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Care and Wonder in Two Novels by Heather O'Neill

DOMINIQUE HÉTU

Enchantment does coexist with despair; somehow, it remains an existential actuality.

— Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* 159

READING MONTREAL WRITER Heather O'Neill's first two novels encourages a form of attentiveness to the spatial, material, and everyday configurations of care in contexts of poverty, neglect, abandonment, and daily struggle. *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006) tells the coming-of-age story of Baby, a twelve-year-old girl who seeks to reconnect with her drug-addict father through different positive and negative relationships. As she experiences foster homes, starts using heroin, and becomes a sex worker, Baby struggles to imagine a future for herself. *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* (2014) tells the story of nineteen-year-old Noushka Tremblay, who attempts to leave her family behind to find out who she is. In a symbiotic love/hate relationship with her twin brother, Nicolas, disgusted by her locally famous father's strategies to regain celebrity status, and caught in complicated and tragic love stories, Noushka desires a better life, but her desires take unexpected forms. In these two novels, girls and women, inadequate fathers, fantasy, dreams, friendship, love, and poverty are uniquely interrelated. More specifically, I suggest that both texts expose a model of ordinary ethics that relies on care, wonder, and imagination. In particular, the novels challenge as well as expose oppressive power dynamics and asymmetrical care.

French philosopher Sandra Laugier argues that care ethics stems from an attention to the ordinary, to a shared vulnerability that qualifies our experience in and of the world: “Le *care* se définirait à partir de cette attention spécifique à l'importance des ‘petites’ choses et des moments, à la dissimulation inhérente de l'importance. Cette fragilité du réel et de l'expérience, . . . est propre à l'expérience ordinaire, ‘structurellement vulnérable’” (84).¹ She also claims that the ordinary is “un agrégat à la

fois naturel et social de formes d'expression et de connexions à autrui" (82),² suggesting that this shared vulnerability is a fundamental life phenomenon while also acknowledging the socially constructed manifestations of vulnerability that shape the lives of the oppressed in intersecting systems such as racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Like Laugier's claim that care brings to attention the invisibility of ordinary gestures and attitudes that maintain a shared, livable, habitable world, Veena Das's metaphor of the "descent into the ordinary" points not only to a shared vulnerability but also to the singularity of everyday life. This singularity refers to the situated, particularist perspective advocated by care ethicists such as Fiona Robinson, who argues that care ethics "regards morality as existing not in a series of universal rules or principles that can guide action but in the practices of care through which we fulfill our responsibilities to particular others" (4). Valuing concrete experience and situated knowledge is closely connected to the importance of the ordinary in care ethics. This approach to the experience of care in crisis informs my approach to O'Neill's literary texts. I try to demarcate the particular, imagined dispositions that, to borrow the words of Amelia DeFalco, "express the vulnerability of embodied, embedded lives, the necessity of care for human survival, alongside the risks of care, the ease with which care transforms into [harm or] self-negating sacrifice" (225). Care is not always a source of comfort, nor is it always motivated by good intentions, and, as O'Neill's literary works show, "sometimes the response to vulnerability is care, sometimes the response to vulnerability is aggression" (Sara Ruddick, qtd. in Tronto). The novels dramatize this double response to the need for care by imagining complicated contexts of attachment, responsibility, and survival.

Drawing on Laugier and Das for a model of care ethics that pertains to an ethics of the ordinary, I propose an analysis of these two novels in which I examine the unique texture of O'Neill's imaginary fabric, characterized by the successes and failures of caring practices in situations of precarity and suffering. In the context of O'Neill's imaginary world, this means looking at how the risks of care that O'Neill dramatizes in her fiction are triggered and increased by drug addiction, poverty, abuse, grief, and a need for belonging that at times places the protagonists in dangerous, volatile situations. Paying attention to problematic configurations of care in these two novels also sheds necessary light on

a simultaneity that her narratives play with through the experiences of wonder and squalor.

Wonder is a word often used in O'Neill's fiction. It is associated with the protagonists' imaginations, dreams of better lives, and child-like, naive appreciation of new encounters, random objects, and at times deceptions. However, the protagonists' ability to wonder does not eradicate or deny their material, economic, sexual, and emotional struggles. Rather, the presence of wonder suggests that the protagonists are not solely victimized subjects and that their agency and self-care strategies should be acknowledged. These protagonists refuse to let squalor define their lives entirely, and the novels' representation of poverty and "white trash identity," though it does not shy away from depicting abjection and marginalization, is also negotiated through figures of care and wonder that play roles in resisting and coping with the different sources of oppression. I thus argue that wonder does not serve to make the squalor "prettier" or "easier," nor does it function as a site for the sublimation or glorification of poverty. Instead, I suggest that the wonder found in O'Neill's first two novels, as I configure it by relying on the philosophical tradition of thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Marguerite La Caze, provides a way to respond to, and persist in kindness in, suffering and precarity.³

