UN/HAPPY NARRATIVES: RE-ORIENTING THE ROMANTIC IMPERATIVE IN REBECCA K REILLY'S *GRETA & VALDIN*[*]

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Abstract

This article explores *Greta & Valdin* (2021), the literary debut of Māori author Rebecca K Reilly. The novel tells the story of the Vladisavljevics, a family of Russian and Māori descent and focuses on the romantic conflicts of their two youngest siblings, Greta and Valdin, as they struggle with professional frustrations and negotiate intersecting identity issues and family dramas. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's exploration of happiness (2010) and on her articulations of the feminist killjoy figure (2017; 2023), I argue that it is possible to narrate hopeful stories which envision optimistic endings for the characters while rethinking the imperative of happiness articulated in conventional romantic narratives. I read Reilly's novel as an un/happy text that critically engages with and reorients normative constructions of happiness and as a decolonial, queer and killjoy intervention which opens up a space for the unhappy family stories to emerge, while granting its protagonists with a happy ending. Finally, I argue that the novel vindicates the reparative value of love in all its forms, presenting the family not so much as a source of unhappiness, but of joy and protection.

Keywords: Rebecca K Reilly, Māori Literature, Romance, Love, Un/happiness, Queer Identities.

NARRATIVAS IN/FELICES: LA REORIENTACIÓN DEL IMPERATIVO ROMÁNTICO EN *GRETA & VALDIN* DE REBECCA K REILLY

Resumen

Este artículo explora *Greta & Valdin* (2021), debut de la autora maorí Rebecca K Reilly, que narra la historia de los Vladisavljevic, una familia de origen ruso y maorí, centrándose en los conflictos amorosos y profesionales de los hijos menores, Greta y Valdin y la negociación de su identidad interseccional. A partir de las teorías de Sara Ahmed sobre la felicidad (2010) y de su articulación de la figura de la feminista aguafiestas (2017; 2023), argumento que es posible narrar historias esperanzadoras con finales optimistas y, a la vez, replantear el imperativo de la felicidad propio de las narrativas románticas convencionales. Planteo que la novela ha de leerse como obra in/feliz que critica y reorienta construcciones normativas de la felicidad y como una intervención decolonial y queer que permite narrar historias familiares infelices y mantener el final feliz. Finalmente, argumento que la novela reivindica el valor reparador del amor en todas sus formas, presentando a la familia no como una fuente de infelicidad, sino de amor y protección.

Palabras clave: Rebecca K Reilly, literatura maorí, ficción romántica, amor, in/felicidad, identidades queer.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed links the social imperative to be happy with restrictive and normative discourses of whiteness, heterosexuality or national identity. This "happiness duty," as Ahmed calls it, is "a form of world making ... often used to justify oppression [and] to redescribe social norms as social goods" (2010, 2) as it entails orienting subjects to specific life goals and achievements. The very hope for happiness –Ahmed argues– means we get directed in specific ways, as happiness is assumed to follow from certain life choices and not others" (54). The pursuit of this happiness duty can thus become coercive, particularly for those whose way of life does not adjust to what is considered socially good or acceptable, whose choices are oriented in different directions and who, as a result, are excluded from the promise of happiness in the terms that are conventionally established by society. The "happy family" –Ahmed contends– has been traditionally understood as necessary for the achievement of a happy life, "a myth of happiness, of where and how happiness takes place, and a powerful legislative device, a way of distributing time, energy and resources" (45). Through a discussion of the happy family, Ahmed goes on to explore three key figures who are excluded from the promise of happiness or marginalised from its constraining scripts: feminist killjoys, unhappy queers and melancholic migrants (2010, 49). These "troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy" (2010, 17) are the figures who "get in the way" (2023, 1) of happiness by speaking up and at the same time are alienated from its promise.

The feminist killjoy[1] –on which Ahmed has written profusely (2010; 2017; 2023)– embodies the purpose of feminist consciousness as a force that interferes with the joy and complacency of heteropatriarchy. The history of feminism, Ahmed argues, is the history of killing joy, standing in the way, troubling the gendered scripts of happiness (2010, 59), which are sustained on the rules of domesticity and its gendered division of labour as personified by the happy housewife. The feminist killjoy speaks up to question normative fantasies of happiness and is perceived as threatening to "what is deemed by some to be necessary for happiness: a belief, a practice, a way of life, a social arrangement" (2023, 16). The "unhappy queer" is the name Ahmed uses to refer to those who do not adjust to the narrow scripts of heterosexuality, also imbricated into traditional heteropatriarchal family structures. The archive is full of unhappy queer figures who are excluded from heteronormative happiness scripts; but in her work Ahmed argues for the mobilisation of queer unhappiness as a political force to achieve recognition without reproducing the social rules and family structures of happy heterosexuality (2010, 114). The "melancholic

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[1] Ahmed's original concept of the feminist killjoy has been refined and adapted to include various agendas and perspectives and has now given way to various theorisations of the ethnic, black, indigenous, queer, trans or disabled feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017, 267).

