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Stand on Guard for Me: Paradigms of Care in Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*

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(School)grounds for Dismissal: Preamble on Caring Canadians

One abiding stereotype of Canadians is their consummate politesse and caring, a cultured inclination to be "nice." Some city buses even appear to offer an earnest apology when not in service, adding to a host of memes that underscore the conscientious, likeable, good-natured national ethos ("FYI"). Canadian graffiti, one satirical article points out, features reversals of typical insults ("Your mom is a nice lady," instead of a more predictable epithet rhyming with "witch"), and wholesome lessons replace hurtful slurs, as when "Hate fags" has been crossed out and replaced with the mature exhortation, "Respect differences" (Chen). The child narrator of celebrated Indigenous writer Thomas King's short story "Borders" summarizes stereotypes about Canadian versus U.S. attitudes with a sardonic juxtaposition of two border towns: "Just hearing the names of these towns, you would expect that Sweetgrass, which is a nice name and sounds like it is related to other places such as Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw and Kicking Horse Pass, would be on the Canadian side, and that Coutts, which sounds abrupt and rude, would be on the American side" (134). To be Canadian is to say sorry, to be kind, and to care. When clothing company Roots featured the slogan "Be Nice" in conjunction with the Canada 150

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celebrations in 2017, the commercials added nuance to this national personality by defining "real" niceness. The moment the woman narrator stresses the words "*real* nice," an image of lip-locked Michael Leshner and Michael Stark, the first gay couple to wed legally in the country, flashes on screen. *Really* nice Canadians have "guts," are "courageous," display "selfless" qualities, and—most provocatively—carry in them the capacity to be "disruptive." The narrator explains, "Nice means screaming when you have no voice" while the lens lingers on a candlelight vigil for the nineteen young women murdered by a gun-toting misogynist at Montreal's École Polytechnique in 1989 (Roots Canada). Clearly, this niceness encompasses social justice concerns and accounts for historical violence against both sexual minorities and women.

Negotiating this "disruptive" space of socially conscious national niceness is Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim* (2008), an award-winning graphic novel about a half-Japanese, half-white teenager attending a Catholic girls' school in Toronto during the early 1990s. Eleanor Ty identifies the aptly black, white, and gray text to be a kind of "graphic *Bildüngsroman*" capturing how the sixteen-year-old Kimberly Keiko Cameron (nicknamed "Skim") inhabits the roles of "daughter, rebel student, romantic, artist, and friend" (*Asianfail* 42). Claire E. Gross deems the text "stunningly emotional" with a "thoughtful, brooding misfit" as a protagonist (459–60). Identifying Tamaki and Tamaki's novel to be one of four key Asian American contributions to the comics genre in 2000–2010, Ty acknowledges how the fusion of verbal and nonverbal narratives conveys "the difficulties of articulating the self, especially as a queer Asian North American subject" ("Introduction" 17).[1] This observation accords with Monica Chiu's praise for *Skim* as "a fantastic feat of inconspicuous scopic revelation" (45) given its ability to showcase the "symbolic affinity between what is visually represented and what is read through verbal silences and across [page] gutters" (29). Homosexuality and race, typically charged topics, remain "imagistically present but absent in prose" (Chiu 29). And despite a "relatively calm visual pace" where the reader must "slow down and consider the image" (Stanley 192), *Skim*'s arresting splash pages, stark close-ups of faces and objects, and weaving of diary entries into the regular flow of plot and dialogue comprise a chiaroscuro of anticipation and anxiety. Skim faces "an open-ended future" (Kahn 342) shot through with fears aroused

1 The other "most influential" Asian American graphic narratives from that decade are Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), and Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings* (2007) (11).

by the "intense vulnerability of young hearts in a world of grown-up rules" (Stanley 191). Appropriately, the breaking and mending of bones and hearts, with each type of rupture necessitating time and patience, stands as an unmistakable leitmotif in a narrative heavily informed by the politics and emotional demands of care.

Like I care: stereotyping and silencing

Some might only "skim" over the protagonist's story, treating her as peripheral to the more vocal or visible players in her high school setting. Others might discount her because she appears to fit the stereotype of the uniformed, self-effacing Quiet Asian Girl.[2] As a Goth, however, she may not be as wholesome or whole (to use the milk metaphor implicit in her nickname) as another heroine might be. Japanese American feminist Mitsuye Yamada calls Asian American women "the most stereotyped minority of them all" in terms of care work, given that they are typecast by Western society to be "submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, [and] easy-to-get-along-with" (31). If being Canadian means being predisposed to niceness and caring, then being mixed-race Asian and female like Skim must entail an even larger, compounded burden, namely the need to care more because of gendered as well as racial expectations. Yamada argues that since people of Asian descent are already disadvantaged as "the visible minority that is invisible" in countries like Canada and the United States, it would follow that a queer female within this group, as diverse and diffuse as diasporic Asian identities can be, must contend with even more complicated threats of erasure, ostracism, homophobia, racism, and gender-based violence (31).

In her survey of contemporary Canadian comics for youth, Naomi Hamer discerns a "pedagogic agenda" underlying the most acclaimed of these visual texts, with prevalent themes being formative events in national history, environmentalism, and an array of social justice concerns, including racism and homophobia (170). Falling within the third group, *Skim* illuminates "outsider experiences" via a plot that "pushes the boundaries of the coming-of-age narrative" (Hamer 183–84). Social concerns like suicide, homophobia, bullying, body shaming, negative self-concept, and depression persist among teens decades after the book's publication, testifying to *Skim*'s ongoing relevance and continued capacity to appeal to a broad

2 See Lo on stereotyping, body shaming, and Asian diaspora women's mental health struggles.

range of readers.[3] It is the suicide of a popular athlete rumoured to have been gay, John Reddear, from a neighbouring school that initiates Skim's journey to self-awareness as a "fat, goth, Wiccan-practicing, lesbian Asian girl who has been the 'project' of her school's anti-suicide, bullying prevention campaign" (Froese and Greensmith 43). Theirs is a kinship based on "queer potentiality," with the school officials, fellow students, and "helping professionals" proving to be more invested in candied "celebration of life" narratives than "naming and making visible the conditions that make life unliveable" in the first place (Froese and Greensmith 45–46). Skim's experience is thus clearly marked by "aggression, ambivalence, and contradiction" (Miller 90). As Marni Stanley explains, the teen "understands, as the school administration does not, that the differences they perceive in her—sadness and an interest in the gothic—are not as important as the difference that everyone pretends they do not see" (194).

We gain access to Skim's diary and other personal thoughts ("And suddenly I'm talking like there's no tomorrow, which is weird because I'm not a talker" [26]), largely concentrated on a complex inner life that aches for personal intimacy, acceptance, and shared imaginative affinities. Beyond her growing interest in witchcraft ("I feel like I am definitely a witch, although I am technically only starting to be a witch" [28]), Skim navigates a "queer and complicated sexual life" with her English and drama teacher, the flamboyant Ms Archer (Miller 84). Obsessively caring about this careless adult, Skim forgets to care for herself, plunging into a functional depression characterized by brooding, miscellaneous artistic pursuits, and compulsive, stress-induced snacking.[4] Her experience as a sixteen-year-old correlates with what theorist Judith Butler describes as "girling," a process that "governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm" (576). The "norm" here is personified by her slim, white, middle-class classmates, including her best friend Lisa Soor, who ends up less of a sister ("soor" sounding ironically like *sœur* in French) and more of a "frenemy." Butler elaborates, "Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation

3 See, for instance, a 2019 civil claim filed against Crofton House, an elite British Columbia girls' school, by parents of a mixed-race Asian Canadian thirteen-year-old who was allegedly driven to "suicidal and self-harming behavior" because of incessant bullying. The claim points out, "In addition to racist remarks about [the daughter's] mixed race heritage, Crofton House students spread homophobic rumours and hateful gossip about [her] sexuality" (Larsen).

