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Power through Intersubjectivity: Representing the Resilient Child in Urban Survival Narratives

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The problematic relationship between urban dislocation, the proscribed spaces of urban childhood, child marginalisation and the societal invisibility of under-age citizens is widely thematised in contemporary children’s literature. This article examines how childhood agency, as a form of power, becomes aligned with resilience through intersubjectivity in the narrative representations of marginalised child subjects in Virginia Hamilton’s The Planet of Junior Brown (1987) and Julie Bertagna’s The Spark Gap (1996). Depictions of child homelessness, which construct resilience in the determination to survive experiences of marginalisation, dislocation and loss, offer an opportunity to examine representations of child subjectivity. This discussion centres on the role of intersubjectivity as an alternative construction to some humanistic frames that privilege the notion of an individual agency divested of childhood’s limitations. It identifies the experiential codes which more accurately reflect the choices available to young readers, where liminal spaces of homelessness that first establish social and cultural dependencies are re-interpreted through depictions of relational connection among displaced child subjects. The discussion suggests that these multifocal novels construct dialogic representations of social discourse that affirm intersubjectivity as a form of agency.

Key words: homelessness, agency, intersubjectivity, children’s literature, Virginia Hamilton, Julie Bertagna.

The struggle toward agency and social becoming is a dominant theme in children’s literature. This narrative pattern, which Robyn McCallum identifies as a growth out of childhood solipsism toward social maturity, is particularly common in quest narratives (Ideologies of Identity 7). When coupled with depictions of child displacement, the same pattern offers an opportunity to compare representations of childhood agency that differ in their adaptations of agentic power. The fictional portrayals of homeless subjects selected for this discussion not only refuse comfortable solutions to the complex issue of displacement, but also promote alternative forms of agency more appropriate to child audiences. A common consequence of loss and displacement is powerlessness, so representations of agency – such as the power to intervene – can be problematic if patterns of childhood growth are linked with homelessness. This is because the power to act, which works within a text to affirm childhood agency, is essential
to the development of character, yet the writer needs to avoid attributing adult capacities for intervention to child characters.

Narrative representations of displacement address important issues such as the loss of a primary caregiver, the fracturing of family connections, and the relative invisibility of children in urban settings. The realistic portrayal of homeless children acknowledges that such children have little power to act independently or determine their own circumstances, and that childhood agency is always limited. Depicted outcomes will lie between two polarities: at one pole is an ideal concept of childhood power that is in practice unachievable, and at the other is a form of disempowered alienation that denies characters what might be deemed a reasonable degree of social agency. This dualistic representation of childhood subjectivity will be addressed in greater detail at a later point in this paper.

The two novels selected for this discussion, *The Planet of Junior Brown* (1971) by Virginia Hamilton and *The Spark Gap* (1996) by Julie Bertagna, evidence an approach toward the construction of childhood agency that balances limitations and possibilities. Most notably, intersubjectivity forms the basis for acts of intervention and affirms the agentic capacities of subjects through connection with other homeless characters. Child subjects are depicted as social beings who gain agency through interaction. The setting of these novels within the precincts of densely populated cities – New York City and Glasgow, Scotland – has important functions: first, their cosmopolitan settings duplicate problems inherent to dense urban environments; and second, although each setting incorporates local elements, there is a sense that these childhood predicaments of loss could indeed occur in any city and impact any child. The narrative use of such environments makes visible otherwise invisible structures of inclusion and exclusion, structures that produce subjects on the edges of daily life. Because liminality depicts homelessness as a position of exclusion, outside the societal structures of everyday life, the power to act is achieved through interactions that affirm social being. For this reason, and to facilitate my investigation of the relationship between intersubjectivity and agency, I have deliberately chosen narratives that promote intersubjectivity in social alliances which are supportive rather than destructive to their homeless subjects.

The more recent novel, Bertagna’s *The Spark Gap*, is set in Scotland where a child protagonist, Kerrie, lives with a grandparent carer. When the grandmother’s sudden death displaces the protagonist from her home in a city tenement block, the consequences are both instant and unpredictable. The author exposes societal issues associated with survival and homelessness in depictions of loss—loss of place, separation from affirming family structures, and distance from previous friendships. The focus provided by the novel’s title – *The Spark Gap* – draws attention to positive social connections by which characters negotiate relational barriers: for example, the small toy ‘sparkly’ and its ability to reflect light rays across the dark spaces of the tenement rooftop provides an appropriate image for the formation of new relationships among similarly marginalised and homeless children. As a metonymic device that signifies the
broader intent of Bertagna’s narrative frame, the ‘sparkly’ aligns intersubjectivity with the power of social connection. The image represents newly lighted spaces of association: first in Kerrie’s attitude toward similarly marginalised subjects, Mauve and Skip, and subsequently in an ongoing reciprocal capacity to break down social barriers through interconnection. These exchanges are depicted intersubjectively in the narrating of perception, reaction and response. The novel portrays new relational connections: first as dialogic patterns mirror reciprocity between Skip and Kerrie, then, in the layering of shared understandings, a relational bond is established between the three displaced characters. This depiction is strengthened by events: their rooftop shelter is destroyed – an act that severs Kerrie’s connection to her past life; Mauve’s paintings of the rooftop children bring in funds; and the group accepts a commission that leads to the continuation of Mauve’s work with the two children in a wilderness setting. The image of the sparkly’s kaleidoscopic light, a continuing presence within the novel, metonymically frames and initiates social and relational connections that affirm group capacities for action.