migrant" disrupts another form of happiness: that of the migrant/minority/ethnic family. For the migrant, national identification comes at the cost of leaving behind their traditions and assimilating into the happy nation. Unlike the melancholic migrant, who is stuck in the past, the happy migrant forgets about the experiences of displacement or colonial history and takes up the "happiness duty" (2010, 130) which promises happiness "in return for loyalty to the nation" (22). What these killjoy figures have in common is their willingness to cause unhappiness, that is, to raise their voice "whenever there are difficult histories to bring up" (267) in order to generate "new horizons, ... alternative ideas of happiness" (77). Ahmed's project is then not about refusing happiness, but about mobilising unhappiness as a political tool in order to raise "our awareness of *how much there is* to be unhappy about" (223; italics in original) so that we can envision "a world in which things can happen in alternative ways" (233).

In this article I build on Ahmed's theorisation of happiness and on the role of these unhappy or killjoy figures in relation to *Greta & Valdin* (2021), the successful and widely-acclaimed literary debut of Māori author Rebecca K Reilly (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Rehua Ngātiwai ki Aotea).[2] *Greta & Valdin* tells the story of two Māori-Russian queer siblings in their late 20s, struggling with unrequited love, unrewarding or poorly-paid jobs and a caring but unconventional multi-ethnic family, the Vladisavljevics, formed by their Māori mother, Betty, their Russian father Linsh, and a large cast of secondary characters of various backgrounds.[3] In line with the aforementioned ideas, I contend that Reilly's novel can be read as an un/happy text that critically engages with and reorients normative constructions of happiness. The novel disavows the conventional scripts of happiness by exploring stories of queer, indigenous, racialized, migrant and neurodivergent characters; in fact, Reilly dedicates the novel to "the colonised, queer, trans, ace, and intersex people, and the hot autistic community" (Acknowledgements) –the troublemakers or killjoy figures who are so often excluded from the promise of happiness. As an un/happy text, the novel opens up a space for the unhappy family stories to emerge, to "get in the way" (Ahmed 2010, 60) of the various normative social norms on which happiness supposedly depends. But *Greta & Valdin* is also, and primarily, a happy story which concludes by granting most of its characters an optimistic and hopeful ending, vindicating the reparative value of love and care in all its forms and presenting the family not so

[2] The novel received the 2019 Adam Foundation Prize in Creative Writing, the Hubert Church prize for the best first book of fiction at the 2022 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards and the 2022 Aotearoa Booksellers' Choice Award. Following its success in Aotearoa New Zealand, it has been translated into several languages and published internationally to wide acclaim.

[3] These characters include their paternal uncle Thony, married to Giuseppe (a businessman of Italian and Spanish background); Giuseppe's brother, Xabi, a Catalan man, and Valdin's former partner now living in Argentina; the siblings' older brother, Casper, and his family, a German woman also named Greta, and their two children, six-year-old Freya, and seventeen-year-old Tang; their grandfather Vlad, who lives in Europe, and other minor family members and friends.

much as a source of discontent, but of joy and contentment. The Vladisavljevics are depicted as givers and recipients of love, in itself a radical act, given the long record of unhappy stories of racism, homophobia, exclusion or marginalisation which have defined not only the family history, but also the wider histories of the communities to which they belong.

2. UN/HAPPY NARRATIVES

Reilly's novel is paradigmatic of the thematic and formal shifts which have defined Māori literature in the last two decades, as seen not only in the works of mature writers like Tina Makereti, Paula Morris, Alice Tawhai, Kelly Anna Morey or Whiti Hereaka, but also in the writing of emerging authors, such as Steph Makutu, Tayi Tibble, Becky Manawatu, Nic Low or Shilo Kino, who have produced increasingly diverse stories and ventured into formerly untouched subjects by confidently employing new formats and genres. In that sense, *Greta & Valdin* corroborates what Witi Ihimaera, one of the pioneer figures of Māori literature in English, has stated: that these younger writers are now telling stories which are "hybridised, hyphenated and intoxicatingly mixed up" (2015, 31) in their concern to explore "who they are rather than what they are" (28). This comment concurs with Tina Makereti's observation, in her overview of recent Māori fiction, that "Māori writers no longer grapple with the need to articulate their right to existence as distinct peoples, but instead enjoy the autonomy to decide how that distinctive existence may best be expressed" (2020, 1). Indeed, the characters in the novel show that "there is a wide and diverse spectrum of ways to live as Māori" (3) and are unapologetic about their various intersecting identities. This confidence, unheard of in previous generations of Māori authors, does not free them from experiencing discrimination or intolerance, but it does equip them with the tools to censure all forms of social injustice and to handle the aggressions they experience more resolutely. In sum, these are works which explore, following Ahmed, what it means to be *happily* Māori, that is happy and willing to acknowledge "the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity" (2010, 116), in this case the rules that dictate how Māori identity is meant to be understood and experienced.