4 For a discussion on (over)eating as signifier of resilience, see Fink.

of a norm whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (576). The all-girls' religious school, which Skim distrusts as a site of surveillance and suffocating conformity (a "goldfish tank of stupid" [47]), facilitates this coercive process of "girling" and the constant policing it entails.

Skim challenges the assumption that for young women, and Asian-descended women in particular, caring is both an imperative and a given. In trailing the affective life of this baby witch, we cannot merely repeat the prosaic life lessons aimed at her teenage peers, namely that love is disappointing and reciprocity difficult to find, even with one's parents and professed best friend. The protagonist is an only child and product of a broken home; Skim quips, "My parents = serious issues" (10). She seeks emotional support and reassurance elsewhere, including through the trustworthy companionship of food. Loneliness prevails, however, and she divulges, "When I got home from dinner [with her father and his girlfriend] I called Ms. A on the phone but no one answered so I hung up. I'm not sure I'm supposed to do that" (67). With a tentative air, she adds, "I think I'm in love. Being in love is not what I expected.… Things That Make Me Sad. Love. Things That Make Me Happy. Love?" (66–67). The vacillation suggests that Skim cares a lot—indeed, too much—for her teacher, but she is not the only one guilty of such self-indulgence.

Skim challenges the assumption that for young women, and Asian-descended women in particular, caring is both an imperative and a given.

We witness, for instance, a public parade of pain orchestrated by the popular girls at school. With much pomp and preening, they form a club called Girls Celebrate Life (GCL) in response to John's death. Ironically, the young man was only tangentially linked to the school via his ex-girlfriend, Katie Matthews, whom he dumped before taking his own life. Increasingly hounded by her over-zealous friends, Katie finds herself repurposed as a kind of mourning mascot for the club. This adoption represents an exploitative move on the part of her peers, which steadily alienates the girl to the extent that she vandalizes the GCL bulletin board and teeters on the edge of mental crisis: "Katie scratched all the GCL daisies and peace signs off her cast. She said the GCL call her like, fifty times a day and are constantly stalking her" (135). How appropriate that by the end of the novel, Skim (a self-described "stalker" of Ms Archer [29]) and the stalking victim Katie are both healing broken bones and hearts, becoming closer in the process.

Caremongering: campaigns of care as homophobic spectacle

What follows is a two-pronged intervention into the discourse of caring: the first part fleshes out the concept broadly, exploring how public performances of concern about queer youths' susceptibility to suicide[5] can morph into self-centred spectacle. The skewed, patronizing dynamic hinders opportunities for nuanced, ameliorative reflection and heartfelt expressions of awareness and solidarity. As Jocelyn Sakal Froese and Cameron Greensmith point out, *Skim* is a text that empowers readers to question "who is deserving of care and intervention" and "which stories, as they pertain to suicide, are culturally produced as worthy of attention?" (33). Caring that focuses more on *professed* feeling does little to catalyze improved self-confidence, sense of acceptance, and safety for queer youth or youth in general. Racialized minorities among this group may find themselves even more vulnerable given instances of "compassionate" manipulation, tone deafness, patronizing attitudes, and even co-optation of personal struggle for media acclaim. When someone takes undue pains to demonstrate their capacity to care, the disingenuous and self-serving behavior—which I term *caremongering*—overshadows the impetus for caring in the first place.

The second part of the discussion tackles *Skim* as an Asian diasporic feminist text, understanding that there is an element of spiritual self-care that may serve as an alternative to the familiar suicide prevention mantra "It Gets Better." I use formative life experiences detailed by mixed-race Japanese-American writer and Zen Buddhist priest Ruth Ozeki to illustrate this angle. In *The Face: A Time Code*, her coping with teen angst and racial as well as sexual fetishization, mastery of *Noh* mask-making, and awareness of Japanese aesthetic models like *wabi sabi* stand as generative examples of feminist self-care. Understanding and variegating the struggles of racialized women in North America remains key as we move through the COVID-19 era, a period that witnessed unprecedented violence toward Asians and especially Asian women.[6] While not a baldly political narrative, *Skim* can still help articulate the empowerment imperative for Asian girls as well.

5 Other contemporary queer Canadian writers of colour like Suzette Mayr have broached the topic of queer teen suicide; see, for instance, Patrick Furey, a seventeen-year-old Catholic school student who dies early in the novel *Monoceros* (2011).

6 Reported instances of anti-Asian violence in Canada rose exponentially in several Canadian cities, including Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. See, for instance,

The novel is essentially a narrative snapshot of a queer child's *felix culpa*, or "fortunate fall" into sexuality, with all the implications of forbidden knowledge and threats of banishment intact.[7] Having as a key theme alternative ways of knowing and being, the graphic narrative sheds light on Kathryn Bond Stockton's observation about queer children being "strange" and "grow[ing] sideways" since they are unprepared for the romantic relationships they desire. Such deficits, according to Bond Stockton, can lead to substitutive relationships, whether with pedophiles or more innocuous entities such as pets (6).[8] In addition to her attachment to the fascinatingly reckless Ms Archer, Skim braves toxic cliques and erratic friendships among the student body. She struggles with an existential crisis triggered tangentially by John's death. Reddear, a near anagram for "reader," haunts the narrative; he was not even a classmate, let alone a student at the school, and details about his death come primarily from rumours, not facts. Skim speculates in her diary, "P.S. No one knows if the boy from the volleyball team loved John back" (95). When first hearing the news of his passing, she had commented, "I believe in suicide but I don't care if John Reddear is dead. I never even *knew* John Reddear.… I think I maybe met him once" (23). Even with these doubts, represented by a faceless boy sitting pensively among the trees on the following page, she still decides to make Katie a sympathy card when encouraged to do so. This gesture is part obligatory caring and part self preservation as she subtly strategizes to prevent the patronizing guidance counselor, Mrs Hornet, or others from suspecting her of being suicidal or—for that matter—gay. The administrator, her

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Judd; Zeidler; and Balintec, which mentions the March 2021 Atlanta Massacre where six Asian-descended women were killed.

7 Skim pulls a card on Ms Archer, which turns out to be The Lovers reversed (59). The Lovers in the popular Rider-Waite-Smith deck features a nude couple, presumably Adam and Eve, under the angel Raphael. Behind the man is the Tree of Life, and behind the woman the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Upright, the divinatory meaning is "choice between diverse allurements; the struggle between sacred and profane love" whereas reversed "the possibility of wrong choice, parental interference, marriage breakups and quarrels over children" (Gray 83). The latter scenario relates to Skim's own parents as well as to the paramour.

8 In addition to having a large black cat cum familiar named Sumo whom she describes as making her "happy," only to cross this comment out for fear of judgment by her peers (61), Skim entices a stray cat with food in a dark alley instead of going to the library to spend time with Lisa after hearing the young woman call John a "fag" (99). On the stark white page that follows, we see her going to a restaurant by herself, stating, "I don't necessarily mean to be avoiding Lisa but I am" (100).

threatening name masked by matronly mildness, assumes Skim's interest in "goth culture" makes her obsessed with death. As a potential liability, she is to be handled carefully and observed with care, much like a rare specimen or unique case study for educators.[9] Skim, for her part, camouflages her attraction for Ms Archer by joking underhandedly to Lisa, "What, I'm some giant lesbo because I'm getting extra help after class?" (37). The more she cares, the more she performs indifference.

