

REAL, TRULY LIVE PLACES: NOTES TOWARD THE QUEER UNCANNY

By

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## Abstract

This dissertation problematizes contemporary ideas of epistemological dependability and advances queer theory's critique of heteronormativity by reading the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny in conjunction with the critical concept of the queer to produce the queer uncanny. The first chapter analyzes the *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and introduces the disruptive interpretive potential of the queer uncanny in several of its manifestations: the compulsion to repeat, doubling, and dislogic. The second chapter focuses on the novel *Mysterious Skin* (Scott Heim) and of redemption in light of childhood sexual molestation, demonstrates the ability of the queer uncanny to broaden available interpretative ranges vis-à-vis cultural discourses surrounding traumatic events like child sexual abuse. The final chapter applies the lens of the queer uncanny to a municipal domestic partnership registry ordinance that by its own terms provides no rights to registrants but which upon further analysis turns out to offer evidence of the performative potential of the queer uncanny.

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## Introduction

### “Topsy Turvy: Joining the Queer and the Uncanny”

When I went on my first Atlantis week-long all-gay vacation for men at a coastal resort in Mexico, I and the other men I met agreed that this was special, that somehow this vacation was unique.<sup>1</sup> But what exactly did we mean by that? I began to push the other men to articulate exactly why this vacation experience felt so different. Was it just that we were on vacation and for a time liberated from work and domestic concerns? No, many of us vacationed frequently. Was it that we found sexual encounters easy to initiate? Again, no, for the sexual possibilities on this trip seemed no more or less numerous than in regular life. Was it perhaps the week of gay-themed entertainment and programming? Again, no, because most of us frequented gay-themed comedy shows, films, and performances. My own initial reaction came from my training in American Studies and in Women’s Studies: there is power in numbers and we were likely building community with others like us, having a chance to “be ourselves” together. Certainly we could analyze this experience using the rubrics that have fruitfully explored issues of identity and community in gay bars, gay enclaves, gay bathhouses, and the like – that is, as an example of how delimited physical spaces which contain or attract concentrations of gay men can have individual and social implications. It

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<sup>1</sup> Atlantis Events is a Los Angeles-based company that charters entire cruise ships or land resorts, books gay-themed entertainers and activities, and markets the vacations to gay men aged eighteen and over, although men and women of any orientation are welcome. Because of the timing, cost, and focus of the vacations they are largely populated by gay men between thirty and seventy years of age. See Atlantis Events, Inc. “Atlantis: The Way We Play.” <http://atlantisevents.com>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

would also be tempting to examine the Atlantis situation as a moment of queer consciousness, a twist on Marxist coming to consciousness in which a person finds himself in a particular set of social circumstances and recognizes his place in it for the first time – and more importantly his connection to others similarly situated. This, indeed, is how much work in gay and lesbian studies has progressed, by examining social sites and cultural moments in which gay men and lesbians have recognized themselves and each other and thereby been able to band together to develop friendships, communities, and social movements. While these explanations certainly fit the facts, I remained skeptical because nearly all of the men I vacationed with were, to large degree, like me – not at all socially, politically, or geographically isolated. To a man we were all living relatively open lives in communities, workplaces, organizations, and family circles that were for the most part gay or gay-friendly.

There was something uncanny about the Atlantis vacation, and I was reminded of Sigmund Freud's short essay on the uncanny and the anecdote in which he came up on the red light district of an Italian city and then inadvertently came back upon it several more times in the course of a single sojourn. On the Atlantis vacation one could walk anywhere on the resort and know, without a doubt, that every other man there, excepting perhaps men on the resort staff, was gay. It was a feeling that one need not speculate about or even for a moment guess at the sexual orientation of the other men at the resort. It was not frightening, but it was at once both unfamiliar and familiar, both novel and known. As a friend put it, it was like being in the twilight zone because normal life was turned upside down and the world was topsy-turvy. This resort, this itinerary of activities and shows, this on-going experience was a 'real, truly live place,' and not simply a break with our every day realities or an escape from the daily grind. What I discovered, in staying in contact with my friends after our returns to



our respective homes, is that the experience stayed with them, that there was a period in which the two moments merged and overlapped. Unsatisfied at reading this as community-building, I turned to queer theory for guidance.

Scholarship dealing with identity and community in the lesbian and gay context forms an important and essential archive of such times and places and developments.<sup>2</sup> But such work has not been the only thread in the development of gay and lesbian studies; parallel to, or perhaps more aptly, in opposition to, such studies has been the development of queer theory, emerging in the early 1990s from the intersections of literary, critical, and gender theory. While gay and lesbian studies largely remains committed to an essentialized gay or lesbian identity and the behaviors and movements associated with such as a means of uncovering gay and lesbian history and forwarding a progressive politics for full inclusion of gays and lesbians into society, queer theory has concerned itself with deconstructing the notion of any essential self and with examining the ways in which various discourses (particularly those of gender and sexuality) shape, limit and enable the range of possibilities for the individual subject. This queer theoretical approach begins to get more directly at what I sense is going on at the Atlantis resort and what is the subject of this dissertation: a fundamental uncanniness at the levels of both ontology and epistemology, a sense of the familiar but unfamiliar, a “crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of this sort of work include Allan Bérubé’s study of the centrality of World War II to the development of gay and lesbian identity, George Chauncey’s masterful unearthing of gay life in New York City in the first decades of the twentieth century, and Esther Newton’s cultural history of the gay enclave on Fire Island. Bérubé, Allan. Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II. New York: Free Press, 1990; Chauncey George. Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940. New York, Basic Books, 1995; and Newton, Esther. Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

world.”<sup>3</sup> It may seem a small thing to be able for even a day to exist in an environment where the normal rules do not apply, where the usual expectations are disrupted, but such moments – what I will define as the queer uncanny – need not be merely fleeting blips on the radars of our existence but can be taken up as fractures and fissures in the heteronormative ontologies and epistemologies that structure our existence. In other words, topsy turvy may be more than a feeling. The queer uncanny names moments and spaces when dislogic, repetition, and multiplicity can suggest new ways of knowing and living.

### **Contentions and Approaches**

To problematize contemporary ideas of epistemological dependability (i.e., how we know what we know) and to advance queer theory’s critique of heteronormativity in its many forms this dissertation reads the psychoanalytic and literary concept of the uncanny (*Unheimliche*) alongside the decidedly postmodern critical concept of the queer, joining the concepts to suggest the queer uncanny.<sup>4</sup> Two central contentions structure this dissertation. First, this projects asserts that the queer uncanny (a concept explained below) offers us a useful way of actively (re)engaging how we know what we think we know not only because it provides us with a different way of viewing the world or the events that take place within it but because it allows for a multiplicity of interpretations to coexist and allows for interpretive and epistemological points of view that work alongside and yet against standard heteronormative frameworks of understanding. The second contention is that while

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<sup>3</sup> Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester Univ Press, 2003. 1.

<sup>4</sup> My first acquaintance with the phrase itself was in Olu Jenzen’s article of the same name. Jenzen is to be credited with developing the concept as applicable beyond literary studies of the gothic. I extend Jenzen’s work in the article by developing the concept further and by utilizing it in different contexts. Jenzen, Olu. “The Queer Uncanny.” *eSharp*. 9. Spring 2007. <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/issues/9/>. Accessed 10 February 2009.

contemporary gay and lesbian activism continues to rely heavily on a politics of representation and a strategy of seeking inclusion through sameness (i.e., a focus on visibility and an identity politics that asserts “we’re just like you”) that strategy is serving not to liberate gays and lesbians (or humankind more generally) but to bind all human subjects more firmly to a system of heteronormativity that continues to dictate what counts as “legitimate and recognizable” forms of personal and group identity and to continue to exclude those who fall outside this realm of recognizability.<sup>5</sup> In this regard the project seeks to critique the liberal humanist project of gay and lesbian studies and activism in favor of a de-identified approach in which sexual orientation is an element but not the defining element.

In accord with both my intellectual training and my previous work, the dissertation proceeds under the assumption that certain elements of identity – namely, gender and sexuality -- are omnipresent, structuring individual and collective experiences and that that omnipresence is the basis from which the human psyche develops, even as other axes of identity may be added to the mix.<sup>6</sup> In addition, although this project dwells in the realm of the theoretical, the intention is to recognize that theory and practice (what many might call

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<sup>5</sup> Edelman, Lee. No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. Durham NC: Duke Univ Press, 2004. 105.

<sup>6</sup> The Atlantis resort vacation that serves as the seed bed for this project conforms to precisely the circumstances for which queer theory is oft and rightly criticized: a theory focused on gay, white men. I attempt in this dissertation to move beyond the resort vacation -- which is in a sense controlling for a number of important variables like gender, race, and class -- and to begin the important work of addressing the queer uncanny with a female character, a novel focusing on two young, rural, and less-class-privileged characters, and a city ordinance that ostensibly applies to all citizens of a midwestern college town. Even so, this work highlights the possible trajectories for further development of the queer uncanny. Although not dealing with the queer uncanny, a body of work that suggests its potential is already extant and includes David Eng’s work with psychoanalytic theory and race and Martin Manalansan’s fascinating ethnographic work in which he deftly explores the interactions of gender, class, race, and sexual orientation among Filipino immigrants in New York City. Eng, David. Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America. Durham NC: Duke Univ Press, 2001. Manalansan IV, Martin. Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in New York City. Durham NC: Duke Univ Press, 2003.

“theory” and “real life”) are not separated but are rather mutually informing existing in a sort of call-and-response relationship, a continuing reiteration and reflection of one another.

To employ a queer theoretical lens is to do more than locating gays and lesbians in history or literature or film or to catalogue varieties of non-normative sexual behaviors.<sup>7</sup> In building a body of history and theory, some scholars in lesbian and gay studies have at focused on outlying forms of sexuality and suggested that among those most certainly queer would be “radical self-defined lesbians and gays ... sadomasochists, fetishists, bisexuals, gender-benders, radical heterosexuals.”<sup>8</sup> The problem with attempting to create a list of identities or behaviors that are or are not queer is that such a list fails to take into account how those behaviors and identities, which might seem quite beyond the normative pale in written form, might be quite un-queer in their actualities and it tempts us to create yet another binary - queer/un-queer – and to then fit texts into that binary as queer texts or un-queer texts in much the same way we might say that something is Southern literature or African-American drama or heterosexual behavior. One way of thinking about the text from this vantage point is by thinking of queer not as a descriptor or as a position vis-à-vis a text but rather as a

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<sup>7</sup> A number of scholars have mounted influential and persuasive critiques of western-centric feminist and queer studies. Gayatri Gopinath, for example, works against the notion of singular identity and troubles notions of spectatorship in relation to queer. In the south Asian diasporic context, Gopinath argues that the impossibility of the queer female diasporic subject requires viewers to resituate themselves vis-à-vis certain cultural texts and to read those texts not overlaid by semi-permanent notions of what “lesbian” sexuality is like but rather from a starting point that recognizes the impossibility of such desires. The result is a more nuanced form of participation and viewing, a reaching to “encompass cultural interventions ... such as queer spectatorial practices, and the mercurial performances and more informal forms of sociality ... that occur at queer night clubs, festivals, and community events” that offer “sexual and racially marginalized communities [the space to] reimagine their relation to the past and the present [and to] what constitutes a viable archive of South Asian diasporic cultural production in the first place.” Gopinath, Gayatri. Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and the South Asian Public Cultures. Durham NC: Duke Univ Press, 2005. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Weeks, Jeffrey. Against Nature: Essays in History, Sexuality, and Identity. London: Rivers Oram, 1991. 113.

sensibility or aesthetic (or even as an “attitude,” as Doty describes it<sup>9</sup>), such that reading a text queerly is about pricking one’s ears and eyes to the ways in which all texts contain fractures, fissures, and spaces from, in, and by which the stability of single meanings, univocal interpretations, and normative prescriptive and descriptive understandings are challenged, resisted, expanded, or allowed to stand.

The question of whether any text can be understood as a queer text or whether any text may be read queerly is not simply a matter of grammar; the difference is as constitutive of queer theory as the very malleability of the term queer itself. To label a text as queer is to situate that text and to begin limiting its interpretational possibilities by layering upon the noun a descriptive adjective which serves not only to describe what the text is but also what it is not. My queer theoretical approach to texts is to employ queer as an adverb: to read the text queerly. This approach is valuable for two reasons. First, it allows a multiplicity of approaches to the text to remain viable and in play without the finality or certainty that an authoritarian reading implies. While one person may see merely a children’s animated television program, another may see an allegory for the condition of the modern subject and another yet may see a prophetic warning of a religious nature. Second, it allows the text to be dynamic rather than static, living rather than dead. Texts are always “works in progress [not] ... museum pieces.”<sup>10</sup> This performativity of the text, the idea that it is never “finished” but rather always in the process of being (re)created harkens to deconstruction and the notion of *différance* and suggests that meaning may re-present itself in slightly altered form each time the text is engaged. The text itself is but a collection of words, images, shapes, textures, and the like, each of which is legible and cognizable only within the situational and contextual

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<sup>9</sup> Doty, Mark. Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture. Minneapolis: Univ of Minn Press, 1993. xv.

<sup>10</sup> Phelan, Shane. Postmodern Lesbian Politics. Minneapolis: Univ of Minn Press, 1994. 41.

parameters of the circumstances in which it is both encountered and engaged. These two elements are in keeping with poststructuralist thinking in general and with queer theoretical thinking in particular, concerned as both are with the defamiliarization of the familiar and with the perpetual slippage of meaning.

At this point, the objection may be raised that if we are not allowed to describe a text as something (e.g., African-American, queer, southern) then every text is everything. Not quite. My resistance to adjectivally qualifying any text as something is not based on the idea that no text is no thing or that all texts are all things; nor is my resistance anti-common-sensical. Of course William Faulkner may be responsibly referred to as a Southern writer; of course, *Brokeback Mountain* may be with some authority classed as a gay film; of course *The Color Purple* may be rightfully termed an African-American novel. My objection is that the tendency to refer, categorize, term, and describe such texts as such things has the tendency over time to transform the adjective (a grammatical form that is intended to provide more information) into a noun (a grammatical form which is a linguistic proxy or signifier for the thing to which it refers) with all of the permanency and seemingly direct correlation that implies. By referring repeatedly to a text as a certain type of text or as having a certain quality we by and by so interassociate the adjective and the noun it modifies that they become the adjective-noun kin to dead metaphor, as described by Donald Davidson.<sup>11</sup> For Davidson, dead metaphors are understood as those in which the “nameless act” has become known or has become so familiar through its place holding moniker that the entire compound analogy – A:B : C:D (A is to B as C is to D) – collapses, no longer requiring the full sequence of cognitive steps (no matter how quickly they might be completed) and resulting not simply in a

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<sup>11</sup> Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean." *On Metaphor*. Ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

collapsed form but in an entirely new form– A:D. Davidson uses the example of the mouth of a bottle:

[W]hen “mouth” applied metaphorically to bottles, the application [of mouth to bottles] made the hearer notice a likeness between animal and bottle openings. Once one has the present use of the word, with literal application to bottles, there is nothing left to notice. There is no similarity to seek because it consists simply in being referred to by the same word.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, we may be so attuned to phraseologies like “southern writing” or “gay film” that we no longer hear (by which I mean “cognitively process”) the modification of the noun by the adjective, instead hearing only “southernwriting” or “gayfilm” as neologistic unmodified nouns.

### **Queer Theory and the Jouissance of No Future**

There seems often to be the impression that if a project deals with lesbians and gays in any way, it is a queer theory project; but this is not the case. Queer theory is often misunderstood as trying to prove that certain historical or literary figures were lesbian or gay or that some set of sociocultural circumstances provided fertile ground for the development of gay community, and too often the queer theoretical label is applied to projects that fall more rightfully in the realm of gay and lesbian studies. If we describe the “queer” of queer theory with too much certainty, we immediately lose sight of the very point of queer theory. The undefinability and the irascibility of “queer” are constitutive of the queer theoretical project. Growing out of gay and lesbian studies, queer theory fomented and began to take shape in the early 1990s as much attention was paid to the disconnection among sex, gender, and sexual

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<sup>12</sup> Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 37. Emphasis in original.

orientation and a great deal of work went into unmasking the hidden assumptions of universality, essentialism, and naturalness of heterosexuality. Queer theory has in many ways moved beyond such an intense focus on sex and sexuality though still tied to those foundational considerations, and might more aptly be understood as an effort to destabilize the stability often ascribed to particular identities, to disconnect the presumed connections between and among various behaviors and identities, and to “queer” the apparent norms and normativity that structures so much of the life of the subject. Queer theoretical projects do focus on issues of gender and sexuality, in part because of the expanded definition that queer theory employs in understanding those terms. In many ways, queer theory recognizes the polymorphous perversity of the human subject and recognizes that pleasure and the sexual drives are often piqued, aroused, satisfied, or left wanting not simply in the arena of the genitals or even based on one’s specific object choice but on the flux and flow of power and in the reach of a broad based affective range. In this regard, then, queer theory is not simply a theory of sexuality but is rather a critical theory of power insofar as the world in which we live is created and recreated through universalized, essentialized and naturalized notions of what is normal and these notions of normal serve in turn as the foundations or starting points for developing and maintaining systems of power. What distinguishes queer theory from postmodern theory more generally is this emphasis or fundamental reliance – whether implicit or explicit – on sexuality and the sexual pulse as the driving force and underpinning for the creation, deployment, and experiences of power in nearly all parts of human experience, from the interpersonal sexual, familial, and collegial relationships to economic, governmental, medical, and legal structures on both the local and macro levels.



The truth about queer theory is that despite any claims adherents to it might make about it being a general theory, it does rely on sexuality as the nexus of its analysis, revealing the debt it owes to Freud and his progeny. Although queer theory emerges in part from the work of lesbian and gay studies with its focus on identity – the location of identities in history, the liberal humanist leveraging of identities in the current age to promote future political change – identity in the realm of queer theory is quite a different being altogether. Lesbian and gay studies is for the most part modeled on a liberal humanist approach to identity, holding that there is an “essence” to each human and that humans who share certain common identities are alike enough to be presumed to want the same progress within the same sociocultural framework. We might go so far as to suggest that lesbian and gay studies is very much invested in heteronormativity and in the standard system of gender relations. As Michael Warner has written in a different context: “Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist.”<sup>13</sup> And lesbian and gay activism seems to great degree to agree, putting much effort into securing marriage rights for same-sex couples, repealing laws that prohibit gays and lesbians from fostering or adopting children, and ending the U.S. military’s ban on homosexuals serving openly – all efforts that rely implicitly (or not so implicitly) on the argument that gays and lesbians are no different than heterosexuals.

If anything, queer theory attempts to do something which reeks very much of the uncanny: to defamiliarize the familiar and to familiarize the unfamiliar, to take the places in which we feel most at home and to make them un-homelike and to take the foreign places and

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<sup>13</sup> Warner, Michael. “Introduction.” Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: Univ of Minn Press, 1993. vii-xxx. xxi.

make them wanderable. Working predominately but not entirely with gender and sexuality (and their correlatives difference, identity, and power), queer theory takes normativity (and particularly heteronormativity) as its predominant target, focusing intently on the elements of human life that systems of normativity produce as essential, natural, and universal. The standard story of human development goes something like this: one is born with a body that is recognizably male or female and that ages into adulthood accordingly; that one behaves in accordance with the status conferred by the particular genitals; and that upon sexual maturity a male-bodied person would be sexually attracted to a female-bodied person and vice versa. This standard story makes very firm connections among sex, gender, and sexuality and is based on a number of assumptions that usefully illustrate the very work that queer theory attempts to do. First, the notion that there are two sexes and only two sexes. Second, that the two-sex schema is natural and universal. Third, that biology is, as the old saying goes, destiny.<sup>14</sup> In other words, humans are born as either/or, humans live their lives according to that initial either/or, and anyone (any “thing”) outside of that either/or is non-human -- queer. Theorist Judith Butler understands this schema in a slightly more nuanced way as the heterosexual matrix:

a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender ... that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined, though the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Oyama, Susan, Paul E. Griffiths, and Russell D. Gray. Cycles of Contingency: Developmental Systems and Evolution. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001. 120-121.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990. 115n6.

To great extent queer theory helps resolve (by problematizing, never by finally solving) some of these issues by beginning with the assumption that identities are always constructed rather than natural, always contingent rather than essential, and always situated and contextual rather than universal and immovable. Such an approach a priori decenters heterosexuality and puts the entire heterosexual matrix in the position of being radically deconstructed, at least theoretically. But another way that queer theory diverges from identity politics (actually not so much a separate difference as an extension of the one already discussed) is the uncertainty of outcome that queer theory offers any attempts at change. Unlike identity politics, which portends to be able to evaluate a given system with reference to its inclusion/exclusion of humans of particular identities and then develop useful strategies for excluded or marginalized humans navigating that system almost always based on the presumption that more inclusion and less exclusion is better for all, queer theory offers no such certainty or comfortably deductive predictions. Instead, queer theory changes (indeed, wipes out) the ontological ground on which any subject stands and forces a radical reevaluation of the very meanings of identity, change, and progress. Queer theory, however, rather than assuming that, for example, gays and lesbians have some commonality among them, the poststructuralist parentage of queer theory demands recognition that all identities are contingent and foundationless. Again, this is akin to dead metaphors. Rather than assuming that one “is” gay, a queer theoretic would focus on the verb form: one is “being gay” or one is “gaying.” Again this is more than mere grammatics; it is a resistant politics that demands vigilance be paid to the identity as an ever-changing product of intersecting cultural forms. Any movement, therefore, cannot be understood simply in the binary identity-politics framework of forward/backward or progressive/regressive but must be understand as

potentially multidirectional and always without certainty the direction taken will produce the results desired.

Queer theory itself, for all of its refusal to be defined or stabilized, has indeed tended toward a certain stability, most especially as it has become ensconced in particular academic departments. Yet it remains an essentially contested area with different adherents operating under different assumptions about the value (or non-value) of queer theory. A group of queer theorists working in a utopian vein theorize queer in various forms as a vehicle for possibility and hope, positing queer as that which may enlarge or reconstruct our notions of the normative and in that respect enlarge or enrich human experience, often in a very broadly philosophical or sociological sense. Queer is the horizon of possibility, for these theorists, whether or not we recognize it or choose to move toward it; it is the step just beyond where we are, always mobile; it is always just out of reach but always beckoning. The anti-relational strain of queer theory, with which I align myself, is, as the name suggests, less hopeful, and tends to see queer through a much more psychoanalytic lens as the structural location of that which must be disavowed but which must not be destroyed completely for it is against this disavowed, removed, distanced structural location that the terrain of the normative is meted out. Where the utopian strain of queer theory might be described as hopeful and very much related to a future, the anti-relational strain of queer theory is “lavishly present tense” often arguing against the very notion of a future.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the best and most recent statement of the anti-relational strain of queer theory is the one that serves as the springboard for this dissertation: Lee Edelman’s 2004 polemic,

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<sup>16</sup> Snediker, Michael. “Queer Optimism.” *Postmodern Culture* 16.3 (2006). §26.

*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.<sup>17</sup> Steeped in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Edelman posits that in order for subjects to manage, both individually and collectively, the gnawing lack that serves as the center of subjectivity itself, we have produced a grand narrative by which to produce a feeling of unity, permanence, and cohesion where there is none: the figure of the Child is not simply a straw man, a mere figure, the figure of the Child “invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought.”<sup>18</sup> Our fear of facing the lack that is constitutive of our being as subjects and our fear of death as the collapsing of the ego fully into that lack, has spawned a fiction of epic proportions in which the figure of the Child and the futurity it holds in its hands is projected forward and once projected as an externalized figure, allows us to identify in part with “what’s to come” and then to project backwards from the child to ourselves again as the parental, care giving protectorate. By this elaborate schema, the entire force and logic of the political field is subtended by this Child. This all Edelman terms “reproductive futurism” - a system of logic, a *weltanschauung*, that structures not just our notions of the future but which serves to shore up our uncertainties about the present.

All of this is premised on the disavowing of a certain set of negativities regarding sexuality and the placement of those negativities onto the “queer” – that is, the being that has “no future” because it does not reproduce and may not be fully human. Queers, then, are those whose *raison-d’être* does not correspond to or run in conjunction with this “reproductive futurity” and the compulsory reproduction it demands, in either the immediate physical sense or in the more generalized but equally powerful political sense of always keeping one’s eyes trained with hope on the future. Queers are those whose bodily, libidinal and even cultural

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<sup>17</sup> Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham NC: Duke Univ Press, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

foci are far afield from the real or presumed reproductive capacities and responsibilities necessary to support the fiction of the child and hence their non-reproductive energies (both in the sense of their sexual activities but more so in the sense of their perceived location outside of the political logic of futurity at all) leaves them outside of the realm of the Symbolic social order. Edelman makes clear, however, that the being left outside is not mere accident. The queer is not a person or identity but a structural position – a displacement or exclusion of all the hope and investment piled onto and into the figure of the “Child” as the overarching future-figure par excellence. The position and the occupants who fill it are read as not simply outsiders but as *against* the future and *against* children.<sup>19</sup> In this particular moment, the rhetoric of recruitment, sexual abuse, narcissism, and lack of reproductive capacity delimit the discursive contours of the category; at other moments in time different rhetorics may apply.

Edelman argues that the political field is largely and even wholly dominated by a logic that refuses to be refused, based as it is on “reproductive futurism” and a focus on the future that is projected out onto and then back from the image of the Child as the symbol, repository, and torch of that future – indeed the Child as the Parent of us all. This image – of the child who requires our protection, our attention, our vigilance – preserves heteronormativity and its attendant privileging and the communal relations it implies and effects by reminding us at every turn that the point, the *raison d’être* of our existence is to be responsible parents, *in loco parentis*, for the figure of the child and by limiting the scope and terms of any debate that can take place. If you are not with us, you are against us, and the rhetoric surrounding nearly every major social issue of the day in some way points to or uses as its crux the child.