In the first section of this essay, I attend to O'Neill's use of storytelling and imagination as strategies to adapt to and cope with social and relational distress. It is a "fictionalizing lens" (Fabre 73) firmly grounded in ordinary patterns of everyday life, in affect, in memory, and in the characters' private and public struggles with poverty and with what O'Neill has repeatedly named a "white trash culture." Relying more heavily on ordinary, care, and wonder studies, I examine, in the second section, how the two texts play with a continuum of wonder and squalor that revisits, on the one hand, the relational experiences of girls and women in oppressive environments and, on the other, the elements and figures of wonder to bring attention to the simultaneous ethical and political persistence of moments in O'Neill's writing of joy, happiness, and relational fulfillment in contexts of suffering.

Imagination, Filiation, and White Trash Culture

O'Neill's first two novels confront the reader with the harsh circumstances of urban poverty, ordinary sexism,⁴ and child neglect. In her

literary works, it seems that “all children [are] being raised in prisons of one sort or another,” as one of her characters in the short story “The Holy Dove Parade” remarks (*Daydreams* 57). Incidentally, in *Lullabies*, Baby dramatically expresses the fate of children living in her Montreal neighbourhood: “All that children can hope for is that the adults who were around them would be kind. All they can do is beg for mercy” (306). However, O’Neill’s literary works also expose the naïveté, wonder, and candour of children with the power to imagine and daydream, an ability “to notice that everything was full of wonder” (*Daydreams* 19). These two interconnected aspects of her work encourage paying attention to the power of literature and of imagination for a reweaving of fragile, wounded lives, a “retissage des vies brisées” (Lovell 24). Such a weaving consists of small and grand gestures of care, expressions of hospitality, moments of wonder and daydreaming, and instances of storytelling that do not evacuate the suffering or fragility that comes with the living situations and problematic relationships but that alleviate the “strange sense of futility” that inscribes the everyday lives of characters (O’Neill, *Girl* 123).

As such, O’Neill’s “retissage” offers a rich perspective for rethinking and reimagining sources and encounters that can provide healing and “capture different truths” (O’Neill, “My Education”). These truths are rooted in her fascination with her background, which O’Neill qualifies as white trash culture: “I’m not white trash. I grew up white trash though. . . . I’ve been born into a poor family. But it didn’t seem so bad” (“On Growing Up” 20). In the same piece published in *The Walrus*, titled “On Growing Up White Trash,” she adds that,

By then, I had started writing the truth about my background. I wrote about how the basement walls of my building were covered in licence plates and hubcaps. I thought it was beautiful, like Aladdin’s cave. I wrote about eating pork chops while sitting on the sidewalk and watching a television plugged into an extension cord that ran through a window. I wrote how we collected bottles in a suitcase after festivals in the park. (22)

There is an understanding that, as O’Neill herself says, “being white trash isn’t a genetic disorder. It is a culture” (22). She adds that, when she started telling the truth about her experience of white trash culture instead of denying it, “beautiful things began to emerge. And I began to be proud of my heritage” (22).

O'Neill's child and young adult characters have "to create thoughts from scratch" (*Daydreams* 54). However, as O'Neill remarked during her 2017 Kreisel lecture, they also have a "poetic way of life" and are "natural storytellers" ("My Education"). The texts' weaving of ambivalent caring relationships, white trash culture, and daily struggles sheds a unique light on the "lien privilégié que l'imagination entretient avec les émotions" (Gibert and Paris 57)⁵ by using wonder and imagination as survival strategies as well as by using storytelling and artistic performance as ways of opening the "space of re-inhabitation and second chances" (Das, "Ethics"). Drawing on Das's "descent into the ordinary" as a way of acknowledging the particularity of experiences and refraining from an analysis of vulnerability, responsibility, and attention through aestheticizing and essentializing measures, I suggest that these moments of imaginative wonder and storytelling shape the protagonists' social and intersubjective agency. On the one hand, they allow a certain form of escape as well as sustain the characters' courage in not giving up that "poetic way of life." On the other, some storytelling practices, like those of Baby's father (Jules), her abusive and manipulative pimp (Alphonse), and Noushka's narcissistic father (Étienne), serve to manipulate and exploit Baby and Noushka.