The second novel, *The Planet of Junior Brown*, is set in the city of New York and traces the progressive displacement of a young boy, Junior Brown, who, while physically marginalised by his obesity, is further traumatised by a toxic domestic environment. In initial scenes Junior and Buddy, a homeless and street-wise youth whose address remains unknown, meet daily with Mr Poole (ex-teacher and current janitor) in the basement of their local school. Hamilton’s novel, at one level, examines the invisibility of homeless and displaced children, but the intricate web of relationship is inscribed at a deeper level within the narrative. Hamilton depicts the development of trust between Buddy and Junior in a manner that promotes the power of social connection as a survival strategy. The author’s narrative exploration of systemic co-operation and support among homeless children on New York City streets is extraordinary in its construction of co-operative power amid the marginalised population of displaced persons. The novel opens symbolically with a description of a planetarium, a model of a new solar system to which a large planet has been added, the ‘Planet of Junior Brown’: ‘Glazed in beige and black, the planet of Junior Brown was shaped in the soft round contours of Junior Brown’s face. It was a stupendous mass in a brand new solar system’ (Hamilton 3–4). Buddy’s design of the planet asserts Junior’s place in the cosmos and, while debate between the three main protagonists attempts to establish how the addition of such a large planet might impact the stability of a solar system, at a more figurative level the cosmic simulation is a metaphor which grounds the novel’s quest theme in relational mutuality. Agency is framed intersubjectively in representations of life systems: within the novel’s multileveled allusions to planetary systems, for example, Hamilton depicts cosmic systems. When Buddy fashions the planet of Junior Brown in ‘the soft round contours’ of his friend’s face, Hamilton conveys the intention of one subject to understand the effects that obesity – ‘a stupendous mass’ – would exert upon another subject. In effect, Buddy imagines what it might be like to inhabit the embodied self of Junior Brown. When Buddy’s hidden world becomes apparent as a subculture
of ‘planets’ by which homeless children are rescued from life on the streets, his capacity for care as ‘Tomorrow Billy’ is identified from its source in his origins as a street kid who has been similarly rescued by another ‘Tomorrow Billy’. In the novel’s culminating scenes Buddy consults Mr Poole, explains his role in sustaining the ‘planet’, and requests help to rescue his friend from further mental deterioration. Together they winch Junior Brown into the ‘planet’ shelter where Junior finds a temporary haven.

It becomes clear that because nurtured interconnection between marginalised subjects in each novel provides a frame for acts of compassion and the power to intervene, individual heroism is being understated. As an alternative construction of childhood agency the authors convey a sense of social agency through relational mutuality. Bertagna’s representations of resilience and survival depict an intertwining of relational interactions among the three protagonists, Kerrie, Skip, and Mauve. The experience of social connection initiated by the shared rooftop space has been intensified by homelessness, in that mutual need grounds the creative ventures that support group survival. Hamilton depicts a more systemic frame of rescue in her novel as the interconnections between her two main protagonists, Junior Brown and Buddy, identify a gradual unfolding of Junior’s predicament. Relational mutuality culminates in intervention when Buddy identifies the origins of Junior’s obesity and of his failing mental health. Hamilton indicates a shift in representation here in that, even as the combined frame of social agency and mutual understanding portrays a capacity for resilient action, the concept of individual heroic achievement remains muted.

REPRESENTING RELATIONAL CONNECTIONS AS INTERSUBJECTIVITY

As a recent theoretical concept, the term ‘intersubjectivity’ has been linked to Edmund Husserl’s notion of the ‘lifeworld’, a concept which Nick Crossley identifies as the ‘shared and acquired cultural maps’ which exist as an irreducible part of interactive social space (Intersubjectivity 14–16). McCallum notes the emergence of the same concept in Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism: that constructions of subjectivity may be identified in the cultural assimilation of linguistic frames, an appropriation ‘that strives to determine the very bases of our ideological relations with the world’ (Dialogic Imagination 342). Bakhtin’s dialogic theory proposes that the power of social discourse is embedded in this immersion within linguistic systems. As McCallum argues, constructions of the subject and Bakhtin’s concept of the novel as a dialogic representation of social discourse are concepts that both ground and inform discussions about the intersubjective construction of agency in narrative fiction (Ideologies of Identity 9).