Recycle so that the children inherit clean water and fresh air. Monitor the internet so that children do not stumble upon obscenity. Stop abortion so that children are not murdered in

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that neither Edelman nor I equate queer with any specific sexual orientation.

the womb. Save the children. Think of the children. Fight for the children. Protect the children. How, exactly, does one *not* help, think, or fight for the children and still remain invested in the social order? In standard slogans and demands like these, children (the specific little beings) are a stand-in for the Child and Edelman demands that queers not fight their position in the structure (as lesbian and gay activist would) but instead

[say] explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for they stand hear anyway in each and every expression of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck [Little Orphan] Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capitals *ls* and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.<sup>20</sup>

Queerness and the figure of the queer help us think about what it would mean to not help, think, or fight for the children because, as Edelman argues, just as the Child is the future-projection on to which we cast our own desire to exist when we know we will not, so too is the queer a figure-projection onto which is cast that outside of the politically demanded logic of heteronormativity and reproductive futurity, a cultural and figurative space for the excess of the psyche – the death drive – to reside. The queer figures as a “bar to the every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form.”<sup>21</sup> The death drive, for both Freud and Lacan and for queer theorists, is the drive, parallel to the drive toward life, toward realization, toward complete unity, that wants to shred it all apart, to put it all in reverse, to move back to the primary state of unoriginated beingness. In Lacanian terms, the death drive resides within and as constitutive of the Symbolic order,

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<sup>20</sup> Edelman, No Future, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Edelman, No Future, 4.

emerging in relation to a surplus or excess that meaning misses. Reproductive futurity and the politics it both spawns and is spawned by promises an antidote to the excess, an orderly, continuous (re)staging of our desire to reach the point where being and meaning are unified.<sup>22</sup>

This leads us, though, to a second important element of Edelman's argument:

“queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity, but only a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, queerness is a space, a place-holder, and simply identifying as homosexual or engaging in same-sex behaviors is not guarantee that one will occupy this structural position; rather, Edelman is arguing that the position should be embraced, that the abjected position of “queer” is one which we should work not to eliminate (via a liberal progressive politics of full inclusion or via a fundamentalist program to eliminate difference) but rather to recognize as essentially constitutive of not something so vague as our “world view” but of all politics, progressive or not. To this end, Edelman advises that “we should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction.”<sup>24</sup> Edelman's point seems to be less about doing so in the service of short-term achievement of some sort of social or political acceptance than about a more long-range and devastating agenda of dismantling our very notions of the social and of the future (i.e., reproduction) on which those notions are based.

To make this differentiation clear, Edelman, in Lacanian fashion, adopts the neologism *sinthomosexuality*. In Lacanian terms, the *sinthome* (also known as the “symptom”) is *jouissance* itself, unburdened by the need to refer to anything, unburdened by the need to address anyone/thing, unburdened by signification or the Symbolic. In other words, it is the

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<sup>22</sup> Edelman, No Future, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Edelman, No Future, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Edelman, No Future, 16.



particular modality of jouissance for the particular subject or the very particular way that a certain subject enjoys. The sinthomosexual, then, is the being occupying “the site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it precisely by rendering it in relation to that drive.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the sinthomosexual is the subject who refuses to reproduce (both in the sense of off-spring and in the sense of participating a politics based on reproduction) and whose particular node of enjoyment is centered and based elsewhere besides the reproductive regime: Ebenezer Scrooge before the ghostly visits, Almira Gulch, Silas Marner before Eppie. As Edelman imagines it, homosexuality is a position that is the receptacle of everything that reminds us of the lack, the alienation, the space, around which our egos cohere. It thus serves as the limit in both the individual and collective political sense: “while the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child, and while it projects itself back on the past through the dignified image of the parent, the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization.”<sup>26</sup>

### **The “Queer” of the Queer Uncanny**

Part of the difficulty in any project situating itself as a queer project is in defining the term queer, and this dissertation takes up the complicated task of juggling a number of approaches to queer. As with queer theory, too often queer is understood simply as a synonym for gay, lesbian, or LGBT. While that connection is useful for many it fails to differentiate fully the power and consequence of the term queer as it used in queer theory, where it may or may not refer to sexual or gender orientation:

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<sup>25</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Halberstam, Judith. “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies,” *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences* 5.2 (2008): 140-156. 141.

I want to construct “queer” as something other than “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual”; but I can’t say that “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual” aren’t also “queer.” I would like to maintain “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual” as concepts that have specific historical, cultural, and personal meanings; but I would also like “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual” culture, history, theory and politics to have some bearing on the articulation of queerness.<sup>27</sup>

Definitions of “queer” vary but generally converge around some notion akin to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>28</sup> We might also consider queer as “a strategy, an attitude, a reference to other identities and a new self-understanding.”<sup>29</sup> Even then we venture further into the definitional woods as queer understands common words in perhaps uncommon ways – a “new understanding” is an active “articulat[ion of] a radical questioning of social and cultural norms” such that “a strategy” is often an attempt to “fuck up the mainstream,” while a “queer attitude” would “mark a growing lack of faith in the institution of the state, in political procedures, in the press, the education system, policing the law.”<sup>30</sup> Some like Cherry Smith propose that queer is about what one does and some of the actions that she cites approvingly as queer include the use of provocative acronyms, outing, actions that promote the visibility of queer sex practices, and the reclaiming of historically or currently pejorative terms (like queer). In the case of each of these actions, the effect is disruptive and shocking.

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<sup>27</sup> Doty, Making Things Perfectly Queer, xvii.

<sup>28</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Tendencies. London: Routledge, 1994. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, Cherry. “What is This Thing Called Queer?” The Material Queer. Ed. Donald Morton. Boulder CO: West View Press, 1996. 277-285. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, “What is This Thing Called Queer?”, 279-280.

This focus on surprise and shock is also found in Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman's discussion of queer, in which they explore a number of queer practices and descriptors that include not only many of the actions cataloged by Smith but also assimilation refusal; the use of devalued forms of affect like longing, accusation, and embarrassment; reclamation and reterritorialization of public space; strategic use of other theoretical stances and rights movements like identity politics and the peace movement; exploitation of internal differences; deliberate incoherence or anti-logic; anger and rage; and surprise.<sup>31</sup> Berlant and Freeman's essay highlights what makes queer both attractive and repulsive: its "deliberately unsystematized" system which seems to encompass almost any action or approach, even those which we might think of as decidedly heteronormative if placed in a new, alternative or problematized context.

The role of the outsider – whether in the sociocultural sense of not belonging or in the sense of being outside of heteronormative time/space is also central to queer. As Sallie Munt writes, the figure who "has been shamed, who has turned away and been released, whose gaze is momentarily free to look around and make new, propitious connections.... Being non-intelligible means more potential for new identities to form, in the moment of radical indecipherability, when the subject is turned, s/he is lost from view and undefined... and thus discursively more open to resignification."<sup>32</sup> Eschewing a focus on the position of shame, Judith Halberstam has defined queer as "an outcome of temporality, life scheduling, and eccentric economic practices."<sup>33</sup> This definition seems to focus on the heteronormative

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<sup>31</sup> Berlant, Lauren and Elizabeth Freeman. "From 'Queer Nationality.'" The Material Queer. Ed. Donald Morton. Boulder CO: West View Press, 1996. 305-309. 307-309.

<sup>32</sup> Munt, Sallie J. Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame. Aldersht: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Halberstam, Judith. "What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives." Queer Youth Cultures. Ed. Susan Driver. Albany NY: State Univ of New York, 2008. 27-30; 27.

teleology rather than on any set of individual or group identity categories and suggests that queer is not a label or space occupied only by non-heterosexuals but by anyone who lives outside of the dictated parameters of what is expected, most especially in late capitalist, 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century western world. Indeed, the reference to eccentric economic practices suggests that an economic element would exist in any manifestation of queer. Halberstam has specific ideas in mind with these concepts: ““Queer time” is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. “Queer space” refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.”<sup>34</sup> Hence, the acorn in queer time is not destined to be an oak tree; maturity, reproduction, resolution, and the like are not necessary components of queer time, although they might be elements of it.

### **The “Uncanny” of the Queer Uncanny**

In a relatively short 1919 essay Sigmund Freud explores in psychoanalytic terms what he recognizes might more properly be addressed within the realm of aesthetics: the uncanny.<sup>35</sup> Recognizing that aesthetic inquiry is most usually concerned with beauty and the sublime, Freud is drawn to the darker side and to that dreadful and sometimes horrific feeling that is produced in the human mind by encountering particular literary or actual circumstances or situations. In the essay Freud first concerns himself with defining the word and tracing its etymology before then moving to a psychoanalytic dissection of the concept centered on

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<sup>34</sup> Halberstam, Judith. In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives. New York: New York Univ Press, 2005; 6.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, Sigmund. The Uncanny. Trans. David McLintock. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

E.T.A. Hoffman's masterful short story, "The Sandman." From this Freud extrapolates a plethora of examples of illustrative examples of the uncanny before finally asserting a foundational and psychological origin for this feeling.

In the first part of his essay, Freud defines the uncanny as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar."<sup>36</sup> In this definition Freud draws on but works diligently to separate himself from an earlier work on the uncanny by Ernst Jentsch in which Jentsch defined the uncanny as "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate."<sup>37</sup> For Freud this definition is insufficient because it fails to take into the account the philological history of the word (in the German language), demonstrating that the word and its opposite have over time come to mean the same thing. Too, Freud is unconvinced by Jentsch's focus on the uncanny as that which is unfamiliar and as that which produces intellectual uncertainty.

While *unheimlich* means strange, unfamiliar, and peculiar; *heimlich* is defined as both (1) belonging to the house, not-strange, familiar, intimate and as (2) concealed, secret, withheld from sight and from others, two definitions in which Freud finds no contradiction but rather finds evidence for his thesis: "*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*."<sup>38</sup> This is central to Freud's thesis because his understanding of the uncanny is that it is always something that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time: "For us the most interesting fact to emerge from this long excerpt is that among the various shades of meaning that are recorded for *heimlich* there is one in

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<sup>36</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Jentsch, Ernst. "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." Angelaki: A New Journal in Philosophy, Literature and the Social Sciences. 2:1 (1996): 7-21. 10, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 134.

which it merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*.”<sup>39</sup>

The next section of Freud’s essay is a direct engagement with Entsch’s reading of E.T.A. Hoffman’s short story, “The Sandman” and the textual site at which Freud departs dramatically from Jentsch’s understanding of the uncanny. The short story is quite circuitous and complex, dealing with Nathaniel’s childhood and his issues with father-figures and the two different women that he loves. The story is divided into three narrative moments. In the first, Nathaniel fears the Sandman who collects the eyes of naughty young children and feeds them to his own bird-children. This figure takes on association with a friend of his father’s (Coppelius) when the friend threatens to burn out Nathaniel’s eyes after Nathaniel is caught spying on his father and Coppelius; the horror of the incident puts Nathaniel into a long illness. Later as a young man, Nathaniel buys a spy-glass from the optician Coppola and becomes infatuated with a woman (Olympia) upon whom he spies (much to the chagrin of his fiancée Clara). Nathaniel becomes obsessed with Olympia, much to the chagrin of his fiancée Clara, only to find that Olympia is an automaton created by optician Coppola and the professor Spalanzani. Nathaniel witnesses them fighting over the doll so violently that its eyes come out and while Olympia’s “father” hurls the eyes at Nathaniel in anger, Coppola carries the lifeless body of the doll away. Again Nathaniel is driven into an attack of madness which lasts for some time. Recovered some time later, Nathaniel seems to have returned to his normal self and forgotten both the Sandman incident of his childhood and the Olympia incident. While in a tower overlooking the city with his fiancée Clara, Nathaniel uses his spy-glass to look more closely at a walking figure who, it turns out, is the frightening Coppelius

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<sup>39</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 132.

from his childhood. Taken by madness, Nathaniel attempts unsuccessfully to throw Clara from the tower before jumping over the edge to his death.

Where Jentsch's interpretation of the story is grounded heavily on the figure of the automaton Olympia, Freud dismisses that as "quite irrelevant in the case of this more potent example of the uncanny" and reads the entire story through a psychoanalytic frame in which the leitmotif of eyes, vision, and spy-glasses is an indicator of castration anxiety, a connection Freud made in his earlier works and which continues to advance Freud's assertion from the earlier section of the essay: that the etymological circularity of the word *heimlich* is echoed in the psychology of the word.<sup>40</sup> In the instant case, hanging the entire story on a theme of castration anxiety is both plausible and convincing (though not necessarily fully adequate, as other commentators have noted). The frightening incident from Nathaniel's childhood in which the dreadful Coppélius threatens to burn his eyes out for spying on his father and Coppélius, followed soon thereafter by his father's death in an explosion, does have the taste of the Oedipal. And throughout the course of the story it is the Sandman who disrupts Nathaniel's love – for his father, for the automaton Olympia, and for his fiancée and her brother (Nathaniel's best male friend). Yet, interestingly, Freud returns to Jentsch's focus on the living/not-living aspects of the doll, as if the idea itself hovers between the living and the dead, as the very reading that Freud himself is trying to repress keeps returning to the fore. As Sarah Kofman has astutely noted, Freud's curt dismissal of Jentsch's focus on death and then his own return to it multiple times in the essay suggests that "[e]verything takes place as if Freud could not bear the importance of his discovery concerning the death instincts and as

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<sup>40</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 139.

if “The Uncanny” with its successive validations, its tortuous procedure, is a last effort to conceal “the [real] return of the repressed [death].”<sup>41</sup>

Using this story as a literary illustration of the uncanny, Freud asserts that the uncanny, then, does not simply mean new, novel, or unfamiliar; rather, it is the return of the repressed, the revivification of an earlier psychic stage or experience that touches upon familiarity but within an unexpected or novel context. To explain more fully his understanding of the uncanny Freud proffers a number of other examples. Primary among these is the double – figures who look or act alike, who identify with another, or who are psychologically or narratively twinned. Again, though, Freud goes to great pains to establish that the uncanny nature of the double is not simply in duplication; the uncanny nature of the double emerges because the double is always a reoccurrence of the earlier infantile projection of a double as a guard against the power of death resulting from the primary narcissism of the infant or of the later perception of the double as a harbinger of death, once the infant has passed through the period of primary narcissism. In other words, the double is a denial of death, a harbinger of death, a sign of immortality, and a defense against castration, which may be understood as a form of death, the double an “energetic denial of the power of death,” and it seems likely that the “immortal” soul was the first double of the body.”<sup>42</sup> This duality is not unlike the philology of the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* themselves, in which the definition of one eventually runs into the definition of the other. The double can, similarly, be both the receptacle of all that is unacceptable and threatening to the ego and all that is wished and hoped for. A second example is what Freud terms the “repetition of the same thing” as when one is lost and keeps floundering back to the same starting point or when identical numbers or

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<sup>41</sup> Kofman, Sarah. Freud and Fiction. Trans. Sarah Wykes. Boston: Northeastern Univ Press, 1991. 160.

<sup>42</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 142.



words crop up in ways that make it tempting to attribute their appearance to more than mere chance.

It is precisely Freud's refusal or inability to adequately and finally define his terms, despite his lengthy investigation into the etymology of *heimlich*, that suggests the connection between the uncanny and queer. Critics of Freud's essay argue that it is too quick to universalize the uncanny and fails to take into account various personal, cultural, and historical locations from which the experience of the uncanny might be perceived quite differently. Hélène Cixous is one such critic but her criticism of Freud's universality is tempered by her recognition that Freud's queer little essay, which might be categorized as literary criticism, as psychoanalytic theory, or as a mere "itemized topology of the weird," is itself an uncanny piece.

[Freud] keeps his text in these indistinct and libidinous regions where the light of law does not yet cast its logic and where description, plural hypotheses, and all the pretheoretical games are given free reign.<sup>43</sup>

The essay itself is both uncanny and queer as "what is brought together here is quickly undone, what asserts itself becomes suspect; each thread leads to its net or to some kind of disentanglement."<sup>44</sup> The two terms, while not identical, draw on and are constituted by common elements. Both the uncanny and the queer draw heavily on the defamiliarization of the familiar and the class of objects, events, and identities that is at once both known and unknown. Too, each concept is connected to a place or space that is next to but not of, that is in opposition to, or that is nearby. Queer exists in this relationship to the heteronormative,

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<sup>43</sup> Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*." *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976): 525-548. 538.

<sup>44</sup> Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms," 526.

touching on and drawing from the heteronormative but never identical with it. Similarly, the uncanny emerges, as Freud demonstrates, from both the homely (*heimlich*) and the unhomely (*unheimlich*), both of which structure but neither of which is singularly sufficient to define the uncanny.

It is impossible to escape the gendered nature of Freud's rendering of the uncanny, and that gendered approach has been the subject of much criticism not only of the essay on the uncanny but of Freud's work as a whole. Freud's dismissal of Jentsch's focus on the life-life female automaton in Hoffman's short story and his recasting the tale as hinging upon castration anxiety in the central male character (Nathaniel) is but one example of Freud's masculinist focus as is his identifying the female genitalia and the womb as uncanny sites. Even the examples Freud offers from his own life demonstrate a similar bias. While in Italy, Freud finds himself three times returning to the same red-light district:

I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Only heavily made-up women were to be seen at the windows of the little houses, and I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning. However, after wandering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence began to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad to find my way back to the piazza that I had recently left and refrain from any further voyages of discovery.<sup>45</sup>

Some commentators, however, have approached this gender bias constructively by placing Freud's short essay into the larger context of postmodern gender theory, effectively recasting (queering?) Freud's gender biases in light of a hundred years of new thinking. Steve Garlick,

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<sup>45</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 144.

for example, applies the lens of the uncanny to the concepts of gender melancholia and gender performativity, as developed by feminist theorist Judith Butler.<sup>46</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Butler emphasizes that repetition can be a form of rupture as for instance in a drag performance.<sup>47</sup> A drag performance, no matter how realistic, necessarily reminds us that something is being repeated and that in that repetition there is something askew, something that crosses the boundaries between perfectly familiar and not quite familiar. The repetition itself raises issues similar to that of Freud's theory of the uncanny, which as we learned above, involves both repetition (the "compulsion to repeat") and doubling, separately and jointly. Butler's theory of gender melancholia posits a homosexual taboo that precedes (and to some degree replaces) Freud's incest taboo. An earlier homosexual attachment, disavowed because of the homosexual taboo, haunts the heteronormative subject by being incorporated as the "lost other."<sup>48</sup> Connecting Butler's "miming of the lost other" to the very repetition that Freud suggests is constitutive of the uncanny and even suggests that the etymological move from *heimlich* to *unheimlich* is echoed in the relationship between gender and (ontological) identity in which gender becomes the "home" or "housing" in which subjects nest their identities but which, like the *heim* in *heimlich/unheimlich* is always haunted by its own precariousness: "gendered identities are the equivalents of haunted houses – melancholic structures inhabited by the lost other."<sup>49</sup> Both work to focus attention not on the thing or event itself but on the difference or rupture between the thing/event and the thing/event to which it refers or from which it draws.

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<sup>46</sup> Garlick, Steve. "Melancholic Secrets: Gender Ambivalence and the Unheimliche." *Psychoanalytic Review*. 89.6 (2002): 861-876.

<sup>47</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146-147.

<sup>48</sup> Garlick, "Melancholic Secrets," 869.

<sup>49</sup> Garlick, "Melancholic Secrets," 861.

## Real, Truly Live: The Queer Uncanny

It is precisely Freud's refusal or inability to adequately and finally define his terms combined with the refusal of the queer of queer theory to be detained or contained by definitional boundaries that lead me to extend nascent work on the queer uncanny.<sup>50</sup> The essay itself is both uncanny and queer as "what is brought together here is quickly undone, what asserts itself becomes suspect; each thread leads to its net or to some kind of disentanglement."<sup>51</sup> And the queer of queer theory is not simply a descriptor but "a strategy, an attitude, a reference to other identities and a new self-understanding" that is continuously built in, on and around "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically."<sup>52</sup> The two terms, while not identical, draw on and are constituted by common elements. Both the uncanny and the queer draw heavily on the defamiliarization of the familiar and the class of objects, events, and identities that is at once both known and unknown. The two ideas – the uncanny, the queer – both twisting back on themselves, both undulating, like a Mobius strip, difficult to stabilize.

To suggest that "the uncanny *is* queer [a]nd the queer *is* uncanny" alerts us to precisely the way that the queer uncanny operates.<sup>53</sup> If the uncanny is "what should have remained hidden" then the queer uncanny is that which should not, cannot, be hidden. The queer uncanny is not the what but the how and when. For Freud, the uncanny is in part a "reading-

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<sup>50</sup> Jenzen, Olu. "The Queer Uncanny." *eSharp*. 9. Spring 2007. Jenzen does an astute job of naming and beginning to define the queer uncanny in the context of various theoretical paradigms. <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/issues/9/>. Accessed 10 February 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms," 526.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, "What is This Thing Called Queer?", 280; Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. London: Routledge, 1994. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, 44.

effect.” In other words it is not only something “in” the text that the reader locates or connects but also the very experience of reading that text. The queer uncanny extends the notion of the text, understanding text broadly, queering all of life into a text to be at once written and read. Olu Jenzen has already begun the work of developing the theory of the queer uncanny in her essay of the same name in relation to boundaries between the human and non-human and in relation to “the closet,” the metaphor used most often to describe the situation in which gay men and women find themselves hidden or unable to live their lives openly.<sup>54</sup>

Moving beyond the notion simply that gender is a performance and that identity might be structured on and around the lost other requires us to consider that perhaps what we are really discussing is ontological in nature – that is, a question what it means to be or exist at all, as Jenzen recognizes by referencing Sue-Ellen Case’s foundational essay, “Tracking the Vampire,” in which Case asserts that “queer theory ... works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology, to shift the ground of being itself.”<sup>55</sup> Case situates queer within the category of non-reproductive unlife and at the borders of the living/non-living. In similar fashion, Judith Butler has also explored the ways in which gender affects whether a subject is intelligible indeed in later work posits that to “stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question.<sup>56</sup> In other words, it is not simply that “men” and “women” exist and that those who are not fully or recognizably men and women do not exist; rather it is that the system of gender as organized in a heteronormative context “delimits the very field of description that we have for the human.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jenzen, “The Queer Uncanny,” n. pag.

<sup>55</sup> Case, Sue-Ellen. “Tracking the Vampire.” Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1997: 380-400. 382.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, Gender Trouble, 33; Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. New York: Routledge, 2004. 27.

<sup>57</sup> Butler, Undoing Gender, 99.

I extend these arguments in a different direction with the notion of the queer uncanny. Moving away from conceptualizations and meditations on the nature of threshold states between the living/non-living, I focus on the epistemological possibilities of the queer uncanny, most especially through the elements of doubling, the return of the repressed, the repetition compulsion, and dislogic.<sup>58</sup> Part of the queer uncanny is an interpretive process, a way of looking and reading that works to not privilege any one interpretation over another, based only on immediacy or likelihood. Rather, reading with the queer uncanny eye means locating those places where the repressed returns, where elements are repeated, where doubles appear, and blending them together to move beyond “an” instantiation of the uncanny and into the realm multiple instantiations at the same moment, some or all of which fold back into upon one another and upon themselves so that what is uncanny in the first order is doubly uncanny in the second. The queer uncanny is not just a moment or instantiation of the uncanny; nor is it simply non-heteronormative. It is an amalgamation. The queer uncanny is the merging of an instantiation of the uncanny with the personal and political potential of queer resulting in a new way of connecting and understanding the way that gender and sexuality inflect human experience.

It is the queer context in which an uncanny instant takes places and the queer context in which it is interpreted and the way in which it is understood. The queer uncanny disrupts normative expectations and behaviors. In standard dominant readings (whether or those artifacts we designated as “texts” or those experiences we designate as “real life”), we

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<sup>58</sup> The literature on threshold studies is immense, ranging from Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” to Martha Nussbaum’s work on species membership to Derrida’s late lectures on sovereignty. Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. 1*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2009; Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991: 149-181; Nussbaum, Martha. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge MA: Belnap Press, 2006.

forcefully, willfully, seductively succumb to the temptation and pressure to choose (see, feel, highlight, discuss) those clues, moments, symbols, images, memories, et cetera that support as bulwarks the reproductive futurity to which we are told and asked and ordered to subscribe. Thus, we somehow create a sense of the uncanny (isn't it funny how the good guy always wins...? isn't it something how the two lovers always meet...?) in that we perpetuate the artificial repetition of recognition, which we then disclaim as proof of the way things are or are supposed to be. Anomalies, oddities, queer bits, the unfamiliar among the familiar is cast aside, flattened out, ignored. The uncanny which we might individually and collectively experience is flattened out, reduced to anomaly which therefore requires no further explanation than a pert "how uncanny!" The queer uncanny defies this, runs against it, asks instead that before we give birth to a reading or understanding that replicates what we already know or want to know – even in the face of contrary evidence – as in the dislogic that underlies the final scene of *The Wizard of Oz*, which I will discuss more fully later – that we give pause, that we attend not to seaming together elements that extend the heteronormative farther but that we attend to the cracks and the fissures.

In the follow chapters I attempt to lay out the parameters of the queer uncanny more clearly using three different texts: a film, a novel, and a municipal ordinance. In the first chapter I analyze the popular 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. My aim in beginning with such a ubiquitous text is to rely on readers' familiarity with the film for introducing the disruptive interpretive potential of the queer uncanny in several of its manifestations: the compulsion to repeat, doubling, and dislogic -- as elements themselves and as located in specific characters and scenes in the film. The second chapter takes us further into the queer uncanny as I focus on Scott Heim's novel, *Mysterious Skin*, which is a less-known and far more troubling text

than *The Wizard of Oz*. Read by most as a tale of redemption in light of childhood sexual molestation, the novel is fertile ground for demonstrating the ability of the queer uncanny to broaden not only the available interpretative range vis-à-vis characters and scenes but to evoke rethinking of the cultural discourses surrounding so-called traumatic events. The final chapter takes us out of the realm of film and literature and into the law as I apply the lens of the queer uncanny to a municipal domestic partnership registry ordinance that by its own terms provides no rights to registrants but which upon further analysis turns out to offer evidence of the performative potential of the queer uncanny.