Baby in *Lullabies* and Noushka in *The Girl* have literary inclinations and a propensity to daydream as a form of escape, what Domenic Beneventi labels "imaginative flourishes" in his analysis of Baby's movements into and out of "spaces of poverty" (269): "Living in a space constantly being violated by outside forces of law and lawlessness, Baby . . . constricts her sense of home to its smallest possible dimensions, the size of her suitcase and her imagination" (268). For example, she carries a copy of Réjean Ducharme's *L'avalée des avalées* with her and rejoices in her father's narrative of his romantic relationship with her mother. Cara Fabre also notices that her father "Jules's 'terrible stories' of his rural upbringing, which are filled with incidents of familial violence, neglect, and schoolyard poor-bashing, are to her 'like Grimms' fairy tales. . . . The stories about Val des Loups helped [her] to feel better than other kids" (72). Noushka has to "read *Bonheur d'occasion* for school" (*Girl* 125) and decides to pursue a writing career. The latter is a subversive following in her musician father's footsteps and a reflection of how her mother, pregnant at fourteen, had to "invent stories to understand what had happened" to her (394). To some degree, Baby and Noushka

trust literature and storytelling to reinvent themselves and momentarily escape their difficult material, physical, and emotional struggles. The girls use life stories and writing to cope with grief and fading memories as well as to make sense of their places in a world that systematically reminds them that where they live, care, and wonder is limited and constantly threatened.

Fabre decodes Baby's "mechanisms of self-governance" (75), but her work centres on the girl's use of drugs "and several imaginative measures . . . to emotionally and physically negotiate conditions of physical displacement, moral regulation, and stigmatization" (71). Fabre uses a "fictionalizing lens" to describe Baby's imaginary reconfiguration of her traumatic experiences. This lens is useful for looking at how the text mobilizes, from the vantage point of a young, poor, sexualized, marginalized character, a "continuum of imaginative acts" (74) that disrupts or rewrites the "tropes of recklessly abandoned addicts to construct Baby as a willful negotiator of class and gender norms" (71). In *Lullabies*, as Fabre rightfully observes, whenever Baby feels sad and insecure, she questions her father about her dead mother, a habit that soothes her emotionally and rearticulates her connection to Jules.

Similarly, in *The Girl*, Noushka enjoys listening to her father's speeches despite his many shortcomings. Étienne has hired a film crew that wants to make a documentary about his life, which he is trying to reinvent and which can only be achieved at certain emotional and moral costs. Much like Jules and Alphonse in *Lullabies*, Étienne is an expert storyteller who manipulates the truth. Noushka says the following about the filmmaker: "He was after a fairy tale, but there was only tragedy, chaos, and squalor behind the doors that he was knocking on" (55). Much like Jules in *Lullabies*, Étienne is a "bon vivant" who "made the ridiculous squalor that was everyday life sublime" (56). The twins' emotional distress is mostly connected to their resentment of his instrumentalizing his children to revitalize his career: "Our whole lives, from our conception onward, had been a romantic take on a narcissist's asshole behaviour. Our lives were a fiction. I had swallowed it all. I have believed it more than anyone" (106). Noushka is not blind to the fact that her family life has been a lie, and she struggles to reconcile her admiration for Étienne with his inability to provide care.

For Noushka, coming to terms with her writing ambitions also means negotiating her responsibilities as an adult and soon-to-be parent,

especially since her father, while she is pregnant, is not shy about telling her that children should never come first: "If you have a baby, you're supposed to be their slave from here on in? They come first? But why? . . . No, children don't come first. A person's *raison d'être* must always come first" (*Girl* 331). Noushka is "insulted" as once more she experiences his rejection: "He was basically saying that Nicolas and I had been a waste of time and his talents. . . . All that he valued in me was that I was some sort of artist too. So I decided to forget for a moment that I was a human being" (331–32). Noushka's difficult interactions with her father, similar to Baby's relationship with her father, are marked by neglect, invisibility, and carelessness: "We were just two poets sitting at a diner in the middle of the night, discussing our work. . . . It must be nice sometimes to have an all-consuming philosophy that includes not really caring for anyone other than yourself" (332). Jules is also partially an absent figure first as he manipulates his daughter to feed his addiction and then when he goes to the hospital and then to rehab.⁶ He also provides Baby with a sense of the everyday marked by the extraordinary as he brings her weird presents and unusual clothes: "When I was growing up, Jules and I had been living in a bit of a fantasy world, which had been a lot of fun. But now it felt good to deal with consequences because it meant there was nothing to be afraid of" (*Lullabies* 325). Like Étienne, Jules invents stories to cope with his poor parenting skills.