As mirrored in the multiple allusions to *Romeo and Juliet,* a textbook from Ms Archer's class, Skim feels both giddy and insecure in her romantic designs. She derides herself as a "stalker" and "a freak" (29) while engaging in spell work which would, in her words, "bring my love to me" (28). Fellow aspiring witch Lisa criticizes such efforts and sneers that Skim is a bit naïve to comply with school expectations: "Well, that's you. I'm more independent than you are" (33). Not only does Lisa use names like "weirdo," "spazz," and "psycho bitch" to disparage her friend, she also rages at her to just "go make out with Ms. Archer" (34). This jealous outburst prompts the addled Skim to shut herself in a bathroom cubicle (the water closet) and later, seek solace in Wiccan texts (the broom closet). Her uncomfortable, closeted reaction recalls Christine Jean-Baptiste's insistence that witchcraft can be "a safe space for women to access power—but even more importantly, a connection with ourselves alongside a community of women" ("30 Years"). In an observation that coincides with Skim's cognate enthusiasm for tarot cards as a divinatory tool ("This weekend I studied my Shakespeare and read my fortune a million times" [59]), Jean-Baptiste paints Wicca as a form of feminist self-care for adolescents, even though in practice there are obvious flaws and inconsistencies. The writer notes,

> In difficult and tumultuous times, women have increasingly turned to witchcraft practices, whether it's looking into astrology, reading tarot cards, and crafting potions. The radical nature of witchcraft gives young women access to rebellion against the limits of patriarchy, and though the marketing of witchcraft can make it feel exploitative, it also makes it more accessible to the curious teen girl wondering about her place in the world. ("30 Years")

Wicca is a domain of spiritual knowledge that Lisa feels is more her bailiwick than Skim's because Lisa's older sister, Kyla, happens to be part

9 This intense scrutiny of a wayward, possibly queer student by school administration is reminiscent of Willa Cather's 1905 short story "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament," which I deliberately echo here.

of a coven. The coven, we learn later, doubles as an Alcoholics Anonymous support group, an indication that psychic suffering, collective vulnerability, and multiple forms of healing can take place under unexpected guises. Yet as much as witchcraft helps differentiate and individualize the two teens from the crowd at their faith-based school, the coven is surprisingly conformist, just like the institution. Skim marvels at the witches' startling uniformity: "Everyone was dressed the SAME! Everyone but us was wearing ugly rock T-shirts and black jeans. Weird" (16).

Skim quietly endures her friend's criticism which could, at best, be construed as a form of sisterly care and at worst a form of bullying. Lisa actively resists obligatory caring. She announces, "I don't even know Katie Matthews, let along give a shit about her fucking dead boyfriend," adding dramatically, "I think it's a total violation. Making little kids try to feel something they don't" (33). The detractor does end up making a sympathy card like most of her classmates, suggesting the highly performative nature of her rebellion. Her initial resistance to obligatory caring contrasts the actions of the GCL club members who fetishize John's suicide and enact rituals of grief to affirm their own normative straightness and professed love of life. One cannot help but sense some *schadenfreude,* or joy in others' misfortune, intermingled with their solicitude. Club leader Julie Peters takes it upon herself to deliver the sympathy cards via a semi-public art installation ostentatiously called a "mosaic of mourning" (23). We later hear of a GCL fundraising dance called "LIVE!!!" with proceeds going to a national suicide prevention hotline (99). There is a deliberate ambiguity as to whether the event's name is in the imperative mode, with the three exclamation points and hyperbolic capitalization reminiscent of today's shouting text messages, or the adjective commonly associated with a performance that is happening in real time (a "live" show, which is subtly mocking because John is no longer alive).[10] The old-fashioned handbill features a silhouette of a straight couple dancing vigorously, illustrating the fullest expression of the GCL's injunction to "seize the day" (99). The patronizing use of the *carpe diem*[11] motif is akin to dancing on John's grave

10 In today's social media lexicon, to "unalive" can refer to suicide or homicide, with the usage meant to evade censoring algorithms that target sensitive topics. See McMillan for an overview of how such linguistic innovations can invite conversations about suicide while also appearing to superficialize or euphemize the issue

11 This dictum is one of the major themes informing *Dead Poets Society*, the 1989 film screened by the GCL and lampooned by Lisa as being "a dead guy movie" (54). The hectic enthusiasm of the GCL club members may be contrasted with the philosophical depth of an excerpt from chapter 2 of Henry David Thoreau's

as it masks their homophobia and deflects attention away from suicide as symptom of the larger scourge of systemic violence that assails queer youth daily.

The obsession with *celebrating* life for its own sake underscores how low the stakes really are for these club members. Their primary motivation for the fundraiser is to appear caring when, indeed, they are driven by self-aggrandizement rather than respect and compassion. In today's slang, they excel at virtue signaling. As Skim observes at the balloon release memorial, "No one talked about John being gay at the ceremony. Surprise, surprise. Although Julie Peters practically ripped Anna Canard's tongue out when she brought it up afterwards" (95). Complicit in toxic positivity, their guidance counselor warns against undue melancholy when the point of a memorial is to contemplate upon and honour the deceased: "Mrs Hornet says we are not here to focus on the negative (dead people)" (92). The GCL members opportunistically pounce on a visit from local television crews to pontificate about not "dwelling on past tragedy" and instead "celebrating the living spirit" (93). The latter is something they pride themselves on personifying, thereby usurping the spotlight and deflecting attention away from the need for institutional change, self-reflection by peers, and appropriate accountability when bullying or other forms of harassment deepen the precarity of queer lives.

Replicating the moral cowardice of the adults, the zealous GCL members avoid addressing the underlying homophobia that informs the operating structures and guiding ideologies of their school. We see the reality laid bare in the vandalism of a newspaper clipping on the GCL board with "FAG" scrawled across John's forehead (89). Whether or not it is a morbid joke, the hurtful nature of the epithet and the lack of administrative action to root out the perpetrator obtains. Skim starts to avoid Lisa, given the friend's glib use of the insult, such as when the latter describes Katie as someone who will perpetually be known as "the girl whose boyfriend

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Walden that appears prominently in the film: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately.… I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life!" (*Dead Poets Society*). Changes in diction and ordering of ideas notwithstanding, the passage gestures to how the woods comprise a significant site for Skim's personal awakenings. She goes there with Lisa to summon John's spirit (24) and to "do ceremonies" (62), she meets Ms Archer there for their intimate talks and kiss, and she meets Katie there in the book's last major scene (142). There are other similarities: both film and graphic novel feature a single-sex high school, settings during fall and winter, an exuberant, unconventional English teacher who changes students' lives but leaves unexpectedly, and the suicide of a promising young man.

committed suicide because he was a fag" (97). The reactive escalation of interest in Ms Archer, manifested in Skim's uninvited visits to the teacher's home, finds an uncomfortable echo in the GCL's public campaign of care for Katie. Not only do the members incessantly phone the young woman with the sole intent to discuss John and mine details about his life or the failed relationship, they also engage in coercive surveillance under the guise of "protecting" the classmate from herself (135). Lisa, while denying that she is part of the club to convey an impression of autonomy, even accompanies a club member to John's home to "search his garbage for gay porn and other mementos" (116). Their forensic mission is ostensibly to use the items when contacting his spirit, yet earlier, when Lisa and Skim attempted to do the same shortly after his death, there was no response. Neither of the girls took the mediumship seriously, with Skim recording in her diary, "Lisa asked what we would do if he did show up," to which the diarist responded, "Nothing, I guess. Ignore him" (24–25). The careless answers lay bare their immaturity and clear lack of skill in this arena of sensitive metaphysical practice. The splash page, with faceless John clad in white, has him sitting at the far left of the page slightly elevated in a grey woodland clearing. The two girls amble away as entirely blacked-out figures to the far right of the two-page spread, conveying how much the pair lingers in darkness when it comes to knowing the young man's full story.

