novel's approach to relationality thus works closely with a discourse of intimacy, vulnerability, and violence. Simultaneously, the novel also shows how "the nerve of caring, so rawly exposed" (Wiseman 60), helps the reader to see more clearly how certain lives are, on the one hand, saturated with vulnerability, and, on the other, how there is power and



agency on the peripheries. Those peripheries and margins can be the site of a renewal of social and relational interdependencies, and a space for a different idea of the “good life” to unfold.

Accordingly, I contend that Hoda’s singular knowledge mobilizes an ethics of care, as she uses her unique perspective on the world not “as weapon, but rather . . . as gift” (60). This gift embodies more than her naive optimism: it is a clever, radical, and compassionate offering of “a strong personal myth” built on a very “different value system” (Wiseman, qtd. in Meyer and O’Riordan 153). For instance, despite her inadequacy and repeated rejection in the social sphere, Hoda comes “with the friendliest of intention” when “nobody else seem[s] to know or care” (Wiseman 322), and she often cannot understand or make sense of other people’s carelessness or lack of solidarity: “Helplessly, Hoda suffered, knowing herself to be lovable but in this place unloved and misjudged” (42). She is repeatedly shocked, often lost for words, in rage and in awe, “isolated in her astonishment” (151) following humiliation, rejection, and misunderstandings. Nevertheless, her determination prevails, even after the trauma of unexpected childbirth and the pain of giving the child away. Hoda keeps “blocking life’s kicks and trying to catch a glimpse of life’s butterflies” (247), hoping that “the good things” come (231).

As Marcia Mack rightly observes, “*Crackpot* rejects universalizing mythmaking techniques.” Instead, she adds that “the text concentrates on elements of creation that are powerless, the nearly silent voices, in its celebration of each individual’s situatedness in history” (136). However, I would argue that this negotiation of wonder and squalor — “shards of confusion and evil and sparks of divinity and beauty” (136) — that inscribes such situatedness is done through relational processes of individuation. The novel complicates, through Hoda’s unique sense of care, the “hostile invasion” of Hoda’s and Danile’s presence outside the home (Wiseman 90). Hoda’s fat body and Danile’s old age and blindness, in addition to their status as immigrants, indeed problematize their presence in public space, as they experience rejection and unwantedness, but they also experience “hostile acts” (97) inside their home.

Uncle Nate’s attempt at controlling their lives and the visit from the “gentle ladies from the blind club” show how class consciousness, shame, and debt also invade the private space of home and inscribe Hoda’s and Danile’s marginalized bodies:

she [Hoda] couldn't understand why they [gentile, Christian ladies] wouldn't touch anything, not even one little thing, and she began to worry that maybe they had noticed that one of her fingernails was dirtier than the rest, which she had only now just noticed herself. She tried to bury her hands in her lap and worked at the dirty fingernail with the thumbnail of her other hand. (94)

In this scene, Hoda's awareness of her dirty body emerges as "a direct result of her own hospitality" (97), of her own gestures of care towards her guests. The language of hospitality displayed by the protagonist clashes with the Christian ladies' disgusted charity and Uncle Nate's harmful, dehumanizing care, which Danile angrily calls "the disease of inhumanity" (105). Much like Danile's unexpected burst of anger towards Uncle Nate — a man who is highly regarded in the community — for wanting to put him in a home and Hoda in the orphanage, Hoda's insistent care towards the Christian ladies transgresses and challenges normative behaviours in an unwelcoming community.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, this community repeatedly shames, marginalizes, and distrusts Hoda's and Danile's unruly bodies and their strange, inappropriate social behaviours. Their feelings of pride, shame, and guilt in both situations push them to take greater responsibilities, to challenge expectations, and "to reconstruct from the shambles of th[ese] visit[s] the great myth of their heroic resistance" (109). Coming back to Mack's claim that the novel subverts universalizing mythmaking strategies, Hoda and Danile's resistance becomes a particular, revisited myth that debunks, through these fictional subjects' refusal to conform and stay silent, both religious and social configurations of subjectivity and citizenship. Their feelings of injustice, shame, and anger, expressed to preserve their dignity and their home, show the blurred boundaries between private and public spaces, as the community and Uncle Nate are not afraid to lecture Hoda and Danile on their lifestyle and living conditions, and as the two occupy public space in disruptive ways.