## Chapter One

### “Home is No Place: Moments of the Queer Uncanny in *The Wizard of Oz*”

It is hardly necessary to sketch even briefly the story of this now-classic American film, given how broadly and deeply it has become a part of what we might call American culture. The life of the film extends far beyond the actual celluloid on which it is preserved and has entered the vernacular in myriad forms: from clothing and collectible figurines to now well-worn clichés reminding us that ‘we aren’t in Kansas anymore’ or that ‘there’s no place like home.’ Yet this film for all of its nostalgic and even banal deployment in the vernacular remains for me and many others a troubling, haunting, and disturbing film, rather than a welcome and comforting yearly tradition. I am not referring so much to the camp elements of the film as they have been worked and reworked in any number of drag or parodic renditions of the “Over the Rainbow” or in any number of readings that posit the film as the great gay coming out story. Rather, I’m referring to the way that the film evokes an uncanny world, produced from and speaking back to the psyche of the young Dorothy, mirroring for a slight few of us the trouble and troubling past.

It seems almost impossible to avoid reading sexuality into the film even though many of my own friends and family disclaim the film as anything but wholesomely neuter, decrying any recognition of sexuality in the film, whether they have seen it once or a hundred times. There is a bit of truth to their resistance, and perhaps the first item to note about *The Wizard*

*of Oz* is that there is little if any heterosexuality in the film at all.<sup>59</sup> Every other character in both Kansas and Oz is ostensibly divorced from sexuality of almost any kind, except of course the heterosexuality implicit in the worldview of the farm and the future. Yet of course, the film is not all neuter, and is instead awash in sexual energy as commentators before me have noted convincingly. I extend these prior analyses in this chapter beyond “sexual identity” or “sexual development” and the question of Dorothy’s burgeoning sexuality, whatever her orientation, and instead insist that alongside other readings of the film, is my reading: a tale of Dorothy, a subject on the cusp and a traveler whose journey is not to a fantastical magical land and back but to a quite different place that exists between Kansas and Oz: the space of the queer uncanny, in which both worlds exist overlapping. I read the film as a representation of Dorothy’s psychic experience, conscious and unconscious acts and attitudes that open to her the position of the sinthomosexual within the traditional framework of both narrative and reproductive futurity, a futurity that Dorothy in the end turns up on itself by declaring that indeed there is “no place like home.”

It is perhaps the dislogic of the film as a whole and in individual scenes that gives the film its queer and uncanny character. My aim in beginning with such a ubiquitous text is to rely on readers’ familiarity with the film for introducing the disruptive interpretive potential of the queer uncanny in several of its manifestations: the compulsion to repeat, doubling, and dislogic -- as elements themselves and as located in specific characters and scenes in the film. From the beginning as Dorothy disavows Hunk’s simple, logical, and commonsensical direction to take a path that does not include Miss Gulch’s garden to the concluding moments

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<sup>59</sup> The only heterosexuality present in the film would be the implicit heterosexual union between Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, if we presume that they are married and not – perhaps – brother and sister. The novel makes it clear that the two are married; the film leaves that to the viewer to decide. I am grateful to Ann Schofield for mentioning this possibility.

when Dorothy asserts that there is “no place like home,” the film defies normative pathways of logic (unless, of course, they are forced onto the film, as I argue they have been). Most viewers of the film gloss over these fractures in what has coalesced into a collective though perhaps not conscious effort to stabilize the film within a socially sanctioned and culturally necessary framework of sentimentalized conceptualizations of home, security, family, and self-discovery.

### **The Text That Returns: 100 Years of *The Wizard of Oz***

*The Wizard of Oz* was a book before it was a film, and had already experienced wide circulation in that form, along with thirty-nine other Oz books, for some four decades before the film version came into being.<sup>60</sup> It is no small item to note that L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* shares its year of publication with several other iconic texts. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and O. Henry’s “The Four Million” offered readers rather sordidly realistic views of the gritty side of American urban life while Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, Thorsten Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), and William James’s forthcoming *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901), opened the minds of readers to the inner workings of their psyches and to the outer institutions like religion and capitalism that structured life in the modern world. Though no presumption can be made that any broad audience read each of these books or, if they did, that they made any connections among them, it is no leap to suggest that the cultural context in which Baum’s book was published was, indeed, a fertile turn-of-the-century period. Baum’s fairy tale was the best-selling children’s book for two years running, earning Baum and

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<sup>60</sup> There were fourteen Oz books penned by L. Frank Baum (and another nineteen penned by Ruth Plumly Thompson, at the behest of Baum’s publisher after Baum’s death in 1919). The film is drawn almost entirely from the first novel with which the film shares its name, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

illustrator William Wallace Denslow each nearly \$4000 in the first year of publication (approximately \$100,000 in today's dollars and a fairly incredible amount in the publishing industry of the early 1900s) and was praised for blending American themes and values into the traditional fairy tale narrative, with sufficient philosophy and satire to attract adults as well as children.<sup>61</sup>

The popularity of the book almost immediately spawned adaptations for the stage and screen, including a 1902 stage performance running on Broadway for nearly 300 performances and a 1910 silent film version.<sup>62</sup> It seems almost prophetic that advancement in film technology (e.g., Technicolor, which had been in development and use as early as 1916 but which only reached fruition in the late 1930s with the release of Disney's first, full-length animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) would keep Baum's fanciful novel on the short list of possible adaptations given Baum's highly visual narrative style, which featured color-coded districts in the land of Oz and vibrant descriptions of scenery and vistas. It was in fact the Walt Disney Company, sailing on the phenomenal success of *Snow White*, which sought the film rights to Baum's novel intending at one point to produce an animated version of the book featuring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and others from the Disney stable. Baum's widow Maud repeatedly refused Disney's offers for reasons that remain unclear and instead authorized her son to sell the film rights to cofounder of MGM Samuel Goldwyn for what in today's dollars would be about \$650,000.<sup>63</sup> MGM executives originally had ten year-old child star Shirley Temple slated for the starring role of Dorothy Gale; the

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<sup>61</sup> Baum Bugle, 19 (Autumn 1975): 14; Hearn, Michael Patrick, ed. The Annotated Wizard of Oz (Centennial Ed.). New York: W.W. Norton, 2000: 11, 33-34; and Hearn, Michael Patrick, ed. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Critical Heritage Series. New York: Schocken Books, 1983. 136.

<sup>62</sup> Riley, Michael O. Oz and Beyond: The Fantasy World of L. Frank Baum. Lawrence KS: Univ Press of Kansas, 1997. 78.

<sup>63</sup> Schwartz, Evan I. Finding Oz: How L. Frank Baum Discovered the Great American Story. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. 304.

switch to sixteen year-old Judy Garland for the leading role inaugurated what would become a long list of casting and production crew changes before the film was finally completed and released in 1939. The list of producers, directors, screenwriters, and other members of the production crew is both convoluted and well-documented enough to cause Salman Rushdie to question “[w]ho ... is the *auteur* of *The Wizard of Oz*” and then answer that the film “is as near as you will get to the that will-o’-the-wisp of modern critical theory: the authorless text.”<sup>64</sup>

Initial reviews of the film were generally quite negative. *The New Yorker* castigated the film for showing “no trace of imagination, good taste, or ingenuity” while *The New Republic* lauded the film for trying to rival Disney’s *Snow White* but ultimately cast it as a humorless and “painfully literal” failure wrongly featuring as its star the near-adult Judy Garland whose “thumping, overgrown gambols” were characteristic of the film overall.<sup>65</sup> Other reviews read similarly, finding much to dislike about the film from its overly Broadway-esqueness to its overly sentimental ending, although arguably the most influential review (from *The New York Times*) was favorable.<sup>66</sup> Critical reviews aside the movie-going public of 1939 went to the film in droves due in part to the tremendous amount of publicity the film received upon its release and the attendant packed film theaters it played in, but it is a fact that *Oz* failed to be profitable until nearly ten years after its release. Much of the financial failure of the film can be attributed to the extraordinarily high production costs, the

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<sup>64</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *The Wizard of Oz*. London: BFI, 1992. 95. Victor Fleming, the last of several directors (including George Cukor and King Vidor), is the one generally credited as the auteur/director of the film.

<sup>65</sup> Harnetz, Aljean. *The Making of the Wizard of Oz*. New York: Knopf, 1977. 20-21.

<sup>66</sup> Harnetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz*, 21-22.

vastly expensive publicity campaign promoting the film, and the fact that the bulk of the audience for the film paid children's admission prices.<sup>67</sup>

It was not until the mid-1950s that the film began to take its place most firmly in the American imagination, due in no small part to the development of and widespread ownership of television. CBS's 1956 broadcast of the film reached forty-five million viewers, most of whom were only able to see it on their black and white television sets; beginning with the 1959 broadcast, the film was aired annually. Over the past century since the novel's first publication and the seventy years since the release of the film, the recreations and adaptations have continued and have spawned theater, film, musical, comics, art installations, performance pieces, and books that tell, retell, or extend Baum's original tale and the film in often dramatic ways.<sup>68</sup> Two of the most popular include *The Wiz*, which began as a Broadway musical in the 1970s before being released as a film in 1978. Though generally panned by critics and failing to make much of a mark at the box office, the film did earn four Academy Award nominations and when viewed today is actually a remarkably creative revisioning of the 1939 classic featuring an all African-American cast and reimagined in an urban setting. A second and wildly successful extension of (or, more aptly, prelude to) the 1939 classic is Geoffrey Maguire's 1995 novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, which provides back story to the lives of the Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda the Good Witch (Galinda in the novel and musical) and which inspired the Broadway phenomenon, *Wicked*.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Schwartz, *Finding Oz*, 309.

<sup>68</sup> For an extensive though not exhaustive listing, see "Adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz*." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptations\\_of\\_The\\_Wizard\\_of\\_Oz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptations_of_The_Wizard_of_Oz). Accessed 12 January 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: Harper, 1995.

With widespread viewership comes increased opportunity for negative criticism and it was not long before debates began to be waged over the appropriateness of the film for children and over the supposedly anti-Christian and anti-capitalist sentiments of the film and the books on which it was based. School districts banned Baum's books from their curricula and school libraries as unwholesome, religious groups decried the witches and the secular message of self-reliance, and politicians labeled the books socialist.<sup>70</sup> The film, however, continues to play on broadcast and cable television year round and has been released on VHS and DVD almost continuously since 1980 when it was the first videocassette film released by MGM/CBS Home Video. It is the 1939 MGM film that is most often cited as "the" *Wizard of Oz*, the "authoritative work to which all other telling, even the original one, must answer."<sup>71</sup> It is most definitely to the film that most people refer when referencing the yellow brick road, ruby slippers, Dorothy and Toto, Kansas or any of the now colloquial taglines, for in the novel the shoes are silver, Kansas merits just barely a hundred words of description, and Dorothy never specifically states that there is no place like home.

Although many find the film to be "in most respects, faithful to the original book," many fans of L. Frank Baum's book series were and remain critical of the film version and charge the film with having evacuated Baum's child-focused literary vision in favor of a hyper-romanticized film version.<sup>72</sup> Such charges are not far astray from the sorts of contention that always exists when written works are adapted for the visual screen and that are often at base conflicts or misunderstandings about the production and aesthetic values attendant to two very different media. But the charges are also not completely unfounded.

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<sup>70</sup> Schwartz, *Finding Oz*, 310.

<sup>71</sup> Billman, Carol. "'I've Seen the Movie': Oz Revisited." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 9 (1981): 241-250. Rvd and rpt in *Children's Novels and the Movies*. Ed. Douglas Street. New York: Ungar, 1983: 92-100. 92.

<sup>72</sup> Riley, *Oz and Beyond*, 199.

The film version draws on but is not faithful to Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and alters the story in significant ways.<sup>73</sup> Katharine Rogers notes of the novel, for example, that it places all characters at the height of six year-old Dorothy and that it details the entire adventure as from the point of view of a child, both of which give the novel an entirely different flavor and appeal than the film.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the most relevant charge against the film is Rogers's assertion that while the novel treats Dorothy's journey as an actual trip in which the house moves, the film turns her travels "into a dream, a *mere* projection of her wishes and fears that could not possibly be mistaken for reality" and that the film version is "false to Baum's view that the world of imagination ... has its own validity."<sup>75</sup> This note of dissatisfaction is the ending note of Roger's finely detailed biography of Baum and is expressed even in her final footnote in which she laments that upon seeing the film for the first time at the age of seven she was "deeply disappointed ... because it did not literally follow the book, but in retrospect I think I sensed and was hurt by its refusal to take Baum's story seriously."<sup>76</sup>

It is precisely Rogers' disappointment with the refusal of the film to take Dorothy's journey seriously, as anything more than a "mere" dream, that serves as the springboard for my own thinking about the film. But where Rogers' disappointment seems from some allegiance to Baum's supposed approach to the imaginations of children, my concern is far more extensive. I lay the blame squarely at the feet of reviewers and viewers of the film over

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<sup>73</sup> A listing of some of the main differences between the novel and the 1939 film can be found at "[The Wizard of Oz \(1939\) Film.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wizard_of_Oz_%281939_film%29)" [Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wizard_of_Oz_%281939_film%29) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Wizard\\_of\\_Oz\\_%281939\\_film%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wizard_of_Oz_%281939_film%29). Accessed January 22, 2011. There is a small cottage industry of web blogs dedicated to locating and cataloguing the differences between the film and the first Oz novel.

<sup>74</sup> Rogers, Katherine M. *L. Frank Baum, Creator of Oz: A Biography*. Cambridge MA: DeCapo Books, 2002. 253.

<sup>75</sup> Rogers, *L. Frank Baum*, 253-254.

<sup>76</sup> Rogers, *L. Frank Baum*, 290n32.



the past seventy years and find that the real quandary is not about the Baum and his faith in children and their imaginations but about the ways by which our interpretations of this and other texts, including our own “lived experiences,” is shaped and delimited by the Symbolic episteme in which we find ourselves living.

### **So Many Interpretations, So Little Queerness**

Perhaps best to first remind us of the basic plotline. Young Dorothy Gale rushes home, frantic because her little dog Toto has yet again run through spinster Gulch’s yard. Orphaned and in the care of her Uncle Henry and her Aunt Em, Dorothy’s concerns are side-stepped by everyone on the family farm as there is bad weather afoot and work to be done. As Dorothy runs off determined to find a better place in the world, a cyclone threatens the flat Kansas landscape and by the time Dorothy makes it back to the farmstead proper it is too late: everyone is in the root cellar with the door tightly closed against the raging winds. Dorothy rushes into the farmhouse, where she is hit by a dislodged window and transported to Oz. Dorothy emerges from the black and white of Kansas into the Technicolor wondrousness of Oz, where she is celebrated as the hero ‘who fell from the star named Kansas’ and whose house has landed squarely on the Wicked Witch of the East, freeing the Munchkins from dictatorial rule and causing a pair of sparkling ruby pumps to disappear from the wizened legs of the dead witch and to appear magically on Dorothy’s young feet. To return to Kansas, Dorothy must travel to see the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, who will be able to tell her how to return home. Along the way she meets Scarecrow who is in need of a brain, Tin Man who is in need of a heart, and Cowardly Lion who is in need of courage. Their journey is interrupted and slowed by the Wicked Witch of the West, who wishes to avenge her sister’s

death and to nab the ruby red slippers that now rest on Dorothy's feet. The foursome (and Toto) kill the Wicked Witch only to find that the great and powerful Oz is in reality just a little befuddled professor from Omaha who is also trying to get back home. He offers to take Dorothy and Toto with him in his hot air balloon but at the last minute he lifts off without them. As Dorothy despairs, Glinda returns and instructs Dorothy that "[y]ou don't need to be helped any longer. You've always had the power to go back to Kansas" and tells her to tap her heels together and think to herself that "there's no place like home." In the closing scene of the film, Dorothy awakens back in black and white Kansas surrounded by her aunt, uncle, and the farm hands and trying desperately to assure them all that "it wasn't a dream. It was a place. And you, and you, and you, and you were there."

It is precisely because the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* is so beloved and so highly esteemed as the quintessential American fairy tale that I find it valuable as the entry point in advancing my thesis. While I am fully in accord with those who view the cultural productions of marginalized individuals and groups as offering new epistemological and experiential avenues for viewing and existing in the world, my personal interest runs to texts and cultural sites that are ubiquitous and circulating (as is the case with *The Wizard of Oz*) and to the perhaps less mainstream but still widely available (as with the novel *Mysterious Skin* in the next chapter). A performance piece that takes place in a basement bar in the West Village of New York City once certainly holds politically progressive potential just as a decidedly elitist text like Jean Genet's *Notre Dame des Fleurs* can influence a cadre of academic scholars; my interest, however, is to take the already widespread, the already colloquial, the already ubiquitous, the widely available and to submit it to renewed examination.<sup>77</sup> Why this

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<sup>77</sup> Although I am not a firm adherent to the myth and symbol school of American Studies and its focus on a singular American mind, there is much to be said for how popular cultural forms speak to and of

particular film remains so popular among casual viewers and cultural studies, popular cultural, and film theorists alike hints at something that may perhaps transcend (though never fully) elements of race, class, and gender: the notion of looking for something and finding it back at the beginning, at home.<sup>78</sup> Whether or not home is a place of comfort or anxiety, there can be little doubt of the ideas place and permanency as it circulates in myriad ways in our culture.

The film has been the subject of interpretation almost since before it was even released, and the interpretations range from the banally sentimental and straight-forward to the almost unbearably forced and frankly unsupportable readings in which the filmic treatment of Kansas is described as “upbeat” and “cozy” with “farms ... comfortably enclosed by fences, and [the] life on these farms is not such a singular endeavor (e.g., Dorothy’s aunt and uncle have three jovial farmhands around to help them).”<sup>79</sup> My purpose in this project is not to disprove any of these interpretations; working in a postmodernist milieu, my project recognizes the multiple ways in which these interpretations adhere as authoritative without being authoritarian: as stepping stones in the development of newer and perhaps more complete or nuanced interpretations, as integral to and viable within certain theoretical or historical contexts, and as indicative of the potential of any text to proliferate meaning.

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the character of any group. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., captures the sentiment aptly when he observes that “[w]hat succeeds at the time in movies, what is remembered later (often two separate things) obviously offers the social and intellectual historian significant clues to the tastes, apprehensions, myths, inner vibrations of the age... The fact that film has been the most potent vehicle of the American imagination suggests all the more strongly that movies have something to tell us not just about the surfaces but about the mysteries of American life.” Schlesinger, Arthur M. “Foreword.” American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image. Ed. John E. O’Connor and Martin A. Jackson. New York: Ungar Publishing, 1979. x-xi.

<sup>78</sup> I recognize that Schlessinger, writing over thirty years ago, is veering dangerously close to the approach of the myth-and-symbol school of American studies, in which the search for “the” or “an” American mind tended to place great emphasis on the works and lives of white male Americans like Whitman, Melville, and Thoreau as elucidating quintessentially American values.

<sup>79</sup> Billman, “I’ve Seen the Movie,” 242.

Though my project diverges from these prior interpretations in ways that will become apparent in the pages that follow, my thinking is informed by these other prior representative readings of the film.

One of the dominant interpretations of the film originated in the mind of high school educator Henry Littlefield, who saw Baum's books (and most especially the first book on which the film was based) as a "Parable of Populism."<sup>80</sup> Littlefield's inspired interpretation saw the Tin Man as the factory worker of the east, the Scarecrow as the rancher of the Midwest, the Yellow Brick Road as the gold standard, and the Wizard as President McKinley living in the City of Emeralds, Washington, D.C., an historical-allegorical reading that continues to be reexamined and revisited today.<sup>81</sup> While there is no evidence that Baum intended his story in this way, the interpretation continues to spawn interest. A more generally acceptable because seemingly timeless interpretation is that it is an "inspiring message of a girl of the prairies facing a crisis, extending true friendship to those in need, surmounting obstacles to personal development, overcoming those obstacles, and then finally, having deserted the family farm in a self-pitying attempt at rebellion, returning home to it with a promise never again to leave."<sup>82</sup> Such an interpretation manages to fit both the sentimental needs of some viewers and the self-actualization needs of others.

As one might expect, many of the interpretations of the film in the past couple of decades have focused on the sexual undertones of the film, or to be more precise the issues of gender and sexuality that seem to infuse the film, supporting the narrative framework in ways

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<sup>80</sup> Littlefield, Henry. "The Wizard of Oz: Parable of Populism." *American Quarterly*. 16 (Spring 1964).

<sup>81</sup> See, for example: Geer, John G., and Thomas R. Rochon. "William Jennings Bryan and the Yellow Brick Road." *Journal of American Culture*. 16.4 (1993): 59-63.

<sup>82</sup> Hamelman, Steven. "The Deconstructive Search for Oz." *Literature-Film Quarterly*. 28.4 (2000): 312-319. 313.

both subtle and obvious, depending on the point of view of the interpreter. While these interpretations seem at least as plausible as Littlefield's populist parable reading, many who hold the film dear see such interpretations as "a form of literary child abuse."<sup>83</sup> That rings a tad hyperbolic and more than a little out of touch with current understandings of both child abuse and child sexuality, although one cannot but recognize that to interpret through the lens of sexuality a film that has for nearly three-quarters of a century been viewed, discussed, and held up as a paragon of innocence in the face of evil and of wholesomeness in the face of wickedness is indeed to risk the tincture of illicitness.

Psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations of various stripes have ranged from the laudatory to the lamenting, many focusing on the erotics between or among various characters. Harvey Greenberg psychoanalyzes Dorothy as the "Little Girl Lost – and Found," suggesting that the romance in the story was to be found between Dorothy and Farmhand Hunk, provided that Dorothy could move past her powerful psychic connection to Aunt Em.<sup>84</sup> Salman Rushdie suggests that the focus of energy in the film is among Dorothy and the two witches -- Glinda of the East and the unnamed Wicked Witch of the West -- but fails to take note of how this might be read as anything more than woman-centric and ignores the potential lesbianism of such a triangle.<sup>85</sup> Linda Paige's feminist reading situates Dorothy as a failed heroine who "succumbs to the patriarchal voices of her subconscious, and thereby represses her imagination and wastes her powers."<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Bonnie Friedman recognizes the obvious woman-centric erotics in the film, an erotics she locates among Dorothy, Auntie Em, and the

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<sup>83</sup> Schwartz, *Finding Oz*, 311.

<sup>84</sup> Greenberg, Harvey. "The Wizard of Oz: Little Girl Lost—and Found." *The Movies on Your Mind*. New York: Saturday Review Press, 1975. Pages 13-32.

<sup>85</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *The Wizard of Oz*. London: BFI, 1992.

<sup>86</sup> Paige, Linda Rohrer. "Wearing Red Shoes: Dorothy and the Power of the Female Imagination in The Wizard of Oz." *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. 2.4 (Winter 1996): 146-153. 146.

Wicked Witch of the West, but ultimately reads the film within a heterocentric framework in which Dorothy returns to Kansas to assume the heterosexual homemaking role that the aging Aunt Em is sure to soon relinquish, leaving Uncle Henry and three farmhands without the civilizing and disciplining influence of the feminine. Friedman laments that “[t]his is a story about who owns what, as any archetypal story about women must be. It is about kidnapping and re-kidnapping and ultimate possession. Merged with our mothers, unsure of our boundaries, women’s drama often enacts the story of the self in jeopardy, the self that has been absconded with – raped, ravished, invaded, and annexed – and the struggle to get that self back.”<sup>87</sup>

### **Both Here and There: Kansas and Oz**

Katharine Rogers’s criticism of the film for reducing Dorothy’s journey into a mere dream is certainly well-founded; most viewers understand the entire Oz sequence as the result of an extended hallucination resulting from the blow to the head Dorothy receives. Some slightly more nuanced readings of the film see “dream” as a bit more symbolic, as the battle of two dreams: a dream of escaping to someplace “over the rainbow” and a dream in which there is “no place like home.” The two dreams seem at first glance to be antithetical and ripe with conflict for the plot, for how can one both desire escape and also desire to return home? There is a certain legitimacy to either sense of the word “dream” as there is ample evidence that lead screenwriter Noel Langley was familiar with Freud’s developing body of writings, including *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and related works by Freud and others that

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<sup>87</sup> Friedman, Bonnie. “Relinquishing Oz: Every Girl’s Anti-Adventure Story.” Michigan Quarterly Review. 35.1 (1996): 9-28. 15.

followed.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps the best example of the influence of Freud on Langley's script is the opening sequence set in Kansas, which in Baum's novel merits but a few hundred terse words but which in the film is not only a central tool in setting the story but also takes up a full fifth (20 minutes) of the total running time (100 minutes). The black and white opening is almost insistently superego-esque with its harsh lines reminiscent of German Expressionist film (e.g., *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), the curt responses of the adult characters to Dorothy's dilemma, and its punishing cyclone. These elements, combined with Dorothy's troubles with the stern, angular Miss Gulch, are counter-posed to Dorothy's plaintive wish to be somewhere over the rainbow. When the journey begins, it is indeed difficult not to understand Dorothy's journey as being a dream because of the stark juxtaposition of bleak Kansas with brilliant Oz and because of the way that elements of her 'real life' appear in Dorothy's journey through Oz. In his extended essay on the film, Salman Rushdie interprets the film using precisely this rubric and determines that in the final analysis it is the dream of escape that controls both the film and Dorothy.<sup>89</sup> The concept of the queer uncanny, though, allows us to express and live out both dreams at once as co-existent rather than conflicting realities because the queer uncanny relies not on different topographies or geographies for its power but rather on the mental agility to recognize at one and the same time a familiar/unfamiliar quality to each moment and space. Early in the film, Dorothy seems to be attempting just such a 'queering' by attempting to read her life within a much more dynamic epistemological framework than her aunt, uncle, and the farmhands would allow; hence her response of exasperation and dissatisfaction at Hunk's suggestion that she simply take a route that bypasses Miss Gulch's garden: "Oh, Hunk, you just won't listen, that's all." She is explicitly not suggesting that Hunk

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<sup>88</sup> Schwartz, *Finding Oz*, 305.

