



A Deluge of Affects: Critical Encounters in *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn's film *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* (2019) through the lens of materialist and feminist affect theories as they intersect with critical Indigeneity. It investigates how the film produces two parallel and conflicting reactions in the viewer, for whom "ugly feelings" (Ngai, 2007), such as failure, embarrassment, pity or shame, compete with an overwhelming and often frustrated need for empathy and compassion.

KEYWORDS

Critical Indigeneity; Feminist Affects; Kathleen Hepburn; Suspended Agency; Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers; Ugly Feelings.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his 2017 essay "The body remembers when the world broke open," Driftpile Cree Nation Billy-Ray Belcourt denounces the irreversibility of the colonization of Indigenous peoples, describing the indelible mark of past and present violence on the Indigenous body and how colonial trauma expresses itself through an affective overflow in everyday life. Belcourt

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writes about being “strained by a deluge of affects, where ‘affect’ describes psychic and physiological responses to moments of profound instability—when the you you have been struggles but ultimately fails to persist in the wake of something that moves you, for better or for worse.” *A deluge of affects* is then what happens to the Indigenous body as it navigates the overlapping and intersecting time frames of colonialism, tackling a sense of loss, vulnerability and failure. And “this kind of loss,” Belcourt continues, “yields affects that reverberate into the near future by way of the body’s ‘critical receptivity;’ that is, the ease with which we can be undone and displaced by others.”

Explicitly inspired by Belcourt’s haunting words, Elle-Máíjá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn’s 2019 film *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* offers a strangely poetic and highly distressing story of a one-day encounter between two Indigenous women from very different walks of life¹. Central to Belcourt’s anticolonial stance is his critique of capitalism. And so is Tailfeathers and Hepburn’s approach to their characters pointedly traversed by class and strongly focused on their daily struggles against personal, social and/or economic precarities in the aftermath of colonization. Moreover, exploring the limits of affective encounters through materialist feminist methodologies, Tailfeathers and Hepburn probe the capacity of filmic language to express the inextricability of embodied forms of failure as well as their profound unrest.

This article extends Tailfeathers and Hepburn’s own methodology by providing an analysis of *The Body Remembers* through the lens of materialist and feminist affect theories as they often intersect with critical Indigeneity². With that intersection in mind, I will investigate how the film produces two parallel and conflicting reactions in the viewer, for whom “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2007), such as failure, embarrassment, pity or shame, compete with an overwhelming and often frustrated need for empathy and compassion. My analysis will be structured around the film’s various critical encounters, heeding Sara Ahmed’s conceptualizations of *the encounter* in a literal sense, as a face-to-face meeting “where at least two subjects get close enough to see and touch each other,” this involving “a necessary movement in time and space” (2000: 7). According to Ahmed, encounters are also potentially antagonistic in that there often is “an asymmetry of power” that necessarily affects the building of social and bodily relations (8-9). I qualify the film’s various encounters as *critical* in this sense of potential antagonism as well as in their exposure of the urgency of embodied relations. They are also critical in that they signal the chronification of the precarious conditions they expose, evoking what Antonio Gramsci would call *an interregnum* (1971: 276). By quoting Belcourt’s article in my title, I intend to highlight my focus on the critical productivity of negative affects in the film.

The story begins when two women, 31-year-old Blackfoot and Sami Áila (Tailfeathers) and 19-year-old Kwakwaka’wakw Rosie (Violet Nelson), meet by chance at a street corner of East Vancouver, where they both live. Áila, fair-skinned and middle-class,

notices young Rosie, bruised, bleeding, soaked and barefoot, as she is standing in the rain while her boyfriend shouts violent threats at her from across the street intersection. Moved by an impulse to help, Áila quickly takes Rosie by the hand and leads her to her apartment, where she provides a change of dry clothes and gives her something to eat, while she tries to convince a reluctant Rosie to go to a women's shelter. Before that triggering event, the film prologue has subtly established the location in East Vancouver by means of a graffiti sign on a wall, and the class difference between the two women by showing two parallel scenes: Rosie's small apartment where she lives with her boyfriend and his mother, and Áila's visit to a birth control clinic. The prologue also marks their unlikely connections through Indigeneity and the motherhood thread: Rosie is pregnant while Áila is having an intrauterine device inserted to prevent pregnancy. Before they meet, the two women coincide on the bus in the very opening scene.

While there are no article-length studies of this remarkable film yet, most reviewers have emphasized the film's sense of authenticity and social relevance, most efficiently achieved, I will argue, through its formal aspects and narration techniques. Once the initial (dis)connections between the two main characters are drawn in the prologue, the plot is clearly structured into five parts, with five different settings: the initial encounter on the street, Áila's apartment, the safe house, and two real-time taxi rides, linking these locations and somehow reversing the plot. Throughout the whole film, the conversation between Áila, struggling to help Rosie, and Rosie, wary and alternating between hesitation and hostility, is blunt and snippy. Shot on 16mm through long continuous real-time scenes and edited in such a way as to create the illusion of a single take (Smith, 2019), the film emphasizes non-verbal forms of communication, building its meanings through grainy photography, shaky and uncomfortable camera close-ups and a highly effective approach to sound based on the absence of background music and the presence of natural background noise instead. The emphasis on stillness is only broken by two songs that are given special relevance, acting as affective extensions of the film's central meditation on motherhood.