Significantly, Reilly chooses to trouble the narrow lines of normativity and to engage with the Māori and queer agendas through a playful engagement with the tropes and conventions of what might be considered the "happy genres," and in particular of narratives which focus on the search and attainment of happiness through romantic love. Indeed, romantic narratives have been conventionally understood as bringing joy and comfort to their readers through the prerequisite of the happy or, at least, "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending," as encapsulated in the well-known definition of the Romance Writers Association of America (About the Romance Genre). This happy ending is often associated with personal fulfilment and affective healing because, as Kamblé, Selinger and Teo contend, "the genre has always placed value on the happiness of women and the opportunities for freedom and fulfillment offered them in terms of work and social inclusion, as well

as through romantic love" (2021, 5). But romance novels have also, paradoxically, been seen as sources of unhappiness. This concern was most clearly voiced by classical feminist critiques of the genre published from the 1970s (Greer 1970; Modleski 1982; Mussell 1984), which saw popular romance as responsible for complying with heteropatriarchal and heteronormative expectations, for perpetuating regressive gender roles and for being "damaging to women in all sorts of ways: economically, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and sexually" (Teo 2018). Scholars working in popular romance studies, the field which looks at romance narratives in all their diversity and complexity as worthy of serious academic study, have also recognised that many romance novels continue to articulate problematic gender and racial representations (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo 2021, 5). In her recent discussion on the cultural prevalence of the romance story, *Happily Ever After* (2016), Catherine Roach largely sees these stories as reparative and healing for their readers, but also concedes that

> [t]he romance narrative becomes problematic if and when its stories imply that a woman must be a heterosexual wife and mother in order to be happy. Note that the problem is not with these choices *per se*. ... The problem is when these stances become norms that are enforced by the culture as more or less mandatory. (2016, 91)

Similarly, Erin Young recognises the evident racial bias of many romance novels, not only in their use of "heavily racialized" language and imagery, but also in their meagre depictions of "non-white characters in general, and of non-stereotypical representations specifically" (2021, 512). Authors, critics and readers alike –effectively acting as killjoy figures– have questioned the narrowness of the happiness scripts found in traditional depictions of romantic love, which has resulted in a rapidly changing landscape of romance fiction. Attending to readers' growing demand for more inclusive and diverse representations, authors from an increasingly diverse range of backgrounds have revamped the format to tell love stories which envision different types of relationships and forms of affective commitment which do not conform to the rules of marriage, heterosexuality or monogamy. They also criticise hegemonic, heteronormative or white-centric constructions of romantic love and populate their novels with characters who have historically been absent from or marginalised in happy stories and who are now granted the right to reclaim joy, rather than suffering, as a feasible ending (Pryde 2022, xiv). When asked about her novel's happy outcome, in fact, Reilly explains:

> [m]y intention was not to show a happy ending as such, but a not-horrible ending for my two protagonists. [I]n the queer community and in the Maori community we've got enough media where something cooked happens to the characters right at the end. This is not a book where people are drowning or going to jail or revealing they're actually straight-engaged to someone else at the end. ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.)

Although *Greta & Valdin* cannot be categorised as a romance novel, romantic love plays a crucial part in the narrative, and so I read it in the light of the

aforementioned debates on the changing face of romance fiction, the increasingly diverse depictions of romantic love in contemporary narratives and media and, as previously mentioned, as evidence of how young Māori authors are pushing established thematic and formal boundaries and daring to engage with (happy) topics through generic conventions which have so far been seen as unfitting for the more pressing (unhappy) political issues which have defined Māori literature in the past. Indeed, the novel proves, as Witi Ihimaera and Tina Marketi argue in their introduction to *Black Marks on the White Page*, their edited collection on Oceanic writing, that Māori and Pacific writers are going "beyond the edges of what is expected of Oceanic writing" (2017, 13), geographically, thematically, generically and formally.

Certainly, *Greta & Valdin* offers a fresh, witty and quirky depiction of the lives of young people in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and liberally employs ingredients from various recognisable narrative formats. Since several characters study or work at the University of Auckland and a large part of the action takes place on campus, the novel can be read as a campus novel of sorts, but because of its portrayal of queer identities, the novel has been primarily classified as LGTBQ+ fiction. The narrative foregrounds the romantic dilemmas of the siblings, not in the form of the classical and often tragic "coming out" narratives –Greta and Valdin are both openly queer and feel accepted and loved by their families–, but in its lighter and humorous treatment of their search for love. Resembling the growing number of millennial fiction depicting young and sad women facing anxiety, apathy and unease (Fuller & Miller 2025), the novel opens by providing evidence of the unhappy love lives and existential dilemmas of the siblings, but these are narrated through a combination of humour and pathos. Greta is in love with Holly, a fellow tutor in the English department, who has been taking advantage of her, asking her to teach her tutorials and mark her papers and who, as Greta finds out in one of their meetings, already has a girlfriend. On his part, Valdin has been experiencing a period of anxiety and depression; he has quit his university job and his career as a physicist, and has finally come to realise that he is still in love with Xabi, his ex-partner, who is now living in Argentina. Furthermore, and in line with the reassessment of stereotypical representations of neurodiversity and mental health conditions in contemporary fiction and popular culture (Freeman Loftis 2015; Hesse 2025; Trostle 2025) and with the growing calls for the inclusion of neurodivergent characters, the narrative also works as an honest and full disclosure of Valdin's struggles with OCD as he recalls how this condition has affected his life and relationships. The action nevertheless advances optimistically to show that Valdin finally manages to overcome his fears of commitment and to openly express his feelings for Xabi, while Greta finally forgets Holly and finds love with Ell, a caring woman who understands and supports her.