Treating spirit communication as a flippant game indicates a level of disrespect for the dead. We see the scenario played out again when the marauding GCL members do not find anything while scavenging around John's house. They satisfy their prurient desires by peering through the windows, an act reminiscent of thieves or peeping toms (116). The criminal symbolism is clear: theirs is a discourse of surfaces, and while they may not have entered the premises, the action was still a violation of privacy. They believe it is permissible to trespass on the property of a deceased gay peer and his grieving loved ones to seek out "mementos," as if collecting souvenirs from someone's trash or even a crime scene is acceptable behaviour even for "little kids." While some immaturity is to be expected, the girls' assumption that John's property would be riddled with sex-themed paraphernalia emanates from the familiar stereotype that gays and lesbians are promiscuous and deviant. As Audre Lorde cautions in her essay "I Am Your Sister," it is absurd to assume this diverse group of people lacks collective values like cohesion, loyalty, and mutual caring because "Many of us have families of our own" (99). Likewise, suggesting they are incapable of controlling personal behaviour in accordance with rules, laws, and mores of civil society is offensive. Whether John used erotica in his own

home is irrelevant to his right to dignity after death. These GCL members clearly do not care. Lorde declares, "We are women who love women.… It does not mean we are about to attack you if we pay you a compliment on your dress. It does not mean we only think about sex, any more than you think about sex" (99). The souvenir-seekers presumptuously assume John's parents would be throwing away his personal effects instead of keeping them as many (if not most) bereaved parents would do. While these supposedly edgy exploits leave Lisa "giddy," Skim views the trespassing as "kind of weird" and notices that her increasingly erratic friend is "always trying to stare [her] down" (116). The behaviour echoes the negativity Lisa displayed when Skim first began her liaison with Ms Archer. The GCL members care too much about themselves to authentically ameliorate the situation for those needing care. If anything, their campaigns of care turn queer suicide into straight spectacle.

If anything, their campaigns of care turn queer suicide into straight spectacle.

Let (sh)it go: toward a methodology of *care-lessness*

At the novel's climax, GCL leader Julie Peters confronts Skim and Katie for leaving the dance early. When Skim starts to weigh in on the exchange, Julie shuts her down, implying that the discussion does not concern her. Clad in angel's wings, Julie goes on to chastise Katie for being ungrateful, to which Skim groans, "I just realized today that Julie Peters thinks she is a mom" (130). The self-appointed saviour maintains her sense of superiority by gaslighting Katie, accusing her of being selfish and self-centred. Julie conveniently ignores the hypocrisy that fuels the GCL's programming around their emotionally burnt-out classmate: "I'm TALKING about this dance, which just happens to be a FUNDRAISER for a service that would have saved your boyfriend's LIFE" (131). She continues to reproach Katie with the supercilious, maternal tone Skim disliked, stating, "I'm totally disgusted that you don't seem to care at ALL that all of this was done for YOU" (131). For her part, Katie reminds her tormentor that John ended the relationship, not the other way around. One might assume that the indignity of being dumped, which at the time Katie had mourned publicly by drawing broken hearts on her hands (11), would diminish the degree to which one should care about an ex. Coming to her new friend's defense, Skim responds bluntly, "[O]nly a crazy person would say she could see into the mind of a dead boy. You're not a psychic. You're a high school student" (131). Given what we know about Lisa and Skim's failed séance with John, this humbling remark doubles as an admission of her own limitations. Skim exercises moral courage as a closeted queer person by putting Julie in her place; after all, a high school student does not command much social

power, even among cliques. Skim demonstrates her heightened maturity by acknowledging her own futile attempts at "see[ing] into the mind of a dead boy." She confesses to her diary, "I realize this contradicts my intentions to channel John's spirit," but takes pains to differentiate her sincere commitment to the sacred arts from the GCL leader's pretentions: "Julie Peters would never channel anyone's spirit. She's just a know-it-all pain in the butt" (131). Despite her self-deputization as a caring leader, Julie is neither omniscient nor particularly compassionate, which places her opportunistic caremongering in even starker relief.

While Lisa infantilized the school population as "little kids" earlier in the text as a means of absolving them from obligatory caring (33), Skim's clapback at Julie reinforces the relative powerlessness of these young people beyond their narrow institutional environment. While limitations (intellectual, social, economic, ideological) are real, these students do have a measure of social power among themselves. In contemporary queer theory, children are a well-known trope for the promise of reproductive futurity,[12] but as Michel Foucault explains, "[T]he body of the child, under surveillance … has constituted, particularly since the eighteenth century, another 'local center' of power-knowledge" (98). Viewing Skim multimodally prompts us to wonder to what degree caring about others, especially their expectations, correlates with the public perception of North American teens as self-centred—that is, over-invested in ego—and in a way that is potentially destructive. Their self-centredness paradoxically coincides with an over-investment in the opinions of others, a double-bind that implicates both popular and unpopular child alike. The former must achieve and maintain their status, while the latter must strive for ascendancy or else linger in the fog of alterity (which can, of course, be liberating as well). There is a fine line between being selective about how others' opinions affect the self and declaring a lack of care for others' opinions. *Care-lessness*, or more selective caring, which is not the same as carelessness (that is, selfish or blatant disregard) involves acknowledging that a degree of care for others is necessary. It does, however, prioritize the self by allotting more energy to what is best for the individual's wholeness and mental health. In *Skim*, compassionate but selective care (hence, *care-lessness*) balances the need for awareness of the society at large with the welfare of the queer person's heart and mind. Skim may lack access to formal resources for mending, strengthening, and maintaining resilience,

12 For more on children as symbols of compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive futurism, see Edelman.

much like the broken bones and hearts that repeatedly grace the pages of the novel; that is why she turns to coping strategies like art, eating, as well as witchcraft. Caring less for others can still be productive even though the choice can lead to insecurities about adequately doing one's part, especially when gender-based and racial expectations come into play.

