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Ruptured Relationships in a Patriarchal Commons: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Priscila Uppal's *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother*

ASMA SAYED AND JACQUELINE WALKER

PRISCILA UPPAL, IN HER MEMOIR *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother* (2013), documents her reunion with her mother, Theresa Catharina de Góes Campos, whom she had not seen for two decades. When Uppal and Theresa meet in Brazil, personalities, memories, expectations, and realities clash and recoil as the two women struggle to connect after years of no contact. The meeting is complicated by Uppal's past and present expectations of her mother rooted in socio-cultural perceptions of the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Throughout her visit, Uppal makes a point of consistently reminding Theresa that, when she left, their family struggled financially, emotionally, and psychologically and that Uppal herself strove to fulfill what she understood as her mother's responsibilities to the household. Uppal criticizes and blames her mother for her failure to accomplish the duties of being a wife and mother. She delivers her memoir as an indictment of her mother and as a testament to the futility of pursuing certain relationships, concluding that "Some relationships are not worth pursuing" (261).¹ The ways in which Uppal describes her mother's failings and culpability throughout the book show that she has internalized patriarchal standards and institutionalized expectations of motherhood that prevent her from exploring the relational discord rooted in the socio-political commons.

The wider socio-economic and political ruptures are pertinent to understanding the challenges within any relationship, including mother-daughter ones. In this essay, we argue that both the mother and the daughter, Theresa and Uppal, are victims of an overarching neoliberal capitalist system whose failures are so wide-reaching that those subjected to them cannot always appreciate their impacts at community, family, and individual levels. A ruptured commons does not provide the needed

supports for health care, family sustenance, and disability justice. Thus, the social infrastructure surrounding Uppal and her family was inconducive to upholding healthy relationships. One aspect that we consider is the role of her attachment to the idea that women cannot default on their unrelenting responsibilities to their husbands and children and how this view relates to the failure of her relationship with her mother. Uppal's rejection of her mother results from a commons that fosters desires to see traditional maternal roles fulfilled without considering how individuals and families are socio-economically un(der)supported in a broken social system, particularly strenuous for those whose families are overburdened with the demands of disability and childcare. Although Uppal engages to a degree with these concepts, the gaps in her memoir also generate a sub-text for understandings that go beyond the underlying characterization of Theresa's inadequacies as the singular source of relational, economic, and social disruption and breakdown within the family. Theresa is characterized by Uppal as someone who unwisely, selfishly, or at times apparently wickedly decided to build "another road" rather than stay with her family as a way of "fixing the hole in the road" (105). Although Uppal herself is significantly harmed emotionally by her mother's departure, and her grief is to be acknowledged, her deliberation on Theresa's motivations, intentions, circumstances, accessible options, and their relevance to Theresa's choice to return from Canada to her home country, Brazil, results in a daughter-centric. Uppal's grief, combined with socially defined expectations, ultimately leads Uppal to project her desires onto her presentation of her mother.

Literary representations of and theoretical perspectives on mother-daughter relationships can offer commentaries on socio-cultural expectations of women's roles and provide a framework for deconstructing and understanding various socio-economic structures. In her article "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-First Century," Andrea O'Reilly discusses the features of "Western patriarchal motherhood" (20). Some of the "characteristics or rules" of this notion of motherhood are that "children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother," that "the mother must always put children's needs before her own," and that "the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed and composed in motherhood" (20). Although this image of a successful or "good" mother is unattainable and places unreasonable demands on mothers, women

who fall short of this “ideal” nevertheless suffer the consequences of what is considered failure by patriarchal society’s standards. Thus, “the ‘good’ mother remains self-abnegating, domestic, preternaturally attuned to her children’s needs; the ‘bad’ mother has failed on one or more of these scores” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 6). The influence of patriarchal socialization in regard to marriage and motherhood is not limited to women with husbands and children. Although this socialization shapes how women understand and (de)value themselves, it also dictates how they are to be seen and evaluated by others. Historically, societies have glorified motherhood, and women have struggled with the idea of an autonomous mother and her right to carve out her own life on her own terms. In *Projection*, Theresa’s deviations from her expected role as a good mother are made highly visible; by underscoring the criticism that Theresa’s failings deserve, according to Uppal, and by the fact that her mother chose to leave her family to pursue her own health as a priority, the mother-daughter relationship is established as a site of tension.