Because Reilly narrates their protagonists' journeys towards their happy endings resorting to generous doses of humour, *Greta & Valdin* has also been read as a romantic comedy with connections to both classical and contemporary varieties of the genre. A reviewer mentions that in this novel "[q]uintessential rom-com meets the delicious family sprawl of a Russian classic" (Te Herenga Waka); another one describes the novel as possessing "the sophistication of a Shakespearean comedy" (Penguin) because, as in the classical plays, the multiple subplots concerning several

members of the family are solved in a final group scene which concludes with marriage and the restoration –here, the reorientation– of order. *Greta & Valdin* also plays with elements from the recognizable chick lit format, women's novels featuring young protagonists in urban locations, juggling personal and professional conflicts in their quest for self-fulfilment. Chick lit novels are essentially coming of age narratives, in which the protagonist narrates her problems through an informal, humorous and confessional tone, and where readers witness the maturation of the heroine and her attainment of happiness, often, although not exclusively, in the form of romantic love (Missler 2017, 31). *Greta & Valdin* is indeed an urban novel (it is set in Auckland, New Zealand's largest and most cosmopolitan city), it employs a confessional and humorous tone (by alternating chapters entitled "G" and "V" and narrated Greta and Valdin in the first person), and it traces the emotional development of the two siblings, as they juggle work, romantic disillusionment and family problems. That Reilly is playfully employing some of these elements is evident when a love-struck Valdin proclaims, after breaking-up with Xabi, that "[i]t's time for a new chapter and a new me. I'm not going to be worrying about men anymore. I'm going to be focused on my career, like a woman in a movie from the 1990s" (64).

The jacket design[4] visually encapsulates Reilly's blending of romance, humour and social critique, by combining the pink background –the recognisable pastel tones often employed to market women's fiction– with the sharper greenness of the limes, a visual cue of its caustic and acid humour. The choice of a torn mesh bag unable to hold the limes suggests the ways in which the novel both contains and exceeds various thematic and narrative conventions; that is, the ways in which, in a truly killjoy fashion, the narrative borrows and then transgresses specific formulae without forsaking its deep engagement with the depiction of love and its transformative effects on the characters. Indeed, this book is primarily about love in its multiple varieties. Reilly has explained that she enjoys "thinking about how love works and how people relate to one another, what sort of forms that can take, how far it can stretch" ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.). The novel depicts love between siblings, between parents and children, friends and relatives, but also romantic love as experienced by homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual characters, in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships across various ethnic, national, age and class divides. Although Greta's and Valdin's respective love stories unfold separately, the different narrative strands concerning the siblings and other family members converge at the end of the novel, as the plot moves towards a final family gathering in the form of a very idiosyncratic wedding, several unexpected (romantic) reunions, and the fulfilled promise of happiness for the protagonists.

[4] I refer here to Clay Smith's design for the 2021 hardcover edition of the novel published by Hutchinson Heinemann. The international editions present variations of the original cover, but generally maintain the colour palette and the motif of the limes, in reference to the ones Valdin buys for Greta in the novel.

Considering the unique features of the novel and the centrality of love in the narrative, I propose to discuss *Greta & Valdin* as an un/happy novel. I use this term, rather than more restrictive generic labels or definitions, to argue that it is possible to narrate hopeful stories which envision optimistic endings for the characters while rethinking the imperative of happiness articulated in conventional romantic narratives. I show how the narrative maximises the potential of romantic tropes and conventions to decolonise traditional approaches to the depiction of romantic love and the structures of privilege they uphold and to project horizons of happiness for its characters which vindicate the power of love beyond such limiting scripts. In the following sections, I explore how *Greta & Valdin* puts some of the above-mentioned generic conventions to use –or rather to "queer use." This is the expression Ahmed uses "to refer to how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended" (2019, 199). On the one hand, Reilly expands the focus on romance to explore the reparative possibilities of the unhappy family stories of colonialism, displacement, racism and loss which often integrate the migrant, queer and indigenous archives. In this task, Greta and Valdin act as killjoy figures willing to call out the various happiness myths that condition their lives and those of their families, as discussed in the next two sections. On the other, the narrative clearly gears the characters towards forms of happiness which involve various forms of love. Thus, in the last part of the article, I consider how Reilly queers the happy ending, imagining joyful and hopeful outcomes for non-normative individuals, families and communities.