Intersubjectivity has emerged as an important concept in the psychoanalytical field of relational theory. In an analysis of mother-infant relationships Jessica Benjamin suggests that ‘very early on we find that recognition between persons – understanding and being understood, being in attunement – is
becoming an end in itself’ (*Like Subjects, Love Objects* 33). Defining aspects of change in relational theories of the self, Benjamin’s research suggests that, as an ongoing transformative process, intersubjectivity is strongly linked to the recognition of the ‘other’ as ‘another subject’. Mutual recognition is made possible through reciprocity, Benjamin argues, in that ‘a need for recognition’ is balanced by ‘a capacity to recognise others in return’ (30). As an expression of psychoanalytical perspectives, Benjamin’s affirmation here of recognition, reciprocity and mutuality as important aspects of intersubjective theory is concordant with Crossley’s view that the capacity for ‘putting oneself in the place of the other’ is an important function of intersubjective practices (*Intersubjectivity* 14). Intersubjective frames in fiction reflect that aspect of relational connection, now portrayed by interactions between subjects, and will also include the construction of acts of recognition and of reciprocity in the layering of dialogic exchange.

In Hamilton’s depiction of empathy, Buddy’s response to Junior’s problematic obesity portrays just such an act of recognition and reciprocity in that one subject’s gaze records the recognition of another subject. In the following segment, the slipping between the narratorial focalisation of Buddy and Buddy’s focalisation of Junior creates the sense of an active participation in Junior’s distress:

The whole time Junior talked, Buddy sat before him. His eyes never left Junior’s face. One moment, Buddy wrung his hands and the next, he stuffed them deep in his pockets. All his own tough coolness slipped away as he came to understand the awful ugliness Junior felt about himself. Sitting there listening and watching, Buddy could be, for a few seconds at a time, Junior Brown wanting to hide himself from the world. (Hamilton 33)

Participation is signified in the depictions of gaze—‘his eyes never left Junior’s face’—and in Buddy’s physical actions: ‘sat before him’; ‘Buddy wrung his hands’; ‘he stuffed them deep in his pockets’. With each small embodied movement, in the wringing of hands, in the ‘tough coolness’ that slips away, Hamilton signifies growing mutuality. The narrator, as an external focalising agent, conveys Buddy’s empathic identification with Junior by drawing attention to the small movements by which Buddy’s comprehension of Junior’s deep feelings of abjection are made visible.

In an examination of the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Jürgen Habermas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Crossley argues that theories of intersubjectivity will reflect those broad societal relationships that build community within the lifeworld of modern societies (*Intersubjectivity* 152). The ‘lifeworld’, a concept introduced by Husserl and Habermas, has been closely linked with intersubjectivity and, as Crossley suggests, both concepts are related to modern notions of citizenship. Lifeworlds are identified in the shared meanings and understandings that broadly shape both culture and language. Hence the notion of sharing a ‘common symbolic interworld’ that is ‘effected within a shared system of relevancies and a shared context’ is one way, so Crossley argues, of explaining how the lifeworld both surrounds and supports
individuals within societal groups (*Intersubjectivity* 141). The lifeworld concept offers an informative way to discuss the constructions of narrative space and the interworlds of meaning in the fictional worlds of *The Planet of Junior Brown* and *The Spark Gap*.

Hamilton’s notion of small interworlds as systems for survival is metonymic in its depiction of lifeworld structures. Shared meanings and understandings are embedded in Buddy’s remembrance of another ‘Tomorrow Billy’. This recollection of his early years of homelessness is a representation of the more formative aspects of inclusion. Buddy’s early integration into the ‘planet’ system has been accepted on condition that all knowledge gained will be knowledge shared. His promise is the founding impulse for ongoing interactions with street children like himself:

> How many ‘Tomorrow Billy’s had there been, and for how long? It had taken Buddy three years to learn all that the bigger boy on his planet could teach him [...] Always they’d ask him, ‘Tomorrow, Billy? Will we see you again tomorrow night?’ The boy had always answered yes. (Hamilton 73).

‘Tomorrow Billy’ encapsulates both question and response and signifies an ongoing promise of responsible relationship with homeless children: care in the choice of shelter, the pursuit of food and clothing, and in the willingness to maintain the responsibility until care is not needed. Intersubjectivity is pivotal to this notion of systemic rescue. Crossley’s suggestion, that intersubjectivity integrates the subject into an interactive lifeworld of culturally interpreted experience (*Intersubjectivity* 14), thus affords an apt frame within which to place Hamilton’s depiction of a lifeworld where social interactions support the formation of agency.

THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

As a representation of social acts of exchange, focalisation provides an important framework for the study of intersubjectivity in the two novels. The capacity for fiction to depict social exchange reflects what Bakhtin observes as a tendency, through interaction, toward discourse assimilation: ‘Another’s discourse [...] determine(s) the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very bases of our behaviour’ (*Dialogic Imagination* 342). Intersubjective acts of exchange are constructed in the layering of interactions between subjects. These acts, recorded in dialogue, in narration of perception, and in character focalisations, construct shifts in perspective within the text. This pattern of expression, response and adjustment indicates the continuing development of relational connections and constructs a multifocal or layered discourse that is evident in both novels.

Fictions that model intersubjective forms of agency are most likely to encourage plurality in the construction of point of view. The representation of independent subject positions, an important aspect of focalisation in novels which depict the growth of subjects through relational connections, also becomes
evident in the authors’ construction of multifocal strands.’ What George Butte refers to as ‘deep intersubjectivity’, a discourse strategy that inscribes social and relational aspects in the novel, is constructed through the interweaving of character perceptions. This strategy encourages complex layering in the novel because subjects—both focalising and focalised—are socially constructed as relationally connected: they serve as fictional representations of relational embeddedness between lifeworld and subjects. Depictions of interrelating subjects introduce an inbuilt capacity for characters to reflect the consciousness of other selves at multiple levels. As an examination of shifts in representation, notably the ‘mirrorings of self’ conveyed in the subject’s recognition, exchange and realigned representations of other subjects, Butte’s analysis suggests the manner by which interrelational connections in the novel are intersubjectively constructed (33).

Narrative layering in The Spark Gap is evident in Bertagna’s constructions of dialogue, between characters, but is also evident in the focalisation of that exchange in perceptions and responses to the recognition of another perspective. The following segment is an example of how shifts in focalisation convey an intersubjective space. In the first week of rooftop seclusion, Kerrie declares to Mauve that she finds Skip’s elusive presence troubling and that her overtures have been rebuffed. When Skip crosses the rooftop space to demonstrate why the sparkly is important to him, the dialogue between the two characters gives some indication of a growing mutual understanding. The passage also demonstrates the textual layering that Butte describes as deep intersubjectivity: that is, the exchange reveals how a representation of the consciousness of another subject’s self may alter perspectives. The segment begins with Kerrie’s focalisation. Her perceptions are both visual—as her gaze embeds observations of embodied stance—and interpretive—as her spoken response and internalised reasoning:

In one hand he held the sparkly disc. In the other his tatty notebook. The boy stood in her doorway.

‘Sorry, didn’t hear you knock.’ Kerrie was crisp and polite. He hadn’t.
Ignores me all this time, she fumed, then comes barging in at midnight. He had some cheek.
Skip was looking at her with the same flicker in his face she’d seen this morning.
‘I brought over my sparkly.’
[...] Kerrie wondered what on earth she was supposed to say. She’d better say something quick: he looked as if he could just turn and go.
‘Right. Well, come in then.’
Hardly encouraging, but what did he expect when he had taken her totally by surprise? Then, she had done the same to him, hadn’t she, barging up on his roof without warning.
Skip shuffled in and stooped down beside the bedside candle. He placed the sparkly under its light. Then he spun it. Kerrie caught her breath as the dimness of the room scattered. Brilliant fireflies darted from the sparkly, stars exploded, rainbow lightening forked and spiked [...]
'It's—it's utterly crazy. You could watch it for hours.'
'I do,' said Skip.
[Kerrie] 'So you do.' (61)

Thought functions in tandem with focalisation in the above passage in that the 'seeing' conveyed through Kerrie's gaze – ‘The boy stood in her doorway’ – is supplemented by her non-voiced perspective, first as direct thought ('Ignores me all this time') and then modulating into free indirect thought before a break-through to direct speech dialogue. Kerrie’s reviewed perception marks a shift in attitude as Skip stands before her. Although her initial reactions signify annoyance – ‘Didn’t hear you knock’ – free indirect thought conveys her awareness of another perspective, that is, Kerrie realises that Skip feels her presence on the rooftop as a sudden intrusion even as she has felt his arrival as an intrusion into her space. The scene is first focalised by Kerrie but Skip’s willingness to cross separating spaces and enter the other’s shelter, albeit with caution as suggested by his movement ‘shuffled in’, is narrator focalised. Another shift in focalisation occurs when the narrated view of Skip’s actions with the ‘sparkly’ registers Kerry’s response – ‘Kerrie caught her breath’ – as Kerrie is again the focalising agent. The visual effect of the sparkly depicts this shift as a new relational dynamic in the novel, an effect that is metonymic of intersubjective processes. In effect then, Skip’s overture – ‘Then he spun it’ – is answered by Kerrie’s entering into perception of this metonym of Skip’s self. Relational interaction follows when Kerrie’s response to the light conveys this recognition: Skip’s attempt to bridge the gap between them has been affirmed by his willingness to leave the sparkly, his most treasured object, with her.