Projection is firmly situated as a mother-daughter narrative. Uppal begins by explaining that “This is a story about mothers and daughters, disappearances and reunions, family bonds and family secrets, travel, trauma, grief, art, and the nature of the imagination” (16). The memoir, with its focus on an absent mother and a daughter’s reaction to reunification, is a compelling, and somewhat polarizing, study in gendered understandings of autonomy and mother-daughter responsibility. However, the lack of the mother’s voice in the memoir, or for that matter the lack of a response from the mother (also a journalist and writer) in Brazil, makes it difficult to empathize fully with Uppal and her mother’s circumstances and experiences. In the absence of such an account, it is impossible to do full justice to Uppal’s analysis. Recognizing the subjectivity of truth as well as the absence of thoroughly good-faith representations of one another from each side, the story, in some sense, remains incomplete. Uppal’s trip to Brazil, her mother’s home country, is prompted by her unexpected discovery of her mother’s personal website, on which Uppal finds a picture of herself and her brother, Jit, as young children wearing outfits that she “recognize[s] as ones our mother had made” (13). As she reads a section of her mother’s website “dedicated to thanking and acknowledging the many doctors who have kept her alive,” Uppal learns that her mother is “a woman riddled with cancer” (14). This discovery leads to a desire and an urgency to contact her, following which Theresa

enthusiastically offers to host her daughter in Brazil. To foreground her narrative focused on her “runaway mother,” Uppal recounts the various challenges that the family faced because of her father’s sailing accident, which happened when she was only two. On one of his official trips, her father, Avtar, an immigrant from India working as a civil servant in Ontario, ingested contaminated water, and two days later a “strong, ambitious father was a quadriplegic” (4). Almost six years later, when Uppal was eight and Jit was nine, their mother emptied the family’s savings and purchased tickets for herself and her two children to move to Brazil, but Uppal and her brother refused to go with her. Subsequently, Avtar secured legal custody of his children in Canada, and Theresa was awarded legal custody of her children in Brazil, though a further relationship or communication did not follow, and both children grew up in Canada.

In the absence of “anti-sexist” or “feminist childrearing” (O’Reilly, “Outlaw(ing) Motherhood” 18) that disrupts the internalization of patriarchal parental roles, children can go on to anticipate uncritically the fulfillment of reductive roles. Uppal’s discussion of the circumstances surrounding Theresa’s decision to leave her husband often casts doubt on the righteousness and morality of her decisions. Some of this occurs through an exploration of her predicament, which characterizes Theresa in ways that are simplistic and convenient for Uppal to construct and justify her side of the narrative. Although she seldom discusses her father’s impact on her emotional development, she frequently illustrates how her mother failed to abide by the roles that she yearned to see completed. Uppal acknowledges the devastating impact that her father’s sudden quadriplegic condition likely had on her mother, but she denies her mother the power of choice to leave: Theresa is blamed for choosing to leave her disabled husband and wanting to pursue a life that she could manage for herself and her children. Thus, Uppal’s expectation of her mother aligns with the prescribed behaviours of mothers and wives under a patriarchal system.

There are indications in *Projection* that Uppal herself developed patriarchal expectations as a child and has maintained them into her adulthood. Albert Braz, in his article “The Accidental Traveller: Priscila Uppal’s Search for Her Fugitive Brazilian Mother,” notes that “Even though she [Uppal] is in her late twenties when she reconnects with her mother, she sounds like a wounded little girl searching desperately for

the maternal love of which she was deprived as a child and who is bitterly disappointed to realize that she still has not found it, and likely never will" (107). Although Theresa tries to explain why she left her family, Uppal resists allowing these discussions to progress in a way that would fulsomely explore the relevant circumstances that informed her mother's choices. Often Uppal avoids listening to — and especially engaging with curiosity to understand — Theresa's individual experiences, which appear to complicate the simplistic explanation of where blame lies. Instead, Uppal redirects conversations toward herself, her brother, or her father; when Theresa tells Priscila "*I am afraid of life. Afraid all the time. To live is frightful. I am not tough. I am fragile. I could not fight,*" Uppal acknowledges that her mother tries "to explain why she had no courage, no strength to hold the house together for her children or even to keep in contact with them," but despite knowing this Uppal decides to respond with "*Jit and I are tough*" (88). So, though she might justify internally some of her mother's actions, externally she does not acknowledge the relevance of the difficulties and challenges that Theresa faced. One might wonder if such reactions then prevent Theresa from expressing the motherly care for which Uppal yearns. In positioning her own level of perseverance as the mark of acceptable performance, Uppal sets a boundary that pre-emptively rejects the permissibility of Theresa's past motherly underperformance. This highly conditional approach creates further barriers between mother and daughter, yet Uppal nonetheless expects Theresa to clear these hurdles. Theresa's explanations might have attempted to ease Uppal's disappointment, but the lack of interest in understanding her mother nevertheless continues to validate many of Uppal's long-standing judgments of Theresa.

Occasionally, Uppal recognizes her mother as an individual with aspirations and the right to make her own decisions for her life, but this recognition is ultimately undercut by the fact that Uppal's expectations align with stereotypical social narratives and assumptions regarding the obligations of wives and mothers. Uppal remains caught up within misguided concepts of gendered responsibilities and does not attempt to appreciate or to consider the explanations of why Theresa made such decisions. If Uppal were to entertain earnestly the idea that her mother had valid reasons for making the changes in her life that she did, then it could add a complexity to Uppal's narrative that might threaten the "childhood hate for her" that Uppal has nurtured into her adulthood

(84). Rather, she questions the need for having a relationship with one's mother. Analyzing the film *Blade Runner*, Uppal asks, "What does it mean to have a mother? Is it the necessary condition of humanity? If you don't have a mother (or have no contact with her), what is the value of your invented memories or projections of this person over the years? Does this change how you suffer, love, hate, care, run, or dream?" (11). Given that Theresa could not conform to Priscila's desire for an ever-present, doting mother, Uppal finds it difficult to forgive her mother.