3. MYTHS OF HAPPINESS, KILLJOY TRUTHS

Although *Greta & Valdin* is structured around the protagonists' stories of romantic disillusionment and the eventual resolution of their love dramas, these amorous conflicts are played out against the background of complex family histories and personal identity struggles. The novel offers extensive commentary on social issues, often in the form of sardonic observations made by the siblings, who vocalise their unhappiness with the legacies of colonialism and the pervasive structures of racism, sexism, precarity and inequality they encounter daily. As killjoy figures, Greta and Valdin "expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy" (Ahmed 2010, 65) and elaborate "killjoy truths," insights though which the protagonists expose the happiness myths defining their social reality: "[A] killjoy truth [Ahmed explains] is clear and striking, even obvious. The obvious is often obscured by happiness" (2023, 261).

The chapters narrated by Greta unfold around her life on campus where she experiences the unhappiness and precarity of academic life for postgraduate students. Adding to her realisation that Holly has been manipulating her, Greta's worries are more specifically about her bleak prospects once she finishes her degree. Greta is unsure about how her MA thesis on Russian literature is progressing, she fears her tutoring hours will be reduced due to budget cuttings, and she ponders constantly on which career paths will be available to her:

> I stay up all night doing government careers aptitude tests that tell me I'm best suited to being an actor or playwrights. The job opportunities are described as *poor* and the pay starts at *zero*. I can't retrain as a lawyer because I've nearly used up my lifetime limit on student loans. I can't be a viral internet sensation because I'm over twenty-five. (208; italics in original)

Leaving the final comic remark aside, Greta's worries are genuine. She repeatedly refers to her meagre bank balance, condemns the government's removal of postgraduate allowances, and resents her lack of economic independence, which forces her to rely on her brother to pay for the flat they share in the city and even for food. The novel's discussion of precarity and anxiety linked to campus life and postgraduate research aligns closely with the shifts that scholars have identified in millennial campus fiction and its depiction of young academics "with little chance for a better future" (Williams 2022, 14). More specifically, it criticises the widening economic and social disparities that have come to define contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand (Rashbrooke 2021), in turn reflecting the pervasive legacies of colonialism which continue to be materialised in the systemic disadvantages in health, housing, income and education experienced by Māori and Pacific ethnic minorities.

Greta & Valdin can also be read in the light of contemporary novels which queer the 'straight' and heteropatriarchal trajectories of classical campus fiction (De Vido 2022, 362) by illuminating alternative experiences of academia beyond the white, male and middle-class perspective. Both Greta and Valdin, as well as their older brother Casper, who is also a lecturer at the University of Auckland, act as killjoy figures in that they denounce these injustices and voice their unhappiness with the system. Reilly's campus narrative can thus be read as responding to the worldwide calls to decolonise the University sector, which have also reverberated in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly in discussions about the underrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika staff (McAllister et al 2019; Naepi 2019) and students (Mayeda et al 2021; Webber & Watson 2024), or about the shortfalls in their equity and diversity policies despite the "language of benevolent inclusion" adopted by these institutions (McAllister 2019, 237). There are multiple references to how these structures of privilege condition the characters' lives; for instance, Greta attends a panel on diversity where the speakers "are all white" (256) and wonders "[h]ow much ... the people on this panel [are] getting paid" (257) at a time in which she fears that she will be unable to support herself if her tutoring hours are reduced. On his part, Casper has made it his cause to help Māori students navigate the multiple challenges they encounter in an educational system where they continue to be underrepresented by protesting against "the massive advantage that Pākehā students have coming into higher education" (53) and "lobb[ying] the government for money for Māori teenagers to get proper careers advice" (53). Greta herself comments on the ethnic bias that conditions the career choices of young Māori people, which she herself experienced a few years before:

> [o]nce, at school, I got called to the dean's office because I didn't show up to a careers meeting for Māori students, and they assumed I'd been wagging. It turned out my

> form teacher thought it was a mistake and threw the letter about it in the bin. I was just in maths trying to measure stupid triangles the whole time, when I could have been learning about joining the army or becoming a security guard. Everyone else came back to class with a keychain that said NZ POLICE. My life would be different if I didn't lose my keys all the time. (54)

Although Greta is signed up for the meeting because she is Māori, her physique –she describes herself as having "pale skin and black hair" (54)– does not adjust to her teacher's expectations of Māoriness, which paradoxically releases her from the obligation to attend. Greta's anecdote is conveyed through her mordant sense of humour, but her story is a poignant critique of the ongoing educational gap between Māori and non-Māori students in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. It also clearly illuminates the uncomfortable truths that shatter the happy narratives of egalitarianism (Bell 1996) and harmonious inter-ethnic relations on which New Zealand has constructed its distinctive identity historically by pointing at the many subtle and not so subtle forms of racism, ethnic bias and inequality that still condition the characters' lives.