Depressed about the erratic nature of her relationship with Ms Archer but unable to share her thoughts with her distant mother or judgmental best friend, Skim indulges in tarot card readings and stress-eating for a semblance of control over her life. Academically, she considers art and English to be the only subjects in which she is not "seriously screwed" (115). These disciplines also happen to be Ms Archer's specialties, suggesting an affinity for the subjective fields in which answers must be negotiated rather than memorized, calculated, or accepted as facts. Simultaneously bored and anxious, Skim grapples for clarity in the relationship. She notices that it is "funny" (83) she is now the source of great concern for school administrators and classmates given that just a short while ago, prior to John's death, she was virtually invisible: "Everyone is watching me = Julie, Lisa, Mrs. Hornet, Mom. I do not give two craps though. When I got home I ate three frozen yogurt bars, a bag of peanuts and some cheese and went to bed" (105). They assume she is depressed, but no one takes steps to ascertain the cause or validity of the conjecture. The miasmatic concern about her well-being triggers a bitter memory of the birthday party she attended three years ago, namely Julie Peters's costume party where Skim and an adoptee from Vietnam, Hien Warshowski, were driven out of the home by the host and attendees, all of whom were white girls dressed as ballerinas or figure skaters (83). Attending as the Cowardly Lion from L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz,* Skim had to gather the courage to care about herself amid the humiliation. Like the tarot card Strength, which in the popular Rider-Waite-Smith deck features a woman serenely closing a lion's mouth,[13] she confronts the concomitant need for calm as well as assertiveness, which the following section addresses as key ingredients for self-care.

13 The divinatory meaning of the card is the triumph of spiritual power over material power, as well as love over hate and elevated sensibilities over baser impulses (Gray 85). It is also worth noting that in Skim's costume, we have the ironical coincidence of a "yellow" character portrayed by a yellow (read: East Asian) person.

The art of darkness: finding space for self-care

When Skim was six years old and part of a school play, the organizers ran out of roles in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. She finds herself assigned the character of the Night Sky, certainly more a part of the setting than any dramatic agent. She is not a figure in "their town" at all but a literal backdrop against which the lives of others transpire. Her role as cosmic/comic darkness foreshadows her existential condition in high school. Locally, she stands as a kind of space-filler, an accessory, an aspect of the set, even a prop. While her father misunderstands her on the phone and protests, "But there is no knight in *Our Town*" (48), Skim's mother opts for the easiest, least controversial tactic of reinvention: "Mom said I should tell people I was the moon" (51).[14] Although being the moon may have great metaphysical significance to the teenage witch today, she found herself typecast early on as a peripheral presence, namely literal darkness. This negative position sets a precedent for disrespect and erasure in future interactions with the various groups ("towns," as it were) she dwells in but does not inhabit. Being cast as the moon pays homage to her round, full countenance, and while "moonface" may usually be understood as a fat-shaming epithet, Skim's endearing awkwardness illuminates the social environment faced by other less popular students. She is thus both nocturnal darkness and celestial light.

The girl works through her most difficult realizations within two types of self-care environments, or what might be termed personal and impersonal "night spaces." Her first epiphany about the need for *care-lessness* occurs while walking home alone after being ejected from the racist and classist birthday party. The trek through the wooded darkness, shedding the costume and untying her hair, constitutes a declaration of independence: "I decided I'd rather be alone in the dark. The dark's not so scary. It's just quiet" (87). Upon arriving, she does not disclose any of the unpleasant events to her mother, instead spiriting away a plate of cookies to the balcony to decompress and eat herself better. This tactic—voluntary withdrawal into spaces of quiet darkness—is one form of self-care. She relishes isolation as it distances her from peer pressure, social strictures, and adult demands. In Judith Taylor's view, this and other instances of alone time demonstrate self-awareness, as Skim "has disentangled loneliness and

14 Eleanor Ty comments that Skim's evening forays to Ms Archer's home comprise "a lonely journey … much like an unattainable knight-errant's quest" which emerges through "illustrations that are dark and scary" (*Asianfail* 41).15 Punctuation has been added to the original text here for better flow, and line breaks have been omitted.

fear and values the space to hear and record her own thoughts" (465). The same goes for the teen's attraction to Wicca, which sets her apart from her predominantly Catholic classmates. Her altar and spell work, in addition to her comfort with researching the craft on her own, eschews the prescription that a witch needs a coven to practise successfully. She likewise loiters in public spaces at night, including a bus stop, a neighbourhood chain restaurant ("Swiss Chalet = Social black hole" [101]), and on random Toronto streets. She realizes that seeming invisibility doesn't equate to a lack of presence: "You are never really alone in the city at night. There are always taxi drivers, coffee shop people, the 7-Eleven guy, people in their homes watching talk shows. It just feels lonely" (107).[15]

On her ride to Ms Archer's house, where she invites herself on several occasions, the darkness of night is generative, a catalyst for artistry as she sketches a stylized portrait of a woman with large, cat-like eyes (49). It is perhaps an allusion to her teacher's bold habit of making direct eye contact ("When Ms. Archer talks to me, she always looks right into my eyes" [27]) and an earlier statement the instructor made to the class about Skim having "the eyes of a fortune teller" (13). The teen understands this metaphor to be a major compliment, energizing her self-confidence with the impression that someone is really seeing her. Likewise, Ms Archer's praise elevates the teen's monolid eyes for their supposed prophetic capacity, not their exotic or mockable appearance as found in racist caricatures of East Asians. Skim identifies with her teacher because the flame-haired woman was "always eating" and "saying weird stuff" (13). These actions mirror and affirm Skim's own experience as a non-conformist, art lover, and compulsive snacker. The pair first connect in the wooded ravine outside of the school after Skim skips physical education class, partly due to her arm injury and partly out of a personal aversion to sports involving balls: "I try to go to gym but am forced to skip class whenever balls are involved. I have this thing about balls" (26). To think crudely, "balls" may allude to overt, testicular masculinity (machismo) as well as courage, something that Skim has not always been able to muster up (hence the Cowardly Lion costume).[16] In a later scene featuring Skim and Katie, both of whom the gym teacher facetiously calls "cast-offs" (108) because of their broken bones, they witness a rigorous game of dodgeball. This game stands as an analogy for the ways life leaves scars, some based on appearance (Skim muses, "I

15 Punctualtion has been added to the original text here for better flow, and line breaks have been omitted.

16 It may also be worth noting that Skim has a goddess statue on her altar but not one of a god, which she classes as "still missing" (14).

think I am also marked to some degree [biologically] as a weirdo for life" [124]) and others based on behaviour (Skim reports, "Lisa's mother got drunk once and told us that all relationships leave a scar" [125]). Already separated from the crowd because of her injury, Skim smokes outside and Ms Archer joins her. Their avid conversation comes from a place of caring, non-judgment, and what Monica Chiu identifies as desiderata for this and most other teens: "intelligent, compassionate guidance" (30). The exchange morphs into a kind of progressive eroto-initiation, with regular meetings and ritual intimacies, like Ms Archer holding Skim's cast ("It's just this thing" [31]), praising the student's features ("Ms. Acher says she can't stop looking at my eyes" [31]), and even kissing.[17] Their outdoor meetings exist just outside of the institutional space and in the figurative and literal gutters of the comic book page. Unlawful lovers, much like the star-crossed pair in *Romeo and Juliet*, Ms Archer remains an adult authority figure while Skim is still a minor.[18] Subtly outing herself at the first meeting, Skim complains about the classic romantic tragedy: "[W]hy is it so important, that a boy falls in love with a girl? … I understand that it's a masterpiece and everything, but there's a part of me that's all like, so what?" [27]). Displaying *careless-ness*, she doesn't pretend to like the text to please her interlocutor; by detaching herself from the outcome of her words, she feels affirmed in voicing her honest opinion.