Both protagonists experience the caring power of storytelling when knowledge about their respective mothers is shared with them. In *Lullabies*, as Jules takes Baby out of Montreal and back to Val-des-Loups in a final gesture of love for and protection of his daughter, at the moment going through painful withdrawal, he opens up about her mother, to her surprise: "I was driving the car when your mother died, you know,' Jules said suddenly. I sat up, startled, forgetting all about the dope, and stared at Jules" (324). Learning about her mother's life and their short relationship, Baby finally gets answers to her questions: "I think it was the first time that anyone had told me that my mother loved me. I felt excited, like when you sneak up on the roof of a building and you can feel the earth falling through space" (328). Placed at the end of the narrative, this careful story symbolizes a new beginning, a new source of memories and belonging for Baby, who needs new relational connections after experiencing the trauma of losing her boyfriend, Xavier, and Alphonse's overdose next to her. Receiving confirmation

that her mother loved her, on her way to where her mother lived and gave birth to her, also helps to reconcile Baby with her father's decision to leave a city that she loves so much.

In *The Girl*, Noushka learns more about her mother, Noëlle, when Nicolas tells her that he has found her. He ambushes Noushka by taking her directly to Noëlle's house. As the narrator notes, she is "suddenly afraid": "I did not want our world turned upside down. I did not want to have any actual information about our mother" (92). Their first meeting at Noëlle's house is awkward; during it, Noushka finds out that she has another family and that Noëlle was very young when she had the twins. Noëlle says, "You have to understand what life was like for me when I got pregnant. Everybody in my town looked down on me. . . . My mother and I took the bus to Montréal to meet your grandparents. I left you two with them" (94).⁷ Noushka reacts badly to her mother's life story: "I just wanted it to end. I didn't want to hear her story. It had never occurred to us that she would see herself as the sad one in this story" (94), and once they leave Nicolas confesses that he "thought that maybe, possibly, something magical would happen" (100). Noushka has little compassion at first, and she gets angrier when Nicolas tells her that Noëlle was the nanny to Adam, her boyfriend at the time. Later in the novel, when Noushka is married to Raphaël, she unexpectedly meets with Adam, who secretly shares bedtime stories that Noëlle would tell him when he was a child. He confides in Noushka, wanting to share with her "how she would lie in bed with [him] and tell [him] stories" about the twins:

"Stories about me?"

"Yes, there was a boy and a girl."

"What did they look like?"

"What do you think? They had wild black hair and they were so lovely that people would slam their brakes to get a better look at them."

"Did you add that, or did she?"

"Noëlle did." (241)

Adam is filling the gap for the twins' grandfather, Loulou, whom the twins "had begged to tell [them] stories" (245): "But Loulou had only gone to Grade Three and the effort would put him into a deep, deep sleep. He would take all the space in bed, so that we were scrunched up against the wall" (242). Although Noushka appreciates Adam's stories,

she is also bitter: “Those were our stories Adam heard. We were meant to be the ones who heard those stories” (242). She responds to the story by crying, since Adam “had managed to bring us even the voice of our mother and spread it out at my feet like a fantastical tapestry from another land” (244). This choice of language — Nicolas hoping for something “magical” to happen when meeting Noëlle and the “fantastical” tapestry — shows not only how these young adults rely on wonder and fantasy to sustain a certain sense of hope, but also how they need imagination and the surreal to make sense of the world that they live in, a world that keeps disappointing and rejecting them.

Paradoxically, as they experience poverty, violence, and parental abandonment, the protagonists grow up thinking that they are special and should not be “at the bottom of the barrel,” as Noushka expresses it early on in *The Girl* (5). The different male figures who pretend to care for them use imaginary tales to manipulate them, so Baby’s and Noushka’s sense of wonder and care becomes a survival strategy when the young women face different forms of physical and psychological abuse. Dreaming, fantasizing, and wondering through storytelling and imagination operate as tentative self-care strategies that enable the characters to escape from and negotiate harmful gestures.

The Costs of Wonder

O’Neill’s texts mobilize the ethical by showing how vulnerable life is inevitably “redefined to include the traces that one strives to leave” (Turcot-DiFruscia 145) despite institutional, systemic, and socio-cultural forms of erasure and silencing that shape what O’Neill has often referred to as white trash culture.⁸ I read these traces as threads woven into a relational ethics of wonder that reassesses, if not “repoliticizes,” the potential of imagination. O’Neill’s characters are often described as “daydreamers” (*Girl* 164); by using their imaginations, they undermine approaches to care and the good life that historically stem from above rather than below. Accordingly, in this section, I consider O’Neill’s fiction as mobilizing an ordinary vulnerability that does not take away, invalidate, or delegitimize the agency of struggling subjects but challenges the “privileged irresponsibility” (Tronto 70) of those who benefit the most from a social model-based subject whose life and worth are shaped by ideals of rationality, independence, and individualism that care ethicists seek to transform.