Nonetheless, to understand the events of Uppal's childhood, it is necessary to situate Theresa's choices in the context of motherhood studies. Feminist scholars such as Adrienne Rich, Andrea O'Reilly, and Sara Ruddick have argued that "the institution of motherhood functions within specific sociocultural perimeters, and either rewards or punishes women based on how they perform their roles as mothers" (Sayed 88). Theresa, from her daughter's point of view, fails to perform her role as a mother. After all, patriarchal motherhood "denies mothers a selfhood and life outside of their identity and work as mothers and demands of them selflessness, constancy, and sacrifice in motherhood" (O'Reilly, "We Need to Talk" 69). Considering that Uppal's judgment of her mother's exit is intertwined with social expectations, one has to seek to understand what happened aside from how Uppal has perceived and relayed it. For much of the text, her discussion of her mother's departure revolves around how life for Uppal was upended by it and how she was deprived of the mothering that she was entitled to by virtue of being a daughter, no matter the mother's circumstances. Erika Horwitz's "seven themes" by which "outlaw motherhood may be characterized" might be helpful here. These themes are

the importance of mothers meeting their own needs; realising that being a mother does not fulfil all of a woman's needs; involving others in their children's upbringing; actively questioning the expectations that are placed on mothers by society; challenging mainstream parenting practices; not believing that mothers are solely responsible for how children turn out; and challenging the idea that the only emotion mothers ever feel toward their children is love. (O'Reilly, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood" 20)

Situating Theresa's choices in the context of outlaw motherhood scrutinizes the reductive nature of Uppal's narration of events. From the above list, the most relevant theme to Uppal's (mis)understanding of her mother

is “the importance of mothers meeting their own needs.” Rather than direct her disappointment toward the prohibitively challenging circumstances that eroded Theresa’s ability to cope, which therefore necessitated her move to Brazil, Uppal’s anger is directed toward Theresa for her apparent failures. Braz notes Uppal’s daughterly desires, suggesting that Uppal “is less determined to get to know her mother, including discerning why she abandoned her family, than she is in finally having a mother who loves her unconditionally and is captivated by every detail of her life merely because she is her offspring” (107). In her eyes, Theresa fails because she is unable to withstand immense personal hardship, for years longer than she already did, in order to continue to serve her children as a “good” mother should have. Uppal assumes that women owe it to their families to meet such standards and that they should succumb to immense psychological and physical hardship to do so; if they do not, then their children, as well as their status as mothers, will be affected. After Theresa tells her daughter that “*There will be no more tears. I don’t want to cry anymore or to remember any tears, Priscila. I really wanted my marriage to work*” (144), she shares more of her experience: “*I was going to die. Just die if I stayed. I tried to get in touch with you and your brother. Your father would not let me. No one can get angry at me for that*” (146). Theresa’s words offer nuance to the family’s story.

However, even as Uppal briefly narrates her mother’s side of the story, she often redirects conversations away from Theresa’s experience and toward her own: rather than explore her mother’s choices, which, until this trip, Uppal has not had the opportunity to access, she pays attention to them only when they seem to align with her understandings. After her mother explains why she left after feeling that her own life was at risk if she stayed any longer, Uppal says,

There were consequences to you leaving. I had to take care of my father and my brother: shopping, cleaning, cooking, medical procedures. I had a Visa card with my name on it at ten years old. I was so old and worn out by the time I was fifteen that I left home and have been self-supporting ever since. It was easier for me to work full-time and go to school full-time and earn A-pluses across the board than it was for me to keep that household functioning. (147)

Although one can empathize with Uppal for having to take on adult responsibilities as a child, her characterization of her mother is steeped in societal narratives about the permanent responsibilities and obliga-

tions of mothers to their families. She also fails to acknowledge that both her father's extended family and the social structures of the time were inadequate in supporting the family. Additionally, public perception and awareness of mental health have gone through significant shifts in the time since Theresa was raising Jit and Priscila. It is likely that Theresa would have been more aware of the option to find support from her family network in Brazil than to seek public medical support or mental health support on her own in Canada. Her experience is passed over and regarded as secondary, if regarded at all, to the downstream impacts of her failure to cope with competing and mounting familial burdens in the absence of adequate social and governmental support.² The circumstances of her experience are not only important but also relevant to understanding the impacts of a failed commons. When Uppal allows her mother to share her thoughts and offer explanations, she is forced to acknowledge new points of view:

I can't face these things, Priscila. I know you want to talk about them. If I have to face them I am afraid I will die. I am afraid I will break and the breaking won't end.

My mother is more insightful of her psychology than I have given her credit for. She's not oblivious; she's desperate. The woman has been in survival mode for over twenty years. . . .