<sup>89</sup> Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz*, 12, 23.

has simply misheard her; she is insistent that he is listening to her words facially and superficially and not to their emanations and deeper meanings. She is not seeking a solution; she is invested in the process and in the flow of the discontent and in the contentment that the state of discontent ironically provides. In other words, she is not seeking the normative conflict resolution process; she finds pleasure (jouissance) in the symptom itself.

What makes Dorothy's home so interesting is that it is so harsh and so far removed from the Midwest and small-town America of the cultural imagination, which focuses on "a street, lined with three or four-storey red-brick business blocks.... This is Main Street.... And around it lays a prosperous farming country dotted with handsome farmhouses and big red barns."<sup>90</sup> The Kansas where Dorothy lives is nothing like this; although the farm on which Dorothy lives is surely near a small town (for it is from the small town that Dorothy is walking when we first meet her and the errant Toto), the farmstead is hardly prosperous or handsome. It is imperative to note that the film is *not* black and white initially but rather shades of gray. This is not simply a comment on the visual elements of the film; our description of the visual is an analogue to how we will imagine other elements of this film: not as black or white but as shades of gray, drawing out the subtle gradations of color, meaning, and possibility from a film that has been routinely and firmly situated in a particular genre and interpretative framework.

Munchkinland is in distinct contrast to the geometric and linear face of Kansas. The two landscapes seem to be polar opposites; but closer inspection reveals that these two locales may be doubles, not because they are opposites but because they are mirror reflections but with a difference. The first indication of this is Dorothy's quizzical expression as she

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<sup>90</sup> Meinig, Donald.W. "Symbolic Landscapes." The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays. Ed. Donald .W. Meinig. New York: Oxford Univ Press, 1979. 164-191. 167.



ventures out of the farmhouse and into Munchkinland, commenting, “Toto -- I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.” Her first comment is not “Look, Toto! It looks so strange” or “Toto, we're lost” but “I've a *feeling*....” This alerts us that we are in a moment of the queer uncanny because Dorothy is not focusing on empirical knowledge (what she sees or hears) or on certainty but on feeling, the sense that all is not what it was. Yet Dorothy does not seem unduly frightened or undone; her gaze is cast around in a manner that seems full of wonder rather than fear.

To the eyes Kansas and Munchkinland could not be more distinct. Kansas was gray and linear and flat, including the people, and the only roundness the undulating spinning cyclone flying across the land is the force of destruction. In Munchkinland everything is brilliantly hued, rounded, undulating, including the Munchkins themselves, and it is the sharp black pointed line of the Wicked Witch that is the disruptive force as she flashes into the scene. In Munchkinland the types, sizes, and colors of the flora suggest a fecund abundance in contrast to the dusty bare Kansas landscape and farmstead but we look closer we soon see that both Kansas and Munchkinland operated within a very queer uncanny space of “artificial naturalism” or “natural artificiality” for the flora in Munchkinland is plastic, foam, and rubber, not at all real yet not not-real, growing and thriving as we would expect plant life to do. Similarly, in Kansas where we would expect trees, grass, and crops to grow while birds and critters multiply, there is a marked absence of natural reproduction. The landscape shows but a few trees, the yard is dust, the creek nearly dried up; the animals who are reproducing (which doesn't include the humans, apparently, as Aunt Em and Uncle Henry appear childless, Gulch is a spinster, and the farmhands make no allusions) are ones who are forced to do so under the watchful eye of the calculating, scheduling farmer as baby chicks are

shipped in to be counted and used and as the pigs are corralled or separated depending on whether it is rutting season or not. In other words, the very ideas of reproduction, fecundity, natural, and artificial rest easily in neither Kansas nor Munchkinland. This suggests not only the constructedness of the heterosexual and reproductive matrix (a la Judith Butler et al) but it also harkens to Edelman's regime of reproductive futurity, in which a collective hallucination of the figure of the child is projected into the future and then cast back to draw us forth. The construction of the things that seem natural highlights the constructed (and hence partial, unformed, never complete) psyche of the human subject. That Dorothy feels not the fear of the unknown in Munchkinland but rather a curiosity tells us that the two worlds are mirrored and doubled as such things always are in the realm of the uncanny, which is a realm of feeling rather than certainty and which is always a realm where the borders and edges are the sites of knowledge.

Some have pushed the analysis further. Mark Dietrich Tschaepe has read the dislogic of the film through the lens of "folk explanation," which he defines as "answers to why-questions that connect mental behavior to physical behavior [and which are] based on the claim that psychological states, such as mourning or desire, have important content and cause us to behave in some ways and not others."<sup>91</sup> In other words, according to Tschaepe, the film avoids mechanistic and logical explanations in favor of emotional motivations and solutions based on "pragmatic considerations" (i.e., "what is problematic or what is desirable in an issue at hand [given the] knowledge, assertions, and beliefs" at hand).<sup>92</sup> When Professor Marvel wants to encourage Dorothy to return home, he relies not on a logical argument (e.g.,

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<sup>91</sup> Tschaepe, Mark Dietrich. "Pay No Attention to That Man Behind the Curtain!" In The Wizard of Oz and Philosophy: Wicked Wisdom of the West. Ed. Randall E. Auxier and Phillips S. Seng. Peru IL: Open Court Publishing, 2008. Pages 95-106. 97.

<sup>92</sup> Tschaepe, 97.

you have no money and no job skills) but on the emotionally-charged imagery of Auntie Em clutching her heart and crying. But this emotion-infused explanatory and persuasive process is not coldly emotional, recognizing instead that the approach much be rooted firmly in what will appeal to the listener or appellee and in the end “convince each individual that he or she does not want what they think they want because they already have something equivalent (or even better).”<sup>93</sup>

### **Breaking Down the Queer Uncanny: Accidents, Doubles, and Dislogic**

An element of the uncanny that deserves some attention is the compulsion to repeat. Freud includes this “constant recurrence of the same thing” as an element of his understanding of the role of the death drive in the uncanny. Though he makes short work of this subject in the essay (instead referring readers to his other work on the matter), Freud does write that “[i]n the unconscious mind we can recognize the dominance of a *compulsion to repeat*, which proceeds from instinctual impulses.”<sup>94</sup> In his essay on “Freud and the Sandman,” Neil Hertz notes that the “feeling of the uncanny would seem to be generated by being reminded of the repetition compulsion, not by being reminded of whatever it is that is repeated.”<sup>95</sup> Hence, Dorothy’s chastising Hunk for “just not listening.” Dorothy is not concerned about the behavior she is repeating (walking by Miss Gulch’s, knowing that Toto will get into the garden) but about the repetition itself.

But there is more to it than this. As Robert Pfaller has noted in his work on comedy and the uncanny, both comedy and the uncanny depend on success – or what we might more

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<sup>93</sup> Tschaepé, 96.

<sup>94</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 145.

<sup>95</sup> Hertz, Neil. “Freud and the Sandman.” The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime. New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1985. 113-134. 121.

aptly term over-success.<sup>96</sup> For example, when in romantic comedy a pretend-romance is used to cover for the real liaison but ends up being just as authentic, this is a form of success (or over-success) that produces comedic results because it requires the protagonist to balance, explain, and choose between or among desirable options.<sup>97</sup> In Freud's essay this sort of success can take two forms. Sometimes such success is wished for, though not in earnest, and the result is a form of symbolic causality – that is, the idea that one somehow caused something merely by longing for it, that though one did not wish for something in earnest or take any steps to effectuate the end result, the end results all the same.<sup>98</sup> This is the case in the tale of Freud's patient who on his first stay at treatment facility had a choice room, but on his second admission discovered that the desired room was already occupied. The patient wishes that the occupant "be struck dead" and sure enough within a short time the occupant is dead.<sup>99</sup> In the case of Polycrates, Freud notes that every wish of Polycrates is granted, although Polycrates did nothing to earn this advantage. In other words, Polycrates "simply lives in a world that conforms to his wishes."<sup>100</sup>

Consider the episode that seems to spawn the entire film, an apt illustration of this principle of over-success and which demonstrates as well the way that the queer uncanny refuses to be restricted to a purely optimistic or pessimistic state. Toto has gotten into Miss Gulch's garden, Miss Gulch has whacked Toto over the back with her garden rake, and Dorothy is afraid that Miss Gulch will cause Toto further harm. Simple misdemeanor of

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<sup>96</sup> Pfaller, Robert. "The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic: The Aesthetic Effects of the Thought Experiment." *Lacan: The Silent Partner*. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2006. 198-216. 204.

<sup>97</sup> The contrast would be in tragedy in which failure serves as the mechanism, when the result is not an embarrassment of riches but a paucity of choices if a choice exists at all. Think of *Romeo & Juliet* or *Othello*.

<sup>98</sup> Pfaller, 203.

<sup>99</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 146.

<sup>100</sup> Pfaller, 205.

similar nature have certainly been sufficient to sustain other films, but the viewer soon learns that Toto's indiscretions occur regularly -- "once or twice a week" -- when Dorothy passes Miss Gulch's home on her way back to the farm. When Dorothy tries to excite folks on the farm with her fears for Toto's safety, she is shushed and only commonsensical farmhand Hunk half-listens, only to tsk-tsk Dorothy for not using her head about the situation: "When you come home, don't go by Miss Gulch's place. Then Toto won't get in her garden, and you won't get in no trouble. See?" A fair answer, to which one might expect the teen-aged Dorothy to reply that the fastest or safest way home is by Miss Gulch's place; but instead Dorothy gives the queerest answer: "Oh, Hunk, you just won't listen, that's all." Dorothy is clearly unable to articulate why exactly it is she does not resolve the issue herself with some good Midwestern commonsense (other available options being to put Toto on a leash or to carry him past Miss Gulch's garden so that both dog and garden are unmolested). We could read this stemming from the typical self-centeredness of a child eager to garner attention for what the adult world surely considers a petty irritant, but if we peer closely at Dorothy's action through a different lens we find that these regularly occurring accidents may be a queer subject revealing in the *sinthome* -- a teenaged *sinthomosexual* seeking not a solution to a problem, as it is interpreted by the adults in her life, but simply reveling in the problem itself, reveling in the drama of the conflict, repeating it not because she cannot imagine or discern a solution but repeating it because she can and must. In what might be a slip of the tongue, Dorothy even admits that perhaps she wants Toto to get into Miss Gulch's garden: "Please, Aunt Em, Toto didn't mean to. He didn't know he was doing anything wrong. I'm the one that ought to be punished. I let him go in her garden. You can send me to bed without supper." In the repetition, Dorothy finds neither pleasure nor pain but the complex

interweaving of the two, which Lacan has termed *jouissance*. Of course, the over-success of her repetition has now nearly cost Toto his back and Miss Gulch has promised to contact the sheriff and to have Toto not merely put down or put to sleep but “destroyed.”

This accords with Dorothy’s compulsion to repeat certain behaviors that she then understands as accidents but which result in the death of two people: the Wicked Witches of the East and West. After killing each of the witches, her immediate response is that it was an accident and she did not mean to commit the murders.<sup>101</sup> It is likely that Dorothy did not have the *mens rea* required to make her certainly guilty of either murder; yet through the lens of the queer uncanny we find that Dorothy’s anger toward Miss Gulch (“Oooh, I’ll bite you myself! You wicked old witch!”) is repressed as it should be in a good little girl living in a good Christian home but it returns as the repressed for Miss Gulch’s death, not once but twice within the film. In the first instance the house (not Dorothy) lands on and kills the Wicked Witch of the East. This witch is revived in the form of the Wicked Witch of the West, almost as if the murder of the first witch was but a practice attempt for Dorothy, a practice accident of sorts in which Dorothy can disclaim knowledge or responsibility but for which she can test the waters and received her accolades as heroine to the Munchkins. What is more, the Glinda the Good Witch and the Munchkins mistake Dorothy herself for a witch, suggesting a psychic interplay of (dis)identification with the unerringly focused Miss Gulch for what kind of a little girl “lets” her dog repeatedly wander into harm’s way? Having practiced on the first witch, the repressed erupts again, blossoms into the narrative drive of the film as Dorothy pursues and finally murders the Wicked Witch of the West, only to return to Kansas where we can

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<sup>101</sup> After her house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East, Dorothy assures the menacing Wicked Witch of the West “It was an accident! I didn’t mean to kill anybody! Really I didn’t!” And after dousing the Wicked Witch of the West with water and killing her, Dorothy again exclaims, “I, I didn’t mean to kill her. Really I didn’t!”

only assume that Miss Gulch will be pedaling furiously back to the farm to find Toto and to again take him away to be destroyed.<sup>102</sup>

Continuing this idea of the return of the repressed being combined with a doubling effect (Miss Gulch – W.W. of the East / Dorothy – W.W. of the West / Dorothy – Miss Gulch) is the Wicked Witch of the West’s clear insight into Dorothy. When Dorothy denies liability to the Wicked Witch for the death of her sister-witch (“It was an accident! I didn’t mean to kill anybody!”) the Wicked Witch responds, “Didn’t mean it, eh? Accident, eh? Well, my little pretty, I can cause accidents, too.” Here, then, is a figure who challenges the conventional logic, asserting that she can ‘cause accidents’ and declaring a knowledge of Dorothy that neither Dorothy nor those others around her seem to have. I explore the Wicked Witch of the West in more detail below, but for now let us suggest she may be the sinthomosexual par excellence and whether she actually exists or exists as a projection of Dorothy’s own desires, she is the crux on which the psychic energy of the film centers.

In addition to the purposeful accidents that represent within the queer uncanny Dorothy’s compulsion to repeat, the film is rife with doubling, most especially of its characters. Freud contends that in the past the double “had a more benign significance” and was perhaps welcome and even comic while today it is “a thing of terror.”<sup>103</sup> The queer

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<sup>102</sup> Our certainty that the Wicked Witch of the West is a queer, firmly planted in the position of the sinthomosexual is evident not only in her own intense focus on obtaining the ruby slippers for no apparent reason than to satisfy her own desire for them but also in the Munchkin song about her sister’s death. Playing on the rhyme-sound “itch,” the song contains the following rhyming words: ditch, hitch, itch, kitchen, pitch rich, situation, slitch, stitch, switch, this, twitch, unhitch, which, and witch. The word that haunts the song, that is repressed yet returns in that insistent “itch” rhyme-sound, that fairly begs to be spoken but which is not? Bitch, a word that indicates something that is not far afield from the moniker queer, representing that person who does not conform to the social strictures and who challenges them. The bitch, the woman who speaks and acts of her own accord; the queer who does not reproduce and who operates “outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.” Edelman, 3.

<sup>103</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 143.

uncanny understands both of these as co-existent, not in competition or opposition. For Dorothy, Hunk may be the locus of the initial stirrings of sexual desire. The very name Hunk gives some credence to the idea that these stirrings may not be of a purely physical nature for “hunk” in the vernacular generally refers to a masculine, muscled male form, yet in the film Hunk is a rather scrawny and lanky man, suggesting that “hunk” is a descriptor signifying not a muscled man, perhaps not even a “man,” but something not full or complete, a hunk of man but not the full man. But he is as yet still strange, a man, the object of desire that is not fully known. He is as well off-bounds because he is significantly older and he is of a different class. Dorothy is still a schoolgirl while Hunk is an adult; Dorothy lives in the big house while Hunk sleeps in the barn.

The doubling of Hunk in the figure of the Scarecrow, who is literally a straw man, not quite whole, a “hunk” of potential, erases many of the barriers to Dorothy’s developing sexual desire. Not only is he not-quite human but in Oz the age of the Scarecrow is indeterminate (except perhaps that he has been hanging in the cornfield for quite some time) and Dorothy encounters him as a friend, rather than as an inferior: “Well, we haven’t really met properly, have we,” Dorothy asks of the Scarecrow, indicating that the differences that separated them in Kansas have no purchase here. Dorothy meets the Scarecrow first of the men who are doubled from Kansas to Oz, and at the end of the film it is to Scarecrow that Dorothy admits, “I think I’ll miss you most of all.” While we could read this through the lens of direct sexuality – adolescent Dorothy desires farmhand Hunk and projects this forbidden desire into the figure of the straw scarecrow, a less threatening because less human entity – in the lens of the queer uncanny, Hunk/Scarecrow functions as the limit of Dorothy’s desire, as both the nascent inaugural locus and the straw automaton friend-only figure. The Scarecrow meets



both elements of the uncanny for Dorothy. He is a friendlier, less sexually volatile version of Hunk but at the same time he is “the last straw,” the last barrier or limit before Dorothy either succumbs to the heteronormative push of a linear sexuality or manages to free herself of its time and space limitations. When she says she will “miss” him, she means not only in the sense of missing his company but also of missing the comfort and certainty that a life of invested in the heteronormative path of reproductive futurity would offer, the comfort of the constant busy work of daily, hourly, moment by moment rebuilding the bulwarks that support the future: “There goes some of me again. I just keep picking it up and putting it back in again,” says the Scarecrow as his straw, his substance, his solidity keeps slipping out of him. Dorothy is the acorn that misses becoming the oak tree and instead sprouts wings. It seems that she is moving more firmly than ever into the position of the sinthomosexual.

The only character not arguably doubled is Toto, Dorothy’s dog. It would be remiss to overlook Toto, as many prior interpretations have (see, e.g., Littlefield) for he is the nexus of conflict, the very reason that Miss Gulch and Dorothy cross each other’s paths in the first place, the one who reveals the Wizard as a shyster, and also the one who causes Dorothy to miss her flight home in the hot air balloon. The name *Toto* is related to a number of Latin terms – *totum*, *factotum*, *in toto*, *pars pro toto* – all of which refer to the ‘whole’ or ‘total.’ This suggests that Toto is in some way the ‘whole’ of something for Dorothy. It is possible to see Toto in this way as he does seem to be an externalized expression of Dorothy’s own desires or the mechanisms by which those desires might be explored, a more complete or ‘whole’ version of desire than the actual Dorothy is willing to admit to. Other commentators have phrased this differently as in Samuel Bousky’s Christian reading of the film in which

Toto is the physical body extending out from Dorothy who is understood as the spirit.<sup>104</sup> In less overtly religious language but still firmly with the self-help realm, Darren John Main understands Toto as that part of ourselves that is creative but rather too unbridled, leading us too often into conflict and dilemma.<sup>105</sup> In this case it is actually the Christian-based reading more in accord with queer theory than the supposedly irreligious self-help reading because rather than understanding “conflict and dilemma” as something to be avoided or gotten rid of, my queer theoretical approach understands both as productive, as the nexus of what it is to be human. Toto may very well then be an extension and queer-double of Dorothy insofar as Dorothy feels deeply connected to Toto and may be using the animal to force upon herself the very problems she wishes not to solve. In other words, Toto is a double with a difference, an extension but not a duplicate of Dorothy and she admits as much: “Please, Aunt Em, Toto didn't mean to. He didn't know he was doing anything wrong. I'm the one that ought to be punished.” We could interpret Dorothy's plea to mean simply that she failed to keep Toto in check, but with the queer uncanny and its notions of doubling and of the repetition compulsion, an interpretation that reads Toto as an extension of Dorothy, a extension that “completes” her or makes her “whole,” begins to make a great deal of sense. As a final recognition of how vital Toto is to her own sense of her self, how central the dog-as-extension is to her psyche, Dorothy even threatens Miss Gulch: “Oooh, I'll bite you myself!”

There may be more yet to little Toto. Dorothy allows Toto to run though Miss Gulch's garden and yet wails when Miss Gulch takes him away could be read facially as exactly that – a child too careless to be a “responsible pet owner” yet who sees the little

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<sup>104</sup> Bouskey, Samuel. *The Wizard of Oz Revealed*. Weed, CA: Writers Consortium, 1994. 24.

<sup>105</sup> Main, Darren John. *Spiritual Journeys Along the Yellow Brick Road*. Tallahassee FL: Findhorn Press, 2000. 39

animal as her best friend and confidant. Of course, we might at first imagine that the very notion of “responsible pet ownership” is much in line with a heteronormative take on the world. Nevertheless, in the larger cultural sense, one can see the queering of the cult of the child in the surge of sentimentalism surrounding companion animals like dogs and cats. In just the past decade these animals have gone from being “family pets” to being “part of the family,” entitled often to the same medical, nutritional, and lay comforts as the humans in the house in which the animal lives. This has extended beyond mere medical and nutritional issues, however; companion animals are now not only covered by health insurance and fed “human-grade” refrigerated food but are now being addressed as and treated as children, explicitly and with great evident enjoyment and psychic investment. How does this impact our thinking about Edelman, when he asks “What...would it signify not to be ‘fighting for children’? How, then, to take the other ‘side’ when to take a side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side of, by virtue of taking side within, a political framework that compulsively returns to the child as the privileged ensign of the future it intends?”<sup>106</sup> Is this the Cult of the Child writ larger, expanding out to encompass companion animals? It would seem not, under the rubric of the queer uncanny. In fact, it would seem that quite the opposite is true when responding to Edelman. With companion animals there can be little projection into the future, given that most companion animals are likely to live no longer than twenty years (and more likely to live just ten). It would seem that the sentimentalization and anthropomorphism of the companion animal can be quite queer and is so for Dorothy Gale; it is a willful dis-recognition of the future as a projection, mechanism, or time by which to structure one’s current psychic and political investments. Knowing that the companion animal with whom one identifies, whom one treats as a “member of the family” or as a “best

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<sup>106</sup> Edelman, No Future, 19.

friend,” will most certainly die before oneself, that it will not produce off-spring (or, in the case of those animals who do reproduce, the off-spring will likely not “advance” or “further” the dreams, political or otherwise, of the companion animal or its human), and has little if no agency to affect any change on the future.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, for many companion animal lovers like Dorothy, the value of the companion animal is precisely its present-ness. Dorothy has no interest in the rutting pigs or the chicks that will one day produce eggs and likely end up in the skillet. The companion animal does not deny the future or embrace it; it simply does not recognize the future in any meaningful way. This future-innocence of the companion animal then enables the human to mark off a very particularized and limited domain of time. This is very similar to the way that Edelman understands the place of the queer in the regime of reproductive futurity: unimportant, irrelevant, and unrecognized, except as that which is to be avoided. Is the growing love of companion animals evidence of an embrace of the queer by proxy, a co-optation of the present-centeredness of the sinthomosexual without the complete evacuation of an attendant future? For Dorothy Gale, this is precisely the role Toto fills. He is Dorothy, but less confined to human rules, less subject to the reproductive arc of the farm and of Dorothy’s own developing body.

Finally, we reach a point of our survey that deals with dislogic, an element of both the uncanny and queer. We are referring of course to an dislogic that is only illogical according to the criteria of normativity and, more particularly, reproductive futurity, a logic that demands that things be one thing and not another, that we see the world in binaries and that

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<sup>107</sup> Of course as others have pointed out, companion animal love can produce moments of shame since companion animals are often viewed as “substitutes” for “real” human emotion and “real” human children and companion animal love is often seen as improper. Kuzniar, Alice. “Sublime Shame.” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay & Lesbian Studies*. 15.3 (2009): 499-512. 508.

we privilege one half of the binary over the other, that we see the world as linear and progressing toward an horizon. An element of this, implicit in the definition but oft overlooked in application, is that whatever is perceived as the queer uncanny might have been experienced before. Nicolas Royle lauds Kaja Silverman for sharply addressing this point in her early work on Freud's "Fetishism" essay. Responding to Freud's assertion that most males experience castration anxiety at the sight of the female genitals, Silverman aptly notes that

According to the terms of Freud's own argument, if the spectacle of female castration strikes the male viewer as 'uncanny,' he himself must already have experienced castration; far from functioning merely as an 'innocent' (albeit horrified) onlooker, he too inhabits the frame of the unpleasurable image. In other words, the recurrence of the word *uncanny* in the essay on fetishism reminds us that even before the so-called castration-crisis, the male subject has an intimate knowledge of loss – that he undergoes numerous divisions or splittings prior to the moment at which he is made to fear the loss of his sexual organ.<sup>108</sup>

Though writing in a different vein, Silverman's holding Freud to the "terms of his own argument" is instructive for my analysis as well, as is her conclusion that the subject "undergoes numerous divisions or splitting prior to the moment" in which the uncanny arises. In *Oz*, it is certainly clear to the viewer that the main characters – the Witch, the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man and the Wizard – have referents in Kansas, so why is it that Dorothy does not instantly make or acknowledge the connection between these two worlds? She does not see the Scarecrow, Tin Man, Lion, the Wicked Witch of the West, or the Great

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<sup>108</sup> Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ Press, 1988. 17.

and powerful Oz as doubles or doppelgangers of people in Kansas, although she does several times allude to feeling like she has known her traveling companions for a long time.

Kansas is not her fully realized and specific frame of reference in Oz; instead, her experience of Kansas collapses in upon and – uncannily – reemerges as that which must be sought after, as the spatial desire-object which serves as a synecdoche for a range of affective and physical experiences, as a (re)presentation of itself. Dorothy loses Kansas as a specific frame of reference or as an experience-structuring framework; instead Kansas becomes a fetishized object, the place to where Dorothy wants to return but which she discovers she had in herself the entire time. Kansas, then, is not simply a place (although it most certainly that); it is also a subject position.

Although Dorothy does to some small extent experience the uncanny when she acknowledges feeling that she somehow already knows the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion, it is on her return to Kansas that the queer uncanny strikes: "And you -- and you -- and you -- and you were there." The element of fear and death which often characterizes the uncanny for Freud (and which he understands as the fear of castration in his analysis of Hoffmann's "Sandman") is found in the bewildered refusal of the farmhands to acknowledge their presence in Oz and a refusal to allow Dorothy to claim her time in Oz as authentic. Dorothy's frantic assertions that Oz was indeed a quite real place are met with responses that bewilder her. She is, in essence, looking around her bed and remembering Oz in the eye of her mind and experiencing the castration of both, feeling at once both deeply connected and deeply estranged from them all. But as in Silverman's observation, Dorothy is not looking upon the scene as an "innocent" onlooker but rather with an "intimate knowledge" of her own. The castration of Dorothy's experience with Oz is not surprising, and even though it seems based

in an authentic disbelief on the part of the farmhands and relatives gathered around her bed, such disbelief does not lessen the severity and the integrity of the heterosexual schema at work in the scene, insisting that Dorothy give up what she knows is true in favor of the collective denial of the power of her own knowledge in favor of the collective acceptance and upholding of the authoritarian framework of the worldview we know as reproductive futurity.