There is abundant literature on Hoda's strong, unflinching moral convictions.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Ruth Panofsky has focused on Hoda's inter-subjective struggle between complicity and subversion to argue that *Crackpot* imagines a unique form of fulfillment for women by celebrating the life of a sex worker, showing how fiction can "foster [all women's] independence and accommodate rather than repress their individuality" ("From Complicity" 66). And Michael Greenstein's detailed interpreta-

tion of *Crackpot* zeroes in on this private way, as he brings to attention Hoda's embodied feelings and the novel's use of affect: "Like the imagery of weaving and pieces of the puzzle, the emphasis on 'feeling' creates interrelationships between characters lacking the language necessary to specify their emotions" (26). These scholars rightly highlight the role of private and social emotions in the novel, but I suggest that these personal and shared feelings, when analyzed with a care ethics perspective, complicate ideas of independence and of a "lack" of language, and rather uncover the novel's relational configuration of love and care. Shifting attention to *Crackpot*'s articulation of care ethics allows thinking differently about how Hoda's voice "gropes for an emotional state that conforms to society's norms, but one, nevertheless, that remains uniquely and genuinely her own" (Greenstein 26). And using care ethics stresses Hoda's moral capacity, both as an expression of relational care and as a narrative strategy for challenging and resisting the multilayered discrimination she and her family experience.

*Crackpot* uses particular gestures and moments of care to rupture the dominant moral tradition that governs Hoda's living space, to direct our attention to neglected realities and experiences — including domestic work, sex work, and adaptation difficulties for immigrants — and to what we valorize as human activity. The novel's unique multivocal formal shape not only reinforces the relationality of narrative but also complicates conventional expectations of an individual heroic voice, offering a radical decentring of Canadian, if not Western, identity. Furthermore, reading the novel with care ethics reinforces what has already been said: this is a fiercely feminist novel. Hoda, with her big body and big feelings, is the one who leads, and, as Mack observes, "the expected, patriarchal voices — those of the next generation (David's) and that of the traditional provider (Danile's) do not organize meaning for the reader throughout the story" (137). More precisely, the novel brings into focus certain visions and experiences of the world that are normally ignored in the public sphere, concomitantly highlighting the politics of poverty in the private sphere, characterizing a poor woman in service, and concerning itself with the cruel and often invisible economy of care sustained mostly by women. *Crackpot* thus reframes dominant narratives of care, care work, and community, and problematizes gender-based and class-based roles. *Crackpot* subverts "a culture that idealizes and promotes female selflessness" (DeFalco 111) and that tends to render the

Other — the female, immigrant, fat other — invisible or unacceptable. *Crackpot* does not perpetuate “patriarchal scripts of female subservience” in showing women “struggling to balance the demands of others with self-protection” (111). It could be easy to come to that conclusion as we read that Rahel cannot afford, either financially or emotionally, to see the doctor because she must take care of dependent Hoda and Danile, and that Hoda can hardly say no to men, to clients, both for her own pleasure and for the money. Through the persistence of those “good feelings” that maintain the strength and agency of Hoda’s unruly body despite the trauma, *Crackpot* complicates the injustices that come with the demands of others and of the self, the subjugation that comes with care work, and “the fragile tissue that separates caring from its opposites” (115).

Hoda’s vulnerable struggle unmasks an ideology of colonialism, sexism, capitalism, and independence. And yet, despite the everyday struggle, she incessantly searches for love, for meaningful, caring relationality, for that “prince” — a telling postcolonial fantasy of marrying the Prince of Wales (Greenstein 2) — whom she imagines and hopes for. Hoda’s caring disposition, along with her care work and caring gestures (for her father, for the boys she services, for Seraphina, for her son) serve as entry into the public. Her focus on “good feelings,” on radically reversing and contesting the standards while at the same time welcoming nearly everyone by being kind and generous, empathetic, and compassionate, also contributes to her often challenging, disruptive presence and interactions in the public sphere. More importantly perhaps, Hoda wonders why her caring, careful personality does not “trigger that gesture of friendliness that would bring her in among them for good” (116). Her failed attempts at friendship are key in how the narrative questions notions of hospitality, belonging, and community.