You don't have to, I assure her. Just understand that I can't cover up my mixed emotions every second of the day.

My mother points to her chest, the hard lump of her cancer tube. *I lost your father and both of you. You lost only me. You need to think of that.*

I will. I've never considered it in such a light. (148)

There are few times when Uppal allows the new information that she learns from her mother's experience to coexist with the pain of her own memories. She writes that she will consider what her mother has lost, but she does not verbalize this in response to what her mother has shared with her. Without further exploration of her mother's statement, Uppal soon redirects attention toward her own experience: "And she's never considered that I had to assume responsibilities in taking care of my father and our household — a task that she, as a grown adult, found too burdensome to handle" (148). Recognizing that Uppal undoubtedly faced hardship following her mother's absence does not negate that her mother had a right to act on behalf of her "own needs"; although it neither solves

Uppal's daughterly turmoil nor absolves Theresa's behaviour, there is value in considering that Theresa left after many years of dwindling allowance for autonomy beyond the demands of intensive caregiving and mother work. The back and forth of incomplete consideration and appeals to assess conflicting and difficult experiences between Uppal and Theresa show the extent to which the two women yearn for connection yet are guarded in their relationship, which has sustained damage. Uppal's focus on her duties as a child hints at the difficulty of acknowledging that neither Uppal nor her mother should have been obligated to shoulder such burdens. Uppal does not recognize that "individualization causes such mothering to be the work and responsibility of one person" and that community engagement and advanced and established social systems might be required to care for a person with disabilities (O'Reilly, "We Need to Talk" 65). If anything, what the two women go through can be blamed, at least partially, on the systemic failure of the North American nuclear family structure as well as public support systems that do not prioritize supports for individuals or for families with persons experiencing chronic illness and disability.

Uppal's situation is not unique since many children have had to deal with parents who are sick, stigmatized, and undersupported. In her study "Mother to Daughter: The Shaping of a Girl's Values in the Context of a Parent with a Chronic Illness," Karen A. Blackford notes that "prejudice against disability as a concept and against disabled people as individuals is a broadly accepted social value." This broad acceptability of ableism is relevant to understanding "how disablist notions emerge within family relationships" (151). A common expectation of mothers and wives is that they "do it all" (152); when their ability to fulfill this role is disrupted, daughters who have learned gendered family roles might go on to try meeting the demands of this role. Thus, girls might try to become "super achieving martyr[s]" (153). It appears that Uppal was caught up in this familial, cultural expectation, and she notes throughout her memoir the "slack" that she had to pick up in her mother's absence. In this sense, both the mother and the daughter, the two women at the centre of the narrative, are expected to meet their gender-prescribed roles. Blackford notes the potential for youth to become anxiously "preoccupied with how parental disability, . . . single parent status and . . . low family income construct a picture of a family that differs sharply from" the ideal (149). Uppal appears to operate within ableist and gendered notions of women

as demonstrated not only by her high expectations of her mother (and of herself) but also by the ways she stigmatizes and ridicules Theresa's mental health rather than accepts it as a constraint on her ability to care for herself and others.

Although Theresa, as per her account, left her family in an effort to keep herself, especially her emotional and psychological state, from deteriorating further, she also tried to take her children with her to Brazil, where apparently there was ample care available from her extended maternal family. In this case, her attempts to re-establish herself and her children in a well-supported, healthier environment indicate her awareness of how her mothering directly relied on her own well-being. However, Uppal does not entertain the mere possibility that Theresa did not intend to abandon her children and that she believed that Avtar's family would care for their father. The fact that she left, and twice tried to take her children with her, suggests that, after years of intensive caregiving and mother work, she could not continue to provide care to her husband without affecting her children and herself and that she wanted to remove herself and her children from that situation. After trying to follow through on her (gendered) obligations with minimal support, Theresa might have made the best decision for herself and reasonably thought it best for her children too. However, Uppal does not see this side of her mother's perspective, and, despite accepting that Theresa and Avtar staying together was not an easy option, she does not consider the desperation that it might have brought on for Theresa. Neither does she think that life in Brazil would have been better: "I am aware of how many opportunities I would have lost if we'd immigrated here. We would not have been better off with my mother — able-bodied and employed and from a family of money and social standing though she is. Nor do I think it would necessarily have been better if my father and mother managed to stay together" (89). The only viable scenario for Uppal is the one in which her mother never left.