The remark is a larger indictment of heterosexism inculcated by institutions like the school and church. Skim describes feeling "like an alien" every time she sits at her desk, distanced from academic concerns because her more fundamental need for emotional care is not being met (115). Skim pretends not to care when she is rebuffed: "Yesterday Ms. Archer told me

17 Arguing that race and homosexuality may be "imagistically present but absent in prose" (29), Chiu describes the forest scenes to be ones "whose status as real or fantasy is strategically ambiguous" (34). Some may therefore question whether the "invisible and irrepressible" lesbian experiences emanate from Skim's imagination alone (29, 34). I believe the lived experience of the scenes, especially the kiss, are vital to legitimizing the teen's queer identity. Chiu's hypothesis about homosexual encounters being "potentially fictive" since their "excision from the main plot would not affect the narrative's progression" (32) remains compelling, nonetheless.

18 The age of consent in Ontario for sexual activity was sixteen as of 2020 ("About Sexual Violence"). A real-life example of a case involving a high school teacher and student relationship with problematic boundaries is that of British Columbia teacher Chelsea Cromarty and an unnamed grade 12 youth. Cromarty made repeated attempts to initiate friendship and prolong contact with the student via social media, which led to the suspension of her teaching licence in 2019. See Lindsay.

I shouldn't come over to her house for a while. She said she will see me at school … which is fine and no big deal" (76). Skim started inviting herself over after having carefully looked up the address in the phone book during class time. She always visits at night, an act that symbolizes the clandestine nature of the relationship and a boundary drawn against the daytime hours that are typically devoted to school. The phone listing, "E Archer," spells "searcher" if an "S"—Skim's initial—is added to it (46). These quests for connection are increasingly one-sided and often involve Skim making offerings, whether drawings, her tarot deck, or simply her silent presence as sign of dogged fidelity. Bestowing upon Ms Archer the highly personal gift of the tarot deck may imply Skim's cards are on the table and that she is placing her romantic future in the woman's hands. Such vulnerability is shocking, as readers can discern a pattern of humiliation in Skim being banished from Julie's party and later banned (albeit gently) from Ms Archer's home. In each case, the girl finds herself pushed outside both literally and figuratively. The treatment takes its toll, as Skim sighs, "Apparently I look unwell. Mom says possibly I am losing weight" (32). She uses repeated tropes of somatic distress to communicate her lovesickness as well as her overall alienation: "My heart feels like a piece of chalk stuck in my throat" (28); "My stomach feels like it's popping, like an ice cube in a warm Pepsi" (33); "It hurts to breathe" (56); "Everything I had to say is sticking to my insides" (57). As the awkward visits reach a crescendo, she concedes, "THIS is strange. This is the strangest ever. I feel like I have wings but my bones are bricks" (58). The dissonance between thinking and feeling suggests she cares disproportionately about Ms Archer, neglecting her own mental health. Skim has become, to recall the teacher's cryptic pronouncement about the newly single Katie, "an empty vessel waiting to be filled" (12). Her lover, however, does not commit to the task either in school or outside of it.[19] Meanwhile, Skim languishes: "Today I stayed very still on the couch all day. I am trying not to be obsessive. It is not good to only think about one ~~person~~ thing" (76).

This pattern of emptying and filling, rupturing and mending emerges chiefly through the broken bone motif, as Skim's arm eventually heals within its rigid white encasement. There are other clues gesturing to her

19 Skim identifies her zodiac sign as Aquarius, the water bearer (7). This evocation of filling empty vessels, combined with the protagonist's astrological self-disclosure, may remind some readers of Ganymede, the attractive, youthful cupbearer of the gods in Greek mythology. Zeus abducted him for companionship, a same-sex relationship that mirrors the age-inappropriate pairing between Skim and her teacher.

necessary metamorphosis. For instance, Ms Archer lives on Deneuve Street, which recalls the French adjective *neuf/neuve* for "new."[20] Describing the upright Lovers card in tarot, Skim identifies "new relationships, new beginnings, new connections" (59) as key meanings for this strikingly relevant card. However, when she asks the deck about Ms Archer, the Lovers card comes out reversed, which denotes "a bad decision, an untrustworthy person, a state of imbalance" (59).[21] Skim's equanimity has essentially been flipped upside down by this relationship, proving the cards correct. She forcibly undergoes a realignment of self-regard and self-respect, with these shifts ostensibly as painful as bone-setting and regrowth. This metamorphosis is something she only comes to terms with belatedly when she acknowledges that nearly all the cards in her readings signaled change, including the ultimate card of new beginnings, Death (126). Because she failed to elicit any change of heart in Ms Archer despite the woman's earlier exhortation, "Maybe you can try wearing your rebel heart on your sleeve for a while" (27), Skim had to roll up her own sleeves and plunge into restorative self-care despite her hurt and spiritual inertia. As the upright Lovers card would imply, self-love requires a conscious choice: to forego concentrating on others and choosing to turn inward toward mastery of the self.

20 With Claire Gross describing Ms Archer as having a "serene, vaguely secretive countenance" (460), the naming of the street may remind some of renowned French actress Catherine Deneuve. Not only has she portrayed several coolly enigmatic characters, her branding as a style icon tends to focus upon her retention of a kind of timeless beauty that may not be new chronologically but is always renewed through her self-confidence.

21 The Lovers in the Rider-Waite-Smith deck features a nude couple, presumably Adam and Eve, under the angel Raphael. Behind the man is the Tree of Life, and behind the woman the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Upright, the divinatory meaning is "choice between diverse allurements; the struggle between sacred and profane love" whereas reversed "the possibility of wrong choice, parental interference, marriage breakups and quarrels over children" (Gray 83). Rachel Pollack expands the card's motif of choice as alluding to those leading "socially acceptable lives yet inwardly fight[ing] constant torments of desire" (54). As such, the esoteric meaning of the Lovers may refer to the established (read: religious) path and the "inner path of the occultist" who confronts "hidden desires" (54). Since Skim is a child, Pollack's observation about sexual choice resonates powerfully: "[It is] the first real choice a person makes independently of his or her parents. Until the sexual urge rouses itself most people are content to act out their parents' expectations for them. The sexual urge, however, points us where *it* wants to go" (54).

I am the night: why Asian ancestry matters

Readers may grasp the precipitous leave-taking as a form of self-preservation.

Paucity of choice defines childhood in the experimental memoir *The Face: A Time Code* by Ruth Ozeki. The contemporary North American writer remembers a childhood steeped in racial and gender stereotyping, much of it focusing on her ambiguous physical appearance: "When I was young, my half-Japanese face signified a self that was at odds with who I felt myself to be. My face was a surface onto which people, especially men, projected their ideas of race and sexuality, Asian-ness and femininity" (67). She remembers how "[t]he image of Asian girls as exotic, ageless, child sex objects" fractured her healthy self-concept with its disempowering rhetoric. This stereotype became a mask she donned to cater to—not contradict—others' expectations and demands. This disparity played out most notably in her romantic life via age-inappropriate pairings with white men. Skim's age-inappropriate relationship with Ms Archer—a white woman—reflects a similarly large power differential, one governed by race, age, and authority as well as the teen's difficulty in extricating herself emotionally from a situation that is no longer healthy or productive. With utmost care for herself, Ms Archer exits the school mid-semester, ostensibly to pursue her art. Readers may grasp the precipitous leave-taking as a form of self-preservation, since she avoids professional and legal repercussions for inappropriate conduct with a minor. Unlike the papier-mâché geisha mask that the teacher has resting on top of her bookcase at home (73), Skim's mask of a face, floating against a black backdrop on the very same page, shows no sign of fixity. Much like the night/moon combination she played in *Our Town*, she appears pale and inscrutable as she battles confusion and disappointment at Ms Archer's about-face.[22] Skim ends up leaving the unwelcoming home and receding, like the moon, into the night.