O'Neill's poetics of care and the ordinary relies, once again, on fantasy, dreams, and altered reality through alcohol and drug use that create a pattern of wonder and escape. The emotional struggles between protagonists and their loved ones often situate relationships in liminal spaces that bring attention to the systemic and private structures from above that keep alive, in the words of Noushka, "the Minotaur in every closet and in every room" (*Girl* 140). O'Neill's protagonists express responsive, relational attitudes of wonder that, despite moments of ambivalence and despair, work "as an opening up of new possibilities, prompting creativity in a 'number of meaning-molding activities'" (Howard L. Parsons, qtd. in Economides 6). Living in certain spaces and moving to different environments also trigger a sense of wonder in the texts, especially through the spatial and emotional wanderings of the protagonists. For instance, Baby expresses how the capacity to dream saves her from everyday chaos: "There was a way that you could sleep properly when a house had been straightened up . . . and tomorrow's clothes were laid out neatly on a chair. But then again, when everything was left out all over the floor and the dishes were still in the sink, there was a way that you could dream" (*Lullabies* 51). Similarly, in *The Girl*, Noushka's home is characterized as both a powerful and a vulnerable, fragile, even "filthy" place (362): "We still lived at home, in a tiny kingdom that we had spent years building. But it was so poorly defended that these days a four-year-old could take it down with a wooden sword" (83). The texts dramatize how the fragility of the home, of the "kingdom," is closely connected to the vulnerability of the caring structures and relationships that shape and occupy the living spaces.

Although there is a particular naïveté in O'Neill's characterization, it also unfolds in the ordinary poetics marked by fantasy, dream, illusion, deceit, squalor, and at times a language of madness that renders visible how wonder and care "are not static responses to fixed differences but fluid responses" (La Caze 128). Recent philosophical theorizations of wonder configure it as a notion that "can help us understand . . . the relations between sexism and other forms of oppression and discrimination and how they can be overcome" (La Caze 5). They suggest that it "may represent a reservoir of hope within late capitalism's totalizing systems" (Economides 34). In O'Neill's literary work, wonder also participates in an exploration of "the responsibility of living in a world that [is] filled with so much wonder" when "everything thrilling in life ha[s]

its costs" (*Girl* 76, 66). Drawing on the words of O'Neill in an interview with the CBC, I claim that this sense of wonder, despite the omnipresent squalor in the texts, brings to light how the young characters struggle to find a balance between what they have been taught and told by those with whom they live and their own understanding of the world and their unique sense of imagination that fosters a particular agency. As O'Neill said, "at the same time they see grace in everything, from a cigarette butt to a cockroach to a television screen. They understand that the universe is a magical place, full of insights and gifts that are up to them to accept if they have the faith to believe in them" ("Heather O'Neill").

In *The Girl*, in a description of her blissful romantic relationship with Adam and her pride that he "was the only guy Nicolas didn't toss out on his ear" (51), Noushka romanticizes the presence of a cat and, more importantly, of cockroaches and the mess of the shared bedroom, disrupting the significance of the insects: "The cat's purring made the sound of a motorboat's engine, taking us off into the deep, deep waters of sleep. While the cockroaches put on their minuscule armoured plates and helmets and ventured out on the counter, looking for cookie crumbs" (51). O'Neill's negotiation of wonder and squalor is also shown in Baby's comments in *Lullabies* about the cockroaches on the wall of her room as Baby lies on her bed with her father, high on heroin: "He was hot as hell, but I liked him there right next to me, stoned and not going anywhere. I felt protected and perfect. . . . Even the little cockroaches on the wall were clockwork. They were made with the most beautiful tiny bolts from a factory in Malaysia" (22).

Making use of the same passage, Beneventi rightly remarks that "Baby's imaginative flourishes become strategies for coping with an unstable domestic environment and a neighbourhood marked by the constant threat of violence" (269). I would add that her imagination challenges, if not resists, common assumptions about how "some things are worthy of wonder and some are not" (*La Caze* 8). If the cockroaches on the wall symbolize the squalor of Baby's living conditions, their presence also triggers wonder, in the sense of what H.M. Evans identifies as an "openness" that can lead to a "newly revealed ordinary" (7, 10). In addition, Baby receives strange gifts from her father on her birthday and whenever he needs to apologize for his absences or failures. Commenting on the birthday presents, she remarks, "I could tell that

the hat was secondhand because the care instructions had worn right off the inside tag. Jules had a gift for finding wonderful garbage at the thrift store” (*Lullabies* 9). This “wonderful garbage” represents well the wonder-squalor dynamic at play in O’Neill’s texts, a dynamic mediated not only through objects in asymmetrical relationships, such as those of Baby and her father and Baby and her pimp, but also through her living spaces and many displacements. Her father’s lack of care creates an uncanny mobility for this young girl who makes her way through the streets of Montreal, where she encounters strange figures and admires sex workers: “There were always prostitutes around. They made me feel bad when I was little because they always had beautiful high-heeled boots, while I had to wear ugly galoshes. I closed my eyes when I passed them” (5–6). Her wonder at these sex workers thus comes at a cost: she compares herself and feels ugly, inadequate.