Patriarchal motherhood expects that "the mother must always put children's needs before her own" (O'Reilly, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood" 20). Uppal's characterization of her mother's choices as wrong because of their impacts on her family presents Uppal's early hardships as sufficient justification for her mother's difficulties to be unending. Writing about mothers who leave in "When Eve Left the Garden," Petra Buskens argues that, "While the boldness and devastation of her act may horrify us, if we

delve into the practical and philosophical implications of her decision, we see the possibility of profound social change. Indeed, we see the complete rupture of gendered distinctions between autonomy and care, and a possible synthesis of the two" (267). Buskens clarifies further that "this is not to suggest that mothers who leave provide an unproblematic synthesis between freedom and care, or that practice easily relates to theory, only that a poignant synthesis between autonomy and care presents itself in the case of the mother who leaves" (267-68). Theresa's leaving upended the family in a number of ways, of course, but as a mother who leaves, Theresa is subjected to the kind of scrutiny that Buskens refers to, albeit with limited accompanying consideration of what Theresa deserved in terms of autonomy and care. Uppal only occasionally tries to understand her mother's choices, constraining circumstances, or experiences, yet there are glimpses of Uppal's mental extension of empathy for her mother in *Projection*:

My mother has suffered. Profoundly. I must remember this. She carries her sorrow around with her, in the silk scarf I sent her and in her crippled fingers, in her tacky clothing and bulky frame, and in the exhale of her eternal monologues. For her, there is no end in sight to her curse. Every night and day is torture. She knows she has children, but she knows she has no permission to love them. She gave up her mate. Instead of fixing the hole in the road, she built another road. (105)

Uppal nears discussion of what has shaped the balance of care and autonomy for Theresa, yet her empathy for her mother is often situated in degrading or otherwise imbalanced characterizations of their relationship history. Theresa's family relationships are not described by Uppal as losses that Theresa experiences but as obligations that she intentionally abandoned. Ultimately, the text suggests, Uppal struggled to imagine explanations that go beyond ableist and matrophobic fixations.³

Furthermore, Uppal's lack of concern for or awareness of the mental health challenges that Theresa faced while living in Canada, and possibly since then, also impedes their relationship. Uppal gives the reader an incomplete picture, one that risks overtly privileging her own point of view over that of her mother to the point of reducing her to a caricature of a "crazy lady" (140). After Theresa tells Uppal that "*I did not leave the city of Brasilia for seventeen years because I was so traumatized*," Uppal bristles that "She abandoned us, forsaking a quadriplegic man to raise two kids

on a flimsy pension and disability benefits, but *she's* traumatized?" (77). Uppal often reacts to her mother's claims in ways that invalidate, redirect, or diminish them and show a lack of understanding of issues of mental health brought on at times by unrealistic social expectations. After Uppal pushes her mother to elaborate, Theresa tells her that "*There were bites on my hands and I underwent many body examinations to show the beatings,*" hinting at physical abuse from her disabled husband (78). Theresa then asks Uppal what she remembers, and Uppal responds that she does not remember much about her mother, explaining to readers that she knows that response will hurt her mother, but that is her intention given what Theresa is "saying about [her] father" (79). Refusing to acknowledge the abuse that her mother faced, Uppal then explains that she remembers "some very specific things that are extremely pertinent to this discussion," and she redirects readers to events that took place when she was a child and were likely traumatic not only for her but also for her mother, father, and brother: "She once pinned my skinny brother on his back and proceeded to shove a dirty sock into his mouth and down his throat until he choked because he had forgotten to place the socks in his hamper" (79). Uppal goes on to ask "Why are crazy mothers such sticklers for cleanliness — is it the lack of order in their own minds they are bemoaning?" (79). Her regular characterization of her mother as "crazy" does not speak to the implications that this event and others have for Theresa's mental health. Although one cannot justify her behaviour, Theresa could have succumbed to the psychological and physical strain of her unsupported occupation as a wife and caretaker of a severely disabled man and as a mother of two children with "lots of physical energy" (65). Uppal refuses to validate that there was a consequential toll from such duties. Others have noted her apparent lack of patience or consideration for those who struggle under mental or emotional pressures. Braz — recognizing that Uppal is often deemed "exceptional, which is why she is granted special status" (110) by teachers, coaches, and friends' families alike — suggests how it might affect her judgment of those who struggle in ways that she does not consciously identify with:

Uppal highlights that, from a young age, "I learned to take care of my illnesses — from colds to flus to sinus infections — on my own" (57). Perhaps even more telling, she boasts that since she left home as a teenager and realized she was "alone in the universe, without a proper protector, without someone to fight for and care for me,"

she has adhered to “a revelation” she had one “singular morning: breakdowns are a luxury I cannot afford” (57), implying that mental illnesses are a choice and only the weak succumb to them. (111)

This observation helps to explain why Uppal fixates on her mother’s fragility, characterizing such a “weakness” as offensive.