### The Myth of Hospitality

Storytelling is a key element for facilitating the novel’s discourse on hospitality: this is how Danile best connects with others, maintains the past to make sense of their present situation, and soothes Hoda with meaningful, validating knowledge about who she is, about her special coming into the world. It is also Danile’s storytelling that provides healing and meaning to Hoda when she unknowingly gives birth. He does not know about the birth, as she hides it from him, pretending to be suffering from menstrual cramps and thus avoiding any discussion with her clueless

but respectful father: “She listened now, as she had as a child, when he described to her again the special circumstances of their existence . . . She wanted stories and still more stories. ‘No, not that one, Daddy . . . Is there anything you haven’t told me? . . . Tell me something new’” (235). In search of something new to hold on to, Hoda relies on her father’s imagination and knowledge to forge a more caring, welcoming space for her as she goes through a traumatic experience.

Hoda learns about her family history and heritage through Danile’s recollections, and she also uses these stories in her attempts to gain approval from her peers at school. While Rahel and later Hoda protect Danile from the hostile outside world, Hoda is the one who exists within both worlds and who attempts to belong to the English community. She repeatedly tries to make friends, but they keep rejecting her, thus making her integration in the dominant community a failure. This failure also carries a great emotional cost for Hoda: “she hardly ever liked English school much. It was not hard to learn things, but something always made you feel bad” (42). But young Hoda already has a strong moral compass and self-confidence that help her brush off the insults she receives from the community and at school. She remarks,

When they said nasty things that wasn’t even the worst part. You could always talk back and get into trouble. . . . But how could you look back their looks when you didn’t have the awful looking feelings that were in the faces they looked at you with? Some people didn’t like you. No matter what you did they wouldn’t like you. You couldn’t be what they would like you to be because they didn’t like you to be at all. (42)

Hoda experiences a colonial, institutional, and national model of care — a culture symbolized by the English school she attends. The depiction of Miss Boltholmsup, for instance, who is the last teacher Hoda has, articulates a model of care that exposes “the many ways that ethical [or non-ethical] responsibility can draw attention to gendered, racial and class-based marginalization” (DeFalco 9). For example, this teacher’s refusal to listen to Hoda’s life story — to recognize Hoda’s history, knowledge of the pogroms, of the plague — and her focus on preserving “appropriateness” confronts the myth of Canada as a caring nation. Hoda thinks,

First teacher had not let her finish and then she had simply reduced everything that she had tried to say to nothing, somehow, without

questioning her or even directly criticizing. She had just, simply, thrown it all away, dismissed it as though it had never been, or if it had that it had been something unclean and uncivilized and best forgotten by those who wanted to sing “The Maple Leaf Forever.” . . . How could they all just sit there singing those dumb old songs and not even care what had happened? (151)

Wiseman’s imagined school environment and language of the teacher symbolize a national cultural discourse that Amelia DeFalco characterizes, in *Imagining Care: Responsibility, Dependency, and Canadian Literature*, as a “conveniently selective national mythology” that shapes the myth of Canada as a caring nation (23). She suggests that “the celebration of Canada’s commitment to its most vulnerable citizens depends on a limited view of national history and policy” (20) and she adds that “The vision of Canada as a country built on respect and responsibility, tolerance and care is a mythological reading that obscures a serious legacy of exclusion, prejudice, neglect” (20). Narratives of vulnerability, defiance, and hospitality such as *Crackpot* “encourage their readers to approach the myth of Canadian care with caution, replacing totalizing myths of Canada and its citizens as unified and identified by care with particular scenarios of complicated, often ambivalent relations of dependence and need” (23). DeFalco further remarks that the scholarship of cultural critics, such as Eva Mackey on “Canada’s mythologized kindness to” Indigenous people based on a notion of tolerance that “coexisted with brutal policies of extermination and cultural genocide” (qtd. in DeFalco 20) and Daniel Coleman on Canadian “civility,” has “expos[ed] the problematic excisions and exclusions necessary for prevailing popular narratives and symbols of Canadian cultural caring” (20).

DeFalco also argues that a focus on care as disposition, activity, and system in literary texts “expose[s] the myth of Canadian care in a different register from cultural criticism” (23), shedding light on the value of concrete, singular experience for modifying and challenging problematic myths. Returning to Gilligan’s analysis of the Heinz dilemma<sup>8</sup> and use of narrative form in her experiments, she argues that “literary narratives as opposed to instrumental narratives carefully manufactured as ethical exempla, can convey ethical dilemmas more meaningfully infused with the subjectivity and particularity that complicate straightforward ‘right’ or ‘superior’ moral reasoning” (24). Rather than simply using literary narratives to exemplify the ethics of care, DeFalco shows, in her analy-

sis of Canadian literature, how literature contributes, complicates, and expands care ethics, the latter which Gilligan, already in 1982, configured as “a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (Gilligan, *In a Different* 19).