The novel also comments on the messiness and complexity of identity as experienced by the protagonists. Whereas Greta has to persuade her workmates that she is indeed Māori even though she does not conform to the stereotype physically, Valdin is immediately categorised as Māori, although in fact he sees himself as having "many identities I don't entirely fit in with" (46). His well-intentioned liberal-minded workmates, for instance, ask him to perform "a quick karakia" (93) or prayer before getting on a plane, assuming his knowledge of Māori culture. Valdin cannot think of what to say, so a woman steps in and recites a karakia in his place "which I'm pretty sure –Valdin adds comically– is about food, not travelling" (93). When he visits his uncle Thony, who lives in a wealthy part of the city, Valdin explains that he feels self-conscious and fearful of being in the area and starts to walks faster "just in case the police come and take me away. Māori male, approx. thirty years, thin built, seen enjoying the shade of a colonial tree. Witnesses include a $3,000 Pomeranian and ten high-tech home security systems" (78). Greta also recalls the story of her older brother Casper when he becomes a teenage dad with a Pākehā girl and is considered unfit to bring up his son because "[t]he private-school girl's family thought that the baby was Casper's fault, that this was the kind of the thing Māori boys were always up to, getting good girls pregnant and messing up their futures. They said it would be best for the baby to go to a good home" (110). In exploring these different but interrelated experiences or racism, tokenism or ethnic bias, Reilly criticises the normative ways in which characters are allowed or expected to live and behave *as* Māori. The novel thus addresses the complexity of contemporary Māori cultural identity, which is not limited to "a particular world view, proficiency with the Māori language, darker skin tone, or any other outward markers of so-called authenticity" (Makereti 2020), but encompasses, as the novel amply demonstrates, very different ways of being Māori and experiencing this cultural identity.

Both Greta and Valdin elaborate their "killjoy truths" by stating what they are unhappy about, by turning "noticing" into a form of "political labour" (Ahmed 2023,

137). When the novel opens, Valdin has quit his job in the Physics Department at the University of Auckland after a mental breakdown. His new job is as a comedian and host of a television travel show in which Valdin soon gains a reputation for his controversial opinions on several issues, which are widely echoed on social media. Valdin uses his public platform to pose problems and, thus, he becomes the problem (Ahmed 2023, 18). One of these incidents –here recalled by Greta– happens during his visit to Queenstown, one of the country's luxury tourist destinations:

> He met with a real estate developer who showed him some incredibly expensive properties, which were all foreign-owned, and then they got him to interview a man who owned this enormous golf-course. And then V said: 'Do you know how many Maori children are living in poverty in this country?' Then they had an argument about whether it was possible to work your way up when you exist in a system that doesn't want you to succeed. Then V looked right into the camera and said he didn't want to talk to the Pākehā anymore. (300)

Valdin's reaction echoes the title of Reni Eddo-Lodge's book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2023), based on a 2014 viral post where she explains her frustration when bringing up the subject of structural racism and white privilege in Britain. Eddo-Lodge discusses the emotional disconnect of white people when faced with conversations about the difficult experiences of Black people (2022, ix), which they systematically deny or dismiss (2022, xi), and explores the ongoing exclusionary effects of this "invisible whiteness" (2022, xvi) whose pretensions of universality she sets out to dismantle (2022, xvii). Like Eddo-Lodge, Ahmed insists on the need to *see* whiteness as one of the key commitments of the killjoy figure (2023, 112). The novel illuminates the structures of white privilege that still dominate New Zealand society and condition not only the siblings' lives but also their family history, as discussed in the next section.

4. THE UNHAPPY FAMILY ARCHIVES

Readers and critics have praised Reilly's novel for its unique and refreshing take on diversity. In choosing to depict a vast and heterogeneous range of characters –Māori, Pākehā, Russian, German, Scottish, Spanish, or Catalan– the novel offers a unique and uplifting portrayal of Aotearoa New Zealand, still fairly uncommon in the fiction produced in the country, and illuminates the multiple trajectories which converge in Auckland, the country's largest and most demographically diverse city. But this picture of diversity is far from ideal. The narrative discloses the unhappy family histories, the troubled trajectories of the characters on both their Māori and Russian sides, tracing a genealogy of unhappiness which emerges in various exchanges and conversations. In her insightful review of the novel, Māori novelist Becky Manawatu argues that talking (kōrero) is one of the central themes of the book: "to kōrero ..., revealing yourself and others through talking" (2021). Reilly explains that the extensive use of dialogue between the characters was intended "to

break from the insularity of the tight first person" ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.) which otherwise dominates the narrative. These conversations with friends and family members propel the action because they allow Greta and Valdin, who are facing moments of personal turmoil, to understand where they come from and how the past still conditions their present.

