



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

(to be completed by marker)

Student Name: Hannah Ewing	
Module Code: CSCW6009 Module title: Writing Workshop	Student number: 1703387
For completion by marker: Comments:	
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Critical Commentary: Writing Workshop

In *Honey and Home* I give a fictional account of the current housing crisis in Vancouver, Canada; my home city. Inflation, limited housing opportunities, and general unequal distribution of wealth have made Vancouver a difficult place to rent and live for anyone earning less than \$100,00 per year. I chose to explore this issue, of which I have personal experience, through two fictional characters, Benny and Grace. My intention was not to draw claims on who was to blame for this housing crisis, or why it was occurring. I wanted to focus on the consequences for individuals, how this will affect relationships, state of mind, and how one acts within an oppressed environment.

Though I kept this story set in Vancouver, I know that this issue is more far-reaching than just Canada and I intended for the content to be applicable to a larger demographic. After moving to the United Kingdom, I heard many people who were aggravated and concerned by the same issues that were being brought up back home. Though I had known that this problem was very common in North America, I had not been aware that it extended overseas. Research led me to understand this as a more capitalistic problem. I think the themes of power and wealth, and the isolation that comes within the imbalance of these two traits is prevalent in much of the Western world. This understanding made me feel it was relevant and necessary to explore this problem further, and the best way I know how to do that is to write it out.

My work often centres around distributions of power, whether that be between individuals, groups, or nations. Many of my characters are people who have lost power, whether they admit to it or not, yet continue to struggle against oppression. I like to use my writing as a vessel for social commentary, politics, and protest, as I think that art has always had a responsibility to cultivate new thought in those that consume it. I want to create art that is unrestricted and thought provoking, with characters that appeal to the humanity of the reader. I usually utilize fiction and poetry equally throughout my work.

Some of my greatest inspirations are Albert Camus, Dave Eggers, Arundhati Roy, and Caryl Churchill. Reading is pleasure, but also research. Really, as a writer, everything is research. A trip to the grocery store can bring about more characterization than a week in a library. Film, art, theatre, and general people watching are all places that I draw ideas from. But, literature shows me the craft.

In recent months I have been trying to stretch my catalogue into a more diverse group of writers. Reading on a more global scale gives more dynamic and weighted information about the world. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, are all books that have influenced my writings lately. Adichie delivers incredible cultural information, while managing to give informative subtextual ideas about race and identity. Murakami is a master of creating strange, odd universes that help us question our realities and psyches. Adiga uses comedy and tragedy in a captivating way, staying true to his heritage while still holding it accountable. I enjoy writing that makes us more aware of the world around us, forces us to question what we know, form new ideas, or look at ourselves more closely. It is exactly these traits that I aspire to in my own works.

I think that *Honey and Home* is a good example of my search for this kind of writing. I chose to stick to a culture that is familiar and important to me. Recognizing the beauty of a nation as well as its downfalls is important in developing an honest image. I

tend to write more often about America, because my relationship with that heritage is more complex, but I found a lot of joy in writing about Canada in this way. The more I explore my own world through art, the more I empathize with it, and I hope those who read my work can feel the same way.

After the in-class workshop there was some feedback about repetitive and redundant dialogue. I cut a lot of this down in the subsequent drafts of this piece, as it really slowed the narrative down. What remains is much more concise and direct than the original. There were also comments about the opening paragraph, that it was more imagery than scene. I decided to cut it out and began the story more in the action, with Benny and Grace returning home, rather than them just finding out about the eviction. The information about the eviction is instead delivered later on in the story, and again is much more concise. I played around a lot with the structure of this piece. Being a non-linear narrative it was interesting to move different scenes around, changing the tension and focus of the piece. Much of the beginning sequence has been cut and changed into a more clear and succinct structure. The original story was around 3,000 words, but now it sits at around 2,400 words. I think that funnelling the introduction into a more active place, as well as shaping the dialogue, made this piece a lot stronger in its deliverance.