Published eight years before the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, *Crackpot* exposes, through Hoda’s experience of the education system, as well as through her encounter with the judgmental, moralizing Christian ladies who welcomed her father Danile to their church’s basket weaving sessions, the difficult integration of immigrants in Canada and the illusion of hospitality. Using her family’s mythical story of her parents’ wedding for an oral presentation, Hoda is unable to finish because the teacher deems the story inappropriate. Humiliated and dismissed, “She remained isolated in her astonishment. She did not understand, could not even reconstruct what the teacher had said” (151). The hostile community that Hoda so badly wants to please systematically rejects her: both her personality and her body take up too much space and do not fit with the community’s standards of social appropriateness.

Only privately, with her Yiddish teacher Mr. Polonick, who celebrates her difference, is Hoda capable of making meaningful connections with others. Hoda uses her big body — which in her words “offers more room for good feelings” — and her charms for love. Her character challenges social and moral norms, and transforms and appropriates, at times shockingly, gendered expectations to find material and emotional care. The text shows care in the forms of paid work, gifts, compassion, and responsible — if always difficult — empowerment. But care is also associated with asymmetrical power and subjugation, as shown, for example, by the figure of rich uncle Nate and of Ms. Boltholmsup. In its problematization of hospitality, the text uses care as economic, social, and emotional support, as well as an excuse for abuse and deprecation, such as when Hoda’s mother, and later Hoda herself, are repeatedly disparaged for working as charwomen “crawling on floors” (Wiseman 69). Hoda is a figure who provides a lot of care, but she also demands, both with naiveté and lucidity, the care she deserves without shame. In addition to representing a “moralistic national culture” (DeFalco 20) and myth of hospitality that maintain immigrants and unruly bodies in situations of precarious living conditions and inadequacy, the novel imagines a woman who does not capitulate or abdicate, and who expresses her discontent

with the colonial, patriarchal, class-based idea of what she “deserves” as a poor, immigrant, sexually active, fat woman.

### *Crackpot* Resurfacing

In addition to the oft-acknowledged religious and sacrificial symbolism (Zichy; see also Kertzer and Zipurksy) and discourse on institutional racism and marginalization of immigrant communities that are central to the novel, reading *Crackpot* today allows for new literary connections that amplify the political and poetic grandeur of the novel and that illuminate other literary texts’ powerful play on “good feelings” and the persistence of wonder and defiance in crisis. As Mack notices,<sup>9</sup> Wiseman’s difficulty in finding a publisher can be explained by how the novel “reminds the reader of the position of the victim” and “accommodates, even privileges the position of the prostitute” (135). Mack adds that the character of Hoda “maintains a personal vision” (135), to which I would add that it is also a relational vision. In other words, while it certainly is “personal,” it is not an individualistic voice, and this relationality, as I read it today with a feminist care ethics perspective, not only reminds the reader of the position of the victim, but also fosters accountability by making them “view life from the margins” (135). The insistence of the text on Hoda’s vulnerable and caring perspective might be better received today, with women writers creating a more welcoming space for such a challenging, uncomfortable narrative of unruly bodies. Rereading *Crackpot* today undoubtedly shows how it paved the way for contemporary fiction in which vulnerable subjects and fragile spaces are reclaimed and reimagined to come to terms with the entangled experiences of trauma, complicity, and oppression. The novel does so with a singular care that zeroes in on accountability and responsibility and that encourages, through fiction, ethical and political engagement with vulnerable lives.

There are several examples of contemporary literary texts by women in Québec and Canada that work with a strong relational feminist ethics and bring attention to bodies that struggle to make space for themselves while being subjected to discrimination based on race, gender, body, and class. For instance, Hoda’s marginalized and commodified body shares similarities with Heather O’Neill’s protagonist Baby in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006), especially as the latter carries the guilt of not caring properly for her father and has a similar ability to find refuge in imagination and dreams. Baby’s juvenile body on the street and her job



as sex worker also echoes Hoda's problematic, partially ignorant experience of sexuality. As such, the graphic, raw, radical sexuality of Hoda, complicated by gendered and patriarchal oppression, also resonates with a similar continuum of complicity and subversion found in Nelly Arcan's renowned novel *Putain* (2001), which further highlights the need to address those persistent issues in literary texts from a care ethics perspective that values relationality rather than polarized, right or wrong individual, independent choices. A discourse on mental health and trauma also connects the two narratives, as both use the figure of the sex worker to challenge normative behaviour for women and question institutional and national myths of care. Finally, Mona Awad's *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016) also comes to mind when reading *Crackpot* today, especially with the emergence of fat studies. Both texts dramatize fat stigma, body image, and the relational struggle of pleasurable and acceptance in a hostile world. Awad's text, like Wiseman's, challenges dominant caring practices for bodies that disrupt social expectations and spaces.