My analysis will look into the film's various encounters to probe the power of negative affects in the story. *The Body Remembers* uses the physical encounter between the two protagonists to trigger reflection on specific forms of gendered and colonial precarities that cut across the social, the emotional and the economic. Taking that central event as a starting point, I will extend my gaze to the articulation of other material and symbolic encounters that take place between the two characters as well as between the film and the viewer. These encounters are defined by the construction of the city as a spatiotemporal interregnum, the approach to Indigeneity, the representation of violence and agency, the production of ugly feelings, and the role of music as a narrating device in the affective intensification of the protagonists' predicaments.

2. THE INTERREGNUM

There are many ways in which *The Body Remembers* represents a world in crisis. The film's acute sense of *dead-end-ness* recalls Antonio Gramsci's notion of *interregnum*, an organic crisis of legitimation, in which crisis is not understood as a fixed event but as a process that originates in the social fabric and eventually challenges its foundations by producing what he called "morbid symptoms" (Gramsci, 1971: 276). These symptoms reveal the contradictions of capitalism and disrupt everyday life but cannot be managed or solved within the existing social and economic framework, and do not represent, therefore, "a viable alternative for the future" (Babic, 2000: 773). "Times of interregnum are thus times of uncertainty," Zygmunt Bauman asserts, as he joins many contemporary thinkers in describing the present planetary situation as a clear case of interregnum (2012: 51).

Moving to my field of analysis, Vancouver might provide a telling case of what scholars have identified as a tendency in current global crises to normalize critical conditions and embed them in the social fabric. For decades, the city has suffered from chronic social and economic dysfunctions due to the drastic inequality between the richest and the poorest parts of town. In this context, I read the East Vancouver corner of the film's opening encounter as a sort of interregnum in the spatial and symbolic dimensions of the term, initiating the intersubjective relationship between the two women and locating the Hastings-Sunrise area of East Vancouver as a space for intervention. It is no coincidence that, while Áila lives in an increasingly gentrified area of East Van, Rosie's address borders on the Downtown Eastside³. Talking for *The Georgia Straight*, Tailfeathers has stated their intention to honour the Indigenous communities that live in that part of the city, "and especially Indigenous youth that are aging out of care." The movie intends to document "all the change and displacement happening there," where "single moms are really struggling to get by in one of the most expensive places in the world" (Smith, 2019). Fittingly, British Columbia's decision to cut youth off their foster-care support at the age of 19 is in the background of Rosie's situation: "Turned 19, so that's it," she tells Áila, happy that at least "they leave [her] alone" (38:39).

Regarding time frames, the initial encounter is preceded by the marks of an interregnum in that morbid sign, such as economic precarity, patriarchal violence, colonial trauma or psychological unrest, seem chronified from the start, disrupting the characters' everyday life. The details of these morbidities are succinctly but effectively set up in the prologue. Young pregnant Rosie lives in a small one-bedroom apartment with her boyfriend and his mother, who sleeps in the living room. As she arrives home, her mother-in-law is shown watching a program on an old TV set. No greetings are exchanged but she asks Rosie for a Coke. In the background, and off-camera but increasingly loud over the sound of the TV show, her boyfriend grunts and then snaps in the adjacent room. The close-up on Rosie's face implies the recurrent nature of this situation. In contrast, Áila's personal details are revealed

through a cold interview with a white male doctor at the birth control clinic: she is 31 years old, has a Sami name and a stable partner, had an abortion in the past and takes medication for her anxiety. She has come to the clinic to have an intrauterine device, while the doctor advises her that if she is thinking of having children, she should make the decision “now.” The close-up on her face suggests her discomfort as well as her mixed feelings about motherhood.

When, soon after, these two women meet by chance on a street corner, they connect affectively through the themes of motherhood, Indigeneity, and their positions as subjects to colonial trauma and patriarchal control, even though each occupies different ends in the spectrum of these positions. In parallel, there are centrifugal forces that emphasize antagonism and thus prevent their bond, such as class, education and skin privilege. In sharp contrast with Rosie’s humble and cluttered dwellings, for instance, Áila’s apartment is neat and stylish, with plenty of natural light, Indigenous art hanging on the walls, books, a turntable and a large-screen desktop computer. Significantly, her dependence on anxiety medication places her in the (white) middle class. These differences come with tensions and presumptions on both sides. Áila unwittingly patronizes Rosie in various ways, as when she asks Rosie if she knows how to work her turntable (40:48); to which Rosie, visibly offended, replies: “I think so” (40:52). For Rosie, in turn, Áila’s privilege is an extension of her lighter skin colour, and, looking at a photograph of Áila’s partner (a fair-skinned Musqueam), she asks Áila whether she is “into white guys or something” (34:15). Later, when, during the taxi ride to the safe house, the two women have a fight, their dynamic of mutual prejudice becomes fully fledged. Áila mistakenly presumes that Rosie is using drugs and warns her about the potential dangers for the baby, to which Rosie replies: “Do you think you are better than me? You are not fucking better than me. I can take care of myself and I can take care of my kid [...] You think you are so fucking smart. You don’t know shit. You are just a dumb white bitch” (1:06:20-1:07:56).

