Tarrying with Trauma While Improvising Gender in Alice Munro's 1978 collection *Who Do You Think You Are?*

"For Munro, a thing can be true, and not true, but true nonetheless."
—Margaret Atwood, *The Guardian.*

2013 Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro's 1978 collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* enacts what Lorraine York calls Munro's theory of fiction as "tarrying with difficult emotions and knowledges" (213). Judith Butler's seminal 1988 theory of gender performativity postulates that improvising gender incurs obvious and covert social punishments. Butler insists that performing gender is "an innovative affair" of "ongoing continuous dramatic acts" that reflect the body's "mode of embodying" possibilities and how the body "is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation" ("Performative" 521).

In the journey towards self-awareness for Rose, Munro's protagonist, surviving trauma and defying gender scripts in Munro's mythical Huron County in southwestern Ontario during the 1940s to 1970s cause the "sticky affects" of shame and humiliation identified by Amelia DeFalco (37); the sense that hope is too intense to be endured; and, in stressful situations, either an unwilled emotional dissociation or the willful withdrawal of emotion. Trauma causes disconnection from others and from self; however, Rose also subverts the intergenerational cycle of the victim becoming the victimizer by achieving a sense of community and strengthening personal authenticity. Rose's failures are what Jack Halberstam defines as "queer failures": they are triumphs of personal authenticity over gender essentialism (qtd in Goldman 87). The collection's title includes the irony that, while Rose pays the punitive social costs of contesting gender, her improvisation of it accords with Western culture's imperative of pursuing self-knowledge.

Fear and unspoken love are layered in Rose's relationship with her father. Lee Garner and Jennifer Murray point out that disciplinary beatings were considered socially acceptable in 1940s rural Ontario (3); nonetheless, they inform what Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey call the traumatized child's emotional codebook of trauma that connects men with "threat, anger, and fear" (31). As Garner and Murray argue, Rose mythologizes her father as "the King of Royal Beatings" (*Who* 18-19), theatrically playing the abject victim to his physical dominance and to his imagined judgment that women should remain intellectually childish and avoid inappropriate pursuits, such as Rose's dream of becoming an actress. She discovers that her father lives a secret life of the imagination, inappropriate for working-class men of his time; thus, the vehemence of his beatings springs from his own victimhood. Rose does "not mean to change" those parts of herself that defy her father's patriarchal expectations; moreover, her knowledge of his victimhood enables her to intuit that he secretly loves her as she is (*Who* 50).

The cycle of trauma between Flo, Rose's stepmother, and Rose exemplifies Butler's definition of womanhood as "a becoming, a constructing that cannot be said to originate or to end" (*Gender Trouble* 45). Marlene Goldman argues that Flo, another victim-victimizer, having been beaten and scarred as a teenager, "projects her rage and shame onto Rose" by arranging the beatings (91). Flo comforts Rose with treats, undermining her ability to cope with trauma by stressing that the victimizer has absolute power to give or withdraw comfort (Herman 78). Rose hides her self-pitying sniffles from Flo, emphasizing DeFalco's argument that "cultures that value autonomy and [emotional] invulnerability scoff at tears, fears, swoons, and sighs" (37). Yet, Flo also gives Rose the dual legacy of storytelling and mimicry. These gifts serve Rose as emotional economies, identified by DeFalco and York (2). They empower her to emotionally

disconnect from violence and class shame and allow her to look down on the harsh judgements of her small-town culture.

Enforcing the cultural ethic of “who do you think you are?,” the townspeople of Hanratty repeatedly judge Rose to be too self-confident and self-assertive, but “she [pays] no attention” to this warning (*Who* 208). At the same time, she is haunted by the shame inflicted by trauma, as Gersham Kaufman defines it: “To feel shame is to feel *seen* in a painfully diminished sense…to live with shame is to experience the very essence or heart of the self as wanting” (qtd in Goldman 80). As an adult, when missing a man she loves, Rose feels “[t]he most mortifying thing of all was hope” (*Who* 180). Rose learns from Flo’s sickened reaction to the danger of Rose’s hopeful first love that she must cover this danger with a cultural mask of emotional invulnerability. DeFalco and York argue that Munro’s work exposes the cultural binary of reason over emotion, where “affects expose and destabilize, threaten and transgress prevailing gender and sexual politics…Munro’s characters grapple with the risk of emotionality” (2). .

