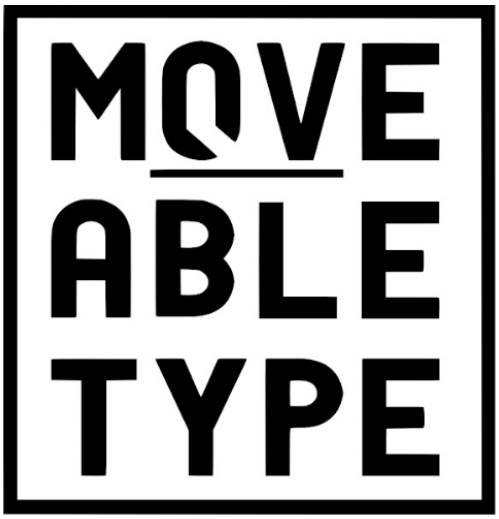

‘Die, cry, hate: the unfeeling of the unwilling Black surrogate mother in *Luster* and *Such a Fun Age*’

Author: Amal Abdi

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Die, cry, hate: the unfeeling of the unwilling Black surrogate mother in *Luster* and *Such a Fun Age*

Amal Abdi

Luster. By Raven Leilani. 2021. 240p. £9.99. Pan Macmillan.
ISBN 9781529036008

Such a Fun Age. By Kiley Reid. 2020. 320p. £8.99. Bloomsbury.
ISBN 9781526612168

The protagonists of Raven Leilani's *Luster* (2020) and Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* (2019), Edie and Emira respectively, share many similarities. They are both young Black women in their 20s living in big cities and both find themselves working for white women as childminders. Emira is hired as a babysitter, while Edie is paid (somewhat dubiously) by the wife of the older man she is dating. Yet what links these two women most is their attitude: their air of detachment, mystery and ultimately unfeeling.

In her study of the cultural politics of nineteenth-century America, Xine Yao defines unfeeling 'not simply as negative feelings or the absence of feelings, but as that which cannot be recognized as feeling—the negation of feeling itself'.[1] Both *Luster* and *Such a Fun Age* engage with this sense of loaded emotionlessness while also lending a personal and political duality to unfeeling, as both a coping

[1] Xine Yao. *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 6.

mechanism—a way of dealing with the issues and demands of the contemporary world, such as social isolation and insecure gig work—and a refusal to perform the emotional labour that is often expected of carers and domestic workers without proper compensation. Crucially, as both these novels demonstrate, unfeeling is intrinsically linked to race relations. Theorising unfeeling, Yao makes it into a kind of manifesto, one which states: 'No more business with white sentimentality'.[2] As the two protagonists attempt to live outside of the shackles of the American dream, they have encounters that are pointedly about race. As such, their adoption of unfeeling becomes a reaction to the 'white sentimentality' that they face, not just in its present forms but also the historical modes of feeling that Black people in America have been subjected to for centuries.

In *Such a Fun Age*, Emira's role is ostensibly just professional. She is a paid babysitter, but not a nanny – an important difference as a nanny's role comes with health care benefits and is implicitly integrated into a family unit. While Emira cares deeply for the toddler she looks after, Briar, her role is more reminiscent of a teenage summer job, with the added expectation of constant availability. Emira is not treated with the seriousness she brings to her task as a caregiver. In Edie's cases, her position in the family is even more precarious. She is paid sporadically by Rebecca (the wife of Eric, the aforementioned older man), who unannounced mysteriously begins leaving change for Edie, seemingly in exchange for looking after the married couple's recently adopted Black teenager, Akila. Rebecca's equally unexplained, or else inexplicable dismissal of Edie later in the novel seems to indicate that the arrangement hasn't worked; that Edie has failed sufficiently or convincingly to care

[2] Yao, ibid, Yao (p. 2.)

for Akila. In both cases, the women seem to suffer from their inability or, rather, refusal to care or feel for their charges in ways that their employers recognise.

While it may seem obvious to state, caring for a child requires some form of emotional labour from a domestic caregiver. The home is an environment where unfeeling is not only discouraged but can become actively harmful. Without feeling the need or being able to demand it, the employers of these two women require that they not only feel but display the feelings of a surrogate mother. They require that they give a good representation of themselves; not only that they perform their duties, but they are seen to be performing them sincerely. Of course, this component, being so hard or impossible to articulate, is not included in any job description. But the force of this tacit demand is made explicit in *Luster* and *Such a Fun Age*. Both Edie and Emira have to play roles for which the expectations have largely been left unwritten, yet it is precisely these expectations that prove the most taxing of all.