Their complex connection is thus granted as much strength as ambivalence. And, by articulating the desire for but also the complexities of their sudden relation, the film highlights the hard edges of bonding and compassion. As I will examine later, the affective exchange between Áila and Rosie is drenched with intensity but also with a sense of what Seanne Ngai (2007) calls “suspended agency.” This would be a sort of interregnum, in that the obstruction of action is charged with political meaning. And nowhere is this political tension higher than in the film’s approach to Indigeneity.

3. INDIGENEITY

I have already mentioned how the film location contributes in essential ways to the viewer’s interpretation, adding complex nuances to it. A decisive strategy in this operation is the

story's unpacking of the multiple layers of urban Indigeneity, economic precarity and patriarchal violence vis-à-vis the history of colonialism in the area. As Karrmen Crey states, “[t]here’s nothing random about the lives of two Indigenous women intersecting *here*, in the traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and the site of a low-income neighbourhood (home to a large Indigenous population)” (2020: 109).

As the city is constantly seen in movement and against the background of important transformations, issues of location, land and belonging frame the story in literal but subtle ways. In the prologue, as Rosie gets off the bus and walks home, she passes a faded graffiti symbol on a wall that reproduces the words *EAST* (in vertical) and *VAN* (in horizontal) in the form of a cross and meeting in the ‘A’. The symbol has circulated in the area for decades with slightly different forms, but its presence in the opening scenes and against the close-up of Rosie’s face as she walks home, signals the importance of location, connecting the character to the specific Vancouver area and indigenizing it, as it were (2:15-2:25). Only moments later, Áila is specifically identified as Blackfoot through a similar strategy: in this case, there is a shot of Áila in her bedroom as she recovers from what looks like an anxiety attack, while the book *Treaty 7* is shown on a shelf in the background (17:57-19:08)⁴. What comes out of these implicit cinematic gestures is the centrality of land as a defining element in the characters’ lives. Both women identify themselves as Indigenous, but their different histories place them apart, and the difference in the representational techniques I have just mentioned foreshadows these discrepancies and reflects their divergent relation to the land.

Most scholars agree that, regardless of their individual experiences, land has always been an identitary element for Indigenous peoples. By “land” here, I mean a literal and a symbolic place, the site of transmission of Indigenous knowledge and values: “Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of a people,” writes Thomas King. “It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home. Not in an abstract way” (2012: 218). Whereas Áila seems attached to the Blackfoot community where she grew up, it is her class and education privileges that determine her sense of belonging over land relations. In turn, Rosie’s relations have been cut off and, with it, her potential connection to the land, this marking a tragic loss of what Glen Coulthard calls “land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time” (2014: 13).

Through the character of Rosie, then, the film dissects the community’s critical disconnection, thematizing the chronification of the trauma of colonization and expressing it in the present through different modes of embodied violence and underprivilege. It is to that haunting presence that Belcourt refers when he writes about a sense of loss that “reverberate[s]” by way of the body’s vulnerability or “the ease with which we can be undone and displaced by others.” In the film, this undoing is at its height in the razor-edged

exchanges between the two Indigenous protagonists. The halted conversation about their origins in Áila's apartment, for instance, proceeds slowly towards a critical dead-end, silence and the close-ups of their faces making up for the scarcity of words:

Áila [off camera from the kitchen]: You want some tea or something?
 Rosie [on camera, standing by the dining table, looking insecure and highly uncomfortable]: Yeah...
 Áila: What kind do you like?
 Rosie: Uhm... I don't...I don't really know...
 Áila: Mint? You like mint?
 [No answer. Rosie looks confused, embarrassed, or both]
 Áila: It's good stuff from my grandma. Back home.
 Rosie: Yeah...Sure...
 [Silence. Camera on Rosie's bewildered face]
 Áila: So, where are you from then?
 Rosie: Why?
 Áila: Just asking...
 Rosie: Some people feel they have to talk all the time, eh?
 [Silence]
 Rosie: I was born in Port Hardy.
 Áila: Is that right?
 Rosie: Just popped out there like that.
 Áila [smiling]: Yeah? You are a long ways from home then...
 [Rosie does not respond as she carefully puts her hand inside Áila's bag and steals her wallet]
 Áila: So... uhm...you are Kwakwaka'wakw?
 Rosie: My mum was.
 Áila: You grew up on the Rez?
 Rosie: No.
 Áila: No?
 [Rosie does not say anything but shakes her head. She seems sad.]
 Áila: You... uhm... you have family there still?
 Rosie: My grandparents.
 (26:00-27:50)

As I will discuss below, watching Rosie steal from the person who is trying to help her might be appalling for the white (perhaps self-righteous) middle-class viewer. Yet the scene offers a real and honest portrait of who Rosie is and how her bare life is ruled by mere survival⁵. Besides, and despite the camera movement to show Rosie's hand inside Áila's bag, the film refuses to judge this act by holding the viewer's attention on the information that reveals Rosie's disconnect, and which, in the scarcity of words, is often expressed through

the body. Later on, while they are both sitting in the living room facing each other, Áila tries again:

Rosie: Do you get along with your sister?