If in the standard sense of the uncanny, dolls and automatons can produce this feeling, then certainly we can understand the Scarecrow and Tin Man in this vein. And it is not much of a further stretch to understand the Cowardly Lion as something “not quite human” because he is an animal with very human-like qualities, the Wicked Witch of the West similarly because as a witch her status as human is suspect (in much the same way as a vampire, zombie, or alien), and the Great and Powerful Oz because he is a projected disembodied head. Each of these five is in some way “other than” human and hence likely to produce feelings of the uncanny. The queer uncanny is the extension of this feeling, the turning it on itself in the closing scene in which the people who surround Dorothy while she comes back to consciousness in Kansas become the “less than humans” because they look like familiar, friendly, known entities but they refuse to believe her story or to grant her agency and in this way become quite inhuman. Where we might typically locate the uncanny in the Oz sequences in which the viewer and to a lesser extent Dorothy feel that they somehow already know these characters, it is not until the closing scenes back in Kansas that the queer uncanny erupts, replicas of replicas, experiences of experiences.

## The Girl and the Witch

It must be remembered that in the film, Dorothy is a child, and children are largely understood as unformed and in process toward adulthood. This currently popular understanding of children fits most popular interpretations of *The Wizard of Oz* as the tale of a little girl lost who matures into adult via a fantastical journey. Bruhm and Hurley also point us to the possibility that Dorothy is a queer child, not simply a happy heterosexual farm girl coming of age with only her aging relatives and three mature male farmhands through which to negotiate her burgeoning sexuality. As a queer child, Dorothy straddles the line between immaturity and maturity, between normalcy and queerness, much as she straddles the fence between the pig sties and ends up falling. “What is the effect of projecting the child into a heteronormative future? One effect is that we accept the teleology of the child (and narrative itself) as heterosexually determined... The very effort to flatten the narrative of the child into a story of innocence has some queer effects. Childhood itself is afforded a modicum of queerness when the people worry more about how the child turns out than how the child exists as a child.”<sup>109</sup> Although in the text and illustrations for the novel, Dorothy is a pre-adolescent twelve year-old, Dorothy’s age in the film is unclear. Clearly she is supposed to be a child (otherwise, at this time in American history, it is likely she would be married and on a farmstead of her own), but the ample bosom and hips of the adult actress (Judy Garland) betrays that, suggesting perhaps that not only Dorothy’s psyche but her body are being queered.

I focus on Dorothy not only because she is the main character in the film but because she seems to be struggling between the position of reproductive futurity that life on

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<sup>109</sup> Bruhm, Steven and Natasha Hurley. “Introduction.” *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Ed. Bruhm and Hurley. Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2004. xiv.



the farm, surrounded by the monthly and yearly cycles of reproduction, by the parental roles of Uncle Henry and Aunt Em, and by the potentially fertile masculine energies of the three hired hands (but most especially of the tellingly named Hunk) and the position of the sinthomosexual which she seems rather to cotton to, due in part perhaps to her youthful exuberance or in part to her isolated rural situation. For all the fecundity represented by the rutting pigs and the baby chicks, Kansas is portrayed as startlingly sterile and barren: only a couple of scrawny trees, a dry creek bed, a front yard in name only but really just dirt separated from other dirt by a fence. The reproductive cycles of the farm do not emerge from the land itself or from nature but from the postman who delivers baby chicks that must be kept alive and from the sties that keep the hogs and boars separated until rutting time. Kansas is presented as flat and filled with sharply geometric angles – the angles of the fences, the angle-ridden shot of the tree in the foreground as Dorothy arrives home, the straight juts of the electricity poles shooting into the sky while advancing into the horizon, all laid out on a landscape that is as sharply divided between sky and ground as any lesson in artistic perspective would be. Even Auntie Em and Uncle Henry are linear and angular. This geometry, as Salman Rushdie has noted, is accompanied by a mathematical theme in the counting of baby chicks, suggesting that life here in Kansas is ordered, précised, on a tight schedule.<sup>110</sup>

This geometric-mathematic preciseness is radically disrupted by the Dorothy herself, a rather rounded and fecund example of femininity with her plump cheeks, ample bosom, and rounded body, and by the swirling, twirling cyclone itself. Both Dorothy and the cyclone are disruptive forces on the ordered, parse farmstead. Both distract people from what needs to be done, both are forces of nature that seem uncontrollable, both are in some sense,

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<sup>110</sup> Rushdie, The Wizard of Oz, 14.

unpredictable, flying about the farm, rustling up dust and distraction. This is best seen in Auntie Em's admonition to Dorothy to "help us out today, and find yourself a place where you won't get into any trouble" for Dorothy is a pest, running around the farmstead, disrupting the ordered and future-oriented work of the farm -- the counting of chicks, the repairing of fences, the sheltering of farm animals in the face of coming bad weather. Dorothy does not seem to have any chores to do and she exhibits little desire to be a part of the ritualistic life of the farm; indeed she seems to disrupt it at every turn, often without apparent intent, so focused is she upon her own concerns over Toto and his transgressions into the garden of Miss Gulch.

Indeed, Dorothy's behavior is an aggression against the workaday farm doings, not simply asserting her own concerns over Toto and the threatening Gulch but to actually interrupt and disrupt the work of the farm, first by taking baby chicks out of the batch to be counted and then by balancing on the fence between two pig sties and losing her balance, upsetting both the pigs and the farmhands. Her responses to her aunt and uncle and to the farmhands might simply be youthful cheek but are also be read as the assertive dismissal or displeasure of a sinthomosexual seeking something that those around her unknowingly refuse to provide. Let us be clear, though. The sinthomosexual is not always of the Ebenezer Scrooge sort, misanthropic and hermetic; Dorothy is nothing if not social, as she scurries around the farm attempting to solicit the attention of anyone who will listen and clearly, loved even if she is in the way. Unlike Ebenezer Scrooge, before his multi-ghost conversion experience, Dorothy is determinedly social, deliberately connected to the people and beings in her environment. This suggests that queer is not necessarily anti-social in the sense of being alone, solitary, or separated out but may be anti-social in the sense of using connections with

other beings in multiple ways, one of those ways being in the advancement of a non-futurity worldview, among but not of. Even as Dorothy strolls around the farm yard aching for attention to be paid her distress, she is still quite relaxed and her behavior insouciant. Both her body and her words belie her desperation, as she lounges next to the chick incubator, whimsically teeters on the fence, and casually complains, “Just because Toto chases her old cat...” before eventually leaning against a plow and launching into the wistful ballad, “Over the Rainbow.”

An interesting take on childhood and the notion of “growing up” is Kathryn Bond Stockton’s notion of “growing sideways,” a phrase Stockton uses to indicate the possibility of avoiding the standard cultural teleology of birth, maturation, marriage, reproduction, death and instead focusing on the multiple ways that children (and actually a human of any age) might meander, move backwards, linger, or delay.<sup>111</sup> Stockton indicates that this growing sidewise may be endemic to childhood itself as the human mind develops but is also both the motivation for and the result of societal restrictions on childhood. Dorothy in many ways physically embodies this growing sideways as her form seems to fill out rather than up, as her concerns seem other-based rather than farm-focused.<sup>112</sup>

Some commentators have suggested that the tornado is the result of Dorothy’s having witnessed the primal scene – that is, that Dorothy walked in on Auntie Em and Uncle

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<sup>111</sup> Stockton, Kathryn Bond. The Queer Child, or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century. Durham, NC: Duke Univ Press, 2009. 11-13.

<sup>112</sup> One of the recurrent critiques of Stockton’s collection (and most especially her opening essay) tracks some of the criticism leveled at Edelman’s No Future polemic: that the works disparage real children, that real children cannot have these motives, that children cannot or should not be leveraged in this way. But neither Stockton nor Edelman is concerned with “real children” so much as they are concerned with the emanations and meanings that are put upon “real children.” It is the “idea” of the child, the “figure” of the child that is of greater import than any actual child for Stockton’s and Edelman’s analyses.) Stockton addresses this criticism in part when she defines the child as “precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back”– and, Edelman would add, then projecting into the future. Stockton, 5.

Henry in the midst of coitus and deals with the trauma of this unexpected sighting by creating the twister as a “remarkably apt representation of the paternal phallus in its swollen, twisting, penetrating state, which is part of the primal scene.”<sup>113</sup> Miss Gulch on her bicycle and the Wicked Witch of the West on her broomstick then become “phallic mothers” who while troubling are more easily psychically manageable than the “enormous and persecuting phallic-like column [the tornado] seen earlier making its way toward Dorothy’s house.”<sup>114</sup> While this would certainly fit within a Freudian framework of psychosexual development, the film does not provide the viewer adequate evidence to support this interpretation. While in the Baum novel, Dorothy shares a one-room shack with her family, in the film it is apparent that the farmhouse is sufficiently large to offer Dorothy her own bedroom and there is little overt evidence that any such sighting has occurred, either literally or figuratively, and more germane to the analysis at hand is that it situates the film within an heterocentric context in which Dorothy’s task is development as a fully sexualized heterosexual.

Let us also take a long hard look at this Wicked Witch of the West, with her bony hands and face, her sharpened nails, her distressingly severe black couture and her shockingly green skin. She is a far cry from good old domestic Auntie Em in her suitable pocketed apron and hair done up in an out-of-the way bun; this Witch is female but not necessarily a woman. Alexander Doty suggests that the witch is a big butch dyke, and the moniker is apt when we consider the historical studies linking lesbianism (or at least a non-heterosexual sexuality) with witchcraft.<sup>115</sup> I depart from Doty in a significant way, not so much in the form of

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<sup>113</sup> Dervin, Daniel. “Over the Rainbow and Under the Twister: A Drama of the Girl’s Passage through the Phallic Phase.” *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*. 42 (1978): 51-57; 55.

<sup>114</sup> Dervin, 52.

<sup>115</sup> Doty, Alexander. “My Beautiful Wickedness: The Wizard of Oz as Lesbian Fantasy.” *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 49-77. Regarding the connection between non-heterosexual and/or non-procreative sex and witchcraft, see the following: Barstow,

disagreeing with his brilliant and creative analysis, but in applying a different theoretical parameter to the film. Where Doty sees Glinda and the Wicked Witch as opposites in a “division of lesbianism into the good femme-inine and the bad butch,” I read this divide much more divisively and from a more decidedly queer theoretical approach in which the two witches are not simply lesbian options between which Dorothy must choose as she develops her own lesbian identity.<sup>116</sup> Rather the choice is between the reproductive futurity represented by Glinda or the non-reproductive a-futurity of the Wicked Witch of the West<sup>117</sup>

It is the Wicked Witch who stands out; it is the Wicked Witch who proclaims her own ‘beautiful wickedness’ and is never muddled in either her desire for the ruby slippers or the avenues that she will pursue to obtain her prize. In this way, the Wicked Witch is not simply challenging patriarchal power by being a woman who knows; she is challenging reproductive futurism, invested in her own beautiful wickedness, intent on her goal, willing to sacrifice all without any apparent engaging in the fantasy of a future. It may of course be said that she is

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Anne Llewellyn. Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts. San Francisco: Pandora, 1994; Bullough, Vern L. and James A. Brundage, eds. Handbook of Medieval Sexuality. New York: Garland, 2000; and Evans, Arthur. Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture: A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People it has Tried to Destroy. San Francisco: Fag Rag Books, 1981.

<sup>116</sup> Doty, 53.

<sup>117</sup> Glinda, who treats the Munchkins as children, who is apparently as ineffective and harmless as the gossamer bubble and gown in which she travels (a womb of sorts, perhaps, suggesting that she herself is not fully mature) given that she’s been of no help in freeing the Munchkins from their dictator. Glinda may be the highly stylized Oz-double of Auntie Em, a less brusque but less effective version of the mother figure. Doty is correct in his reading of Glinda as ‘coded to be able to pass as heterosexually feminine,’ but this indicates precisely the split between gay/lesbian studies and queer theory. Glinda Gay and Lesbian Studies happily (gaily) reclaiming gay history, cataloguing gay literature, and mapping gay communities while Wicked Queer Theory sweeps in and undermines it all by declaring identity contingent. Be she femme lesbian or stylized idealized version of Auntie Em, Glinda is an imminently acceptable form of lesbian/woman, a lesbian/woman of gloss and beauty and, ultimately, as ineffectual or as unthreatening as the cultural notion of womanhood from which she is cut. When Dorothy’s house lands on the Witch, Glinda admits that “I’m a little muddled....” Doty, 51. For more on the idea of ineffectuality and the feminine, see Rivière, Joan. “Womanliness as Masquerade.” Formations of Fantasy. Eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. New York: Methuen, 1986. 35-44.

invested in some sort of future, otherwise why care about the ruby slippers? But the film does not tell us what the shoes do or what ends they might achieve and we are left with the possibility that the Wicked Witch wants them simply for the sake of having them. The ruby slippers are symbols for Dorothy's genitals, Dorothy's youth, Dorothy's vitality, but the Witch never declares what use-value she finds in the slippers and we can only assume that she desires them for no other reason than because she desires them. But even should the Wicked Witch have a purpose for the shoes, this does not place her into the linearity of reproductive futurity because the shoes seem to be useful only in furthering her own "beautifully wicked" goals, which do not seem in any way to be connected to a politics or a desire-system outside of her own aims.

Such single-sighted pursuit of pleasure cannot be simply ignored but, if the social order is to stand and is to continue to make sense, must not be ignored. It must be confronted and either converted (as is the case with Ebenezer Scrooge) or destroyed (as with the Wicked Witch). In much the same way that *A Christmas Carol* is read or recited annually as an affirming message of the value of "God bless us every one," so too is *The Wizard of Oz* shown annually on television and celebrated annually at multiple sites around the country and rereleased on the big screen or in collector's editions as the sine qua non of the quintessentially American film. But unlike *A Christmas Carol*, which is trucked out annually to coincide with the perversely insistent command that we "keep Christmas well," *The Wizard of Oz* is a-seasonal, brought forth anytime we want to reaffirm that there's no place like home. But just as Ebenezer Scrooge's refusal to participate in the genealogical cycle of family and children earns him the scorn of his nephew and his employee and a rather long and sleepless

night, so too does the Wicked Witch earn our collective derisive focus and our collective fascination with her ultimate demise.

Almira Gulch and the Wicked Witch of the West are cut of the same cloth, beholden not to family or children or the pursuits of the common person but rather to keeping Christmas in their own way, steering quite clear of the warm-blooded, earthy vitality of the farm, of the hearth, of the family structures that are so central to the story. Miss Gulch is the sinthomosexual in what we can fairly imagine to be a world of insular families in this Kansas landscape, and her bike, her basket, and her bank account are her own. As farm hand Hickory advised Dorothy “She's just a poor sour-faced old maid that -- she ain't got no heart left. You know, you should have a little more heart yourself, and have pity on her.” In other words, Miss Gulch is less than fully human, quite queer, and Hunk warns Dorothy that she too is veering too far in that direction and should take care. In the opening scene, the sheriff to which Miss Gulch appeals and the writ he issues to confiscate Toto are the Name-of-the-Father but it is Miss Gulch who is the less than human vessel and avenue by which the law is applied. She represents the law but the harsh cold letter of the law, a law that signifies solely for the purpose of signifying, insisting upon itself to such an extent that it questions and nearly disrupts the entire Symbolic order, which depends for its existence on a certain relationality, a certain relativism of connection, a reiterability. Gulch is the double of the law that one normally encounters, law which rests on reason and that has a purpose; Gulch's law is castrated of any purpose other than insistent application. The cold logic of this application of the law leaves no room for affect, no room for the accident or the excuse, no room for anything but its own insistent self-pleasure. In a sense then this application of the law itself is sinthomosexual-like in that it insists upon itself, a logic so cold and insistent self-

aggrandizing that it reeks of nonsensicality, a nearly irreverent jouissance in its own unavoidable logic. Indeed, Aunt Em recognizes this most dramatically when she tells Miss Gulch: “Almira Gulch, just because you own half the county doesn't mean you have the power to run the rest of us! For twenty-three years, I've been dying to tell you what I thought of you! And now -- well, being a Christian woman, I can't say it!” So fraught with the un-understandability of the almost joyful way that Gulch imposes her will and takes no account of the feelings of a child, of an orphan no less, Aunt Em can do nothing in the face of such sheer, inexorable joy except stutter and rebuff herself from saying that which would wreck the Christian sanctity of the tiny, well-kept farm and family.

### **There Is No Home: Dislogic in the Final Scene**

The power of the queer uncanny and its epistemological implications is felt most powerfully at the conclusion of the film and the final scenes as Dorothy prepares to leave Oz and return to Kansas and as she awakens back in the bedroom of the farmhouse. These two scenes are regularly read sentimentally and in a manner that supports a heteronormative approach to reproduction and kinship. But the film itself does not so easily bend toward such a reading; in fact, the film itself is quite queer and the concluding scenes do not flow naturally or automatically from the preceding narrative events but are instead quite illogical, evincing a return of the repressed even in these final moments of the film.

The ultimate deviation from the Baum novel is the concluding sequence when Dorothy is back in her bedroom in Kansas, surrounded by her aunt and uncle and the farmhands. In this scene Dorothy, though insisting that Oz was a real place, also seems to



affirm that home is the best place to be.<sup>118</sup> The concept of home and the sentiments surrounding this word are rarely out of vogue but never so much in vogue than during times of national and international strife.<sup>119</sup>

One of the central themes of *The Wizard of Oz* is surely home: a desire to run away from home, actually leaving home, and wanting to return home. The notion of home is complicated and can refer to multiple ideas, including the brick and mortar dwelling in which one lives and sleeps, the base camp for daily life, but also of physical or political lands, cities, nations, or planets. But home also refers to a complex system of ideas about being and belonging, about self and others, about familiarity, about past, present, and future, about place in the most epistemological of ways.<sup>120</sup> Home is a through-line in American cultural thought. Some have argued that the notion of not having a home, being homeless or rootless, is akin to being “unsound, and, worse, unreliable, unsavory.”<sup>121</sup> While this may be true when applied to the truly homeless and the truly rootless, it is more complicated in American culture when we

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<sup>118</sup> Critics of the film rightfully cite this closing sentiment as being in direct opposition to Baum’s novel in which ‘home’ is not necessarily seen as the best place to be or stay for in the novel, Dorothy not only stays in Oz but brings Uncle Henry and Aunt Em into Oz too.

<sup>119</sup> Part of the reasoning for this rather maudlin conclusory sentiment in the film is likely the time period in which the film was made, in the years of the Great Depression. (For example, in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944; Vincente Minelli), released just five years after *Oz*, main character Esther Smith played by Judy Garland ends the film by observing that “I can’t believe it, right here where we live, right here in St. Louis!” Similarly, in *Gone with the Wind* (1939; Victor Fleming), released the same year as *The Wizard of Oz*, Scarlett O’Hara closes the film swearing her undying devotion to her quest to return home to Tara: “After all, tomorrow is another day.”

<sup>120</sup> Among others, see Darke, Jane. “Women and the Meaning of Home.” *Housing Women*. Eds. Rose Gilroy and Roberta Woods. London: Routledge, 1994. 9-25; Després, Carole. “The Meaning of Home: Literature Review and Directions for Future Research and Theoretical Development.” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 8.2 (Sum 1991): 96-115; Mallett, Shelley. “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature.” *The Sociological Review* 52.1 (Feb 2004): 62–89.; Marcus, Clare Cooper. *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Berwick, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 1995.

<sup>121</sup> Sopher, David. “The Landscape of Home: Myth, Experience, Social Meaning.” *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*. Ed. Donald W. Meinig. New York: Oxford Univ Press, 1979. 129-152. 134.

consider the themes of exploration, frontier, adventure, and quest, all of which suggest a fundamental ambivalence in American culture toward home and not-home.

In a discussion of the concept “home” in relation to Christmas, Paul Nathanson discusses three ways of thinking about home.<sup>122</sup> First there is the idea of being or staying at home, indicative of a certain level of contentment and stability but also with the possibility of discovering that one is “already” home or is “at home” in a place that is not the concrete and supposedly originary site. Second is the idea of “restoring home,” which suggests a significant loss/dislocation often involving trauma or material obstacles and the subsequent return or recreation of home with a consequent resolving of the initial abnormality. Finally there is the idea of “going home” or “returning home,” which usually includes a current or temporary (and non-traumatic, non-dislocated) “home” that is lacking something that the “true home” has. In this sense, “returning home” is often sentimental and nostalgic, about reviving earlier memories or recreating a familial atmosphere. Nathanson next associates these various notions of “home” with the idea of “growing up” because so both are associated with family, whether biological or not, as children are born into a family of some sort and traverse through a “series of stages such as weaning, going to school, coming of age, marriage, and death,” “leav[ing] home *precisely* to establish new homes of their own [so that the] generational cycle is complete [and a] new one has begun.”<sup>123</sup> For Nathanson, then, the success of the project depends *precisely* on the integration of past-home into the continuation of the generational cycle in the new-home.

This all too heteronormative and cyclical teleology fails to account for the queer subject who stands outside the generational cycle, and it takes us too quickly down the

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<sup>122</sup> Nathanson, Paul. *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*. Albany NY: State Univ Press of New York, 1991. 322-325.

<sup>123</sup> Nathanson, *Over the Rainbow*, 327-328. Emphasis added.

common path of reading *The Wizard of Oz* as a maturation tale in which childish Dorothy overcomes obstacles in preparation for establishing a new home of her own. There is a final concept of home that Nathanson identifies as an afterthought but fails to investigate: the notion of dying as “going home.” While Nathanson means this in the sense of being called home and of having a heavenly home that surpasses the earthly home, the idea of dying as “home” is most relevant to an understanding of the position of the queer subject for it suggests that the queer subject as “undead” exists in a heavenly or more advanced home *right here* in this life, raising the possibility that the queer subject’s access to jouissance is always, already achieved and incurring both the fear and jealousy of the non-queer subject, who remains desirous of jouissance but fearful of its impenetrable depth.

It is this final closing scene that is most telling and which cues us to read the entire film as a statement of the queer uncanny. Hélène Cixous has referred to footnotes as “typographical metaphor[s] of repression,” elements of a text that refuse refusal, instead returning, interrupting, erupting on the page.”<sup>124</sup> It strikes me that the dénouement scenes of many films (and novels) operate in the same way. Post-climax concluding scenes, taking place after boy kisses girl, after criminal is caught, after the witch is killed, often feel ‘tacked on’ and it is not unusual for movie-goers and readers to skip or skim these last few minutes or pages; yet it is often in these closing scenes that that repressed themes of the films and novels emerge most fully through careful attentive analysis. In *The Wizard of Oz*, though, it is in this last scene that the conflict of the film arises. The epistemological violence in this scene is perhaps the most striking of any in the entire film. What we see in this concluding scene is an enforcement of the normative, a refusal in the face of the queer uncanny, a denial so certain and so unrelenting that it is almost unbearable to watch. Dorothy’s begging plea of “Doesn’t

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<sup>124</sup> Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms,” 537.

anybody believe me” is answered not by the pointedly harsh *non/no* of refusal that we would expect of “the law” (a la Miss Gulch) but rather with the sweetly delivered lie: “Of course we believe you, Dorothy.” The response shuts down the communicative lines of discourse, effectively placing Dorothy in the position of the infantile subject who does not and cannot know her own experiences authentically or with authority, who must be swaddled in false reassurance until such time as she can be brought back into the fold.

The entire narrative hinges on Dorothy’s supposed desire to return home and much has been made of how her journey through Oz is a process of maturation. But it would seem that the situation in Oz is enviable and much desirable in contrast to bleak old Kansas. Dorothy’s experience on the farm is not initially represented as idyllic or joyous. Auntie Em chastises Dorothy for disrupting the chicken count, no one seems to take Dorothy’s tale of woe seriously, and Dorothy tells Toto that he is her only friend. Combined with the stark, gray landscape, there does not seem to be much to be desired in this scenario. And in Oz the two wicked witches are dead, the citizens of the Emerald City welcome Dorothy and her companions as their new leaders, the trickery of the Wizard himself has been exposed with no negative repercussions. It seems that troubles have “melted like lemon drops” in this place and it is clear that Dorothy has both accomplished more than she has ever accomplished (or been allowed to accomplish) and made some enduring friendships here in this world. Yet, she persists in wanting to return home. Is it possible that this land has become too normative for Dorothy? Is it possible that queer-Dorothy is so queer that she must leave Oz to escape the normative family structures that have developed, casting her as matriarch? When Dorothy first arrives in Oz she is the odd-one-out, the sole human in a land of strange beauty and even stranger beings. She encounters oddities unlike any she has seen before. She is asked to do

things that seem far beyond the reach of a simple teen-aged Kansas farm girl. But as the film progresses, Dorothy's familiarity and facility with the language and mores of Oz increases to the point where it seems there is no further grit required, no challenge, no skating on thin ice left to do. There are no more 'accidents' to have in this world; rather, she is now expected to operate as mother-figure extraordinaire, overseeing the people of Oz with beneficence and skill. Maybe Dorothy wants the hell out because what began as the queerest place has become quite non-queer and therefore quite uninteresting for queer-Dorothy.

Consider Dorothy's comments as she prepares to leave Oz and contemplates what she has learned:

"Well, I -- I think that it -- that it wasn't enough just to want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em -- and it's that -- if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with! Is that right?"

Immediately Dorothy distances herself from kinship ties ("it wasn't enough just to want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em"), removing herself from the familial teleology suggested in some interpretations of the film that understand Dorothy's journey to be about an ultimate return to adult reproduction on the farm, to take over Auntie Em's role as matriarch. Dorothy's thinking focuses on her own individual capacities and limitations, quite separate from her family.