This is particularly evident in the case of their mother Betty. Reilly has mentioned that to a certain extent this novel is really about "the life of a woman who has a lot going on socially and emotionally" ("Invented People of Real Streets" 2022, n.p.), but whose past we are only allowed to glimpse at through snippets of conversation. Indeed, Greta defines her mother as "a fairly mysterious woman" (108) and it is only when she goes to her for sentimental advice that Greta learns details and stories of her youth, including her former relationship with another man who is still "around" as a friend (100). This revelation increases Greta's anxieties because she realises that Betty might still be seeing this man, and she fears that this might put her parents' marriage in jeopardy. Valdin also learns about his mother's unhappy past, the rejection she encounters in her small isolated rural community when she moves to Auckland to pursue a career, her feelings of shame for wanting to be someone different, her fears when she becomes pregnant with Casper that she might be "an unfit mother" or "that someone would take my baby away because of my race" (252), and the economic difficulties she experiences after marrying Linsh. Betty's story reveals the deeply-ingrained colonial legacies which not only condition her identity and her choices as a Māori woman, but also have repercussions in how her children experience their Māori heritage because their knowledge of their whakapapa (genealogical connections) is limited. At one point in the novel, Greta is told by a friend of her mother's that she looks like Hiria Hine Te Huia, a name she has never heard before, and which she later finds out corresponds to her great-grandmother, of whom she knows nothing. Valdin and Greta never visit her mother's birthplace or meet their Māori relatives and are clearly out of touch with that side of the family. Casper, by contrast, is more acutely aware of this "huge hole in [their] whapapapa" (277). Like Betty, he experiences failure and guilt after being deprived of the right to bring up his first child because the mother's Pākehā family do not see him as a suitable father and thus, unlike his siblings, he has a strong desire to reconnect with both the Russian and the Māori sides of the family. In showing their different reactions, the narrative avoids making static assumptions about what constitutes Māori identity or how characters should experience it, but it does allow for the archive of unhappy stories to emerge and "get in the way" of unproblematic or celebratory understandings of the country's diversity, highlighting the shortcomings and deficiencies of official bicultural policies.[5]

[5] New Zealand is officially defined as a bicultural country, despite its multicultural demographics. From the mid-1980s, the country has implemented a bicultural governance structure aimed at consolidating the partnership between the Indigenous Māori population and the non-Indigenous Pākehā people, with a view of honouring what was first established in the Treaty of Waitangi/ Te Tiriti o Waitangi, signed in 1840 by representatives of the Māori tribes and of the British Crown.

The novel also unearths the unhappy stories of the Russian side of the family. Throughout the narrative, Valdin finds out that his father and his uncle Thony did not arrive in New Zealand as migrants, but as refugees, a fact that Linsh has kept secret over the years. In conversations with his uncle Thony and his grandfather Vlad, Valdin learns about their rushed journey out of the country, his grandfather's fears that Thony might be in danger for being gay, and their sad separation from their mother, who is still alive in Russia, but about whom Greta and Valdin know nothing because their father has never mentioned her. Valdin comes to realise, in fact, that "my imagined reconstruction of my father coming to New Zealand is completely illogical" (82). The family's painful history of exile and loss reveals the potential of another killjoy figure, what Ahmed calls "the melancholic migrant", who shatters the happiness myth of the happy migrant which Linsh has built for himself in attempting to comply with the image of the successful university professor and middle-class citizen. Thony and Linsh appear to comply with the "happiness duty", one which binds "migrants as would-be citizens ... not to speak about racism in the present, ... or of attachments that cannot be reconciled into the colourful diversity of the multicultural nation" (Ahmed 2010, 158-159), in their attempt to forget about their painful past. In discovering the parents' stories and allowing Greta and Valdin to understand their experiences of racism, exclusion, exile and dislocation, the novel mobilises unhappiness as a form of political consciousness about the past, but also as a tool to envision new horizons of happiness. Valdin's grandfather voices this possibility when he encourages him to "live your free life and feel indebted to me for every moment of it" (106). Armed with this newly acquired knowledge, the unhappy family stories that resurface throughout the narrative, the protagonists are now better equipped to face their quest for a happy life.

5. FAMILY EVER AFTER: QUEERING THE HAPPY ENDING

If the romance narrative can be simplified into the formula "find somebody to love, work through problems, be happy" (Roach 2016, 4), Reilly's novel aligns with that basic structure by fulfilling the promise of (romantic) love for the characters. The second part of the novel, with a faster narrative pace, moves forward towards the happy resolution as both Greta and Valdin learn to work through the various conflicts they experience throughout the novel. Greta consolidates her relationship with Ell, a Scottish postgraduate student she meets at the beginning of the novel, and becomes more assertive, so that by the end of the narrative she manages to break away from Holly's toxic influence. On his part, Valdin gathers up the courage to confront his real feelings for Xabi, travels to Argentina and declares his love, intent on forming a family with him and Ernesto, the child Xabi has adopted in Colombia. Although the resolution of the conflicts involves a marriage proposal, various declarations of love and the commitment to establish a family, Reilly's novel queers the happy ending by presenting diverse romantic, sexual and affective relationships as equally valid and, as a result, by expanding the normative identity categories on which the white heteronormative romance plot is constructed. The recognisable romance tropes are

thus used to reorient hegemonic construction of happiness as linked to compulsive heterosexuality, monogamy, and reproduction (Fletcher 2008; Kamblé 2014).