Áila: Yeah, mostly.

[Silence]

Áila: Do you have any siblings?

[Silence]

Rosie: I've got a half-sister.

Áila: Oh, yeah? Is she older or younger?

Rosie: She is older.

Áila: Did you guys grow up together?

Rosie: Not really.

Áila: Do you get along?

Rosie: Uhm... [hesitating silence] I don't know.

Áila: Well, uhm... Do you think you could maybe stay with her?

[Silence]

Rosie: I think I should just go.

(36:34-37:26)

This apartment scene highlights the huge gap between the two women. Áila talks about her parents, her sister and her grandmother “back home” and unwittingly replicates the cognitive frame of her own privilege when she asks Rosie where she is from, to which Rosie snaps: “Why?” Rosie then says that she was born in Port Hardy, where her grandmother still lives, but does not want to go there, she admits later, because there are no jobs and she does not want to be “like one of those girls, you know, with the baby” (1:19:15). When Áila confidently identifies herself as Blackfoot and Sami, Rosie asks whether that is “like in Ontario?” revealing the educational gap between them (33:45). The tense conversation reaches its peak of skepticism when Rosie, surprised at Áila’s identification of her partner as Indigenous, retorts “Everybody is Native these days, eh?” (34:29). Indigeneity is thus produced as a highly contested zone, the site of embodied encounters, (un)claimed and negotiated through gestures, stares, silences and grimaces as much as words. As I will argue below, while these exchanges are filled with high emotional intensity, their full signification is systematically suspended or postponed.

The scene also suggests the dysfunctional nature of Rosie’s family, the absence of her parents as well as her own damage and isolation. Rosie is too young to have attended Residential School, but her parents may have been among the many Indigenous children who did not survive it⁶. And that probability would put Rosie in the spot of having experienced violence at home. That the film is dedicated to “her... and others like her” (1:44:59) further

underscores the consequences for Indigenous communities and individuals like Rosie of the colonial project of undoing Indigenous relations. As Julia Emberley reminds us:

Representational violence and social violence worked concurrently to interrupt the flow of knowledge from elders, parents, and other adult kin to youth and children. Such knowledge not only provided Indigenous children with an essential understanding of their history, values, and identity, it also carried an epistemological orientation that, through particular techniques, militated against the formation of nation-state powers used to secure the oppression and exploitation of, among other things, women's reproductive potential and their central role in the politics of kinship relations. (2015: 210)

As has been examined so far, *The Body Remembers* thematizes and critically engages with these forms of colonial violence that have resulted in the tragic disconnect of Indigenous individuals and communities. Regardless of their class and educational differences, both women have inherited the trauma of colonization and its concomitant violence. And, while this legacy of systemic and structural cruelty impacts their everyday lives, they also show their capacity for resilience and their determination to move beyond survival (Power, 2000). Additionally, the film explicitly addresses the issue of patriarchal violence within Indigenous families in the present, articulating the entanglements of agency for women in that situation.

4. VIOLENCE AND AGENCY

As a chronic form of oppression often at the intersection of race and gender, the topic of male partner violence may potentially provide common ground for empathy and solidarity between the protagonists, as well as for the viewer. The complicity between colonialism and patriarchy in the marginalization of Indigenous women has been amply studied. As Joyce Green asserts, “[c]olonialism affects both Indigenous men and women, but not identically” and this is shown in women's “heightened vulnerability to physical and emotional male violence and to being murdered” (2017: 5). In fact, according to a recent official report, whereas violence against Indigenous peoples has been linked to the history of colonization and “continues to impact Indigenous families, communities and Canadian society overall,” Indigenous women are more likely to suffer intrafamilial violence than non-Indigenous ones (Heidinger, 2022). Therefore, thinking of colonialism as a gendered process helps identify the ways in which Indigenous women have been specifically deprived of their connection to their territories through the colonial practices towards Indigenous families, separating siblings and denying children their family relationships.

The alliance between different forms of violence has therefore been effectively demonstrated. Yet I agree with Rauna Kuokkanen when she suggests that the critique of patriarchal violence must necessarily transcend the frames of colonial damage:

While we cannot omit the interrogation of colonization, there is a need to reject discourses of colonization that externalize responsibility for gendered violence or construct male violence solely as a reflection of men's victimhood and loss of status. These considerations construct a hierarchy of subordination, positioning Indigenous men as the greater victims of colonization. Male violence is then rationalized and somewhat normalized as a consequence of colonial history, yet externalizing responsibility for violence denies agency and condones perpetrators' behaviour (Søvnthal-Pedersen 2001; Davis 2011). (Kuokkanen, 2017: 105-6)