Uppal’s treatment of her mother can also be explained in part by “social identity theory,” which Stacy Overton and Sondra Medina discuss in “The Stigma of Mental Illness” (143). They write that “Social identity theory considers how people use social constructs to judge or label someone who is different or disfavored” and “that stigma arises when an actual social identity falls short of a societally defined ideal identity” (143, 144). Theresa could not carry out the “societally defined ideal identity” of a mentally and emotionally robust mother and wife, which affected her relationship with her children. Furthermore, her lack of emotional resilience in her situation and the outbursts that followed imply that she likely suffered from mental illness. Overton and Medina supply a definition that recognizes mental illness as “the spectrum of cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that interfere with interpersonal relationships as well as functions required for work, at home, and in school” (143). They assert that “stigmatized people form a *virtual social identity* when they become disfavored or dishonored in the eyes of society, and then they become outcasts. This applies to people with mental illness because, historically, mental illness has been viewed as a character or moral flaw” (144). The ways in which Uppal and other family members discuss Theresa reflect such a characterization: “It’s evident my mother does not blend into the family unit — she is the outcast, and my rejection of her might be the last nail in her coffin” (Uppal 227). Uppal seems to get some satisfaction here from witnessing Theresa’s familial outcasting, especially when Uppal and her maternal grandmother become close. Theresa’s brother, Uncle Fernando, tells Uppal that “[Avatar’s] sickness let out all her crazy. At once. She’s never been able to put it back inside. . . . I don’t know if your mother is happy. I don’t think so, but I don’t know anything important about your mother at all. Only that she’s the craziest of them all” (224-25). It is significant that Theresa is consistently and simply reduced to a “crazy” woman (a term heavy with stereotypes) without an appreciation of the external factors relevant to her mental health. Overton and Medina note that “the stigmatized person is reduced in the minds of others from a whole and normal person to a tainted, discounted one,”

even though “this does not reflect their whole being” (144). Theresa spent six years prioritizing the needs of her children and her husband, neglecting her own needs and mental health as a result of her duties. Yet Uppal does not share her attempts to understand this process or how it might have encouraged Theresa to “[abandon] the patriarchal structure of mothering” (Buskens 277). Instead, she opts to maintain an incomplete perception of her mother, further sustained by the limits of Uppal’s own memory.

One of the drawbacks, or strengths, of autobiography and memoir is that they depend on memory, which can be both shaky and subjective. Uppal took nearly ten years to write this book after she visited her mother in Brazil. Also, before going there, a considerable amount of time had passed since she had last seen her mother. How much of what Uppal remembers, or thinks she remembers, can the reader consider truth? One needs to be aware of “the limits of remembering, the politics of remembering, the communal effects of remembering, and the ways in which remembering confuses our expectations of linearity and spatiality, of poetics and thematics in narrative” (Smith and Watson, “Introduction” 39). Uppal’s remembering is affected not only by the time lapse but also by her emotional reactions to her mother’s actions. As bell hooks writes, “the limitations of autobiography, of the extent to which autobiography is a personal story telling — a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them,” need to be considered (430). Perhaps Uppal found her version of the story a way of understanding her present; hooks argues that “the act of writing one’s autobiography is a way to find again the aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one’s life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present” (431). Nonetheless, when discussing family photo albums, Uppal writes that “I liked the fact that my past, my family, was off limits to everyone except me. My imaginative territory alone. Able to change if needed, at a moment’s notice” (15). The implications here are interesting, given what Uppal has also written about confronting memory with reality:

When someone disappears, we create and re-create that person in our imaginations, shaping them to suit what we think of ourselves at this particular stage in our lives, a specific time and place in our personal history. To come up face to face against the real person — whose face will never appear to you as you envisioned it — is

to come up against and interrogate your own imagination and discover through cross-examination how true or how false you've been to this person, to the past, and to yourself. (10)

Uppal's memories and perceptions of her mother suggest that her ability to remember accurately, perhaps even fairly, is unreliable. This might have been a result of her inability to cope under her circumstances following her mother's move to Brazil, which also affected her relationship with her disabled father.

Although Uppal hints that there were challenges to her connection with her father, she often remains defensive of him. She describes how, when she was young, out of her fear that "I would look too much like my mother and my father would hate me by instinct," she would say to him "*She was ugly, wasn't she? How could you marry such an ugly, stupid woman?*" (66). Such a matrophobic attitude might have helped Uppal to navigate her father's anger, but it also stigmatizes her mother for what Uppal had to put up with in order to forge a working relationship with her father. She seems to situate herself firmly on her father's "side," saying that she "did feel something akin to pity for her [mother]" but that she "always felt more sorry for my father" (5). Smith and Watson point out that "remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present" (*Reading Autobiography* 22). It seems that Uppal's allegiance to her father and her separation from her mother have affected how Uppal remembers her childhood, particularly the years when her mother was present; to remember her mother fondly, especially in the presence of her father or brother, would have stirred up conflicting emotions within Uppal. Navigating this memory and moving on from it are challenging for her, especially considering her looming awareness of her resemblance to her mother. In this case, her father's opinions and emotions regarding his wife's absence could have become the structure that Uppal had to operate within while dealing with her own opposing feelings. Smith and Watson argue that "Contexts are charged politically. What is remembered and what is forgotten, and why, change over time. Thus, remembering also has a politics. There are struggles over who is authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember, struggles over what is forgotten, both personally and collectively" ("Autobiographical Subjects" 18). It is clear that Uppal had to adapt to a deeply contentious situation each day in her household; when she writes that "I likely accepted my father's condition and everything it entailed," she refers to his caregiving

demands, but it is also relevant to how she conforms to narratives, and thus memories, involving her mother in ways that appear to be out of loyalty to her father (4). She does not seem to have many good memories of her mother: "I couldn't remember good things. The bulk of my memories of her had packed up and left inside her luggage and were lost on the other side of the planet" (3). When discussing her mother's cooking, Uppal acknowledges the incompleteness of her memory: "I have zero memories of my mother cooking — I can't name a signature dish or family recipe she might have lovingly prepared for us after school or on special occasions, though I'm sure she must have cooked on a daily basis" (81-82). Perhaps Uppal's emotionally constrained environment affected the viability of her memories of Theresa. Once Uppal is in Brazil, however, it seems that fond memories of her mother become accessible. She remembers Theresa as