While Baby is in awe of the sex workers whom she meets on the street and finds beauty in cockroaches, she does not receive the care that she needs, and, both while alone on the streets and in foster homes or the juvenile centre, she develops self-care and survival strategies. As she experiences more severe forms of rejection, violence, and neglect, she notices, with a certain lucidity, that her sense of wonder is fading: “Suddenly I realized that I wanted everything to be as it was when I was younger. When you’re young enough, you don’t know that you live in a cheap lousy apartment. . . . A dandelion growing out of a crack in the sidewalk outside your front door is a garden. You could believe that a song your parent was singing in the evening was the most tragic opera in the world” (*Lullabies* 184). Her senses of wonder and survival are put to the test as Baby comes of age in a rough environment and experiences abusive relationships. The initial wonder that she felt with Jules and Alphonse, a pimp who seduces her before abusing and exploiting her, does not last and shifts to a feeling of manipulation and deception, again stressing that O’Neill’s narrative relies on wonder not aesthetically to glorify the protagonist’s experience of struggle, but to trigger an awareness and a sensitivity that help Baby to rely on her agency and develop self-care strategies. For example, following a violent interaction with her father during which he punches her in the face and humiliates her with insults, Baby first tries to self-harm and then hugs herself in a tragic gesture of both self-care and extreme loneliness: “I opened the cutlery drawer and took out a bread knife and pushed it against my

belly. . . . I didn't actually think it was going to work, but I just wanted it to be on the record with myself that I had tried. I felt so sorry for myself that I hugged myself like a baby. 'It's okay. It's okay, sweetie,' I whispered until I felt better" (157). Abandoned by her father, who has relapsed on heroin, and now aware of Alphonse's intention to force her into sex work, Baby attempts to make her own decisions and to live on her own terms: "I didn't listen to Jules anymore, I thought as I hurried down the street away from his building, so why should I listen to Alphonse? I was terribly annoyed that Alphonse was trying to tell me what to do" (257). Nicole Dixon has suggested that Baby's dreams selfishly take over her experience of the real, adding that Baby is thus a victimized character (3). However, by bringing wonder and care into focus to read her disruption of moral and spatial boundaries, one can discuss her embodied spatiality and physical strategy as forms of agency in her struggle for spatial, material, and psychological comfort.

Her relationship with Alphonse, grooming Baby to be a child sex worker, also initially reinforces this struggle to assert agency as he makes her feel special, unique, and destined for greater things. He seduces her with compliments and recognition at a time of extreme vulnerability: her father has screamed insults at her and hit her because of what she was wearing. Baby remarks that "It was that speech and not the punch that made me cry. I felt so bad" (*Lullabies* 157). Alphonse praises her beauty: "You are the prettiest girl on the street. I'll tell you that much" (158). He also shows her what she interprets as care not only by giving her gifts but also by recognizing her distress and respecting her boundaries: "That [Baby's black eye] sort of makes me angry as shit, but I'm not going to bug you about it" (161). Alphonse manipulates a vulnerable girl, but — and this certainly does not attenuate the gravity of his progressive control and abuse — he also provides Baby with shelter, food, and a sense of comfort. She comments on his effect on her: "I was a little obsessed after that. No one had ever made me feel that wild, unusual way before" (162). Her father repeatedly makes her feel guilty for her actions, and her friends repeatedly abandon her, but Alphonse, despite his criminal intentions, provides Baby with some comfort and recognition, if only for a short time: "You really are a special thing," he says (179).

Although Alphonse's actions are clearly abusive and manipulative, Baby's experience of his presence and gestures is positive and gratify-