This reorientation is evident in the last chapters, which revolve around the hectic preparations for a wedding of which Xabi, who is on his way to Aotearoa New Zealand, still knows nothing about. Here Reilly exploits the comic potential of having all the characters gathered in the family home while helping Valdin with the planning, even though he has not formally proposed to Xabi yet. The pre-wedding scenes involve the baking of a wedding cake, a rushed trip to the registry office, and the organising of two pre-wedding parties, one Spanish and one Russian, even though as Greta comically notes, "V doesn't really identify as Russian and Xabi doesn't really identify as Spanish" (299). The gathering of all family members for the wedding allows Reilly to close the various narrative threads and to queer or subvert the conventional happy ending traditionally marked by the heterosexual and monogamous union. This is most evident in the marriage between Valdin and Xabi and their adoption of Ernesto; but also in the final revelation about Betty and Linsh's relationship. Greta's, who has been worried that her mother is having an affair with another man and might be divorcing her father, overhears an intimate exchange between her mother and her uncle's husband, Giuseppe, and then finds out through her brothers that Giuseppe and Thony have put an end to their relationship and that Giuseppe and Betty have been seeing each other. When she approaches her father, he lets her know this is a consensual arrangement based on their mutual understanding of each other's needs: "When you love someone –her father explains– you have to trust them and you have to believe that they wouldn't make choices that would intentionally harm you" (306). The novel thus introduces the topic of consensual non-monogamous relationships as a non-normative but viable form of happiness for the protagonists' parents, presenting Betty as a killjoy figure, in that she questions the myth of the happy housewife which Ahmed identifies as the cornerstone sustaining the idea of the nuclear family (2010, 51).

Ultimately, *Greta & Valdin* proves that, far from becoming a source of tension, repression or anxiety, the family provides love and protection for its members. Ahmed mentions that many white feminist consciousness novels "tend to involve freedom-from-family and its narrow scripts of duty and obligation" in contrast to feminist novels by black authors which often "involve freedom-to-family, as family is what is lost through unfolding histories of displacement and dispossession" (2010, 86). The novel shows how the stories of displacement and dispossession experienced by their parents affect the siblings, but also how by unravelling some of their secrets they become closer to their parents. The narrative advances by depicting their reorientation *to* family and by expanding the apparent initial focus on romantic love to other forms of love and care among family members, and by extension, to forms of social justice which involve affective equality (Lynch 2020) and happiness for all the characters. In the aforementioned review, Becky Manawatu defines *Greta & Valdin* as both "a book that loves people" –this is evident in Reilly's warm and caring construction of her characters– but also a novel which depicts people who are "remarkably capable of love" (2021). Indeed, the novel displays love in all its forms, between lifelong partners and newly formed couples, between members of the nuclear and extended

family, and between friends and members of the community. The narrative thus ascribes to bell hooks' proposition of choosing love as a radical form of relating to others, as "the core of all human interaction" (2006, 246), as a strategy to combat the "lovelessness" (248) on which systems of oppression and domination are sustained and as the practice of freedom. Reilly's characters remain acutely aware of how the normative scripts of happiness perpetuate structures of repression and oppression, and interrogate them by choosing love; the family provides them with the freedom they need to make their own choices and with a network of support to live happily in agreement with those choices. In her study on romantic narratives, Catherine Roach argues that romance is reparative for the reader because it allows her to imagine relationships based on mutual support, respect and trust and thus to fantasize with "the end of patriarchy" (2016, 180). The reparative quality of Reilly's novel not only resides in its bringing a joyful resolution to the story in the form of balanced and supportive romantic relationships for both Greta and Valdin, but also in the characters' struggles for the recognition and validation of other forms of loving and thus of *being* in the world. In sum, what Roach calls "[a] Society of Love," one in of "social justice, civil rights, power-with instead of power-over, an end to violence, and body pleasure and consent-based play of all sorts" (2016, 184).

6. CONCLUSION

Rebecca K Reilly's *Greta & Valdin* playfully engages with romance narrative patterns and motifs, but this does not work in detriment of its politics; on the contrary it allows the author to imagine a world in which romantic love (as well as other forms of love) allows the characters to thrive and experience joy without precluding their active involvement in locating the many sources of unhappiness that condition their lives. Thus, Reilly's un/happy novel troubles conventional scripts of happiness to trace the unhappy stories of racism and homophobia, sexism and exclusion, colonialism and dispossession, displacement and loss, which cannot and must not be forgotten, and it narrates Greta and Valdin navigating their personal conflicts aided by a solid network of support and care provided by an unusual but strongly-knit family structure and a supportive community of friends who choose love as the practice of freedom. The narrative leads its characters to an emotionally satisfying conclusion, showing love (in all its forms) as a matter of social justice and vindicating the *right* to (rather than the duty of) happiness.

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