The Body Remembers implicitly subscribes to Kuokkanen's insightful analysis, engaging with but also extending Belcourt's lament that Indigenous subjects "are not done mourning the 'world-shattering' magnitude of settler invasion and its attendant crime scenes of all sorts." By locating the issue of male partner violence at the center of the plot, *Tailfeathers* and *Hepburn* underscore intersectional forms of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. However, they stop short of externalizing the factors behind male violence inside Indigenous communities or normalizing its consequences. There are at least three strategies through which the directors tackle this difficult question effectively. Firstly, by introducing a class and educational difference between Áila and Rosie, they shift the focus away from Indigeneity to other social and economic factors that affect Rosie in ways that Áila cannot know. As Crey writes in this context:

This place is shaped by colonization, class, and race, which are the dynamics informing the lives of these women who, while both Indigenous, live different realities shaped by skin privilege, urban and rural upbringings, and educational and economic opportunity. As other reviewers have noted, this is one of the first times we have seen class difference between Indigenous people onscreen, but through *Tailfeathers* and *Hepburn*'s clear lens, we also understand that class is just one node in the broader social (and colonial) matrix within which Indigenous women's lives are constrained, the complexity of which is revealed by Áila and Rosie's individual motivations as well as in their nuanced interactions with one another. (2020: 109)

Secondly, by explicitly avoiding any direct show of violence on-screen, the film subverts the current media sensationalism around male partner abuse. This choice is crucial in fighting against the invisibilization of narratives of abuse, for as Balibar writes, "whatever is hyper-represented is also dissimulated or distorted, whereas other forms of violence which are more secret or less 'exceptional' are essentially left invisible, are unsayable even for their victims" (2000: 388). In this context, Diane Shoos claims that *The Body Remembers* reframes the issue, heeding Lauren Berlant's call for "different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates" (2011: 7), and underscoring "the multiple dimensions of abuse" (Shoos, 2020: 103). Shoos admits to the complex class

and educational gap between the two protagonists, reading Áila's visit to the clinic as "an example of class privilege in the form of reproductive 'choice.'" However, she argues, these differences do not mitigate the need for what she calls "feminist vigilance" (115).

I agree that the film provides an unusual and much needed perspective on the topic of male partner violence. By resisting the pull to give Rosie's boyfriend a face or even a voice (he is reduced to yells and grunts and his face does not even appear once) and positioning the victim as the sole narrating agent, Tailfeathers and Hepburn clearly refuse to hyper-represent domestic violence: "We don't want to make it exciting or thrilling to watch," they explain (Smith, 2019). Still, my own reading is more skeptical regarding the transformative paths offered; which takes me to the third strategy through which the film problematizes the externalization of male violence in Indigenous communities: the treatment of Rosie's agency.

Far from being portrayed as a helpless victim, Rosie is never deprived of her own agency. In fact, as Shoos comments, she "defies received ideas about abused women and turns stereotypes of race and class on their head on several levels" (2020: 115). I have already examined some of the awkward exchanges between them, which show as much the agentive power of both women as their mutual prejudices. During their intense one-day encounter, Rosie's attitude shifts several times between reluctance and bare hostility. For the most part, she is in control of the conversation, modulating her silences or calculating her choice of words to block, speed up or slow down the process of communication. For instance, during the interview at the safe house with the social workers Cat (Charlie Hannah) and Sophie (Barbara Eve Harris), when asked why she did not have her shoes on when Áila came across her on the street corner, she snaps: "I didn't put them on" (1:15:18).

There are many ways in which the viewer is faced with formal or content reversals that break their expectations and turn around the film's take on agency. The white middle-class viewer might watch in dismay as Rosie steals Áila's anxiety pills and wallet while the latter is drying her clothes and preparing her something to eat, but that very reaction elicits questions about where the viewer stands in relation to Rosie, interrogating that position. One of the most surprising strategies that the film employs to break the viewer's presumptions about both women and turn the plot over is the flipping technique. Rosie flips the script several times in response to Áila's kind but insistent questions, initially refusing to tell where she is from only to ask Áila a few minutes later "So where are you from then?" (33:26). She then turns the conversation about motherhood away from her and towards Áila, asking her whether she would like to have a baby. When Áila admits that she is not sure but her boyfriend does, Rosie strikes: "Maybe he'll just leave you. Find someone who wants a family" (35:50). Once in the cab to the safe house, she surprisingly becomes a storyteller, flipping again their power relation by fabricating an unlikely family history and telling the incredulous taxi driver that they are sisters and that she is helping Áila to get over her

alcoholism and drug abuse (56:09). Soon after, they argue over Rosie's supposedly drug use and, when Áila asks her if she is using drugs, she replies, "Are *you* taking something?" (1:05:18) smartly forcing the viewer to consider Áila's own use of anti-anxiety drugs.

These scenes endow Rosie with full agentive power and construct her outside the allotted victim position. The strategy is highly effective at turning the tables, since, while the viewer might never question Áila's agency, and this despite her anxious behaviour, Rosie's may be on the spot. It also serves to anticipate the ending, when Rosie's power to decide about her own life remains intact, cancelling Áila's best intentions to help. Crucial in this flipping technique, her own feelings towards her baby radically turn the established asymmetry of power between them, for, although the close-up of her face shows moments of hesitation, on the whole, she feels confident about her pregnancy and ready to be a mother, while Áila does not. The few words exchanged in the final taxi scene return to this question and add a twist:

Áila: I think you're gonna be a good mum.
 Rosie: Thanks...I think you'll be a good mum too.
 (1:35:50)

The moment is charged with great affective power as it shows Rosie flipping the script one last time. But this final exchange is even more bewildering in that the meaning of these words seems suspended by the context of their utterance, the two women silently crying.