Our outdoor parent. The one who took us to bus stops and dentist appointments, to softball games and choir. The one who cleaned the pool and tended the garden: zucchini, tomatoes, green peppers, and four strawberry bushes. The one who bought us birthday presents and Popsicles and ground corn for the petting zoo. The one who taught us to sing and skip and slide and swim. (149)

Uppal concedes that she and Jit "must have loved her once. We must have. Even Jit" (149). Her affectionate recollections of her mother seem to have been dulled over the years by wanting to appease her father or by her own disappointment with Theresa's failure to stay with her husband and children. After twenty years of reinterpreting "the past in the present," where the past good memories are adjusted and perceived through the feelings of the present, Uppal's memories of her mother seem to be tinged inevitably with sadness, social shame, and sometimes bitterness. Although Uppal needed to subject her memories to such a process of interpretation to ensure her own social, familial, and emotional survival in her household, her perception of her mother was likely affected by these interpretations as a result.

Given that readers do not hear the voice of Uppal's father, it is not clear what his expectations of Theresa were and whether he wanted her to abide by the stereotypical South Asian expectations of motherhood. South Asian culture, much like other cultures, emphasizes a woman's role as a mother. As Jasjit K. Sangha and Tahira Gonsalves argue,

In South Asian culture, motherhood has historically held significant meaning and women's reproductive abilities have been celebrated, through rituals performed in ancient India, writings in religious texts in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism, and traditional practices of matriarchy in some communities. However, along with this reverence came terms and conditions, steeped in patriarchy, that defined how women should mother. Most notably, that women should aspire to motherhood within a heterosexual marriage, and as mothers, they should be sacrificial and devoted to their families. (2)

Uppal's disappointment with her mother's failure to meet such conditions is palpable, yet Uppal provides limited insight into the extent that this disappointment was verbalized in her home, especially by her father, while growing up. Her description of her father's and brother's avoidance of emotional or "impractical" dialogue suggests that open discussions of her mother were rare:

My father avoids talking about his dreams. He'd rather talk NHL hockey scores, health care cuts, or Dirty Harry movies. Not dreams. And certainly not about my mother.

Neither will my brother. He pretends she is dead. That fantasy suits his own dream life. My brother is practical, and confronting an unchangeable past is simply impractical. (9)

Although such an approach does not suit Uppal, her emotional development has been influenced, potentially hindered, by her father's inability to become accustomed to engaging in emotional communication or seeking to understand the dynamics of what happened to his family.⁴ Yet, rather than resolving to examine and reform the desires that have left her disappointed, Uppal ties up her memoir with the simple assertion that "Some relationships are not worth pursuing" (261). Joel Yanofsky wonders in "An Exercise in Family Exorcism," his review of the memoir, "whether she knew what she expected to get out of it [her reunion with her mother]," and this "concern is sustained through the early part of the book, but it starts to wane as Uppal and her mother spend more time together." Even though this particular concern eventually fades for Yanofsky, he concludes that, "as a nuanced study of betrayal and reconciliation, it [the memoir] feels rushed." Uppal's neat "conclusion" is consistent with her tendency to skirt discussions of the challenges that

Theresa faced and the dynamics involved in her choice to leave Canada. At the same time, the relative absence of details about family members other than her mother, such as her father or brother, contribute further to a sense of incompleteness.

It is evident from the text that Uppal expected her mother to be a devoted parent, yet she insufficiently explores what this would have entailed for her dysregulated mother, especially in the social, political, and cultural contexts of the time. Because Uppal's exploration of Theresa's experience is lacking, her indictments of and conclusions about her mother fail to ring true. To engage intensively in mother work requires the support of one's partner, family, friends and a whole community. The lack of community involvement alone might have given pause for Uppal to consider how utterly unsupported Theresa was as an individual and in her mother work. Additionally, this lack of support compounds the economic implications of managing competing personal responsibilities within a generally unsupportive, apathetic, and ruptured neoliberal welfare system. Ultimately, to meet Uppal's expectations, Theresa would have had to be a strong, superhuman, "do-it-all martyr" regardless of the family, personal, mental health, and broader socio-economic encumbrances by which she was undoubtedly strained.