ing at first. The reader clearly knows that his actions are misleading, but her agency cannot be denied or rendered invisible. The narrative voice reminds us of that agency: “I smiled. I thought he had put all his cards on the table for me. I thought that he trusted me with his life. I was twelve” (*Lullabies* 179). It also simultaneously stresses that Baby is unable to see the manipulation and the grooming because she is only twelve and does not entirely understand what is happening. Her interpretation of the relationship shows this wonder-squalor dynamic at play: her sense of comfort and awe cannot be denied, nor can the dangerous, criminal, and exploitative actions of Alphonse. I suggest that wonder and squalor do not exclude one another, that they coexist, for O’Neill is dramatizing the volatile and fragile relationality that drives her protagonist’s will to survive. The statement that Baby “wanted to be taken advantage of” (180) further stresses the complicated, messy boundaries of care that such a text displays. Therefore, instead of victimizing Baby, these moments of problematic love can be read as having some degree of caring value. As Beneventi argues, O’Neill’s narrative suggests that such an approach allows a better understanding of her capacity, as both a subject and an agent of change, to play with — if not subvert — the boundaries that limit her daily life: “Baby is bodily and psychologically marked and victimized by the illicit, the hidden, and the unseen, but in her strategic movements in the city, in refuging herself in hidden spaces when she is being pursued, and in her disclosures (or lack thereof) in the face of interrogation by a variety of authority figures, she demonstrates some measure of agency in which she is not simply a victim of her surroundings” (269). Her ordinary, everyday life is disrupted by extraordinary circumstances and shaped by the mythomaniac presence of Jules and Alphonse, and the narrative voice revisits this life by exposing the risks that come with needing care in such unusual, unsafe environments. The narrative voice details the limits of such care, not idealizing it but showing how the vulnerability of the care receiver makes place both for controlling and for healing forms of care, for the constant negotiation between or cohabitation of squalor and wonder.

Noushka, much like Baby, also acknowledges her naïveté and vulnerability as a young woman, lucidly looking back on the deceptive value of her romantic relationship with Adam: “Adam put his arm around me. It made me happy and I was in love with him. Or I was having such a good time that I mistook this good time for love. When you’re

nineteen, almost every day is a day of wine and roses" (*Girl* 74). She is also not duped by her father's delusion despite her acknowledgement that "He made the ridiculous squalor that was everyday life sublime" (11). And though Noushka remarks, early in the novel, that "It has been drilled into our heads that we're extraordinary" (40), her recalling of her brother and her being asked to perform with their father foreshadow Étienne's failed return in their lives and the realization, for the twins, that "We were only as extraordinary as the next person" and that they would have "to do all the things that everybody else does to become something" (40, 41).

Furthermore, a scene in *The Girl* resonates with the scene in *Lullabies* when Jules attacks his daughter. Raphaël's father, Fernand, insults his son for becoming a nurse. Raphaël's reaction — remaining silent and immobile — is similar to Baby's in the first lines:

"The point is that I didn't waste that many hours for my son to be a nurse. . . . I'm embarrassed to tell people about what you're doing now."

Raphaël didn't say anything. This was probably a ritual that they had established a long time ago when Raphaël was a little boy, where he would just sit there and listen to his father's litany of insults. It was sort of an enchantment, a spell that turned Raphaël into a stone. (*Girl* 218–19)

At this point, Noushka does not know the real source of his anger. After questioning Raphaël, she learns that he was abused by his skating coach, hired by his father, who refuses to see that he exposed his child to a sexual predator, much like Jules is unable to protect Baby from Alphonse. The shaming of Raphaël also echoes Baby's shaming for wearing inadequate clothes. The scene further highlights O'Neill's representation of fathers as difficult, aggressive figures who strongly affect their children's psyches and relational abilities. Raphaël's reaction is much different from Baby's: Raphaël pulls out a gun and puts it to his father's temple in a moment of rage after his unfair, careless comments.

Lullabies ends with Baby's warm encounter with Janine, with whom Baby will heal after finally learning more about her mother on the way to Val-des-Loups. *The Girl* ends as Noushka finally warms up to her mother and decides to call her in a moment of despair: "I suddenly wanted to call Lily [Noëlle's nickname]. Supposedly, mothers were like North Stars that guided you when you were profoundly lost" (368).

Noushka is isolated and needs to learn to live on her own: Nicolas goes to prison, Loulou suffers from dementia, and Raphaël commits suicide right in front of her. Her emotional labour, her care work with these men, shifts, and she focuses on her child, a son whom she names Papillon, and reconnects with her mother. In both texts, female characters come together in care and in wonder at what this new relationship entails. Struggling, hurt, grieving, both Baby and Noushka take new paths, enter new relational spaces, endings that echo what O'Neill says in her interview with the CBC: in her writing, she wants "to follow those paths, because all those tales, they seem so incredibly dark, but they're about people who came from dark places and managed to find light" ("Heather O'Neill").

Finally, in line with other writers whose work examines rough neighbourhoods and urban marginalization and abjection in Canada (one might think of Katherena Vermette's novel *The Break*, Catherine Hernandez's novel *Scarborough*, and Chelene Knight's memoir *Dear Current Occupant*), O'Neill works through systemic patterns of abuse and personal injustice, using literature and imagination to challenge and render visible what tends to be left unseen, rejected, shamed.⁹ Her poverty narratives tackle important issues today, including the exploitation of girlhood, the struggle of identity formation in urban settings, and the need for greater care and hospitality for misfits.