However, their failure or else refusal to fulfil those expectations shows how unfeeling might be put to use; specifically, to resist ideas on caregiving as formulated by white people. Rebecca's withdrawal of financial support from Edie brings to the fore the problem of race that had been the backdrop to their relationship. Edie's refusal to care for Akila is, in fact, an extension of her refusal to fulfil Rebecca's expectation that, presented with a Black child, she will act as a Black maternal figure. 'I find it very rich', Edie remarks, 'to have been invited here partly on the absurd presumption that I would know what to do with Akila simply because we are both Black, and now be rebuffed when I have not performed the role of the Trusty Black Spirit Guide to her taste'.[3] Through taking her to an African-American braiding salon in the city and giving her advice on protective hairstyles, Edie does reluctantly

[3] Raven Leilani, *Luster* (London: Picador, 2020), p. 120.

become a friend to Akila. But, crucially, it does not guarantee her a secure place in the family. In many ways, her situation comes to resemble that of Akila, who has seen too many homes and has been made to be part of too many families in her time. This, in turn, poses a troubling question about the efficacy of care and feeling. How much, for instance, can one or should one feel for a family who may only temporarily be 'yours'?

Emira also stages, however consciously, a resistance to the loaded role of the Black caregiver—a figure with a long and laboured history whose perhaps most enduring and problematic iteration is the Mammy, a Black woman tasked with looking after the house as well as the children of their white masters. In *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, Kimberly Wallace Sanders describes the aforementioned figure as 'the ultimate symbol of maternal devotion' and recognises how this image helped define 'the nature of slavery, gender relations, motherhood, and memory in the American South'.[4] Represented throughout popular media and most notably in Hollywood films, stretching from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to ones as recent as *The Help* (2011), the Mammy is displayed as being happy to serve, and so, essentially happy with the state of race relations. As Melissa Harris-Perry has argued, the Mammy stereotype was a creation of the imagination of white supremacy, which reimagined the powerless, coerced slave girls as soothing, comfortable, and consenting women.[5] One of the great successes of *Luster* and *Such a Fun Age* is the way in which they consciously complicate and represent the legacy of this figure.

[4] Kimberly Wallace-Sanders. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p.24.
[5] Chanequa Walker-Barnes. *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2014), p. 84.

One of the other great successes of the novels is that they show the limited options, as well as the limitations of the options Black women have to express their feelings. There are few other viable ways for Edie and Emira to make sense of and, crucially, to make sensible their feelings to other people without fulfilling certain expectations or assumptions about how they should act and feel. Before moving into Eric's family home, Edie is almost completely isolated. She is without family or any real friends and holds contempt for the people she works with. She refers to the one other Black person from her office, Aria, as a 'coon'. In a predominately White space, having another Black person to confide in, share knowing glances with and consider an ally can be incredibly important, yet Edie's disdain for Aria's so-called respectability politics can be read as a symptom of unfeeling. Rather than directing her anger to her White colleagues, she reroutes it to a possible fellow comrade, the one other person who could also be adopting a similar guise of unfeeling. Edie's misdirection of her feelings allows her white colleagues to entirely miss entirely her frustration with her situation, and therefore see her as unproductively unfeeling. Here, unfeeling is characterised as not only being void of emotion, but crucially the rejection of a potential route of intimacy or sympathy; an avoidance.

The interrelatedness or interference of Edie's professional and financial insecurities with her interpersonal ones points to another similarity between these two women. Despite their college education, both lack job prospects and resources, giving them few reasons and even fewer means to glamourise their life. But what is most notable is that Edie and Emira seem to reject one of the most available means through which they could glamourise or else share their discontent: the Internet. In some ways, both novels are a rejection of the 'sad girl' aesthetics which were dominant in the early 2010s, represented best by hedonistic Tumblr blogs featuring

images of cigarettes, pale bruised skin, and running mascara, all scored to the music of Lana Del Rey. It was a kind of un-radical counter-culture where sadness was glamourised and self-destruction was romanticized. The aesthetic was theorized by Audrey Wollen who explained that 'Sad Girl Theory is the proposal that sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicised as an act of resistance, of political protest'.[6] But the 'sad girl' narrative has always had its limitations, always having to contend with the question of who gets to occupy the role. Those who are Black, poor and/or fat do not have the luxury of subscribing to romantic ideas of sadness. Heather Mooney explained that the (white) Sad Girl 'does not fully address the effects of sexism and patriarchy, even when protected by whiteness and normative gender/sexual comportment'.[7] This is to say, ideas such as the 'Sad Girl Theory' cannot be universalised because they do not, as Nia Nunn states, 'dismantle faulty perceptions that Black girls and women carry inherent strength without substantial sadness'.[8]