Connections, shared environments, and shared experiences within these shifts of focalisation become evident because of the novel’s polyphonic construction of perception, perspective and reciprocal response. Even as Kerrie begins to understand Skip’s fascination with the disc and its shimmering patterns – ‘You could watch it for hours’ – further dialogue conveys Skip’s insight, a personal knowledge of solitude: ‘“Maybe I’ve been there,” he said at last. “Maybe I didn’t fancy seeing somebody else there”’ (64). This recognition is voiced and empathic even though the disclosure reveals that Skip’s avoidance of connection was an avoidance of the other’s distress – ‘seeing somebody else there’. The shared knowledge, an implied recognition of loss and sorrow, remains unspoken but hangs in the novel’s silences depicting the stark liminality of rooftop solitude.

The dialogue between Skip and Kerrie, which follows later in the text, illustrates the way relational interactions may also be confrontational. Representations of perception, perspective and response embed intersubjectivity as a dynamic process: resistance invites new perspectives and demonstrates growth when one subject assimilates another’s discourse. In this case, Kerrie’s perspective has been broadened by recognition that Skip’s self and expressed perceptions have value:

[Kerrie:] 'We’re stuck, you know. In the middle of nowhere.'
Skip sighed. 'In the middle of everywhere.'
[Kerrie:] 'I mean it.'
[Skip:] ‘Aye.’
‘[… ] Kerrie flung his coat at him. ‘I need a walk. Come on.’
[… ]
Skip began to walk back down the hill.
He turned back.
‘I’m sick of fighting against things. I used to like it ’cause when it hurt I knew I was alive. Most of the time I dinny feel anything. Here, I’m making songs, eating proper food, seeing a bit of the world, and you think it’s nothing. ‘Feels like living to me.’ [… ]
[Kerrie:] ‘Just give me a minute. I’ve a plan[… ] I just need to do something or I’m scared I’ll cave in and go back. I keep thinking about my mum.’ (150–1)

In the turn-about of dialogue, Skip confronts Kerrie’s perspective with his own perceptions: he conveys an appreciation of change as well as an appreciation of survival—‘Feels like living to me’. This assertion offers a counterpoint to Kerrie’s negativity, but the relational connection constructed at this point in the novel demonstrates how dialogic exchange—the recognition of and response to another perspective (Skip’s)—may represent agency through intersubjectivity. Paradoxically this collision with another’s point of view leads to further confrontation, and a shift in perspective is evident in Kerrie’s response as she acknowledges her unresolved conflict as another agenda—‘I’m scared I’ll cave in and go back. I keep thinking about my mum’ (151).

Bertagna’s construction of this process, the recognition of another self, or—as in the characterisation of Kerrie—recognition of conflicted self, is dialogic because the confluence of multifocal perspectives represents intersubjective notions of social becoming. Each expressed opinion creates a response from the other participant that may include gestures or precipitate further joint activities. Perspectives, once exchanged, openly interact with the perceptions or gestures of the other and allow movement and compromise in making decisions. When Kerrie senses that she is ‘stuck’ and would prefer some action that would keep her inner feelings at bay Skip’s response challenges her perception of their situation as he first walks away, then turns to assert his own feelings. Mutuality, depicted in the willingness to understand another perspective, provides a future orientation in the exchange of opinion. The ensuing hike across the moor with the intention to busk in what seems to be a nearby city centre may be ill-fated, but attitudinal changes convey new views of self and of other self. Concluding scenes imply that each subject experiences newly acquired resilience even though the societal interventions that both Kerrie and Skip have avoided are suddenly implemented.

REPRESENTING AGENCY AS A FORM OF POWER

The problem of dualistic representations of agency pervades child and adolescent survival narratives because the mythic structures that give shape to quest patterns—those depicting the journey and return of the hero—have originated in an heroic tradition grounded in individualism. The journey of a quest fiction is a passage of personal maturation: that is, the child subject suddenly emerges from a childhood experienced as a negative entity into
a mature identity. In this manner, as McCallum argues, survival narratives frequently depict ‘the perceived need for children to overcome solipsism and develop intersubjective concepts of personal identity’ (Ideologies of Identity 7). The intersubjective theory that Benjamin proposes as an amplification of the process of maturation – an aspect of separation-individuation theory – has further relevance to representations of the subject in other fields of discourse. In the field of intersubjective theory, new understandings about the power of relational connection acknowledge that the recognition of the other ‘as an equivalent center of experience’ (Benjamin, Like Subjects 28) is a dynamic of human growth achieved in the process of maturation. It may be argued then, that representations of the relational connections between subjects in the novel will, as Butte suggests, give evidence of that understanding as ‘a new kind of experience among subjects, or at the very least a new practice for representing experiences among subjects in narrative’ (Butte, I Know That You Know 49).