That Rosie's decision to go back to her boyfriend prevails over Áila's best judgement that she should move to the safe house is harrowing. Especially after she has told the two social workers the details of her boyfriend's brutal and systematic abuse, only to take it all back a few moments later, saying that "He can be good too" (1:15:57) and that she "may have exaggerated a bit" (1:28:20). When asked about the position of her boyfriend's mother, Rosie replies that she might be "scared of him" (1:19:20), this confirming, as Kuakkanen argues, that "[i]nter- and intra-family relations and obligations also may form barriers to acknowledging and addressing violence against [Indigenous] women" (2017: 109-110). For Shoos, these scenes foreground the complexities of intersectional forms of violence and expose "the realities, contradictions, and dilemmas of Rosie's experience of abuse as well as her intelligence and agency as an abused pregnant woman" (116). Certainly, the film spells out the multiple entanglements of domestic violence, underscoring Rosie's extreme vulnerability, but also, as Shoos asserts, "her careful balancing of the risks of staying with the risks of leaving" (2020: 117). However, I find it difficult to concur with Shoos' interpretation of the transformative role of Rosie's agency. Should Rosie's decision be read as an empowering act or, conversely, as evidence of the inevitability of her situation and the acceptance of her likely doom?

The film's ending is unmistakably disturbing, its sense of dismal expressed through the meaningful silence of the last taxi scene. In sharp contrast with Rosie's eloquent and lively narration of their own invented life during the first taxi trip, this second and final ride is characterized by an almost total absence of words, the two women visibly upset and silently crying. In its micropolitical character, domestic violence runs the risk of becoming effectively depoliticized, and this seems inevitable for Rosie. She has firmly declined the repeated suggestions to call the police, which hints at the historical complicity of the police with colonial and racist forms of oppression (Heidinger, 2022). Spelling this out, Rosie explains that her boyfriend is on bail. Besides, she does not like "the way they look at you [...] Like you are wasting their time" (1:16:10). Yet this same distrust of institutional powers stands in the way of her best interest to report her boyfriend's violence, depriving her of her legal options. In her unwillingness to call the police, she leaves her boyfriend's abuse in the private realm of her one-bedroom apartment, her predicament, unsayable. As Balibar asserts,

it is always very difficult to know exactly where a threshold of annihilation for possibilities of resistance can arise, in which location in the body or the soul, where in the intimacy of the self or the external life of a collective subject it resides. There is no unquestionable sign that allows us to decide when resistance was simply suppressed in a relationship of forces, when the possibility of using material defenses has become too unequal, or when we must speak of the acceptance of domination. (2000: 388)

Given this dead end, rather than reading Rosie's decision as an instance of her personal agency against the institutional structures set up to provide support or of her failure to resist her boyfriend's domination, I would like to focus on the possibility of suspension of meaning that the movie calls forth. In narrating its critical encounters between complex, contingent identities traversed by multiple vectors of privilege and oppression, the film succeeds in producing Indigeneity as haunted by colonial, sexist and racist relations. The two women converge and diverge through these relations, eliciting as they do so dysphoric emotions between them and in the viewer. Accordingly, I propose to investigate the film's signifying possibilities as the site of an aesthetic encounter with what Ngai calls "ugly feelings."

5. UGLY FEELINGS

I argue that much of the movie's signification is achieved through the production of dysphoric affects in the characters as well as the viewers. Dysphoric affects are "ugly feelings" (Ngai, 2007) in as much as dysphoria designates a state of generalized unhappiness, restlessness, dissatisfaction, or frustration. Dysphoria is often expressed through inaction, a

stasis of sorts where agency is suspended; and, according to Ngai, this suspended agency is the prime site of ugly feelings (3). Ngai takes Melville's well-known character Bartleby as paradigmatic of the process of production of aesthetic emotions through dysphoria, examining his illegible behaviour to find out whether his "unyielding passivity" could be interpreted as "radical or reactionary" (1). Building on Ngai's analysis, Rosie's oscillating behavior, between hesitant and hostile, and, particularly, her decision to go back to her abusive boyfriend at the end of the film occupy that place of indecisiveness, between agency, as Shoos asserts, and resignation. It is worth noting in this context that the suspension of agency that Ngai articulates does not necessarily pre-empt political meaning but rather deviates its route by transforming aesthetic emotions through the "prime occasion for ugly feelings" (3). In what follows, I would like to probe the significance of these ambivalent situations of suspended agency in the film, with a focus on the "aesthetics of the ugly feelings that index these suspensions" (1-2).