For queer youth, in the absence of affirming and inclusive community, self-care may entail *choosing* to be alone, even if it is a provisional state and one that may increase one's susceptibility to loneliness, isolation, and depression. Lisa excoriates Skim for avoiding social interaction, stating, "Because, SKIM, all you do is sit around at home. You don't have to CELEBRATE life or anything, but you should get out into the REAL WORLD every once in a while" (112). Barbara Smith declares, "As people of colour, as lesbians and gay men, we live with potential or actual danger" (52).

22 This is the same evening that Skim decides to leave her tarot cards for Ms Archer to find. The Moon card, one of the Major Arcana, can symbolize illusions, fears, delusions, and mysteries. The divinatory meanings include "imagination, intuition, and dreams" on the positive side, and "unforeseen perils, deception, secret foes" on the negative side (Gray 95).

Removing oneself from that danger might appear an obvious solution, but how possible is it for a minor? Smith stresses, "I lived my adolescence and young adulthood in terror. I knew I was a lesbian, too" (46). Violence is entrenched in systems of power, control, and knowledge production like the family, school, and church. It is also a matter of weathering everyday microaggressions from classmates, coworkers, and even strangers. The same sort of vulnerability applies to racism, which is an aspect of caring for the self that cannot be ignored in an environment like Skim's school where clique formation and gossip are weaponized to maintain a hierarchy of popularity and power within a racially homogenous space.

Skim boasts no friends of colour, nor can she count any teachers, counselors, or adults other than her mother as racialized persons close enough to make a strong impact on her sense of racial belonging. The dearth of associations and the attendant deficit of care are inconveniences she appears to work out on her own by brooding, journaling, snacking, practicing divination, and making art. Other times, she just retreats into her personal space, feeling sorry for herself: "Dear Diary: All day today I was rubber. My eyes felt like bathtub plugs. I tried to take up as little space as possible" (106). Skim's mother may have helped with school projects in the past, but she is largely disengaged from her daughter's life, asking whether the girl is sick but not intervening when Skim answers in the affirmative (104). While Ms Archer's ardour cooled over time, Mrs Cameron's demeanour has always been chilly. Skim remarks, "The only time my mother cries is when she is watching *Sisters*. That is totally bizarre" (110). Perhaps grieving her own lack of access to, or experience with, sisterly care, the woman appears oblivious to the fact that her daughter has been visiting an adult lover in the evenings. The neglected teen scoffs, "Mom is NOT a light sleeper. Good thing I'm not a drug addict or anything or I could easily rob her blind" (52).

Makeda Silvera, editor of *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology*, explains that without political support, provisions for mental health, reciprocal ties to organizations and institutions that are explicitly and genuinely inclusive, or simply a sense of belonging, queer women of colour find "fear is overwhelming. Fear suppresses" (xiv). This fear can escalate into paralyzing scenarios like "fear of the loss of family, fear of obliteration from a whole community, [and even] a whole culture" (ix). An Asian North American feminist reading can help underscore how committing to *care-lessness* forges a less fearful, more affirmative space. Suzette Chan of the comics webzine *Sequential Tart* observes that while the novel's protagonist "does not stake her identity on her ancestry," having an Asian

background is an undeniable aspect of the teen's alienation. In her interview with Chan, Mariko Tamaki shares intimate reflections of her own mixed-race ancestry that subtly influenced her and her cousin Jillian's aesthetic choices in *Skim*: "I always thought I was an ugly Canadian, you know, I thought I had these ugly eyebrows, until later, when I thought of myself as Japanese." Her unquestioned assumptions about beauty norms, linked to growing up as a racialized person in a white-majority country, gesture to whiteness still predominating as the national citizenship model. In her poignantly titled article "Canadian = Blonde, English, White: Theorizing Race, Language, and Nation," Marnina Gonick comments that even after comprehensive multicultural legislation was enacted, the ideal of pluralism has not matched many people's lived experiences with prejudice and discrimination. Gonick writes, "Despite multiculturalism's declarations of its relevance to all Canadians, it has done little to disrupt the normative notion of Canadian identity," which still privileges being straight, white, and male (96).[23]

In an interview with *Room* magazine, Mariko Tamaki admits to having unapologetically fulfilled a representational imperative: "*Skim* is about a young Asian person … in part because I think that there is not necessarily a lot of young Asian people in books" (Wong). Her quest to portray "diverse experiences of race" beyond the Model Minority Myth called for dreamers, misfits, rebels, and losers to coexist with the stereotypical images of studious scholars, filial children, and hardworking immigrants. Jillian adds that while "positive examples" can indeed be salutary, these should not exist for the sole purpose of forwarding a political agenda, especially at the expense of nuanced representations (Wong). Both writer and illustrator agree that refuting stereotypes need not be explicit, and that comics easily accommodate the call for subtlety. Mariko adds, somewhat sardonically, "What is Japanese Canadian in a comic? Should Jillian have drawn her with chopsticks in her hair?" (Chan). Jillian praises her cousin's gift for showcasing the power of the unsaid, which correlates with Skim's own penchant for pauses, silences, understatements, and indirections: "A lot of her work is about non-communication, and blockages between people. It's not in the words, it's what you're *not* saying" (Wong, emphasis added). This technique of subtlety, or what the illustrator describes as "filling in

23 Offering a further complication, Barbara Cameron points out that the endemic fear experienced by lesbians of colour stems in part from the "rampant racism" infiltrating white LGBT communities, which is a problem that has "never [been] adequately addressed or acknowledged" (45), at least in Cameron's home base of the United States.

the gaps a little bit in sort of an enigmatic way" (Wong), hearkens back to the roots of comics in Japanese *ukiyo-e*, or woodblock prints from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, as well as other genres of traditional Japanese art. Ozeki's experience with mask-making for the Noh theatre illuminates how Japanese aesthetics and Buddhist teachings can render Skim's coming-to-consciousness an exercise in *care-lessness* from a specifically Asian diasporic perspective.

Zen and the art of the high school student

Just as such critics as Michelle Miller have effectively harnessed studies of youth rebellion among largely white, heterosexual male subjects to illuminate *Skim* as a coming-of-age narrative,[24] Ozeki's reading of Japanese aesthetics via traditional mask-making can shed light on Skim's move toward *care-lessness*. Ozeki speaks of herself as having been an "emotional and secretive child" in high school, someone who had suffered from trichotillomania, a disorder involving obsessive picking of the hair. The condition was "often triggered by depression or stress, which the ritual of hair-pulling relieves" (63). Just as Skim stress-eats frequently while scoffing at her schoolmates who express anxieties verbally about topics like suicide, Ozeki maintains that for young women, such "obsessive compulsions are not uncommon" (63). The writer cleverly superimposes the habit of pulling hairs with the act of splitting hairs ("hunched, cross-eyed girls, enthralled with splitting the ends of their hair" [64]). Beyond the literal sense, the latter act points to an interpretive compulsion, an obsessive investment in fleshing out a minor matter. While picking at, pulling, and splitting hairs may take on different forms now among teen girls (especially with the rise of smartphone-centred behaviours, including selfie addictions), Ozeki acknowledges that all these actions foreground an adolescent sense of powerlessness. Engaging in repetitive acts of pleasurable pain may be a form of ironical self-care for the puller/splitter, if only offering temporary relief.