In The Planet of Junior Brown and The Spark Gap, the quest for survival is also conceived within the frame of child displacement; and here, the representational problems that complicate depictions of childhood’s agentic capacities are negotiated through constructions of appropriate social being. In effect, power is intersubjectively constructed through interaction such that growth toward maturation and the capacity for resilience are represented in an ongoing struggle for survival. Agency that is achieved through social interaction suggests a shared context which then shapes the way the telling is framed. Because these novels depict the journey as an ongoing process of change, they resist instant transformations of power that would resolve the survival issues of childhood displacement. Thus, when childhood agency as a form of power becomes aligned with resilience and intersubjectivity, aspects of loss and liminality are transformed by newly formed social alliances.

Narrative constructions of intersubjectivity then reinterpret the spaces of displacement and subsequently model social agency as a new frame for childhood adversity. For example, The Spark Gap traces a journey which begins with depictions of displacement and loss, but agentic behaviours are embedded in group capacities for action that concomitantly encourage resilient responses to change. Initial aspects of loss convey Kerrie’s sense of powerlessness: at the sudden death of her grandmother, she avoids making the difficult decisions about her immediate future, since she views neither a return to live with her drug-addicted mother nor foster care placement among strangers as acceptable options. Initially the novel’s displacement events centre on the tower rooftop setting, an alternative lifeworld where daily routines emphasise the effects of marginalisation. Kerrie’s daily life now exists outside past social structures and she views that life from above as an observer. Because her participation in this rooftop lifeworld centres upon the struggle for basic needs, Kerrie finds her friendships have been reinscribed within the liminal spaces of homelessness. Even so, her sense of connection is depicted as a dynamic process of social interaction and Kerrie’s attitudes begin to mirror the agentic behaviours of Skip and Mauve.
In *The Planet of Junior Brown*, as in *The Spark Gap*, the links between narrative representations of resilience, intersubjectivity and agency demonstrate this transformation from victim to survivor. Hamilton’s characterisation of Buddy provides an example of the transformative aspects embedded within intersubjective constructions of agency. Buddy’s hidden actions as ‘Tomorrow Billy’ affirm the effectiveness of the ‘planet’ system because relational links, and interactions generate a joint capacity for action. These links are then extended when the two main characters, Buddy and Junior Brown, are represented within the shared context of displacement: Buddy lives on the street and has but a dim memory of his parents; and Junior seeks to escape the overwhelming problems associated with his domestic environment. The novel’s depiction of substitute family groups (‘planets’) avoids representing homeless children as helpless victims even though their marginalisation is effected by external and uncontrollable circumstances.

**OVERCOMING DISPLACEMENT AND LIMINALITY**

While displacement events inform constructions of agency in each novel, they also initiate survival quests that lead to reconnection. Bertagna and Hamilton represent homelessness through the strategic use of liminality as each novel portrays images of in-between frames: derelict buildings, school basements and riverside walkways in Hamilton’s New York City; Bertagna’s rooftop setting amid Glasgow’s tenement blocks. Positioning the subject at the edge of ‘everyday life’, liminality is constructed in narrative spaces of exclusion as the direct consequence of displacement events. In this manner the progressive implications of homelessness and marginalisation are additional aspects of loss that frame the journey for each of the main characters.

Aspects of loss and marginalisation are dominant images in the initial settings of each narrative where depictions of early stages of grief—shock and denial—imply a restricted capacity for agency. Junior’s sense of anxiety defines his capacity for interaction, and his plight is expressed in a powerful image: his musical talent, as an expression of voice, has been silenced in that he plays upon a keyboard without sound:

> Buddy watched Junior with amazement. For Junior swayed like a dark brooding bear to an unheard rhythm in the stillness.
> Since he’d come into the room Buddy hadn’t believed what he was seeing. […]
> The top of Junior’s piano had been taken off so that more sound could get out.
> But all of the wires meant to vibrate to make that sound had been removed. (Hamilton 115)

The source of Junior’s sense of loss and displacement depicted here in the deprivation of expression, and its presentation through Buddy’s appalled perception, emphasises that Junior’s loss of voice and diminished agency are a form of emotional abuse.
Loss in *The Spark Gap* is identified in Kerrie’s feelings of fear and despair as she grips the rooftop fence above the tenement block: ‘The tower block, stuck fast to the earth, was her only anchor. […] if she loosened her grip for an instant Kerrie knew she would free-fall from the earth into that endless ocean of sky’ (33). This metaphor emphasises an inversion of gravity: ‘freefall from the earth into endless oceans of sky’ conveys Kerrie’s feeling that her world has been upended and implies that her expectations of normalcy have been overturned. Connection with the tower signifies trusted stability and known ways of life. Correspondingly, the rooftop shelter, however temporary, offers Kerrie a temporary connection to the past. In an apt depiction of the unpredictable nature of loss, Bertagna signifies limited choices in terms of the subject’s disempowerment. In the aftermath of displacement from home space, a loss of previous community connections intensifies the sense of isolation as school, friendship, and tenement contacts suddenly diminish.