O'Neill's work shows how literature opens a hospitable space in its refusal to dramatize only the dark, the painful, and the tragic and in its capacity to imagine singular, situated experiences shaped by the fictional subjects' particular vulnerability and their everyday, ordinary struggle. Such a struggle for survival and for belonging is constituted of gestures of care that offer, despite isolation and precarity, "a human solution to retain dignity in the face of the unacceptable" (Innerarity 173). I would add that the ethics of care mobilized in O'Neill's fiction, through wonder and ordinary vulnerability, provides a solution not only for retaining dignity, what O'Neill calls "grace," but also for imagining it differently. Her fiction shows a compassion for characters and for what she identifies as white trash culture not by eradicating or aesthetically glorifying poverty and suffering but by showing how a good life is still possible in such contexts, how care, wonder, and hospitality are possible and achievable despite "the possibility that something is irreparable" (Innerarity 172). Reading O'Neill's fiction within an analytical framework that

relies on a model of care ethics (which intersects with ordinary ethics and wonder studies) reveals how her texts explore pain interlaced with ordinary structures of lived experience, wounds “woven into the patterns of life” (Turcot-DiFruscia 141) and “with the en-couraging [sic] experience of wonder” (Bennett 160). Indeed, her characters discover the limits of care as they go, experiencing or using care as surveillance and control or as a vulnerable expression of recognition and preservation; they fictionalize a “descent into the ordinary” that uncovers the textures and complexities of care and illuminates the potentialities of its shared ground with wonder and imagination.

NOTES

¹ “Care would be defined as this specific attention to the importance of little things and moments, to the dissimulation of such an inherent importance. This fragility of the real and of experience, . . . which belongs to ‘structurally vulnerable,’ ordinary experience” [my translation].

² “[B]oth a natural and social assemblage of forms of expression and connection to others” [my translation].

³ Relying on French cultural theorist Luce Irigaray, wonder scholar Louise Economides suggests that wonder, as an ecological concept, “is vital not only to sexual politics but also to ethics more generally: ‘wonder and desire remain the spaces of freedom between the subject and the world’ (76)” (qtd. in Economides 25). In *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*, Economides defines wonder as a “welcome uncertainty,” a “gateway to new possibilities” (1) and a “capacity to respond to the call . . . of things” (6). Although suspicious of other scholars’ overconfidence in configuring wonder as a systematically compelling source of ethics and as an impelling force of respect, Economides nevertheless acknowledges that wonder shares ground with “conservation” and “protection” (26) as well as with “something worthy of awe and *care*” (24; emphasis added). She adds that wonder can operate as “an aesthetic of possibility and creativity” (22), and her focus on the aesthetic relationship between ecology and wonder resonates with O’Neill’s imaginary worlds, in which there is also, through the dramatized voices of children and teenage characters who move through spaces and who are often spatially constrained, “a certain naiveté in the name of positive change” (34) along with a focus on the symbolic and material interactions of space, body, and identity. See Bennett; Economides; and La Caze for theorizations of wonder that, as rooted in the work of Luce Irigaray and Iris Marion Young, value singular experiences and resist dominant ideologies of response to “otherness” because they do not idealize or romanticize the term.

⁴ The many instances of sexual abuse, ordinary sexism, and gendered exploitation are other recurring themes in the works of O’Neill.

⁵ “[T]he privileged connection between imagination and emotions” [my translation].

⁶ O’Neill’s father figures are ambivalent: they neglect, manipulate, and hurt their children, but they also provide valuable and genuine care for them. Also striking in O’Neill’s literary work is the absence of mothers as well as their systematic namelessness in the collec-

tion of short stories *Daydreams of Angels*. *The Girl* is the only text in which a mother figure is more actively present and key to the dénouement of the narrative.

⁷ It would be interesting to look further into O'Neill's use of the same places and stories in her writing, such as Val-des-Loups, where Baby's parents are from in *Lullabies* and where Noëlle, the twins' mother, is from in *The Girl*.

⁸ O'Neill has commented on this white trash culture in several interviews. See O'Neill, "Author Heather O'Neill," "19-Year-Old's Referendum," "On Growing Up," and "You."

⁹ For a rich analysis of O'Neill's spatialization of the act of translation in those neighbourhoods of Montreal, see Bloom. Also, Knight's non-fiction piece is O'Neill's favourite Canadian book of 2018. See "Heather O'Neill's Favourite Canadian Book."

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