Goldman connects beatings with being “smashed” (92), and the motif of being “smashed” physically and psychologically represents the cultural role of women in Hanratty. Rose’s classmate Franny McGill is repeatedly raped by her brother and father, and her intellectual disability allegedly springs from being “smashed against a wall” (*Who* 29). Internally, Rose dismisses Franny’s victimhood as “only further abuse” (*Who* 30). When molested by a supposed minister on a train to Toronto at aged 19, Rose dissociates because of earlier trauma induced by the beatings: she internalizes the victim role and desires to be “[p]ounded, pleasured, reduced, exhausted” (*Who* 120). Later, Rose feels “smashed under the skin” when she imagines being humiliated as a college instructor (*Who* 168). The “smashing” constructs identity and submission: for Butler, gender “is in no way a stable identity or locus of

agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time [and] instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts"* (516).

Because Rose contests the values of her patriarchal culture, her marriage is a power struggle. When she meets Patrick, her wealthy and condescending future husband, after being attacked by an anonymous leg grabber in the university library, Patrick views her as a damsel in distress, as depicted in the painting of the *Beggar Maid* whose "milky surrender" he finds appealing (*Who* 82). Rose does not identify with this image, but, perceiving her experience through her codebook of trauma, she desires an ideal of dominant masculinity that could reduce the *Beggar Maid* to "a puddle, with his fierce desire" (*Who* 82). Rose is pleased when she and Patrick master the socially expected task of sexual intimacy, but her post-coital desire for sweets is more authentic: as Katrin Berndt notes, it is "genuine and sensual" (531).

Yuhui Bao (9) argues that their relationship becomes a sadomasochistic tug of war, as they exchange roles of victim and victimizer. At university, before marriage, Rose sexualizes Patrick in the snow, instigating a conflict with the intention of forcing Patrick to dominate her (Bao 9): "Her bullying hand went for his fly. To stop her, to keep her quiet, Patrick had to struggle with her…As soon as he started to fight she was relieved…but she had to keep resisting, until he proved himself stronger" (*Who* 85). As the marriage progresses, the damage done to Rose is not only emotional but also physical: Rose made "scars on her wrists and her body…with a razor blade" (*Who* 143); as Herman observes, self-injury occurs in trauma "to relieve unbearable emotional pain" (109). On another occasion, "Patrick had tried to choke her" and at another time, she tore up "handfuls of grass" outside in her nightgown (*Who* 143). Rose's marriage repeats the abusive relationship she had with her father, because, as Herman notes, "no ordinary relationship offers the same intensity as the pathological bond with the abuser" (92).

Jack Halberstam defines the term "the queer art of failure" as "generative and productive forms of failure, including the failures associated with imperfection, illness and disability" (87). As a single working mother, Rose struggles with the guilt and fear of failing to provide for her daughter Anna, yet she also feels accomplished and learns to understand domesticity as "the meaning of shelter" (*Who* 151). According to Kristina Getz, this life Rose creates "however briefly" is "effectively free from the limitations and expectations of patriarchal motherhood" (104), but informed by 1970s second-wave feminism, Rose must make the binary choice to relinquish motherhood for freedom (Getz 98, 109). Paying one of the most devastating costs of improvising gender roles, she exchanges her relationship with Anna for her budding acting career.

Rose blames herself for losing Anna and for her desperate need to be in a relationship. Herman notes that in the aftermath of trauma "[i]t is the victims, not the perpetrators, who feel guilty" (53). Rose refuses to be defeated by guilt, but it impedes her healing.

The loss of Simon, the one man who might have been the love of Rose's life, causes Rose to consider that such "disarrangements" are unfair and leave her feeling helpless and powerless. Not knowing about Simon's cancer, Rose quits waiting for him to show up for the weekend and drives west, leaving behind her dependence on male power, "a magnetic force" that weakens as she drives across Canada (*Who* 181). In Vancouver, Rose lands a role as "pseudo-mother" on long-running television series, likely based on the *Beachcombers* nurturing-mother figure, Molly, the cafe owner ("Molly's Reach"). Rose's letting go of the pursuit of romantic love is an affective economy and an emergence of another kind of love. What Lawrence Mathews calls Munro's "art of disarrangement" shows that Rose is able to leave behind the ideal of "a man for my life" (*Who* 175) and to reclaim her authentic self.