This brief self-reflection is generally interpreted as meaning that Dorothy's desire to go somewhere over the rainbow, to escape the stultifying loneliness of the farmstead was misguided, that her dreams of other places were the fanciful wishes of a child, that she now

realizes and values her 'own backyard.' The mature, adult lesson is one of simple rational materialist economics: Feel wistful, unwanted, or desirous? Look around at the life you've got. If that doesn't satisfy, then your wishes and desires are wrong and you should be satisfied with what you've got or else realign your desires to match your circumstances.

But when we look at Dorothy's pondering more closely we can sense a different and much more queer thread informing her thinking. Her comments seem 'of the moment,' invented on the spot, the words of a very queer person uttering the language of the normative in order to escape. When asked "what have you learned" Dorothy's response comes in fits and starts at first ("Well I – I think that -- ..."), sounding as if it is being invented on the spot and not at all like the mature self-reflection that some interpretations of the film suggest it is. Dorothy's quick glances around as she speaks, her clipped cadence which increases in swiftness as she works up her lie, her rushed and excited conclusion ("Because if it wasn't there...!") all suggest that this is subterfuge. And then she expresses the ultimate question betraying herself not as an unsure child but as a queer making sure she utters the correct passwords: "Is that right?" She wants to leave but she knows she must say the magic words so that she will not be detained. She uses the expected language of normalcy to achieve her own ends.

It is also of import that Dorothy's professed lesson learned from her trials and travails in Oz is that "if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with!" Odd that someone who has claimed to want to go "home" instead uses the word "backyard" to capulate what she has learned. We might usefully play out the resonances of the word backyard in contrast to its opposite, front yard and in relation to the structure they bracket, the

house. The front yard is the public face of a house, fenced, maintained, orderly, manicured. It is the super-ego of a homestead, the perfect, demanding face, which the house and backyard can never live up to. The back yard is id, the less-kept, messy area, the location of the back porch, the boundary between yard and house, where muddy boots come off, where panting dogs and messy children play, where the detritus of life untamed by the superego accumulates, occasionally tracking into the house. The ego is the house, the constructed center that houses the self, the place where the self dwells and makes itself presentable before walking out the front door into the crisp light of the front yard's demands, the structure that always seems at any moment ready to succumb to the messiness of the back yard. While Dorothy's lesson-learned comment seems at first glance to be admitting defeat and suggests that she recognizes now how silly and even infantile she was to wish for something over the rainbow, closer inspection tells us that Dorothy has just learned about the chthonic power in her own self and how to commit subterfuge in the face of normative expectations. We find that Dorothy is recognizing queer potential as something that is always already present and not something 'out there' that must be sought. This notion of the queer is important because it forces us to recognize 'queer' not as a position or approach that one seeks and adopts but as a force in itself, present and possible in each moment in every context. Dorothy's comments, then, do not necessarily mean that she realizes the folly of longing for what is 'over the rainbow' but rather that she now recognizes the queerness that was already existent in her life on the farm, in her own backyard.

We might wonder, too, at the dismay Dorothy expresses at leaving her traveling companions. Is it disingenuous? Is she weeping fake tears as she tells her friends goodbye? Not necessarily, because Dorothy's queerness does not require her to abandon all human

emotions. It simply gives her license to look beyond these intimate relationships as the sole means of satisfying herself and gives her an additional lens for analyzing relationships and their value to her. Her heartfelt goodbyes are a bittersweet recognition that her friends are no longer fulfilling her biggest needs; witness what she says to the Lion: “Goodbye, Lion. You know, I know it isn't right, but I'm going to miss the way you used to holler for help before you found your courage.” Here Dorothy breaks character a moment and let's on that she knows the rules and how to ‘talk right’ but she can't help revealing that what she liked about the lion was his weakness, his fragility. Now that the Lion is self-assured, he's much less interesting to queer-Dorothy.

More to the point of the queer uncanny is the mantra that Glinda instructs Dorothy to repeat as she clicks the heels of the ruby slippers together: “There's no place like home.” The dominant interpretation of this adage offers the comforting yet rather banal idea that “home” is a special and desirable place, a good and welcoming place unlike any other. But this idea is not on the face of the adage nor is it supported by the narrative of the film. Taken as truth, the adage would suggest a negative connotation; truly there are few places as dismal, stark, and unwelcoming as the Gale acreage, where Dorothy is perceived as a pest and as a disruption to the workings of the farm, where her only friend is her little dog, and where the sky is not blue but brown, where dreams are dismissed as evidence of laziness, where troubles do not seem to melt like lemon drops but indeed chase Dorothy down and vow to kill her best friend. What exactly makes this a desirable place to be or to which to return?

Taking this even further, though, it is evident that what Dorothy might be realizing is that there is no “home” at all, no center, no safe space, not site in which to feel that all is well and familiar. “There's no place like home” means something rather different when the



emphasis is placed on ‘no place.’ There is no place that is like or can be home. This is much more in keeping with the queer uncanny in which those very places that should be or seem most home-like (that is, familiar) are the very places that prove to be the most disquieting, unfamiliar, and unwelcoming. This is evident in the open scenes of the film in which Dorothy approaches her nearest kin, appearing to expect understanding and support and receiving instead dismissal. When she approaches the farmhands, who might be understood as underlings owing some attention to their ostensible superior or understood as friends of a sort for a young girl, she is again dismissed, albeit with jocularly and what seems like genuine affection. When we then add to this mix that Dorothy is also alone in the sense of being an orphan, living on an isolated farmstead, we begin to see that the very notion of ‘home’ must mean something quite different to Dorothy than the conventional wisdom would have it. When Dorothy demands that her experience Oz, the place from which she has returned “wasn’t a dream – it was a place [...] a real, truly live place,” she is recognizing the multivalency of experience and she is challenging the firm separation between dream and what we think of as ‘reality.’ This affront to the ontology expressed by the other farmstead characters (“Oh, we dream lots of silly things...”) is not resolved easily. When Dorothy continues to plead her case, crying out, “Doesn’t anybody believe me?” the response she gets from Uncle Henry clearly doesn’t satisfy her:

DOROTHY

Doesn't anybody believe me?

UNCLE HENRY

Of course we believe you, Dorothy.

## DOROTHY

Oh, but anyway, Toto, we're home!

Dorothy acts as if Uncle Henry has contradicted her. She senses the insincerity underlying his facial agreement about the reality of Oz and she dismisses it, turning once again to the best friend she has. This replays the earlier conversation between Dorothy and Hunk, when Dorothy complains that Miss Gulch is after Toto again and Hunk tells Dorothy to avoid Miss Gulch's garden by taking a different path home. When Dorothy responds, "Oh, Hunk, you just won't listen, that's all" it could be the petulant stubbornness of a child more intent on being heard than on being helped. That is, in its way, an act of queerness that disrupts the current normative cultural notion that problems are laid out to be solved, but there is an additional element of queerness here and that is that Dorothy may not be asking for help but rather reveling in her achievement. So when Hunk gives advice that sounds like it responds to Dorothy's cry for help, he misreads her motives; similarly, when Uncle Henry benevolently agrees that Oz was a "real, truly live place" he is offering Dorothy the obvious response when what Dorothy is after seems to be something deeper, a sort of recognition that "some of [her experience] wasn't very nice...but most of it was beautiful." Again, a close eye to the language reveals a lack of parallelism in Dorothy's description. She says part of it "wasn't very nice" while most of it was beautiful. One might expect Dorothy to describe parts of her experience as scary, horrifying, mean, or ugly; but she chooses instead to describe the two parts as "nice" and "beautiful" before then negating "nice." This negation (wasn't) of the positive (nice) places emphasis on the underlying pleasurable (or "nice") aspects of the experience.

In this chapter I have attempted to offer a reading of *The Wizard of Oz* that goes against a long tradition of reading it largely as the story of a little girl who learns a big lesson about being satisfied with what she's got. The lens of the queer uncanny has allowed us to look more deeply into the superficially comforting platitudes of home and our own backyards and to discover that within this beloved film runs a very queer message indeed. Not only are characters doubled, but the space from which the double occurs changes over the course of the film. Events that might be dismissed as childish become signals of a larger psychic struggle. And the phrases that are so common that we barely hear them any more ("there's no place like home") become gateways into entirely different ways of understanding now only the experience of Dorothy Gale but of ourselves. If Dorothy is more than just a silly child and if over the rainbow are "real, truly live places" that exist not in conflict with but right alongside our own farmsteads, how might our own experiences be altered? In what ways does the normative push toward a singular reproductive futurity limit our abilities to engage fully with our experiences? And at what cost? The queer uncanny casts these supposedly irrelevant experiences into a new light and allows us to make connections that we would otherwise have overlooked.

## Chapter Two

### “Alien Brains: The Queer Uncanny, Troubling Texts, and *Mysterious Skin*”

*Mysterious Skin* is the story of the sexual abuse of two eight-year old boys at the hands of their Little League coach and the differing paths of their lives over the next decade.<sup>125</sup> Blond, frail, inept Brian represses the entire experience at first before later displacing it on to an increasingly obsessional belief that he was abducted by aliens. Neil, on the other hand, precocious and sexually aware even at the age of eight, expresses enjoyment of the sexual intimacy and is compelled to repeat the molestation experiences with a variety of other older men. It is Brian’s search for his truth that serves as the narrative thrust of the novel, which unfolds as different characters (including Brian and Neil, their mothers, and two of their friends) add to the story in each chapter.<sup>126</sup> This chapter takes us further into the queer uncanny as I focus on Scott Heim’s novel, *Mysterious Skin*, which is a less-known and far more troubling text than *The Wizard of Oz*. Read by most as a tale of redemption in light of childhood sexual molestation, the novel is fertile ground for demonstrating the ability of the

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<sup>125</sup> There are a number of fictional works dealing with child molestation and/or sexual relations between children and adults. Some of these have become canonical classics (e.g., Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina, and Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita).

<sup>126</sup> The novel is structured with a nod toward the geometry of the uncanny, which is always about doubling, multiplying, equating, and inverting. The novel consists of three sections, each with six chapters. In addition, the chapters within each of the three sections play off of each other in uncanny ways. For example, the second chapters of the three sections are titled Neil, Eric, and Neil. This same sequence (N, E, N) is replicated in the final chapters of each section. The third chapters titled Brian, Brian, and Deborah are then in inverted as the fifth chapters of each of the three sections (D, B, B). Only the first chapter of each section is the same; Brian’s voice opens each section. Similarly, the names of two secondary characters – Neil’s friends Eric Preston and Wendy Peterson – are nearly anagrams for one another.

queer uncanny to broaden not only the available interpretative range vis-à-vis characters and scenes but to evoke rethinking of the cultural discourses surrounding so-called traumatic events.

The novel opens as Brian Lackey reveals that “[t]he summer I was eight years old, five hours disappeared from my life. I can’t explain.”<sup>127</sup> Immediately a mystery of sorts is presented and we wonder what did happen? The queer theorist is also alerted to the potentiality of a queer time or sequencing in the novel. Brian is the poster child for anti-pedophilia campaigns: frail, pale, blonde, with oversized glasses and a high pitched voice, the second child in a solidly middle-class family in rural Kansas. The other boy, the brunette, vocal and forthright Neil McCormick, is much less innocent and naïve and his first recollection in the novel tells us that after moving four times in four years, his mother “began stripping. Her clothes piled on the floor... She pranced and discoed through the rooms, a dance I’d grown accustomed to.”<sup>128</sup> And upon seeing his baseball coach for the first time, eight year-old feels that “[d]esire sledgehammered my body, a sensation I still wasn’t sure I had a name for. [...] It felt like a gift I had to open in front of a crowd.”<sup>129</sup> It seems nigh impossible to avoid reading these two boys as doubles of one another, if we keep in mind that a “double” is never a duplicate. As the novel is structured, the two are intimately linked not only because of their geographic locale and their age, not by their opposite appearances and personalities, but by their life-altering experiences with Coach. Like uncanny doubles, neither is complete unto himself (indeed, what human is, under the psychoanalytic rubric?) but is an admixture of knowing and not-knowing that culminates in the final scene of the novel in whatever mystery exists is resolved for both boys but to neither’s satisfaction.

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<sup>127</sup> Heim, Scott. *Mysterious Skin*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

<sup>128</sup> Heim, 17.

<sup>129</sup> Heim, 22.

Brian, shy, inept, asexual Brian seems to be occupying the same space of (in)decision that Dorothy occupies in *The Wizard of Oz*, unsure whether to embrace the position of sinthomosexual or to work against it. This indecision begins almost immediately after his first interaction with Coach, when his indecision is manifested physically as nosebleeds and fainting spells that continue through the next decade. Unable or unwilling to destroy the Coach completely, Brian instead recasts him as an alien, an unknowable, shadowy, other-worldly figure. We might be tempted to understand the aliens in Brian's alien abduction fantasies as sinthomosexuals themselves – surely there is little evidence that they subscribe to the reproductive futurity that delimits the normative and the non-normative – and as stand-ins for Coach and his predilection for invading the bodies of others in much the same way that Brian believes the aliens have invaded his body.

### **Troubling Texts: Molestation and the Trauma Model**

*The Wizard of Oz* is a ubiquitous text. In other words, if one surveyed a thousand people chances are very high that nearly all of those people be familiar with the film and that familiarity would range from those who have seen the film just once (or even not at all) but are still able to list iconic elements (e.g., the yellow brick road, the “there's no place like home” mantra, et cetera) to those who are fervent devotees of the film, dedicating entire rooms of their homes to Oz and its memorabilia. In other words, it is a text that has circulated so widely in culture that it now operates beyond the celluloid, and the imagery and aphorisms of the film circulate in culture in widely different contexts. *Mysterious Skin* is a text of a

quite different nature.<sup>130</sup> Only a handful of my friends and colleagues have heard of it, despite the favorable critical reception it received, despite its relevance to Kansas and to queers, and despite its having been made into a critically acclaimed film by director Gregg Araki.<sup>131</sup> It is what I call a troubling text or what James Kincaid refers to as a “scandalous narrative.”<sup>132</sup> Often when we apply a theory to a text or a set of circumstances it is an easy task insofar as the text or circumstances are not unpleasant. But with *Mysterious Skin* this is not the case. The subject matter is child sexual abuse, made even more so perhaps because it has not been wrapped in the blanket of respectability that surrounds other troubling works given academic consideration (e.g., *Lolita*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, and the like).<sup>133</sup> This is perhaps the true test of theoretical application: applying the theoretical lens not to texts or circumstances that with easy comfort demonstrate the utility of the theory but to texts and topics that push back by virtue of their form or subject matter.

When we read texts we can read them from multiple points of view at once. Personal anecdote might make this assertion more clear. When I read the molestation scene between Coach and Neil, I am reading it through the chosen words, sentence structures, and narrative tools of the author of the novel. I am also reading it, though, as a multi-faceted and splintered human subject who possesses, wields, and reads with multiple personal, sensory, historical, sexual, interpretive, and intellectual takes. A part of reader-Milton reads the molestation

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<sup>130</sup> Although this chapter is concerned with Scott Heim’s novel, director Gregg Araki’s film of the same name holds faithful to the novel and is visually stunning. *Mysterious Skin*. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Brady Corbet. Desperate Pictures / Antidote Films, 2004. 99 mins.

<sup>131</sup> Author Scott Heim is a graduate of the University of Kansas and the novel takes place in Hutchinson, Kansas. Interesting, Heim’s surname evokes thoughts of the uncanny/*unheimlich*.

<sup>132</sup> Kincaid, James R. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 15.

<sup>133</sup> The academic study of a troubling text certainly does not nullify the troubling aspects of the text itself but under examination in the classroom, with “critical thinking” as the guiding rubric for discourse, potentially threatening topics are (too-) often sanitized.

scene, visualizes with detail the hairless body of the child with its un-developed genitals twisting with the developed adult body and feels nauseated, fearful, disgusted. But another reader-Milton responds to the scene quite differently, recalling a moment from his own childhood when “desire sledgehammered” him, when at an age similar to that of Neil in the novel, I sat in an innocuous rural 4-H club meeting, and caught a glimpse of the tan, hairy ankle of one of our young adult leaders. That glimpse and the feelings it evoked in me are still so vivid that when I read Neil’s description of the molestation I can identify with him. Of course, this is not to suggest that I was molested or that “deep down” all children want to be molested. It does raise, however, the quite Freudian assertion that sexuality and the sexual drives are not confined to adults or even those of reproductive age. Sexuality, the effluent power of desire, is inherent in the human; children are not immune. The overlay, the elements that cause us discomfort, are entirely cultural. Without for a moment condoning sexual interaction between adults and pre-adolescent children, my point is simply that *Mysterious Skin* is a troubling text precisely because it refuses to settle trauma into a predictably explicable (though not necessarily any less unsettling) of a box (even though many readers and commentators have rather forcefully submitted it to such a reading).<sup>134</sup>

As in my analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*, I read *Mysterious Skin* as a tale of questioning and development: will either or both of the boys embrace the position of queerness, “the side

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<sup>134</sup> Feminism has in the past played a role, oddly, in both stabilizing narratives of child sexual abuse and opening them up to critique. Thirty years ago Shulamith Firestone urged feminists to “think of children’s liberation from male oppression as being linked to women’s liberation” by paying attention to child sexual abuse as part of the larger patriarchal project of oppressing women. Firestone, Shulamith. The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution. New York: Morrow, 1970. Florence Rush was more pointed in her critique of the then-prevalent model: “It categorically assigns a real experience to fantasy, or harmless reality at best, while the known offender – the one concrete reality – is ignored... The child’s experience is as terrifying as the worst horror of a Kafkaesque nightmare: her story is not believed, she is declared ill, and worse, she is left at the mercy and ‘benevolence’ of psychiatrically oriented ‘child experts.’” Rush, Florence. “The Freudian Cover-Up.” *Chrysalis* 5 (1977): 31-45.



outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism,” which their life experiences may ineluctably have thrust at them as an option?<sup>135</sup> We would dishonor the very core of queer theory if we allowed that only certain subjects can take this side and embrace this figuration, especially if we place upon those certain subjects a degree of honor and choice. Certainly there are those among us who do accede to this place of the queer with forethought and through a system of considered choices; but we must also understand that there may be some among us who are thrust into the position – or at least into the position of having it as a nearly unavoidable option – from circumstances that are less than desirable. Brian’s search for answers to explain his alien abduction, along with his nosebleeds, bedwetting, and fainting spells, are his own attempts at symbolicizing an experience for which he has (and at the time it happened had) no words. The resolution he seeks is his attempt to destabilize the traumatic experience and to situate it in the associative network of the symbolic via a vocalized, spoken retelling of it by Neil.<sup>136</sup> This demand for symbolicization, which Brian makes of Neil, is differentiated from Brian’s desire, which is always for Lacan the desire for nothing. What happens as Brian listens to Neil’s explanation for the missing hours of Brian’s life is Neil’s words distort rather than clarify, as Neil himself recognizes: “Those words were no longer accurate. [...] There was so much more I could tell him, but everything seemed irrelevant. [...] I placed my tongue against the inside of my

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<sup>135</sup> Edelman, No Future, 3.

<sup>136</sup> Trauma is no new field of inquiry, especially in the realm of gay/lesbian and queer studies. Ann Cvetkovich has written extensively on how trauma and traumatic experiences can serve as the genesis for “collective experience that generates collective responses,” in ways that challenge traditional ways of thinking about identity and connection. My approach to and use of trauma differs from Cvetkovich in that I am intensely focused on the singular psyche rather than on collectives. Cvetkovich, Ann. An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures. Durham, NC: Duke Univ Press, 2003. 19.

cheek, tasting the steely bud of my wound....”<sup>137</sup> Neil recognizes the failure of language, the necessity by which language fails to convey accurately or precisely our intended meaning.

Unlike Neil, Brian appears to handle the molestation by dissociating, a term for the psychological process by which the mind defends itself and the body against pain by simply removing the mind from the scene – essentially spacing out, blanking out, or going into what appears to be a trance.<sup>138</sup> Where Neil defies the standard “innocent child” profile for child sexual abuse, Brian fits it almost perfectly. Studies suggest that there are basically two situations in which suppression and repression are less than fully effective in keeping memories away from the conscious mind of the subject. In one situation the memories are perceived as negative (“bad memories”); in the other “environmental cues” evoke the memories.<sup>139</sup>

One interpretation of *Mysterious Skin* finds the narrative participating in exactly the dictatorship of reproductive futurity that this dissertation challenges because the novel can be read as a tale of redemption in which trauma is experienced, worked through, and survived as witnessed by the final scene of the novel in which Brian and Neil cling to each other, the molestation replayed in Neil’s retelling, Brian’s nosebleed a baptism of healing and renewal. This certainly fits with the model of reproductive futurity that we find in American culture, for it is not only the figure of the Child that is held before us as the “perpetual horizon” for all political engagement but the supposed virtues of the child state: innocence, freshness,

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<sup>137</sup> Heim, 285-286.

<sup>138</sup> Van der Kolk, Bessel A. and Rita Fisper. “Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic Memories: Overview and Exploratory Study.” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8 (1995): 505-525. See also Freyd, J.J. *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ Press, 1996.

<sup>139</sup> Schacter, Daniel L. *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. For specific data sets, see Schacter, Daniel L., Kenneth A. Norman, and Wilma Koutstaal. “The Cognitive Neuroscience of Reconstructive Memory.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (1998): 289-318.

blankness, the tabula rasa.<sup>140</sup> These values have become translated in the unfolding of late capitalism into a cultural attachment to rebirth, fresh starts, and new beginnings. The result is that we are all ultimately infantilized as innocence becomes equated with moral value. When faced with “no future,” when the questions seems unanswerable, when the avenues of attempt have been exhausted, when the limits of unbearability have been reached, when satisfaction, satiation, closure, and wholeness seem impossible, a fresh start awaits, a sort of “reset” button that can return us to the state of ignorance, which is then understood as Edenic and originary.<sup>141</sup> This has psychic and material ramifications for the individual and for culture at large. As Henry Giroux as aptly noted:

In an endless array of mass media advertisements, innocence is reduced to an aesthetic or a psychological trope that prompts adults to find their ‘inner child,’ adopt teen fashions and buy a range of services designed to make them look younger. This type of adult infantilization enables them to identify with youth while it simultaneously empties adulthood of its political, economic, and social responsibilities and educative functions. Such indifference allows adults to impose on young people the demands and responsibilities they themselves have abandoned.<sup>142</sup>

Giroux is writing in a different context but the point remains the same. The figure of the Child is so exalted and so deeply held as the figure of innocence, opportunity, and

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<sup>140</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

<sup>141</sup> This idea is nowhere more evident than in popular psychology, the realm in which one examines oneself for failings, confesses those failings, and then develops an action plan to overcome or circumvent those failings. Popular television shows like *Intervention* feature weekly examples of how to admit that one is addicted and how to just “let go” and start over after an lengthy rehabilitation stay. But the idea of starting over is not confined to docu-reality television. The system of bankruptcy in the United States is a mechanism for taking stock of one’s finances and erasing consume debt, ostensibly to develop a fresh start at managing one’s money.

<sup>142</sup> Giroux, Henry. *Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power, and the Politics of Culture*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000. 18.

beginning that otherwise mature subjects seek to return to this supposed ideal moment and to reenact it at various moments during the life cycle.<sup>143</sup> This is not, however, a matter confined to the individual subject; it is inherent to the Symbolic insofar as “the symbolic order is simultaneously non-being and insisting to be, that is what Freud has in mind when he talks about the death instinct as being what is most fundamental – a symbolic order in travail, in the process of coming, insisting on being realized.”<sup>144</sup> There is a continual turning in on itself that is not antithetical to the Symbolic but constitutive of it. To do this requires stabilizing the figure of the Child, divorcing it from any actual children, and placing upon it the heavy burden of being that which we say it is. The consequence of this is that empirical and anecdotal evidence of children and their vagaries is ignored or separated out and becomes subject to the adult fantasy of the child. In other words, mature subjects so desperately need the security and comfort of the supposed innocence and fresh-wholeness of the figure of the child that the treatment of actual children is greatly limited. As Bruhm and Hurly have suggested,

If writing is an act of world making, writing about children is doubly so: not only do writers control the terms of the words they present, they also invent, over and over again, the very idea of inventing humanity, of training it and watching it evolve. This inscription makes the child into a metaphor, a kind of ground zero for the edifice that is adult life and around which narratives of sexuality get organized... Utopianism follows the child around like a family pet. The child exists as the site of almost limitless potential (its future not

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<sup>143</sup> I mean “mature” here to refer to age and attainment of adulthood as defined by the culture at hand, though I recognize that a mature subject means something quite different in psychoanalysis.

<sup>144</sup> Lacan, Jacques. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1945-1955. Ed. Jacques Alain-Miller. Tran. Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: Norton, 1991.

yet written and therefore unblemished). But because the utopian fantasy is the property of adults,, not necessarily of children, it is accompanied by its doppelganger, nostalgia. .. Caught between these two worlds, one dead, the other helpless to be born, the child becomes the bearer of heteronormativity, appearing to rend ideology invisible by cloaking it in simple stories, euphemisms, and platitudes.<sup>145</sup>

Nowhere is this more true than in the treatment of childhood sexuality and in particular in narratives of childhood sexual abuse and molestation, where the figure of the child as innocent and blank is so paramount and so firmly entrenched that the ways we can write talk about molestation are limited.<sup>146</sup> There is a great deal of research suggesting that even authorities and experts in the field of childhood sexual abuse fall prey to letting their own adult prejudices influence their research, even when such research is ostensibly child-centered or focused on the child victims and their perceptions of the abuse context: “Due to the morally reprehensible nature of child sexual abuse, researchers have an understandable tendency to project their adult fears, repulsion and horror onto child victims, to assume they react like they do when faced with sexual situations.”<sup>147</sup> The problem with attempting to challenge the dominant theory of child sexual abuse is that even when the children themselves claim to not have understood what was happening to them at all or claim not to have felt the experience as threatening or disruptive – and hence, did not feel danger or violence – this is seen not as a

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<sup>145</sup> Bruhm and Hurly, *Curiouser*, xiii.