It is perhaps unsurprising in this context that Edie and Emira should prefer to exist offline. Published in the last few years, both novels show their protagonists contending with the effects of trying to remain unfeeling in the digital age. In *Luster*, Eric and Edie meet and become familiar with each other online. Upon finally meeting offline, a month into their correspondence, Edie remarks, 'But everything is different IRL. For one thing, I am not as quick on my feet. There is no time to consider my words or to craft a clever response in iOS Notes'.[9] Although this reads at first glance like anxiety, it may also be relief; she no longer has to construct a legible persona.

[6] Ava Tunnicliffe, 'Artist Audrey Wollen On the Power of Sadness', *Nylon*, 2015.
[7] Heather Mooney. 'Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls: Affect, Race, (Dis)Possession, and Protest.' *Women's Studies Quarterly* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2018), p. 178.
[8] Nia Michelle Nunn. 'Super-Girl: Strength and Sadness in Black Girlhood.' *Gender and education* Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p.240.
[9] Leilani, p.8.

Similarly, the central plot of *Such a Fun Age* is set in motion when Emira is accused of kidnapping Briar at a local high-end supermarket by the store's security guard. It is not only the humiliation of the moment which affects Emira but a filmed video of it which is later published on social media by her employer, Alix Chamberlain. Emira expresses discomfort throughout the novel about the way she acted, or was made to act at that moment. The incident emphasises that, in an age of constant performativity, the home becomes one of the few sites where unaffected and authentic pronouncements of the self and politics can be displayed. As novels that are chiefly concerned with the domestic sphere, *Luster* and *Such a Fun Age* illustrate where both feeling and unfeeling are or can be manifested. And what could be more domestic than caring for a child?

However, as we have already seen, the domestic sphere is precisely where unarticulated yet highly specific, and specifically radicalised, demands are made on Black women. There is a sense in these novels in which the women are employed not only to look after the children but the parents, to minister to their emotional needs. This is clearly the case in Emira's relationship with Alix, who views developing a close friendship with her babysitter as essential to constructing her sense of identity as a modern liberal White woman. She becomes troubled, however, when Emira presents a complexity of character that does not align with her limited understanding of Black people. 'She knew Emira had majored in English', Alix thinks at one point. 'But sometimes, after seeing her paused songs with titles like 'Dope Bitch' and 'Y'all Already Know,' and then hearing her use words like connoisseur, Alix was filled with feelings that went from confused and highly impressed to low and guilty in response to the first reaction'.[10] Throughout the novel, Emira is suspicious of Alix's feelings

[10] Kiley Reid, *Such a Fun Age* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2019), p.79.

towards her. Emira's refusal or even indifference to presenting a version of a Black person Alix can easily read is a rejection also of the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman—in many ways, a direct descendant of the Mammy figure—who must support not only themselves but their employers; a task which may in fact be their only means of financial support.

Ultimately, then, unfeeling emerges as an alternative coping mechanism of a particularly complex and varied kind, one that is defined, in fact, by refusing to be seen to be coping or not coping; one that rejects the whole premise of having to perform emotional labour. Heather Mooney links feeling to White violence, writing that in certain 'contexts of white violence and white supremacy, Blackness has defined by emotionality and irrationality to justify violence and containment (both embodied and spatial, including slavery, policing, segregated neighborhoods, prisons, etc.) perpetuated by white individuals and white-supremacist systems'.[11] The home, a contained space in which hired help and caregivers are confined to strict yet paradoxically ill-defined roles, becomes the place in which unfeeling most clearly manifests itself. And, in this way, unfeeling becomes a clear objection to the affect and sentimentality inflicted onto imagined ideas of Blackness.

[11] Heather Mooney. 'Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls: Affect, Race, (Dis)Possession, and Protest.' *Women's Studies Quarterly* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2018), p. 188.