I claim that the film not only reflects but mobilizes dysphoric affects, producing as much intimacy as discomfort, and that this is mostly achieved through its formal aspects. Action is anticipated and then delayed, subverted or diverted through unexpected turns of the plot or camera movements. I have already mentioned the flipping narrative strategies that take place at various moments and shift the power relation between the two protagonists. The frequent unexpected camera movements contribute further to this operation of diversion of meaning. There are three real-time bathroom scenes which condense this strategy in different ways, emphasizing the embodied nature of the core encounter and locating Áila and Rosie as close together and very far apart. In the first one, Rosie spits blood in Áila's sink, looks at herself in the mirror, takes her wet clothes off and puts on the dry ones supplied by Áila, talks lovingly to her baby, then, she opens Áila's cabinet and steals her anxiety pills (which she will sell later on to a drug dealer "coworker") (24:15). The scene, early in the story, introduces the indecisiveness that will reign over the whole film. On the one hand, it positions Rosie as a victim of violence by showing her injured body as well as reveals her state of mind and her acceptance of her pregnancy. On the other hand, the scene shows Rosie as a highly unreliable character, being construed as a delinquent and thus as a perpetrator.

Two other bathroom scenes follow once the two women arrive at the safe house where Rosie is offered a shelter. In the first one, as soon as they arrive and meet the two social workers, Áila asks if she can use the bathroom. The camera then follows her down the hall and into the dim-lit bathroom and shows her sitting on the toilet as she changes her sanitary pad, while the viewer wonders what is happening in the main room where Rosie is talking to the workers. Áila's anxiety, which she exhibits throughout, seems to subside slightly in the quiet privacy of this bathroom. The scene shows that she is bleeding, which reminds the viewer that Áila has just gone through a gynecological procedure to prevent pregnancies.

When, later on, Rosie asks to go to the bathroom, a similar moment of diversion happens by the camera moving away from the action (which, in this case, would be the conversation between Áila and the workers). And yet this scene is charged with meaning for it shows Rosie sitting on the edge of the bathtub humming the lullaby that opens the prologue, only this time we can hear the lyrics of Fawn Wood's song, to which I will return in the final section of this article. These small actions unfold in real time and through mostly close-ups of the protagonists' bodies. Nothing seems to happen and yet everything happens through these daily moments: a visit to the washroom, changing a sanitary pad, looking out the window, humming a song, getting a Coke from the fridge, talking on the phone. The plot moves forward by carefully endowing each of these actions with meaning, a meaning that is announced and then delayed by means of counterintuitive camera movements.

According to Ngai, albeit in a different context, "the anticathartic device of dilating the time in which any particular incident takes place [...] accentuates the manner in which these uneventful moments mirror the general situation of obstructed agency," and this creates a moment of ugly feelings. But "these moments of conspicuous inactivity remain affectively charged" (2007: 13-14). Ngai elaborates:

What seems indeterminate here, however, is actually highly determined. In fact, I would suggest that what each moment produces is the inherently ambiguous affect of affective disorientation in general—what we might think of as a state of feeling vaguely "unsettled" or "confused," or, more precisely, a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about what one is feeling. This is "confusion" in the affective sense of bewilderment, rather than the epistemological sense of indeterminacy. (2007: 14)

In *The Body Remembers*, the deferral of action indeed suspends agency but only as it gives rise to feelings of pity, sadness, embarrassment, failure, shame, frustration, and the general sense of unhappiness that pervades the film. Crey considers that the frequent close-ups of the characters' faces encourage "empathy for women who are often unseen, and who also shield themselves and their scars from the world" (2020: 110). Conversely, I would claim that the film's foreclosure of empathy is built into its affective structure since the construction of Rosie as a highly ambivalent and, to a certain extent, opaque character prevents the necessary identification. Rosie's use of the word "maybe" seems paradigmatic of this strategy of suspension. When Áila asks if she wants her to come with her to her apartment in order to get "her stuff," she says: "Maybe...or maybe I should just go home" (1:27:00-1:28:06). In their final exchange, when Áila says "I'll see you soon," Rosie replies "Maybe?" an awkward smile on her face (1:39:00). What remains at the end is a sense of frustration but also of mild irritation, an ugly feeling that, as Ngai puts it, is "a conspicuously

weak or inadequate form of anger, as well as an affect that bears an unusually close relationship to the body's surfaces or skin" (2007: 35).

Ultimately, the film's formal techniques succeed in achieving a sense of intimacy and intensity, drawing the viewer "into intimate proximity with Rosie and Áila's spoken and unspoken exchanges to insist that we recognize their complexity and humanity in all their discomforts" (Crey, 2020: 110). Yet, deriving from those same techniques and from the same aesthetic emotions is the obstruction of agency through the exposure of the limits of compassion and empathic identification. As a result, the treatment of the awkward relationship between these two women produces conflicting reactions in the viewer. And, in the end, the film offers no resolution to the individual and collective dilemmas it poses, but a sense of being, returning to Belcourt, "strained by a deluge of affects."

6. MOTHERHOOD OR A DELUGE OF AFFECTS

If there is a way in which the film expresses that overflow of emotions that Belcourt calls *a deluge*, that is through the effective use of the only two songs that break the otherwise naked background sound. They are Plains Cree/Salish Fawn Wood's lullaby "Mommy's Little Guy" and possibly Sami and white Albertan Joni Mitchell's "Little Green"⁷. Both songs center on the theme of motherhood, but, while Wood's lullaby expresses feelings of infinite love and protection towards her son, Mitchell's was written in 1966 after she had given her baby daughter for adoption (see Posner, 1998). Through them, Rosie struggles between her desire to be a mother and her precarious situation, the film weighing the emotions of love and sadness they elicit respectively.