In the remainder of my project I hope to continue this trend of giving vivid cultural snapshots, explored through stories that help unravel larger global issues. Having the class to workshop with has been very helpful in cultivating my own self-editing skills, which I plan to continue to work on, probably forever. I will be paying attention to creating captivating first scenes within my other works as well, as I see that I have a tendency to start pieces off with rambling descriptions rather than hooking action. My final project will be a collection of both poetry and short fiction, which will take into account all of these lessons, as well as continue the themes of culture, nationalism, power, and isolation.

Honey and Home

When we get home the sun is just coming up over the mountains. I open the door to see our couches, dining table, and the small TV on the glass entertainment stand. It all looks normal, in place, as we had left it. I guess I had expected broken windows, or letters stuck to the door screaming eviction dates at us. Benny seems un-phased. He puts his rucksack on the floor, rolls me into his arms and says, "Welcome home."

We had stayed in Edmonton only two nights. The first when we flew in, on the couch of an old high school friend of Benny's, a young girl that spoke Mandarin to him and had breasts that were bigger than mine. The second, after we had picked up the car, at a Thriftlodge on Stony Plain that held a broken coffee maker and stained pillows. The third was spent driving in shifts through the night, leaving the flat lands behind and taking the winter darkness by force. Benny enjoyed the night driving, he said it gave him time to think. "Plus," he said just before I drifted off to sleep, "When the snow blows into the windshield I feel like I'm hitting light-speed."

The car was a gift from my Aunt Rachel. She lived just outside of Edmonton in a town called Gibbons. Her husband had worked in the oil fields, three weeks on, one week off. The North was good work for young men who fought with their hands instead of their words. Her husband, Robbie, was a worker. On his days off he would cut firewood, fix sinks, and re-build the engines of old worn out Camrys that sat on their acre property. He was not an unhappy man, though when he spoke of his colleagues, with their cocaine habits and young simplicity, he grew stern. After dinner, with a beer in hand and the radio on the soft rock channel, he would stand at the window looking out at the night, mumbling quiet curses at the rock, snow, and the Canadian expanse. Last spring the company he had been with for nine years downsized. All the big contractors were doing it, the news called for a recession. Robbie took his truck down to Slave Lake, set it to drive, and drank a two-six of Alberta Pure as he slipped into the still-chilled waters.

Aunt Rachel told Benny and I that if we made it to Edmonton, we could take our pick of the Camrys. I couldn't stand connecting buses to and from work and Benny had entered his mid-twenties with a fierce desire to acquire the products that he thought symbolized maturity. So we booked flights, planned our trip, and were soon the owners of a half-rusted 1993 Camry, fit with a brand new engine perfectly placed by my dead Uncle Robbie. "It's a bit macabre, isn't it?" I asked Benny after we'd said goodbye to Aunt Rachel. "I mean, he put so much life into this car. He put his soul into it. But he didn't leave enough for himself. He split himself up into so many pieces, scattered over so much land... what was left in his body?"

"You can't split up a soul," Benny replied. "It isn't like an orange."

The first week goes by and no one comes to the house. There is no reason that they should, unless our mail goes into the wrong slot, or the tree in the backyard falls down. Benny did not respond to the text message about our eviction. "Anything we say can be used against us," he explained. I thought our landlord might take the silence as protest, that she would roll up quietly in her green Land Rover, bumping it effortlessly into the back of our new but used Camry, click her heels down the concrete steps to our suite door, and slap me until I bled. But she didn't come. "Stop letting your mind run," Benny said.