Perry and Winfrey remind us that trauma causes disconnection, and that recovery involves reconnection. By comforting Flo in her onset dementia with physical comedy, Rose reconnects with the younger part of herself whose "stubborn allegiances" formed "a layer of loyalty and protectiveness...hardening" around the town (*Who* 93-4). She finds one of Flo's old wigs from an awards ceremony and brings it to the County Home. When Flo comically cries "it is a dead grey squirrel?" Rose sticks "it on her head, to continue the comedy," and Flo laugh[s] "so that she rocked back and forth in her crib" (*Who* 200). This parallels Flo's entertainment after the beatings, suspending herself "stiff as a board" from head to heels across two chairs; the trick brings the home back to equilibrium with "a feeling of permission, relaxation, even a current of happiness" (*Who* 23). This is the only time that the word "happiness" is used in the collection: it provides a touchstone for the legacy of multi-dimensional performance passed from Flo to Rose, and the personal empowerment that comes with it.

Halberstam states, "the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting the endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all our own inevitable fantastical failures" (qtd in Goldman 88). Rose's reconnection includes her deliberate return to Hanratty to visit Ralph Gillespie, her childhood "partner in mime" and "the queer art of failure" (Goldman 96). In adulthood, Ralph still mimics Milton Homer, the town clown, but his audience no longer knows his original subject; hence, his artistry is lost on them. Yet Ralph mimics to maintain authenticity in the face of his own "smashing": he has been severely injured while in the Navy (*Who* 214). While Ralph, a foil to Rose, deals with his trauma through self-medication with alcohol, Rose finds healing in her dedication to acting. In conversation with Ralph, her shame eases: "That peculiar shame which she carried around with her seemed to have been eased…when she thought

about [Ralph]…her mistakes appeared unimportant" (*Who* 218). As Goldman argues, in Rose's platonic friendship with Ralph, she does not give him sadistic power and there is no distorting shame (98); they can relate as equals. Rose continues her affective economy upon Ralph's death due to a drunken fall as "an honourable restraint [keeps] her quiet," but in the denouement of the final story of the collection, she privately acknowledges their artistic kinship: "she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own" ("Who" 219).

Who Do You Think You Are? is thus part of Kali Tal's "literature of trauma… written from the need to tell and retell" the traumatic experience (21). Alice Munro's often autobiographical stories are frank about her own traumas. DeFalco points out that in the story "The Ottawa Valley," from the collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, the narrator Alice Munro, who was unable to take care of her mother who suffered with Parkinson's disease, confesses that fictional artifice has proved insufficient to exorcise the ghost of her mother: "she has *stuck* to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same" (qtd in DeFalco 50). Because *Who Do You Think You Are?* expresses Munro's theory of fiction and because it is profoundly linked to her own "tarrying" with "difficult emotions" – York insists that the collection is located at the "epicentre" of Munro's work (213). Just as Rose is tormented by trauma induced by her father's beatings, Munro is tormented by what her daughter, Sheila, calls "the way she shut herself off" from her mother for fear of being engulfed by "pity and grief" (S. Munro 161). Munro too suffered her father's beatings between the ages of ten and twelve for the same reasons as Rose: she "talked back," she was defiant, disrespectful (S. Munro 151). Rose's father is a fictionalization of Munro's own father, who suffered from depressive anxiety because his intellectual passions had to be kept secret; Sheila Munro attests to her grandfather's failure to

find “refuge” (99). Munro’s stories stake “a major claim to shame,” as Margaret Atwood puts it (“Portrait” 99), because they are rooted in traumas familial and cultural, particularly living under the influence of the repressive “who do you think you are?” ethic, as Rose does.

While Rose tarries with trauma, she persists in her pursuit of self-knowledge. Through failures that are also triumphs, Rose finds authenticity, which Margaret Atwood says is, for “Munro’s women,” “an essential element, like air” (*MBS* xvii).

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