Liminal spaces draw attention to dual frames of exclusion and inclusion in these novels. While in one sense marginality conveys disempowerment in aspects of loss and dispossession, individual subjects are integrated into the urban lifeworlds of similarly displaced persons: new connections create collaborative forms of agency. Paradoxically then, because subject marginalisation expedites integration into shared interworlds, these intersubjective links generate representations of agency, their border spaces providing a social framework for resilience. When this occurs, representations of child subjectivity, grounded by the exigencies of displacement, are reinscribed with hope.

In essence, three interrelated aspects of intersubjectivity promote the construction of agency in *The Planet of Junior Brown* and *The Spark Gap*. First, intersubjectivity is linked with agency because the power of connection in liminal space enables displaced child subjects to address their survival needs. A second aspect is that new relationships provide social connections which simulate an integrated lifeworld among marginalised characters in each novel. The third aspect may be seen when positive experiences of social integration promote mutuality as a dominant attribute of value: mutuality affirms emotional bonds and strengthens the links between agency and relational connection.

**REPRESENTING CHILDHOOD BY AFFIRMING SOCIAL BEING**

Narrative representations of the child subject grounded in widespread Western humanist notions of individual power are problematic because such assumptions of power are unrealistic. In displacement narratives which are dominated by quest patterns, the physical limitations of child subjects are frequently underestimated by individualistic frames of the heroic paradigm. The tendency of many Western narratives to ground constructions of childhood in humanistic concepts of agency has led to two extreme positions. One representational extreme attributes child subjectivity with agentic capacities that invoke, in McCallum’s words, ‘the image of empowered individuals capable of acting
independently in the world and making choices about their lives’ (Ideologies of Identity 7). At the other extreme, an equally distancing representation may construct the negation of childhood engagements within social and linguistic frames of advocacy. Representations of childhood that affirm the capacity for action will tend to promote the agentic subject through constructions of efficacy embedded in social interactions. Such constructions of power strike a balance between the two representational extremes.

In The Planet of Junior Brown and The Spark Gap the plight of displaced children and their quest for survival in urban settings could well portray insuperable alienation and disempowerment; but because social connections create patterns for survival, the authors ground acts of power in the kind of relational interaction that leads to resilience. Images that expose the frame of deprivation within the initial displacement events of The Spark Gap portray the hidden consequences of loss signified in the absences of home, security, and shelter. Bertagna’s representation of the main character, Kerrie, replicates childhood’s restrictions as a result of sudden marginalisation: first in that displacement signifies a loss of control in personal, environmental and relational circumstances; and second, because the loss of legal rights and freedoms of choice constitute further marginalisation as Kerrie rejects societal provisions over which she would have no control. But resilience is depicted in the movement from roof to street busking as shared connections bring about a change in Kerrie’s attitude toward her own capacities for action. In The Planet of Junior Brown, Hamilton’s survival frame centres on Buddy’s interconnection within an integrated rescue system. His befriending of Junior Brown includes a willingness to understand Junior’s world. To this end, Buddy’s view first conveys Junior’s marginalisation – his bodily sense of abjection; the emotional displacement of silenced creativity; and his enmeshed domestic conditions – then explores the possibility of inclusion. When Junior’s distress deepens, Buddy’s empathy provides the grounds for intervention.

New alignments in group values occur as displaced subjects find solidarity among similarly marginalised ‘others’. Representations of empathy and mutuality break down the barriers between self and other that would otherwise endanger group survival. When connections between Mauve, Skip and Kerrie in The Spark Gap become more intense after their shelter is destroyed by fire, the structural exclusions from everyday life are exposed. In the following passage Kerrie’s focalisation depicts the awareness of change and of relational distance from her past life:

Kerrie knew she had flung herself too far outside of ordinary life to go back now; she was being dragged further and further out each day by an invisible tide. And tonight that tide had left her stranded on a tiny island with just Skip and Mauve to cling to.
Shell was still pleading with her.
‘It’s gone too far. Something’s going to happen to you and it’ll be my fault. I made you do it.’
[Kerrie]: ‘Shell, I’m staying with Skip and Mauve. ‘I’m like them now.’ (The Spark Gap 98)
Images of separation strengthen Kerrie’s sense of exclusion from her previous life in this segment: ‘outside ordinary life’ and ‘dragged further and further out’ give a sense of embodied movement away from past securities. Even as the metaphor, ‘an invisible tide’, depicts both the strength and inevitability of physical movement, distance intensifies Kerrie’s sense of new connection. Her perception of personal safety as a shared condition of isolation—the ‘island’—paradoxically includes a sense of efficacy in the ability to make decisions. Separation has created a new space for understanding mutuality. Bertagna grounds images of separation and re-alignment in conflicting perceptions of place and space: Shell’s plea that Kerrie should come home with her is rebuffed by Kerrie’s recognition that relationships have irrevocably changed—‘I’m like them now’. The difference in perspective is marked by a contrast between Shell’s self-centred perception—‘it’ll be my fault’—and Kerrie’s awareness that she is ‘too far outside ordinary life to go back now’. Kerrie’s sense of closure is demonstrated here in free indirect thought, an awareness of exclusion, but it is followed by another appreciation, a statement of relational connection. Separation from the tenement block rooftop conveys the sense of loss, but also demonstrates Kerrie’s increased social maturity and her acceptance of separation from the home and security once afforded by her association with the tower: ‘Everything’s different. I’m sorry, Shell’ (98). The acknowledgement of change—‘Everything’s different’—followed by her expression of sorrow, is, in effect, articulating the already focalised perception of that knowledge and its implications.