We have only lived in the house for thirty days. The woman who owned the property described it as a long-term rental. She showed me a garden in the backyard that was overgrown with dandelions and said: “A project,” as if there was time waiting for me at this doorstep. We took it eagerly, though the price wasn’t great and the South Vancouver address was a longer bus ride than I had anticipated. We took it because we were the only ones there. No bidding wars, no fear. We had spent months at viewings, crammed into corners as richer couples shouted offers into the air. The property managers were like auctioneers, giving the apartments to the highest voices, thickest check books, smoothest suits. I had never seen property rental as a pastime, more as a bridge. You leave your parents, rent for a while, and then own when you’ve figured out how to show up for work on time and iron your pants.

“That’s what you get for living in a rich city,” my mother said. “Ain’t no use fighting with the rich, they’ve got the time to let you suffer.”

We took the property out of necessity, and because even though it was a basement suite there were no tenants upstairs, leaving us to the quiet of our own lovemaking or shouting in the mornings. We had even become used to the sound of the mother next door, who screamed at her small children in Mandarin after breakfast as they walked towards the car. One morning, with Benny translating, I heard her say: “No, you may not date until you are thirty-five!” Followed by: “It’s time for bed,” which I think he misheard.

Benny was calm. More so than usual, though still surprisingly un-guilty about our choice of defiance. “I want to leave,” I said on the second day. “I want to pack up and go. We can drive back to Alberta and stay with Aunt Rachel until we get settled.”

“You know we can’t live there.”

“We could try.”

“One week in those flatlands and you’d have an episode. The cold, the emptiness, the rednecks. Does that appeal to you?”

“I’m an artist, Benny. I thrive on pain.”

“That won’t give you art. It will give you depression. Seasonal and beyond.”

So we stay. By the third week I am restless at work. Our office holds only four employees, all young Emily Carr graduates whose desks are covered in anti-war stickers, feminist ally pins, and LGBTQ+ flags. The memories of art school, of unprotected sex, of saving the world through collages and craft beer are still fresh in the minds of the others. I am the eldest, four years graduated and turned bitter by giving up my dreams of a New York studio for the confines of a small graphic design office. But the work is steady, the clients are kind, and sometimes I am commissioned to make logos for Fringe Festival pieces that feature men with breasts or acid influenced orgies. If I feel that my artistic talent is going to waste, after the third Go Green Vancouver advert this month, I take out my sketchbook and draw fire. Fire has always been my favourite muse. Fire on a hilltop, fire in the eyes of lovers, and, more recently, houses on fire. Single-homes, trailer parks, walk-ups, and duplexes on duplexes on duplexes.

Benny manages a restaurant in Kitsilano. Sometimes after work I take the ninety-nine down Broadway and let him coax my problems out with beer and cheese platters. “I just don’t feel right about it,” I say tonight. “I can’t sleep because I’m sure that I can hear her walking down our stairs, or breathing on the other side of the windows.”

“You worry too much.”

“Did you end up seeing that place today? What was it like?”

“The usual, an advertised two-bedroom that turned out to be a closet and a solarium for two thousand a month.”

“Jesus...”

“We’ll keep looking, don’t worry. We only have to stay there until we find somewhere decent.”

“Decent. That’s what it comes down to. Livable, acceptable, not dilapidated.”

“I don’t like it either, Grace.”

When I get home there is a Land Rover parked outside of the house. In the darkness I can’t tell the colour, black, or green, or matte grey. But my steps slow and I feel cold inside. I circle the house, coming around the left, opposite to where our door stands. My ears are awake, taking in every breath of wind, every car horn and door slam. As I round the corner, the automatic light switches on and I almost throw up my stomach. The yard is empty. I go down the stairs and try the door handle. Locked. I go inside and lay on the ground. Benny finds me like this at three in the morning when he gets home. “What are you doing?” he says.

“I just needed to level out.”

“On the floor? Did you sweep?”

“No, I did not sweep.”

“Is this about the house? Grace, do we have to go over this again? It’s exhausting.”

“You’re right. Maybe it doesn’t matter.”

“What?”

“I mean, how obscene it is to even care. Do you remember anything about quantum physics?”

“I stopped taking sciences in grade eleven.”