Without confronting the complexities of reviving and negotiating a relationship with her mother, Uppal's conclusion appears to be incomplete in its omission of pertinent circumstances shaping her family's experiences. Her closing remarks underline her inability to extend empathy and generosity to her mother and reduce her capacity to develop a maternal bond, further alienating Uppal from Theresa, who refused to see her when she revisited Brazil. Uppal's interest in securing the unequivocal primacy of her own version of events leaves the narrative truncated in that it offers readers a daughter-centric perspective. Rather than being the case of a toxic relationship more harmful to pursue than simply to let go, the text of *Projection* often points to Uppal's inability to accept morally her mother for leaving the family, let alone articulate moving forward in ways that reimagine or reclaim their relationship. There is little space in the memoir devoted to outlining what would have been required should Uppal have chosen to pursue a relationship with her mother in earnest, or which of the choices available to Theresa years ago would have been acceptable to Priscila, yet there is an extensive variety of gendered, body-focused, fat-phobic, and ableist criticisms of Theresa. Uppal uses terms

such as “overweight” and “fat” to describe her mother multiple times throughout the book: “Although overweight, my mother walks briskly” (81); “How I’m going to be able to stop myself from choking her fat face” (231). The memoir has competing components; at times, it operates as a thoughtful attempt to discover the space between separated mother and daughter; at other times, it channels Uppal’s formative resentment of her mother (likely providing personal relief), yet it does not evolve to include consideration of other relevant factors shaping both women’s experiences. We argue that the larger (ruptured) political and socio-economic circumstances encompassing and surrounding Uppal’s family perpetuate ableism, mental health stigma, misogyny, and other social challenges, ultimately inhibiting an appreciation of matricentric realities that would help explain family histories and experiences.

A state’s neoliberal, capitalist disposition leaves people in circumstances like those of Theresa, Avatar, and their children un(der)supported. The evolving political inability to recognize and account for the value of human and relational health means that the social commons becomes overburdened and simultaneously detached from the state’s circle of responsibility. Uppal does not acknowledge in the memoir that she herself is a product of the ruptured commons; her expectations have formed within the priorities and narratives of a commons structured in ways detrimental to fostering relationships.⁵ Similarly, Uppal does not allow for a meaningful recognition of her mother as part and product of the same ruptured commons. If their relationship were to thrive, then these external factors would first need to be mutually appreciated, followed by the mutual decision between mother and daughter to disrupt the commons as a means of not being subsumed by its reductive space. Rather than disrupt the mainstream understandings of motherhood, the privatization of family care, and the prevalence of neoliberal values, the attempted relationship between Priscila and Theresa only scratches the surface of the tensions that result from these wider factors, leaving their relationship non-viable rather than thriving at most and functioning at least.

NOTES

¹ Some of Uppal’s criticisms of her mother are delivered through the exploration and interpretation of dynamics between mothers and daughters in films such as *Blade Runner* and *Mommie Dearest*. Uppal’s explanations of characters in these and other films both reveal

and channel her daughterly expectations of and subsequent frustrations with her situation with her mother. However, with a lack of space, we are not able to engage in a complete analysis of films as sites of both Theresa's and Uppal's mother-daughter projections based on their experiences.

² The limited public financial support following Avtar's accident combined with the increased cost of living with a disability likely contributed to the strain of day-to-day caretaking and mother work. When Uppal was growing up, disability benefits available through the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) were "not particularly generous" yet "essential to [recipients'] incomes" (Schulze 195). In his criticism of the "obvious inadequacy of public disability benefits," David Schulze explains that "The maximum [CPP] benefit was only \$216.06 per month in 1980 (or \$2,592.72 annually), but the benefits were their recipients' main source of support in 1979 and counted for 32 percent of the group's total income, which averaged only \$7,082" annually (195). Historically, there have been limited sources of public financial support for those like Avtar living with severe physical disabilities. Furthermore, "For a large number of disabled people, their physical condition also means a life of economic deprivation: a 1985 survey found that 63 percent of the disabled had annual incomes of less than \$10,000" (193).

³ Braz notes that "Uppal's text is deeply affected by the author's sense of maternal rejection, of abandonment. So in a way, *Projection* is less about global politics than about family dynamics in general and parental responsibility in particular, a Canadian writer's jeremiad about being forsaken by her Brazilian mother" (104). Given that "Uppal has described 'the swift flight of my mother from our home when I was eight' as one of the 'defining moments of my life — personally and artistically,'" and elsewhere affirms "that her work reveals an obsessive fascination with mothers — particularly missing mothers," it is not surprising that Uppal rarely voices sombre consideration of the complexity of her mother's situation or her particular individual demands.

⁴ Although relevant to understanding the dynamics of Uppal's household while growing up, her discussion of her father's parenting is limited. Braz writes that "Earlier in the text, she [Uppal] refers to 'a particularly angst-ridden time after leaving home at age fifteen for rented rooms' . . . and implies that [her reasons for leaving had] something to do with her father's parenting" (110).

⁵ In her other fictional and non-fictional works, Uppal acknowledges the importance of connections and coming together — between the living and the dead, for example, in *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*. However, she does not explore these themes with any urgency in *Projection*; instead, her memoir seems to focus on disconnect and discord rather than on openings for connection or shared understanding. Her focus in these instances illustrates that she tends to preclude the possibility of a relationship with her mother.

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