<sup>146</sup> To even use the phrase “childhood sexual abuse” is already to have evoked a prepared script of very adult fears and horrors. I use this phrase because the bulk of the literature on the subject – even that challenging the dominant trauma theory paradigm – uses this language.

<sup>147</sup> Burkhardt, Sandra A. and Anthony F. Rotatori. *Treatment and Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse: A Child-Generated Model*. Washington DC: Taylor & Francis, 1995. 2.

challenge to the theory encouraging additional research and refinement but rather as evidence of the overwhelming nature of the trauma itself.<sup>148</sup>

The trauma model (more precisely known as the traumatogenic model) of sexual abuse developed three decades ago and has become firmly entrenched in the counseling and medical fields as well as in the culture at large. The trauma model rests on the assumption that the experience in and of itself, regardless of circumstance or consequence, is traumatic to the child. But this does not gel with anecdotal research or with diagnostic definitions of trauma, which place childhood sexual abuse in the same category as rape and wartime combat under fire and which often connect childhood sexual abuse to post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>149</sup>

... the theory behind PTSD does not readily adapt to the experience of sexual abuse. The classic PTSD theory says the symptoms result from ‘an overwhelming event resulting in helplessness in the face of intolerable danger....’ This theory is well suited to traumas such as war shock and rape and probably to sexual abuse that occurs under violent circumstances. However, much sexual abuse does not occur under conditions of danger, threat and violence.... Abuse experiences may be degrading, humiliating, and stigmatizing but not necessarily frightening or threatening to bodily integrity....<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> See, for example: Russell, Diana E. H. The Secret Trauma: Incest In The Lives Of Girls And Women. New York: Basic Books, 1987. (Rev'd 1999). Russell rather blithely explains away discordant accounts of trauma by insisting that the reports are simply manifestations of dissociation, repression and outright denial.

<sup>149</sup> American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

<sup>150</sup> Finkelhor, David. “Early and Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse: An Update.” Professional Psychology: Research and Practice 21 (1990): 325-330. 328. In addition, it should be noted that diagnosis of PTSD is based not on an objective evaluation of the trauma supposed to have caused the disorder but on patients’ memories of those events. See Rubin, David C., Dorthe Berntsen, and Malene Klindt Bohni. “A Memory-Based Model of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Evaluating the Basic Assumptions Underlying the PTSD Diagnosis.” Psychological Review 115 (2008): 985-1011.

But this is not a new development. Nearly a century ago, children were placed into either of two categories with regard to sexual abuse: “accidental victims” and “participant victims.”<sup>151</sup> The first category includes children who are abducted, harmed with violence or under threat of violence, and/or who are fully cognizant that what is happening is abusive. The second category is, as the moniker suggests, one in the situation is not built around violence but rather on familiarity. The child likely knows the adult but does not necessarily understand that what is happening is bad, the sexual interactions continue over time, and there is an exchange economy in the interactions – the adult has sexual access to the child in return for providing the child material or emotional bounty. Some researchers have suggested that it is this last element – the exchange – that is central to understanding which children might be most at risk. Children who lack material goods certainly, but even more “a common method of coercion used by perpetrators involves the economic exploitation of a child’s normal need to feel loved, valued and cared for by parents.”<sup>152</sup> This at first seems to fit Brian and Neil quite conveniently into the two categories, although with Brian there was no violence or physical force used. Like Neil, Brian knew Coach. With Neil the second category fits more surely given that Neil has no father but only a series of his mother’s boyfriends in his life. But such an account fails to give appropriate credence to the incredibly tight bond that Neil experiences with his mother. In the novel, it is really Brian who seems to have the rockier home life, his mother working odd shifts at the local prison, his father unrelentingly opinionated and demanding, both parents bickering and fighting regularly until Brian’s father finally storms out. If we push the second category to its logical conclusion then all human

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<sup>151</sup> Abraham, Karl. “The Experiencing of Sexual Traumas as a Form of Sexual Activity.” Selected Papers of Karl Abraham, M.D. London: Hogarth Press, 1927. 47-63.

<sup>152</sup> Berliner, Lucy and Jon R. Conte. “The Process of Victimization: The Victims’ Perspective.” Child Abuse and Neglect. 14 (1990): 29-40.

subjects would fall into its purview, given that the psyche is constructed around a central lack that dates back to infancy and that we all try to fill in a variety of ways (“you complete me”).

As Jon Davies writes in “Imagining Intergenerationality,” [t]he discourse of pedophilia is a kind of black hole into which any measured speech about consent, pleasure, and desire in intergenerational relationships seems to vanish” making any analysis of a text in which pedophilia figures both difficult and risky.<sup>153</sup> This is as true for the casual reader with an inquiring mind as it is for the educator attempting to cover honestly and fully a novel or film in which pedophilia or childhood sexual abuse play a part. What words one uses, the framework in which one places it, the lens through which one views it – these are all tightly circumscribed. This is no less true of the novel which is the subject of this chapter than of the films that Davies reviews in his article (including the film version of *Mysterious Skin*).<sup>154</sup> It is worth noting Davies’s observation that even in films that try to interrogate intergenerational sex, there is a “tension between speaking openly yet never being able to show openly[,]” a tension that is often, even in the films that venture most closely to a legitimate and honest exploration of the subject, resolved by “eliding and eclipsing the sex scenes, or the subjectivities of the pedophiles or children themselves” or through assurances by the director and cast that no children were harmed in the making of this film.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Davies, Jon. “Imagining Intergenerationality: Representation and Rhetoric in the Pedophile Movie.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies*. 13.2-3 (2007): 369-85. 370. In his article, Davies discusses how even acclaimed films that seem to break the mold for representing pedophilia actually work within a very narrow range of representational possibilities.

<sup>154</sup> It is important to note that pedophilia and child molestation are distinct. While a pedophile may be a child molester, the inverse is not necessarily true. Pedophilia is a diagnosis, the criteria for which are outlined in §302.2 of the DSM-IV. A pedophile has sexual interest in children while child molestation may be the result of curiosity, uncertainty with sexually permissible behavior, or attributable to other mental or physical health issues. American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

<sup>155</sup> Davies, “Imagining Intergenerationality,” 371-372.



In other words, to talk about childhood sexual abuse in the aim of eliminating it is one thing; to describe it or dramatize is tantamount to committing it, especially when that dramatization does not comply fully with the dominant discourse on childhood sexual abuse and “the discourse of abuse collapses representations of the act into the act itself.”<sup>156</sup> The *Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996 (CPPA)* is a perfect example of this because it extended bans on child pornography even to computer-generated images and virtual pornography – images in which no living children were involved.<sup>157</sup> *Mysterious Skin* commits exactly this crime against the dominant because although it can be read as a tale of ultimate redemption and recovery from trauma, it does not present the so-called “traumatic event” as violent, painful, or even particularly unpleasurable.<sup>158</sup> This is not say that the molestation does not have consequences for both main characters but it is to say that standard equation of “innocent child + evil predator = ruined life” is not the only algebra that may be used to understand the situations in the novel.

### **Queer But Not Queer: Coach Heider**

Coach Heider is our culture’s most feared being: a man who seems too darned ‘right’ with his blond hair and lithe body, his interest in athletics, his masculine insouciance, his

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<sup>156</sup> Davies, “Imagining Intergenerationality,” 371.

<sup>157</sup> Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996 (CPPA), 18 U. S. C. §2251 *et seq.* In *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U.S. 234 (2002) the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the CPPA in 2002 for being overly broad, the portion prohibiting computer-generated images was revived in the “Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today” Act (PROTECT Act) of 2003, which prohibits “a computer image or computer-generated image that is, or appears virtually indistinguishable from that of a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct.” PROTECT Act of 2003. Pub. L. 108-21. 117 Stat. 650. 2003.

<sup>158</sup> Of course I do not mean to advocate sexual interactions between adults and children; rather, I am trying to point out that we are only allowed to talk about such interactions using very particular and limited language and only for very particular ends. Anything falling outside of those limits is likely to be read as child pornography.

fatherly role as baseball coach steering young boys toward wholesome, athletic, healthy adulthoods yet behind the scenes bad-touching the children, feeding them soda and sugar and preservatives and then telling them that it's okay to feel desire or pleasure in their bodies and in their little still-acceding-to-the-Symbolic minds. Precisely because they are children, because their psyches are in such a stage of development, they are at the stage in which they are most recruitable, to use the language of the current discourse surround homosexuality. He is, in popular parlance, a threat to children because he looks just like the rest of us but he acts so very differently. He molests children, which is just the shorthand way of saying that he steals the future from us all.

Neil is Coach's favorite, a naturally gifted player who illicitly Coach's attention and long afternoons and evenings at Coach's house after practice while Neil's single mother is working or out with her many different male friends. Coach's house is a bit like Oz. Coach has video games, snack foods, colorful array of childhood diversions and desires that most children are proffered only in limited quantity by their parents. Coach encourages Neil to act up, to make funny faces, to drink Nehi soda and then belch while Coach takes instant photos and lets Neil record himself on the tape deck. Neil's mother seems not only to allow but to encourage the relationship as healthy for young Neil, who without a father is in need of male role modeling.

The sexual relationship begins in very Oz-like circumstances. Though Neil clearly spends a great deal of time at Coach's house, the actual sexual encounter occurs in the kitchen, a room filled with brightly colored boxes of assorted sugary kids' cereals and cabinets stocked with marshmallow cream and bags of candy. When Neil spies the miniature boxes of cereal, the sort his mother 'never buys,' Coach asks him which one he wants. Then,

as with the *Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy's journey across the rainbow seems to happen quite by accident, Neil accidentally spills the cereal across the floor. Coach responds not with anger but with a smile and tosses the brightly colored cereal from his own box into the air. The two rip open the little boxes of cereal, tossing Froot Loops and Cocoa Krispies and Corn Pops up into the air, "their sugar coatings gleaming in the kitchen light" and the trip begins as Coach tells Neil, "Here we go..."<sup>159</sup> This is more than Coach literally showering Neil with sweets; it is a psychic explosion. Coach, who represents for Neil some version of the symbolic, both as an adult and as a coach, is turning in upon himself. The bright sugary cereal is not only part of the "economy of candy [in which children] have agency, choice, access, a measure for barter..." which the pedophile uses to lure the children; the deliberate undoing and opening of tightly sealed miniature boxes of cereal, the resulting explosion of color and texture, mimics the psychic economy.<sup>160</sup> In a world that Neil surely recognizes as limiting, Coach is permission for the release of *jouissance*. Neil interprets these interactions as love and displaces any confusion or dissonance they may have produced in him into a homosexually situated desire for a particular type of man -- hirsute and older -- and Neil begins to prostitute himself in a local park known for gay cruising.

Coach Heider. With no first name, he is indistinct, a placeholder of sorts, defined by his role (coach) and his surname. The surname itself suggest multiple meanings and resonances, especially when we factor in that it is Coach Heider's molestation acts that set both boys (and unnamed others) onto abnormal paths. "Heider" suggests "hider," one who hides and this is not far afield the images of pedophiles often cast about in American popular culture, as lurking behind bushes, as faceless predators reaching to open the passenger side

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<sup>159</sup> Heim, 34-35.

<sup>160</sup> Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 238.

doors of cars. In reality, studies show that most child molesters are people that the child knows, often a family member or other trusted person. In the case of Coach his “hiding” is done masterfully because he hides in plain sight. Add to this the nearness of “heid” (hide) to “heim” (home) and this cannot but evoke thoughts of the uncanny – that which is familiar yet unfamiliar – for us and Coach’s young victims. “Heid-er” also suggests “hide” in the sense of the skin or pelt, perhaps evoking the title of the novel itself, most especially when nine year-old Neil notices the “thin blond hairs that curled from his shirt collar ... the darker shade of his mustache ... the salt of his skin.”<sup>161</sup> Neil has already developed a taste for a certain type of hirsute masculine man given his foray into his mother’s under-the-bed stash of *Playgirl* magazines and her interactions with her rough-neck Kansas boyfriends, some of which Neil has witnessed firsthand.<sup>162</sup> Neil’s discovery of his mother’s stash of pornography and his witnessing his mother have oral and vaginal sex with her boyfriend is analogous to the subject’s entry into language and the Symbolic. It is not precisely the same but it does mimic the process because Neil believes that his mother is enjoying these interactions and finding some sort of fulfillment in them, even as he masturbates himself to a voyeuristic physical level of enjoyment.

But hide here takes on an even more nuanced meaning than Coach’s pelt of chest and facial hair or Coach’s “hiding” in plain sight for it is also Neil here who hides: “the small copper-colored sunbursts that ringed each black pupil. And, inside that black, a reflection of my face.”<sup>163</sup> Coach is not only hiding Neil within himself but is hiding himself *as* Neil. It is but a small single letter separates “heid” from “heim” – hide from home – and we are back to

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<sup>161</sup> Heim, 31, 34-35.

<sup>162</sup> In German, Heide can also mean heathen. This meaning seems less relevant to the matter at hand but could suggest that Coach is somehow fallen from the true religion of reproductive futurity and practicing a bastardized version.

<sup>163</sup> Heim, 34.

the uncanny again, whereby Coach is both the home that Neil seeks and Neil is the home that Coach seeks. Neil has moved four times in as many years before he is nine years old, does not know his father, and sees his mother work her way through a succession of dead-end jobs and whatever local yokel is her “current boyfriend.” It is clear in the novel that Neil’s mother adores him and offers him a love that he returns without hesitancy but it the love of a mother who treats her young child with perhaps too much of a degree of familiarity for the child to see the mother as other; yet Coach offers Neil a different sort of love: “The hand on my knee tightened. It seemed faultless, the hand of someone amazing, superior, invincible. ‘Neil, I’ve been thinking about you a lot this week.’”<sup>164</sup>

We could appropriately read this within the standard dominant framework of child sexual abuse. I suggest, however, a slightly larger (though not necessarily anti-thetical) reading. Though this could legitimately be read as Neil’s need for a father-figure, a filler for the sense of “emotional deprivation,” a queer theoretical approach sees this as something far more.<sup>165</sup> Coach offers Neil something for which most human subjects long: meaning and existence through absorption into something larger, superior, and faultless both in the sense of non-blame-worthy and in the sense of without fracture or breakage. This plays out on the kitchen floor as “his breaths moved into my mouth” and as “[h]is bottom lip curled over my jaw line. My head was disappearing, he was swallowing me. I moaned and understood it was the right noise.”<sup>166</sup> This offering is for a child like Neil often irresistible and tempting *precisely* because it melds so perfectly with Neil’s burgeoning and somewhat confused senses of parenting, sexuality, love, and care and Neil “knew what was happening. Half of me

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<sup>164</sup> Heim, 33.

<sup>165</sup> Herman, Judith L. and Lisa Hirschman. “Father-Daughter Incest.” *Signs* 2.4 (Summer 1977): 735-756.

<sup>166</sup> Heim, 35.

realized it wasn't right. The other half wanted it to happen."<sup>167</sup> Key here is that Neil does not linguistically set this up as a right/wrong situation; that Neil "knew what was happening" does not indicate that what was happening was "wrong" to Neil, only that he was aware of the events taking place and they possible end-point, given that he had seen similar scenes between his mother and her then-current boyfriends. That Neil knew half-realized that it "wasn't right" could suggest that he knew the behavior was inappropriate in a good-touch/bad-touch kind of way, but I think it also speaks to the larger sense of Neil's not being satisfied fully by the interaction, which has up until this point been a pleasurable experience. That something "wasn't right" does not necessarily mean that it "was wrong," and this linguistic difference suggests that Neil is experiencing a psychically advanced sense of his own place within the Symbolic. The language Neil uses further supports this interpretation as viable because Neil does not say that he half realized it was wrong and half realized it was acceptable, counterpoising right and wrong, good and bad. Instead, he says that "half of me realized it *wasn't right*," which is not at all the same as saying that something is certainly wrong, and his next statement is not that he felt what was happening was "right" but rather that "the other half of me wanted it to happen."<sup>168</sup> The comment that seems to clear on its surface becomes much more fraught when we consider it through the lens of the queer uncanny and locate the disconnections in linguistic structure.

Important to note that Coach (and for that matter pedophiles like him) is not necessarily a sinthomosexual, despite being childless, partnerless, non-reproductive, casual, corrupting, and queer.<sup>169</sup> Coach capitalizes on the idea of queerness without actually

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<sup>167</sup> Heim, 35.

<sup>168</sup> Heim, 35.

<sup>169</sup> Most evidence points to heterosexually-identified males as the most likely perpetrators of child molestation. Freund, Kurt, and Robin Watson. "The Proportions of Heterosexual and Homosexual

occupying the structural position of the queer. We see this in the way that Coach seduces Neil, with an insouciant approach to time and place, to the rules and strictures of the typical grown-up. The pedophilic Coach is perhaps even *more* immersed in the notion of reproductive futurity than others whom we might describe as uber-heteronormative for Coach preys upon the Child, both literally and figuratively. The system of desire in which he operates depends not only upon the figure of the Child *as* innocent and *as* a representation of the future (as in Edelman's schema) but also as a mechanism for accessing and securing his own position *as a child* in the stream of time. As Jim Davies has described it, "[t]hrough relationships with children, life tries to fold back on itself, run backward instead of forward by turning away from adulthood into childhood."<sup>170</sup>

### **Jouissance of an Alien: Neil McCormick**

This tale offers us at least the possibility that sinthomosexuality is not something that one grows into or chooses as an adult but is something that for some people may be a site which they take up or into which they are thrust very early on, even as children.<sup>171</sup> In many ways, before his episode with Coach, Neil is already evidencing traits that are connected to the position of the sinthomosexual. The narrative introduces Neil as a sexually functioning male at the childish age of eight and Neil's own words tell us that to great degree he is already cognizant of and able to articulate his own desires, as when he meets Coach and recognizes

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Pedophiles among Sex Offenders against Children: An Exploratory Study." Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy. 18.1 (1992): 34-43; and Hall, Ryan C.W., and Richard C.W. Hall. "A Profile of Pedophilia: Definition, Characteristics of Offenders, Recidivism, Treatment Outcomes, and Forensic Issues." Focus: The Journal of Lifelong Learning in Psychiatry. 7.4 (2009): 522-537.

<sup>170</sup> Davies, "Imagining Intergenerationality," 378.

<sup>171</sup> There is a point to be made about the possibility about children being closest to the position of the sinthomosexual than adults for children tend to operate with fewer boundaries and ontological limitations than more fully-symbolicized adults. We would want to avoid, however, suggesting any connection between increasing age and increasing enmeshment in the Symbolic.

that “desire sledgehammered me.” Given Neil’s tender age, one might expect his description of the meeting to be couched in terms much more expected of a child his age. But already Neil is using language that indicates the self-shattering, sledge-hammering jouissance that typifies the position of the sinthomosexual, and he is well-versed in a discourse of desire. In other words, Neil is already a “queer child” insofar as he

is, generally, both defined by and outside of what is ‘normal.’ But the term queer derives also from its association with specifically sexual alterity. [...The] figure of the queer child is that which doesn’t quite conform to the wished-for way that children are supposed to be in terms of gender and sexual roles. In other circumstances, it is also the child who displays interest in sex generally, in same-sex erotic attachments, or in cross-generational attachments.<sup>172</sup>

Bruhm and Hurley’s collection explores the rather quite queer way in which our culture interprets children as sex-less (in the sense of not having sexual drives or interests, not having knowledge of sexual matters, of existing as pre- or not-yet sexual beings) yet also as assumedly heterosexual. A common tale in our culture is the tale of childhood innocence corrupted and a great deal of post-childhood non-normative sexual behavior (homosexuality, licentiousness, promiscuity) is traced back to childhood trauma, which is often interpreted as a too-early introduction into adult sexuality – through molestation, premarital sex, over-exposure to popular culture, and the like.

Neil, like Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, seems also beholden to an idol that is idolatrous; unable or unwilling to experience emotional intimacy with others, Neil uses the very traits that are supposed to rouse in us a comforting assurance in our own coherence and

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<sup>172</sup> Bruhm and Hurley, *Curiouser*, x.



the ‘rightness’ of the world – that is, his youthful vitality, the bright future of the hopeful youth, the tender yet potent potentiality of his own reproductive capacity – and expends it in the mouths and on the faces of a series of unidentifiable older men whom he meets in the local park and who kneel between his legs in the announcer’s box at the local baseball diamond -- the same one, presumably, where he was first sledge-hammered by desire for Coach, a site of repetition. Eschewing anything akin to emotional connection with these men, Neil conjures Playgirl images of hirsute men, creating a peculiar and particular sinthome to make manifest his own connection to the Real. Neil’s interactions with the men are moments of the queer uncanny in which he both consciously and unconsciously returns to the repressed and is compelled to repeat as closely as he can the actions that inaugurated the development of his particular sinthome (that is, node of pleasure) in the kitchen with Coach. He closes his eyes, he looks away, or the men sink their heads beneath his line of sight and thereby Neil doubles the Coach, intentionally recreating and reliving the initial experience. The name Neil is a homonym for the verb “kneel,” as in to be prostrate before, and until the closing scene of the novel, this is exactly what Neil does before the image of Coach that he keeps in his mind. The “kneel” reference reminds us that moments of the queer uncanny, emerging as they do from a queer theoretical framework, can never be assumed to be positive or freely chosen; the queer uncanny is not more beholden to a preset system of moral or mathematical precision than queer theory itself and we must recall from Freud that the compulsion toward repetition is exactly that: a compulsion.

“Neil” is also an acronym for both “lien” and – with the addition of the indeterminate “a” – “alien.” Both are here relevant for it is Neil who has a lien of psychic sorts on Brian’s life, a permanent alien lien for a debt that Brian does not know how he incurred and which he

seeks intently to have lifted. In the final scene of the novel, when Neil is revealing in specific detail what Brian has for so long misinterpreted as alien abduction, Brian demands of Neil to “[k]eep going. Don’t stop again until you’ve finished.”<sup>173</sup> In other words, the resolution may not be positive and may not be of the sort that would satisfy Brian’s decade-long search for resolution through appeal to the Other in the form of the aliens whom he believes abducted him and continue to monitor him, but it does resolve and connect the various strands of images, sense perception, and psychosomatic elements that have haunted Brian for so long. Neil is also alien to Brian in multiple ways; not only as the out-going kid who led Brian to Coach but also as the one of the two who seems to have processed the experience in a less repressed albeit not necessarily positive way. How is it that two young boys with relatively similar life circumstances could have experienced this molestation and emerged to follow two very different paths of understanding and recognition of the experience?

Jouissance is translated most often as “enjoyment” but the word in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory means something quite different. Jouissance for Lacan suggests a surplus of excitation, an abundance of stimulation, that which is too much for the organism to bear. Because it is of the real and therefore outside of or resistant to symbolicization and meaning, jouissance is experienced as the very anti-thesis of the way we generally think of “enjoyment.” It is experienced as on-going suffering because it is experienced but unspeakable, because it blocks symbolic association, and because it connected to the other. For Freud this lethal drive was the death drive, the drive which compels humans to repeat patterns and behaviors even against their own best self-interests. Jouissance is akin to the death drive, as Suzanne Barnard explains:

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<sup>173</sup> Heim, 287.

While the subject of the drive also is ‘born’ in relation to a loss, this loss is a real rather than a symbolic one. As such, it functions not in a mode of absence but in a mode of an impossible excess haunting reality, an irrepressible remainder that the subject cannot separate itself from. In other words, while desire is born of and sustained by a constitutive *lack*, drive emerges in relation to a constitutive *surplus*. This surplus is what Lacan calls the subject’s ‘anatomical complement,’ an excessive ‘unreal’ remainder that produces an ever-present *jouissance*.<sup>174</sup>

Over the course of the life (“growing up”), the symbolic world, the many connective, structural, regulative systems in which we live demand that we evacuate *jouissance* from the body and that what *jouissance* is present be controlled. This regulatory pressure begins early and continues through the life cycle, from weaning and sitting up straight in our school desks to making a toast and practicing monogamy. But *jouissance* is plentiful in the body and a portion refuses evacuation and remains in the body, generally in the very spaces where the boundary between self and other is most permeable: the erotic zones, the edges, those places on the body where we are allowed to feel excitation, although when and how that excitation may be expressed or experienced is often subject to tight regulation.

Neil eschews love, turning instead to the love of money that he takes from older men and to the Playgirl fantasies he conjures in his head while performing the sexual acts. Escaping from the heartland safety of small-town Kansas, Neil travels over the rainbow to an Oz of his own, New York City, where he continues to hustle his youthful lithe body to the men he meets in various bars and on the street. But where the men back home were relatively

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<sup>174</sup> Barnard, Suzanne. “The Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and Other *Jouissance*.” Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality. Ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink. Albany NY: State Univ of New York Press, 2002. 173.

harmless (one distributed snack machine crackers from the back of his Volvo wagon) – a clear but less vivid representation of coach’s kitchen, the same variety of colors but this time packed tightly into boxes in the back seat, the men in New York present entirely different sets of issues in front of Neil. Where one man in Hutchinson offered Neil a package of peanut butter in between bright orange crackers, a man in New York removes his clothes to reveal a body covered in the scarlet and wine-colored Kaposi sarcomas indicative of HIV infection. Where the men in Kansas tell Neil that he is beautiful and special and that they need him, the men in New York seem less interesting in aggrandizing Neil’s need for attention or praise. Where men in Kansas reach up to stroke Neil’s still-smooth face while they perform fellatio under the announcer’s stand at the baseball diamond, a man in New York smashes his fist into Neil’s face, slams his naked body over the edge of a bathtub and rapes him anally, bashing Neil’s head into the drain while ejaculating in Neil’s rectum. And this ghost, this final of three who visit Neil during his long night in the city that never sleeps sends him right back over the rainbow, back to Kansas, back to the mother who, no matter her faults – her promiscuity and drink not far afield from Aunt Em’s hard-scrabble brusqueness toward the Orphan Dorothy – is, after all the progenitor, the keeper of the hearth, a reminder of a future, some future.