“Atoms won’t stay put. They disappear and reappear without any notice. Travelling in between dimensions, in and out of space and time and reality as we know it.”

“Maybe we should table this until the morning.”

“So, why care? If atoms can’t fucking stay put, and the world might be another world, on top of another world, in-between four more worlds, on the back of a turtle, laying in a grass bed, wearing fur mitts and sunglasses, watching football on a stardust television.”

Benny moves to the kitchen and puts the kettle on. The click of its plastic button reverberates in my mind as the water starts to boil. Benny always drinks tea when he’s thinking. When we first met he ordered four green teas in a row at Starbucks as I spewed out my life stories of growing up on cattle farms and being a blue haired vegetarian. He didn’t speak until I had stopped, then carefully held my hand across the table whilst running his forefinger over the top of his glass. “So, don’t go back there,” was his answer.

I lift myself off of the floor and sit at the table with Benny. He pours me a cup and we both sit silently, staring at the walls of a house, not a home. “Honey,” Benny says.

“What?”

“I was just thinking that this tea would be better with honey.”

I stay quiet.

“Do you remember Karen? The vietnamese girl who used to bartend with me?”

“Yeah, I remember her.”

“She became a bee keeper.”

“Really?”

“She works out in Hawaii, harvesting honey and raising bees.”

“That sounds relaxing.”

“She sent Kyle a letter. She said that she lives on a community farm, where everyone pitches in with whatever talent they have. She used the words ‘perfect’ and ‘blissful’ over and over again. It stuck with me.”

“Karen. She was the one that always wore the false eyelashes, right?”

“Hawaii would be nice.”

“We can’t go to Hawaii, we have to stay here and fight the good fight, remember?”

“I’m starting to wonder if there is a winner in this fight, Grace. That place I looked at today, and the way the people fought each other for it... it’s not right. I’m not like those people. We aren’t.”

“You love it here though. The mountains, the ocean, the ferry rides. We can’t afford to move to Hawaii.”

“It doesn’t have to be Hawaii.”

“Look, I wasn’t trying to guilt you in to anything...”

“Maybe this isn’t our honey farm.”

I drink my tea. We sleep.

In the morning she arrives. I hear the click of her heels. I stare at the door and let the knocking continue without moving. After a few minutes, her heels walk back up the stairs, and I hear a car pull out. Benny joins me in the kitchen, shirtless in his flannel pyjamas. “Good morning, honey,” he says.

We have five days until the first of the month and nothing is packed. I tried putting my old university textbooks in a box last week, but Benny came home and silently unpacked them, settling them back onto the shelves with the dried flowers and the carved bone boxes that his grandmother had given him. Yesterday I found him staring pensively at the empty box that still sits next to the bookshelf. He looked calm, almost amused as he regarded it. He gave it a little kick before going back to his morning routine.

I take the car down to Jericho beach after work. Benny is off today and he attended three open houses, each of which he sent me detailed accounts of the location, price, and failure. From the inside of the car the waves look comical, almost pixelated as they fall onto the shoreline. I try to imagine the end of the world, not in apocalyptic terms, but the edge, as if it were a table top. What if the ocean hit a border, a plastic fence, that sent the sea creatures writhing into the air, smacking their scaled bodies into the transparent wall that signified the end of their journey. Would they turn around? Or bash their skulls into the edge with some hope of breaking through? A futile attempt, with no one to witness their gloried efforts and no sympathy when they collapse and die. Where does weakness lie? Is it in the failure to fight? Or the inability to see a senseless waste of time? Benny calls and I let it ring.

I get home late. He has fallen asleep on the couch watching some sort of Korean soap opera. I sit down beside his sleeping form, laying one hand on his right thigh which causes him to shuffle, sticking his face further into the couch. I lay a blanket over him,

and walk over to the bookshelf. I begin to pack. First the books, and then the blankets. Benny's clothes, and mine.

##

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