*Crackpot's* relevance is thus reinforced — it *resurfaces* — when read with a feminist care ethics and alongside other narratives of vulnerable bodies that are also not characterized by victimhood but that nevertheless confront, through fiction, the experience of marginalization and violence through strong, vocal, relational subjects.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wiseman 118.

<sup>2</sup> “care ethics provides keys for thinking relations of dependency that are established for people whose capacity to act, or whose moral autonomy, appears precarious and lacking, whether in a temporary or chronic manner” (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> “running the risk of being hurt, of being wounded” (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> “invite a necessity to preserve mental integrity in a manner similar to the preservation of physical integrity” (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this term from the relational approach to ethics and the relational psychoanalytical tradition of thinkers such as Jessica Benjamin and Thomas Ogden, who theorize relationality as “the originary core of personal identity and . . . the processes of detachment and differentiation” (Hollway 219).

<sup>6</sup> There is much more to say about the representation and the ethics of hospitality in *Crackpot*, as Hoda refuses to perform the expectations of the community and disturbs a certain *ordre établi* of Western hospitality by taking charge, for example, of the unexpected encounter with the Christian ladies in her house and offending her teacher and classmates when she very graphically tells the story of her parents' wedding, leading to her silencing and shaming. Her radical and troubling decision to have sex with her son is also a drastic act of

hospitality, as she offers him a space of love and belonging and radically “reclaims her son through incest” (Panofsky, “From Complicity” 64).

<sup>7</sup> There is extensive work on the novel’s important transmission of Kabbalah traditions and stories through her character, viewed by many as a symbol of a Kabbalistic creation mythology, where Hoda represents a vessel going through three stages of development that lead to the restoration of a flawed world (Zipursky 55). Furthermore, Marco LoVerso connects Hoda’s moral dilemma to her “struggle to become public,” to her difficulty in speaking a public language, and to what he questionably calls her “entrapment” in a “pleasure principle” and self-centered understanding of the world. If LoVerso’s analysis fails to fully question the quality and the politics of this “public verbal-moral system” that Hoda apparently lacks to “function” in the world, he nevertheless acknowledges that an important symbol of that system, represented by the school and the teacher, “encourages Hoda to retreat into herself and define the world in her private way” (n. pag.).

<sup>8</sup> The Heinz dilemma is a renowned quandary often used in ethics and moral philosophy. Heinz, the husband of a sick woman, faces a choice: whether or not to steal an expensive drug his wife needs to survive. Carol Gilligan discusses how American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg used the dilemma in an experiment aimed at identifying stages of moral development in young boys and girls. Kohlberg concluded that Amy, the girl he interviewed, gave a response to the dilemma that lacked moral maturity because she suggested appealing to the empathy and moral responsibility of the pharmacist who owned the drug, placing him in a “network of relationship” rather than seeing him as an opponent (Gilligan, *In a Different* 30). Because the boy interviewed, Jack, responded more directly to the given situation, focusing on Heinz’s individual task rather than on the relational aspect of the situation, Kohlberg categorized his response as showing a more advanced moral development. Gilligan, noticing the gender bias in the analysis of the results, suggested instead that the girl’s showed a “different voice” and “a particular conception of human relationships” (28) by “responding contextually” rather than “categorically,” assuming “connection” rather than “separation” (38). Claiming Amy’s response had been wrongly left “outside the moral domain” (31), she argued that the girl showed a different moral understanding of the situation, one inscribed in care. Gilligan’s groundbreaking work marks a shift in the Western study of moral development and moral experience, making place for a “morality of responsibility” (21) and “a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (19).

<sup>9</sup> Mack writes: “*Crackpot*, published eighteen years after *The Sacrifice*, was less well received. It waited five years before a publisher would touch it and another six years after publication before it received any serious reflection” (134).

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