The detail involved in these self-destructive habits cum coping mechanisms prepared young Ozeki for intricate artistic tasks such as learning how to make the iconic *ko-omote* mask during an educational sojourn in Japan. This Noh mask depicts an adolescent girl of "about fourteen or fifteen," and the description penned by Ozeki captures Skim's countenance strikingly: "round white face, full cheeks, and lustrous white skin that is

24 Miller uses studies by psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott focused on postwar Britain among primarily young white male rebel subjects (85–86).

almost pearlescent. Her hair is parted demurely at the centre, and the lines of her eyes are graceful and long, slanting up slightly at the outer corners" (68–69).[25] In Noh mask-making, a key element—and Ozeki's forté—was adding details to the artwork via a process of artificial aging called *mushi-kui*. The mask-maker would labour on the piece for up to a year by mastering a seminal technique that fuses the properties of youth and age. Ancient nature, such as wood from Japanese Cypress trees "over 250 years old" (74), co-exists alongside the newness created by carving, painting, and polishing this aged wood. *Mushi-kui* adds tiny insect trails on the face which confer personality and the semblance of age to the character. While the item itself is a distillation of time-honoured techniques and traditional raw materials, all the painstaking craftsmanship culminates paradoxically in the face of a young girl. While the mask may appear expressionless, it actually conveys a "subtle range of emotion" within the state of *chūkan hyōjō* (that is, "an ambiguous expression, neutral beauty, or versatile vagueness" [70]). The *ko-omote* thus embodies both the "naïve innocence" of youth and the "unforgiving sharpness" of age (73). The paradoxical pairing aptly captures Skim's habit of making hasty, monosyllabic, elliptical statements about her feelings when what she feels is pithy and profound ("I'm okay. I'm just … full" [66]; "I am chill. Lisa should shut up" [78]). Just as the creator of the *mushi-kui* harbors an "intuitive understanding of distress and decay," so, too, does the young female depicted by the new/old mask (Ozeki 79).

When asked during a 2007 interview to define the quintessential Japanese Canadian voice, Hiromi Goto surmised that seeking out a plurality of voices would be a better means of classifying the diverse creative output of this group. If a shared sensibility *were* to be defined, she offered as a common theme *wabi sabi*, the notion that life is but a compilation of imperfect, impermanent moments that are still acceptable—even perfect—in their own way (Greenaway). Ozeki likewise identifies *wabi sabi* as a pivotal concept in her decades-long spiritual and aesthetic journey toward self-acceptance and equanimity as an Asian North American woman and Zen Buddhist priest. A Japanese philosophy complexly rendered through *Noh* mask-making, among other art forms, *wabi* denotes being "proud" or "lonely" and is tied to "subdued grace and austere simplicity." The term emphasizes the individual's capacity to confront hardships with stoicism and self-possession. *Sabi*, a sense of desolation and decay, evokes "the transient nature of all things—as well as the beautiful patina that objects

25 For a discussion of Skim's "conspicuously 'Japanese' visage" (258) and the differences between the original English and Japanese translation of *Skim* from a manga studies perspective, see Berndt.

acquire as they age" (Ozeki 76). As Ozeki points out, *wabi sabi* encompasses and encourages our attunement to life's fragility and evanescence. It combines understated relief with plangent awareness of death and the receding of time, our connections, and worldly cares. More sustainable is gratitude for the intensity and sheer existence of the moment at hand. Given *wabi sabi*'s tempering influence, caring can never be too profound; it must constantly be mediated by the understanding that everything passes. Both the pleasure of reciprocity and the pain of its absence will itself pass in time. In John Reddear's unconsoled shadow, and in light of her own vulnerability as a queer Japanese Canadian girl, Skim cannot deny her proximity to bullying, ostracism, violence, or even death. Yet amid all the drama, she puts on a brave face—a mask—and goes forward as best she can.

Wabi sabi accords strongly, in Ozeki's view, with Zen Buddhism's three key tenets of existence: impermanence (that nothing lasts), "no-self" (the self is neither fixed nor eternal), and endemic suffering (we experience pain when we assume that what connects us to the world and one another is real, substantial, and fundamentally controllable) (14–16). *Care-lessness* is one step on the path to *wabi sabi* as a liberating life philosophy, as it is easier to care less when the stakes are not so high as they once appeared. Adolescents like Skim may find it difficult to practice the requisite detachment demanded of mature Zen practitioners like Ozeki. *Care-lessness* makes room for the adolescent to experience life lessons, suffer through them, and find some measure of emancipation in letting go of the emotional burdens when failure comes, as it inevitably does. *Wabi sabi*, when embraced, is an emotional safety net (both holes and string, space and substance) that reminds us that our cares and non-cares are fundamentally linked, and those linkages may dissolve at any moment, just as they may be reinforced in repetitive thought patterns that Skim facetiously—and knowingly—calls her "obsession." How much to care, after all, is part of a larger politics of refusal. Refusals, as personal praxis, can help affirm the right of a queer young person to different forms of autonomy that are not always available in their given time and place. Foucault conjectures, "[Maybe] the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we *could* be to get rid of this kind of political 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures" (216). Ozeki's meditations on her difficult teenage years, alongside the life lessons conferred by Noh mask-making, Zen Buddhist philosophy, and *wabi sabi* help us better understand how altering the conventional caring/not caring

duality and refusing overinvestments through a commitment to *carelessness* are viable means by which young people like Skim can embrace their imperfectly perfect selves.

This graphic novel both *calls out* specious social scripts and calls for queer youth to envision a revolution in self-regard, self-awareness, and self-respect.

If, as Lynell Burmark proposes, the "primary literacy of the twenty-first century will be visual: pictures, graphics, images of every kind" (1), then Gordon Fyfe and John Law's foundational observation about the visual world resonates strongly with the multimodal discursive power of Skim: "A depiction is never just an illustration. It is the material representation, the apparently stabilized product of a process of work. And it is the site for the construction and depiction of social difference" (1).[26] Part of this graphic narrative's activist promise is to interrogate how much young people are expected to—and capable of—caring for themselves and their most vulnerable peers. According to bell hooks, "While today's youth are eager to live in a world where racism [and other forms of injustice] does not exist, they do not want to do the political work of changing themselves or society. That world entails confronting pain and hostility" (81). The GCL Club harnessed toxic positivity to refocus the trauma of queer suicide on themselves as cheerleaders and saviours rather than possible instigators, necessary witnesses, and potential allies. *Skim* establishes how a racialized queer youth, immersed in a matrix of contrived niceness and performative caring, may not be prepared for, or even desirous of, activist risk-taking, especially if she feels ill-equipped to advocate for herself in the first place. This graphic novel both *calls out* specious social scripts and *calls for* queer youth to envision a revolution in self-regard, self-awareness, and self-respect.

Prioritizing self-care entails a redirection of energies that may appear to contradict the national ethos and democratic expectation that Canadians should—and will—care equally about everyone. It is only through a deliberate extrication from others' problematic choreographies of care that Skim finds a measure of personal satisfaction and peace. Caring less and more selectively thus constitutes effective self-care. It is a rebellious, queer-affirmative stance within a national "problem space" where one can ostensibly never care enough. Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim* highlights the poignant life lessons of an Asian Canadian girl who seeks out venues for personal growth (among them, restorative darkness, contemplative solitude, and occult spirituality), making her better equipped to envision radical self-love in the process.

26 See Low on the key pedagogical and curricular value of comics and graphic novels in the twenty-first century, focused particularly on the power of the gutter between panels as a major site for meaning-making.

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