Mitchell's song is played at Áila's apartment and provides one of the saddest and most beautiful moments in the film. Off camera, the audience can hear Áila on the phone trying to find a shelter for Rosie. On camera, Rosie looks around the apartment, finds the turntable and plays the vinyl record there. Joni Mitchell's "Little Green" fills the almost silence with the beauty of her voice, increasingly over Áila's voice on the phone and as the camera closes up on Rosie's crying face:

Child, with the child, pretending
 Weary of lies you are sending home
 So you sign all the papers in the family name
 You're sad and you're sorry, but you're not ashamed
 Little Green, have a happy ending.
 (Mitchell, 1971)

This scene is indeed a deluge of affects, intimating Rosie's inner struggle. Given her precarious situation, she knows that adoption is definitely on the table. Still, as she places the

headphones over her pregnant belly, her initial feelings of instability seem counteracted by a powerful resolve to have her baby.

Wood's "Mommy Little Guy," played three times throughout the story, signifies that resolve and communicates that empowering feeling. Significantly, the song frames the film by having Rosie hum its tune in the opening scenes, setting the tone and the location. She will go back to it in the bathroom of the safe house. This time, Rosie sings words:

Do you know I love you so, and mummy will never let you go?
To the stars and the sky
You'll always be mommy's little guy.
(Wood, 2012)

In the few interviews available, Wood has stated her strong sense of belonging, a solid respect for her Indigenous traditions and the incommensurable nature of her love for her son (Schwientek, 2022). If there is one certainty at the end of the movie, that is Rosie's determination to be a good mother against all odds. And, as if conferred with mantric power, Wood's song seems to confirm Rosie's decision, as she has just told the social workers: "I'm not stupid. I'm going to protect him. Nobody is taking my baby" (1:21:23). The lullaby, this time performed by Wood, also plays to the film's credits attempting a quiet sense of resolution against the inevitable disappointment and shared sense of failure elicited by the closing scene. In other words, while Wood's firm groundedness somehow makes up for Rosie's lack of it, yet the viewer wonders about Rosie's resolve.

It could be argued that, by placing the theme of motherhood at the center of the plot, the film has an implicit way of undoing the cruelty of the colonial project, this perhaps, and only timidly, opening paths towards the recuperation of kinship and land relations. Still, at the film's closure, there is no viable alternative to the conundrum it describes but a refusal to release the cathartic wrap-up typical of more conventional films (Linden, 2019). Whether the critical productivity of its affective codes of meaning remains at the level of aesthetic emotions or creates increased potential for solidarity, agency and change might still be an open question. Yet, through these encounters with the ugly feelings of disappointment, embarrassment and failure, and through the expression of their affective overflows, the film succeeds in articulating the complexities of intersectional forms of oppression against Indigenous women and thus constructs a powerful social critique. "Don't let its florid, mouthful of a title mislead you," writes Gary Goldstein in his review. "'The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open' is a film that's as urgent and unpretentious as it is remarkable. It's safe to say you haven't seen too many movies quite like it" (2019). It is safe to say that indeed. There will be no disappointment there. Nothing prepares the viewer for the intensity of these critical encounters.

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NOTES

¹ Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers is a Blackfoot and Sámi filmmaker, actor and producer from the Kainai First Nation. Kathleen Hepburn is a Canadian screenwriter and film director. *The Body Remembers* premiered in 2019 at the Berlin Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival and has won multiple awards since, including the 2020 Toronto Film Critics Association's Rogers Best Canadian Film Award.

² Following Brendan Hokowhitu's second definition of critical Indigeneity, I refer to approaches that are “grounded in resistance to multiple forms of violence and micro-aggressions that Indigenous peoples and communities face every day in their neo-colonial realities” (2021: 3). I believe Tailfeathers and Hepburn's feminist take is inseparable from this approach to Indigeneity and firmly grounded in this connection.

³ The two real-time cab scenes are charged with surplus meaning. Áila gives her address (157 Pandora) when she calls the cab, while Rosie gives hers (277 Campbell) when she gets in the cab back home. The distance between their addresses in East Van marks their class difference. The safe house is West of them (450 Maple Street) in a much richer area of Vancouver. That the viewer is given the exact location every time speaks to the film's interest in documenting the city's social and economic inequalities and its materialist construction of place.

⁴ Treaty 7 (1877) is one of the eleven agreements signed between the Crown and several First Nations (mostly Blackfoot) in what is now Alberta.

⁵ I wish to thank Sheila Hernández González for sharing with me her perceptive reading of the character of Rosie.

⁶ The Residential School System operated in Canada between 1831 and 1996, when the last school closed its doors. For the impact that this system has had on past and present communities and individuals, see the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada reports (2022).

⁷ Mitchell has mentioned her Sami origins in various interviews (Swanson, 2015).

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