In a slightly different manner Hamilton demonstrates growing connections between the two main protagonists in her novel: Buddy is permitted knowledge of Junior’s troubled world as Junior Brown realises that he is able to trust the friendship. The following segment demonstrates the way multifocal discourse embeds intersubjective constructions in the novel’s capacity to reframe subject perceptions through dialogue with another subject:

> For some time Junior had kept secrets from Buddy. Now everything was coming out in the open. Still Buddy could hardly believe that Junior suddenly wanted to have him come to his music lesson next Friday.
> ‘Maybe next week I can come see you at your own house,’ Buddy said. He looked unconcernedly out of the window.
> In Junior’s mind his mother’s fearful presence tried to warn him against bringing Buddy home. By gritting his teeth, Junior was able to hold her back.
> ‘I guess so,’ Junior said. ‘I’ll figure out a good time when Mama isn’t feeling too sick.’
> [...] On the bus, [...] Junior felt safe with Buddy and safe hidden in the seat.

(Hamilton 61–2)

The awareness that Junior intends to confide in Buddy is conveyed by free indirect speech—‘Now everything was coming out in the open’. But perspective in the novel shifts immediately to Budley’s perception—an amazement that he is to be trusted. When Buddy pushes further indicating his wish to visit Junior’s home, free indirect thought conveys Junior’s struggle with his mother’s dominant opinions—‘his mother’s fearful presence tried to warn him’. Junior resists this
voice by ‘gritting his teeth’ and then voices his agreement that Buddy should visit. The portrayal of Junior’s vulnerability – ‘Junior felt safe with Buddy’ – affirms a relational agreement between Buddy and Junior, an essential component in the development of trust. This agreement between two relating subjects is transformed into solidarity when Junior finds he is unable to cope with his music teacher’s insanity. As Junior’s mental health deteriorates, Buddy’s willingness to act provides the agentic frame that concludes the novel with a decision temporarily to seclude Junior within Buddy’s ‘planet’. Such intricate levels of exposure, reaction and response indicate a complex interlocking system of care: the macrocosm represented by the school planetarium metonymically represents the ‘planet’s’ social microcosm.

Traditional quest endings would not be appropriate in these displacement novels. Even though Hamilton affirms concepts of social agency in final scenes, quest patterns are refunctioned – the return home limited by substitution in that the ‘planet’ sustains the focus upon displacement issues. Concluding scenes embed the image of homeless children secluded in the basement of a derelict building. The authors also refrain from easy resolutions to serious issues. Most notably, the restoration of domestic security to homeless characters, commonly depicted in traditional heroic patterns, has been tempered by social reality. For similar reasons, Bertagna’s novel steers away from the ‘return home’ solution because there is no ‘home’; the rental apartment has been relinquished and the beloved grandparent is forever absent. Nonetheless, the sense of resilience and agency by which liminality has been reframed informs closure in both novels because final scenes successfully construct a social and relational interconnection that is neither passive nor disempowered.

*The Spark Gap* and *The Planet of Junior Brown* expose societal structures by which homeless subjects are both silenced and excluded – lack of a home address, marginalisation through loss of family, flight from abusive domestic conditions, and seclusion from other dangers – but, paradoxically, they envision alternate possibilities for social inclusion through socially affirming, interconnecting systems. The interactive space of ‘empowered social becoming’, depicted in the textual layering of shared perspectives, event contexts and liminal spaces, promotes that kind of negotiation which, in Crossley’s terms, ‘conjures up an image of multiple overlappings and intertwinnings, organised and arranged in different ways’ (Crossley 173). Because intersubjectivity is embedded in these novels’ multifocal constructions, *The Spark Gap* and *The Planet of Junior Brown* depict the agentic capacities of individual subjects through social and relational connection.

NOTES

1. My argument here draws extensively on Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity*.
2. For a fuller account, see John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (*Retelling Stories* 18).
3. This argument draws on Stephens and McCallum (*Retelling Stories*).
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