Any truth that the ego may provide would then be found only in those moments when the boundaries and borders between self and other dissolve or are revealed as more permeable than the ego would have us imagine. The point of orgasm may be one of those moments, provided it is reached with another being present or in mind, for it is at the point of orgasm that we are both most alone and most dissolved into the other, the moment when our pleasure

consumes us and the notion of the other is driven from our minds while at the same the boundaries of our bodies and minds meld most pleasurably with the other that is beyond us.

### **Eyes, Fists, and the Search for the *Objet Petit (a)lien***

While Neil seems to seek this truth compulsively, reaching orgasms in the city park, in the announcer's box at the baseball diamond, etc, Brian avoids the truth by avoiding sexuality and orgasm. Unlike Neil, who I have argued took up or showed a predilection toward the place of the *sinthomosexual* at a very early age, Brian has the role (or, more precisely, the option to choose that role) thrust upon him from circumstances that are less than optimal. Although he plays on the same baseball team as Neil, he is inept, lacking even the sort of masculinity that normative young boys often present and adopt. And as with Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, there is no certain indicator that Brian is gay. (In fact, there is very little in the novel to indicate that Brian has any sexual orientation or interest in the sexual at all; he seems asexual.) It is perhaps these two elements – his lack of child-masculinity and his seeming asexuality – that alerts us to his potential status as a queer. Brian only meets Coach when he is brought to the house when a game is unexpectedly rained out and Brian's parents are not there to take him home themselves. But we learn this only much later in the novel for in much the same way that Brian himself represses the memory so too does the novel, allowing both Brian and the reader only intermittent and greatly veiled hints at what has happened. Like any good mystery novel, *Mysterious Skin*, is best read multiple times because in each reading new clues and new connections emerge. Unlike Neil, Brian is unaware of his own sexuality and is instead obsessed with the idea that the missing hours from his past, his bedwetting, his unexplained nosebleeds, his occasional fainting spells, his visions of a

shadowy shape standing before him and over him all have something to do with alien abduction. He investigates the subject as extensively as possible in the pre-internet world of small town Kansas.

Brian Lackey is a nerd. He is slight and awkward, he wears large glasses. His name suggests that in some way he is a lackey, a servile follower, rather than a leader. In his family structure, in his inept performance on the Little League field, even in the context of the molestation scenes he is passive and more likely to be lead than to lead – a double with a difference, in contrast to Neil who is an active force in the novel. As Brian seeks confirmation of his alien abduction theory, this changes dramatically. He steals a Little League photograph from the walls of the local Chamber of Commerce, he takes his mother's car with permission, he even imbibes liquor for the first time and then challenges his father over the telephone. His life from 1981 until the conclusion of the novel at Christmas of 1991 forms more and more firmly around the central lack that those “five hours” form and his attempts to resolve that lack in what we might usefully analogize to the ways that subjects both individual and collective work to cover over the central lack that structures the human psyche. It is fitting, then Brian's name is an acronym for Brain because he, through a fairly logical system of detective work, attempts to solve the riddle of his own existence. In my reading of this novel as presenting us with an instantiation of the queer uncanny, the resolution of Brian's detective work – realizing that the shadowy alien figures are actually Coach and Neil, finding Neil's name and hunting him down – is not satisfaction or resolution at all. Nor is it dissatisfaction or a lack of resolution. It is, rather, as we shall in my analysis of the final scene of the novel, a moment of recognition for Brian, a moment of looking around, looking awry, and feeling at home.

In a way, this search for meaning is replicative of the logic of reproductive futurity insofar as it is an organized system of quest or attention paid toward a future (i.e., the Child, the answer, the figure or moment of resolution) that is retroactively applied to explain or connect the events of the past (i.e., the nosebleeds, the loneliness, the fractured self, etc). Although “[b]elieving that the narratives we create to explain our distress accurately reflect reality is both optimistic and naïve,” it is the narrative or psychic value of the beliefs that is ultimately of more importance to the subject than any empirical or historical validity.<sup>175</sup>

If we remember the early work of Lacan, we know that it is the identification of the infant with an image outside of itself that produces the illusion of completeness and of mastery over the body. This identification with the other, captured elegantly in Lacan’s mirror phase, is more than a moment in time, a singular event that one passes through; it is a principle of organization that organizes much of the experience of the individual in the world over time. This “imaginary” register – so named because it is both based on image and in some degree “not real” – forms at the core of our beings a lack. At the very moment when we feel most individuated, contoured, and whole, we are immediately thrust into the position of being least so because our entire sense of ourselves is based on something external to ourselves. This early alienation is the basis for the ego, that seat of narcissism and self-awareness and the site from which an untrue agency is recognized as the ego does the work of hiding or concealing the lack of unity around which it is formed. Eventually the work of the ego extends far beyond covering this initial realization of fragmentation and begins to make sense of the world in various ways when the world the subject encounters is nonsensical, disconnected, or otherwise fragmented.

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<sup>175</sup> Spence, Donald P. Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis. New York: Norton, 1982. 25.

For Brian the specular is central. From the moment he “opened my eyes to darkness” in the crawl space under the house to the even more evocative incident on Halloween when, dressed as Lucifer, Brian is taunted by a group of older boys who tear off his mask and with it his glasses: “My right boot landed on the glasses. I heard the crack, felt them snap like potato chips. I bent to pick them up. Nothing but shards, as thin and sharp as the teeth in a monster’s mouth. I swept the pieces aside and grabbed my mask.”<sup>176</sup> Perhaps this unintentional prank is not so unintentional, in much the same way that Dorothy Gale kept having little accidents in *The Wizard of Oz*, for Brian does not express anger, panic, or fear at his broken glasses; instead he describes the pieces as fragments and then tidily sweeps them aside. As he runs out of the haunted house and in to a grove of trees, “[w]ithout glasses, the world melted from focus [...] I put the mask back on.”<sup>177</sup> Brian seems to be avoiding looking upon the other, the mirror image, the double of himself, as he grabs the mask and puts it back on even though he is alone and in the dark, and far away from the haunted house. This may perhaps be a moment when the queer uncanny is most intimately connected to the mirror stage; Brian uses the mask to mask his own self-recognition, to avoid seeing the double, not in Lacan’s mirror but in the eyes of the other taunting children. Because without his glasses he cannot see, the taunting children become his proxy eyes, their taunts descriptively offering him a vision of himself that cannot stand if he is to remain a unified psyche. But the queer uncanny also suggests that for Brian the mask is a return to the moments in the haunted house when he was active, when it was he who surprised the other children, when it was he took initiative and action. The mask offers Brian a double with a difference – same Brian but

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<sup>176</sup> Heim, 50.

<sup>177</sup> Heim, 51.



different Brian-actions. And what more symbolic figure of non-reproductive futurity than Lucifer himself, the antidote to the tale of the Christ-child who promises an unending future?

For Brian, the fainting spells signal a loss of the conscious self while the nosebleeds and the bed-wetting are expulsions of the life force, an admixture of necessary liquid and wasteful discharge. They suggest not only a crossing of thresholds between conscious/unconscious and self/other but an evacuation of the life force, an acceding to the real of the molestation experience, which Brian has been unable to symbolicize fully. His attempts at symbolicization are useful to him to a point; the myriad documentaries on alien visitation, the bookshelves of books detailing alien abductions, the objective-appearing check list of alien encounter symptoms all allow Brian to stabilize his molestation experience and to translate it into the language of knowing but his translation process is never complete for he struggles to determine precisely the exact details and narrative of *his* experience. The real, that which refuses to be or cannot be symbolicized, haunts Brian's attempts, erupting in moments of the uncanny that force Brian to confront the un-speakable (as in literally unspeakable) experiences he has buried and then reworked. Nowhere is this more evident than in the scene with the eviscerated calf. Avalyn has thus far been to Brian a believable guide to his interest in alien visitation, encouraging him to follow the clues and to be his own detective. And what is a detective but someone highly skilled in the processes of resolution, logic, and symbolicization?

Because he cannot fully integrate the Coach into his psyche, Brian displaces the entire experience into the figure of the alien – an unknowable, other-worldly shadow figure, not fully understood yet not so foreign as to disintegrate Brian's psyche. The alien in popular culture is another version of the sinthomosexual, a figure divorced from the normative family

structure, seemingly without ancestor or progeny or mate. Culturally the alien, like the witch, denotes insistent difference; although the alien has (or seems to have) a purpose for the abductions, neither Brian nor the other abductee (Avalyn) knows what that purpose is.

The unconscious has to resort to particularly drastic measures in order to make its content perceived. It does this most vividly by projection, by extrapolating its content onto an object, which then mirrors what had previously lay hidden in the unconscious.... They [flying saucers] are based essentially on an omnipresent emotional foundation, in this case a psychological situation common to all mankind.<sup>178</sup>

When a television documentary chronicles the abduction story of a young woman in nearby Inman, Kansas, Brian contacts her and she encourages him to investigate his abduction dreams. In line with many survivors of childhood sexual abuse and abetted by a scene in the novel in which Brian and several others see a UFO above his house, Brian begins to attribute this missing time and his symptoms to alien abduction. He immerses himself in this belief by developing a fascination with book and television documentaries on the subject. When one such documentary dramatizes the story of Avalyn Friesen who lives near Brian in the rather tellingly named village of “Inman,” he contacts her and they begin a friendship in which Avalyn encourages Brian to investigate his slowly surfacing feelings and to pay heed to any clues that he may find in his dreams. The queer uncanny tells us that the repressed returns and the “alien” of which Brian dreams and onto which he casts all of his questions, his doubt, and his need is “a neil,” one Neil McCormick. “As I drifted toward sleep my mind focused on two things, a pair of the summer’s images I’d never forget. I saw the cramped room of the

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<sup>178</sup> Jung, Carl. Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies. Tran. R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1979. 13-14.

crawl space... And then, equal in power and mystery, I saw the UFO, still out there somewhere, levitating the earth.”<sup>179</sup> This Unidentified Flying Object, the unidentified capital O “Other,” the great round lighted disc that Brian saw in the cold dark night, that was both present and not-present (“out there somewhere”) is now connected firmly for him to the Unidentified Other of the dank crawlspace, the dark round entrance hole, and, ultimately, to Coach. The abduction, the UFO sightings, the fascination with aliens can be fruitfully understood using the queer uncanny as doubles with a difference and as a compulsion to repeat a prior experience but through different linguistic and imaginative symbols.

Though Brian is well on his own journey, it is perhaps not until he meets Avalyn that he begins most fully to engage the queer uncanny. Avalyn is perhaps the queerest figure in the novel, timeless, trapped in a childhood state, literally committed to an alien logic. It should be no surprise that she lives in “Inman, Kansas” for her it is through Avalyn that Brian reaches into himself to recall the molestation scene in which his arm disappeared into a man called Coach. Her name itself evokes the experience that Brian must have. Avalyn is formed of the two names Ava and Lyn, Ava possibly linked to the Hebrew Chava meaning life or serpent or perhaps the Latin avis meaning bird. Lyn likely comes from Spanish or English to mean beautiful. Her last name Friesen is also relevant, coming from the German “fries” and perhaps further back to the root “prei-” (to cut). This suggests that Avalyn Friesen is the means by which Brian ‘cuts’ through to the truth of his memories and that this process, which is to a degree “life-giving” or that will help him fly like a ‘bird’ (like a bluebird over the rainbow?), it is also with peril (serpent).

Avalyn is also a figure of retarded childhood for despite being a woman in her 30s, whose room “looks like a teenager’s: posters ... covered the walls, and clothes, books,

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<sup>179</sup> Heim, 16.

albums, and tapes scatter the floor.”<sup>180</sup> She gives Brian a copy of book which she autographed with a “series of tiny valentines.”<sup>181</sup> When she is describing what happened to the eviscerated calf she observes that “they take away the sex organs away, the udders and the slits on the females, the you-know-whats on the males,” language which suggests a sexual knowledge that is both clear and clouded.<sup>182</sup> Her favorite band is Kiss, a band that she would have listened to during its heyday in the mid-seventies when Avalyn would have been in her teens, and which Avalyn describes as “so theatrical. You could get lost in them. Every day was Halloween,” evoking not only the second episode of molestation for Brian but also the notion of being lost, out of normative time and space.<sup>183</sup> Although never explicitly clear in the novel, this may all may indicate that Avalyn herself was the victim of sexual molestation. She tells Brian that back when she “wasn’t so fat” she had a single high school boyfriend who was scared off by her father and then attempts to seduce Brian by sliding kissing him awkwardly telling him “I really want to make you feel good.”<sup>184</sup>

Ironically, it is Avalyn’s insistence that leads Brian to the “real” truth and the pivotal scene occurs when Avalyn has summoned Brian to her farmstead to examine a calf that has been eviscerated, ostensibly by aliens. Avalyn points out the lack of blood from the mutilated animal and encourages Brian to reach inside of the body of the animal to see (feel) for himself that the internal organs are missing. When Brian pushes his hand into the body, his experience splits; as Freud traversed again to the illicit section of the Italian city, Brian moves at once between two experiences. He feels not only the inside of the calf but something else as well and it is at this moment that, although he cannot force the memory into the clear vision

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<sup>180</sup> Heim, 140.

<sup>181</sup> Heim, 147.

<sup>182</sup> Heim 157.

<sup>183</sup> Heim, 140.

<sup>184</sup> Heim, 183.

of his conscious mind, he is surrounded by a sense of the uncanny, of having been in this warm, wet place before.

We learn late in the novel that Coach had the boys fist him. This imagery comes up several times – Brian is found in the crawlspace or “bowels” of his house, the eviscerated calf feels “spongy” inside, they “break into” Coach’s old house, and Brian comments that the baby he holds feels “spongy.” Toward the end of his short essay “The Uncanny” Freud offers the comment that “[s]evered limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm [...] feet that dance by themselves [...] – all of these have something highly uncanny about them, especially when they are credited ... with independent activity.”<sup>185</sup> And what is fisting but an act of dismemberment in which one loses a part of oneself in the bowels of another, experienced by Brian as the fear almost of being consumed or emptied, and yet at the same time experiences an embodiment in the most literal sense of the word, a perhaps revisiting of what Freud says is “merely a variant of another, which was originally not at all frightening, but relied on a certain lasciviousness; this was the fantasy of living in the womb” (*Leben Im Mutterlieb*).<sup>186</sup> Other interpreters have suggested that the rectum of Coach is the *objet petit a*, “the touchstone of [Brian’s] quest and the haunting abject of his life,” and that this *objet petit a* resurfaces when Brian puts his hand into the dark innards of the cow.<sup>187</sup> While this fits in a quite literal sense as the “hole in the real,” it does not fully mesh with how Brian reworks and re-experiences the situation over the ten years following the molestation incidents. Coach’s rectum is not the “empty space on which the subject projects the fantasies that support his desire,” as Žižek phrases it; Coach’s rectum is the situs for the trauma but it is not the empty space of desire. The identity of Neil McCormick is Brian’s desire-point, his *objet petit a*, to

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<sup>185</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150.

<sup>186</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150-151.

<sup>187</sup> Davies, “Imagining Intergenerationality,” 377.

use the language of Jacques Lacan, the surplus of *jouissance*. Slavoj Žižek uses the concept to analyze the MacGuffin-Effect, the element on which narrative and plot are based but which is in itself unknown or generic. It is the gimmick from which the dramatic thrust of the film or novel hangs. In Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece, *Psycho*, it is the \$40,000 that Marian Crane steals; in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, it is the briefcase. As Žižek notes, "[the] MacGuffin is *objet petit a* pure and simple: the lack, the remainder of the real that sets in motion the symbolic movement of interpretation, a hole at the center of the symbolic order, the mere appearance of some secret to be explained, interpreted, etc."<sup>188</sup> Similarly, writing of the black house in Patricia Highsmith's story of the same name, "the "black house" in [a] Patricia Highsmith story: a quite ordinary, everyday object that, as soon as it is 'elevated to the status of the Thing,' starts to function as a kind of screen, an empty space on which the subject projects the fantasies that support his desire, a surplus of the real that propels us to narrate again and again our first traumatic encounters with *jouissance* [...] it is an empty form to be filled out by everyone's fantasy [*objet petit a*] is thus the 'hole in the real' that sets symbolization in motion ...."<sup>189</sup> Neil is the MacGuffin, the *objet petit a* for Brian, the face and the screen on which Brian pre-writes a story of resolution and presumably redemption. In the framework of the queer uncanny, it is Neil's identity that haunts Brian, that resurfaces repeatedly in the form of a being-presence beside him in his dreams and visions. This formless figure is the hinge upon which Brian's quest proceeds, but the resolution that locating Neil provides is no resolution at all, highlighting two elements of the queer uncanny: the repletion or reappearance of certain tropes or figures alongside the inability of final

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<sup>188</sup> Love Thy Symptom as Thyself (*Liebe Dein Symptom wie Dich selbst*). Dir. Claudia Willke and Katharina Höcker. Perf. Slavoj Žižek. Merve / Auflage, 1997. 52 mins.

<sup>189</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture. Boston: MIT Press, 1991. 133.

resolution. Just as returning to Kansas does not resolve the issues of Dorothy Gale's life, so too does locating Neil McCormick not bring Brian's experiences to a final conclusion.

### **Two Boys in the Dark: Dislogic in the Final Scene of *Mysterious Skin***

And again, a return to a final scene, although final scenes are rarely final. What makes this novel less satisfying for the reproductive futurity oriented and less amenable to a recuperative reading is the final scene, a return to the scene of the crime, when the two young men break into Coach's old house (we are not told what happened to Coach; like a ghost he seems simply to have disappeared), now occupied by what surely must be a heteronormatively typical family of mother, father, and children judging from the furnishings. Brian urges Neil to revive the illicit jouissance of that moment while Neil recruits Brian into the knowledge of that night, finding his own sinthome node in the retelling of the sexual goings on and in the revealing to Brian the circumstances of his own jouissance, urging him forward not to a resolution of the alien dilemma, not toward a final resolution of the when and the where and the who of that night or any other, not toward a future fantasy project in which all of the questions and lack we have inside of us are brought to full force in the upturned face of a waif-like child and we feel the (w)hol(l)y stillness of the night, but instead toward a position, toward a reckoning of the self, toward a grasping and embracing of jouissance that is neither sanctioned nor condoned. That the boys are reliving their experience in the midst of this holiday and familial deluge is of little surprise; what is more intriguing is that the resolution they seem to reach is not one of mutual support in a post-traumatic event but rather a joining of forces with no thought of the future.

If any holiday is swaddled in reproductive futurity it is surely Christmas with its focus on the child of all children, the infant Christ, the literal and figurative harbinger of the future and of the rebirth offered all who believe. Even for those of us who are not Christian, it is nigh impossible to avoid the holiday, saturated as our American culture is with the imagery, music, and fantasy of this divine birth and the promise of the great future it portends. Yet what a queer birth it is, this little child with two daddies, this infant whose earthly father is but a space-filler for the heavenly, omnipotent, omniscient father who is truly the Name of the Father. The closing scene of *Mysterious Skin* takes place Christmas Eve of 1991 when both Brian Lackey and Neil McCormick are just shy of eighteen years of age, the cusp of legal adulthood. As in *The Wizard of Oz*, it is this closing scene that at first seems to braid the strings of the novel together but which actually leaves the narrative much more ruptured than resolved, revealing the ways in which the queer uncanny can alert us to fractures and fissures.

After Brian finally identifies Neil and arranges to meet him when Neil is back in Kansas to visit his mother at Christmas, they drive to the house where Coach used to live, a sort of primal crime scene for both of the young men.<sup>190</sup> The house itself is the architectural representation of reproductive futurity: a modest ranch home with a two-car garage, a master bedroom, and two smaller bedrooms. Tellingly, though, while “[n]eighbors’ homes were lit up, flashing their greetings and noels to the night street, ... here, in this home from their memories, there was only darkness. No Christmas lights braceleted its exterior, no tree blinked its varicolored eyes from the front window.”<sup>191</sup> In this moment, at Christmas, with carolers singing “Silent Night,” outside the house of this family in this small town of families

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<sup>190</sup> A child comes to an unwed mother on Christmas Eve. A w(a/o)nderer believes this child holds the answers. The analogies to Christmas could be pushed quite far in this closing scene.

<sup>191</sup> Heim, 274.



in this heartland state of family values, Neil and Brian enter into a mutually sinthomosexual moment, Brian urging Neil to tell him what happened that night.

Brian's search for answers to explain his alien abduction, along with his nosebleeds, bedwetting, and fainting spells, are his own attempts at symbolicizing an experience for which he has (and at the time it happened had) literally no words. The resolution he seeks of/from Neil is clarity, answers, certainties that will situate the half-formed, still alien, still a-Neil memories in the associative network of the symbolic via a vocalized, spoken retelling of it by Neil. What happens as Brian listens to Neil's explanation for the missing hours of Brian's life is that Neil's words distort rather than clarify, proliferate the questions rather than answer them, as Neil himself recognizes: "Those words were no longer accurate. [...] There was so much more I could tell him, but everything seemed irrelevant. [...] I placed my tongue against the inside of my cheek, tasting the steely bud of my wound...."<sup>192</sup> Neil recognizes the failure of language, the necessity by which language fails to convey accurately or precisely any intended meaning.

If speech presupposes an other, a position external to oneself and from which one is heard, Lacan posits that other as the space of language and speech as the mechanism by which the subject situates itself in the symbolic. This means that the interpretation of speech should not focus on the words that are spoken but on the position from which they are spoken – and by extension on the position from which they are heard. In other words, when a subject speaks, that subject is speaking from an unconscious identificatory position. Any professed "I" in speech would then be coming not from a coherent, recognizable "I" but from the space of imaginary alienation around which the ego has cohered. Neil, wordless, unable to locate the precise words, is doing more than just indicating the limitations of the English language

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<sup>192</sup> Heim, 285-286.

and perhaps even doing more than simply indicating the fracture between language and meaning. He is, suggesting that he is in a position and speaking from which there is no speaking that is permissible, or comprehensible within the field of the symbolic. His identificatory process has placed him in a position vis-à-vis the reproductive futurity oriented symbolic that he is no longer able to talk or even himself be “talkable.” This is the position of the sinthomosexual.

The closing scene between the boys recalls the E.T.A. Hoffman story recounted in Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny.”<sup>193</sup> In the Hoffman tale, the pivotal early scene is of young Nathaniel, who has been warned that the Sand Man will throw sand into the eyes of little children who refuse to go to bed and then take the eyes and feed them to his own bird-children. Nathaniel defies this warning one night and hides in his father’s study to spy on his father and his friend, Coppelius. While working together over the brazier making something that the boy cannot see, Coppelius cries out, “Eyes here! eyes here! [sic]”<sup>194</sup> Nathaniel screams, ostensibly connecting the physically repulsive Coppelius and the directive regarding eyes to the Sand Man, and so shocks Coppelius that Coppelius attempts to put hot coals in the boy’s eyes. And what proof might we have for reading this as a primal scene? It takes place at night when children should be asleep. Nathaniel hides and is “spellbound” by what he sees, knowing that if he is discovered he will be punished. The two men – Nathaniel’s father and Coppelius – disrobe from their street clothes, reveal a hearth that the child thought was merely a cupboard, and both bend low over the hot brazier and begin to create something.

The final scene of *Mysterious Skin* is not at first glance related to opening scene of Hoffman’s tale until we consider the opening of Hoffman’s tale as a queered version of the

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<sup>193</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 136-138.

<sup>194</sup> Freud, The Uncanny, 137.

primal scene, featuring not the coupling male and female parents that the child spies upon but two nearly half-men half-boys embracing in a non-reproductive union, come upon not by the curious child but by the penultimate symbol par excellence of reproductive futurity, the nuclear family. As carolers near the house, suspecting that no one is at home, a young boy peeks in and sees them. But at precisely the moment when the reader might be wondering how the boy sees the two young men, the focus is upon the entering family, “in the room with us, stood the family, their outlines barely visible within the weight of the room’s light,” a reversal of the point of view of the standard Freudian primal scene. Neil wonders to himself what the boy sees: “two boys in the dark, sprawled together on the couch, holding hands; one battered and bruised, the other bleeding from the nose”, just as in the Freudian primal scene the spying child is likely to see coitus as an infliction of violence rather than as physical coupling.<sup>195</sup> As if setting the primal scene up, divorcing it from its usual narrative in which a youngster espies coupling adults while hidden behind a door or comes upon the adults quite by accident, the carolers begin to sing “Silent Night” and the family that lives in the house unlocks the door — and enters.

This is a moment of the queer uncanny for Neil and Brian, not only in the sense of replicating the Freudian primal scene (which Neil has witnessed several times in various forms) but also in the way that it plays on and returns both boys to the event around which Brian has structured his entire quest: the day when Coach molested Brian and Neil, except this time Neil does not guide Brian into Coach’s house and then into his rectum but into a different dark space, the erotogenic zone not of the building or of the body but of the

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<sup>195</sup> Heim, 291.

symbolic, the dark space of the queer and the sinthomosexual, the “site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it precisely by *rendering* it.”<sup>196</sup>

If we then think that perhaps there has been a retroactive installation of this scene in both young men, it is possible to see them as doubles: Neil the one for whom the primal scene has been witnessed over and over and for whom sexual behavior has become a conscious currency as he moves through the world, Brian the one for whom sexuality is so far removed from his daily existence that the molestation by Coach was simply not assimilable into his psyche, displaced instead onto something seemingly far more fantastical – alien abduction. One event, two lives, similar, doubled, yet not identical. The narrative leaves us with a sense that the story is not over, that this meeting up has produced an entirely new field of questions that must be answered. Where Brian sought stability and depended on the epistemological framework of “mystery-solving,” he has found instead the possibility of an entirely new field of relations.

In *Mysterious Skin*, the queer uncanny has been applied to a troubling text in which the story is one likely to produce distaste under current epistemic norms. Characteristic of the queer uncanny is its refusal, emerging as it does from queer theory, to provide a final solution or a singularly authoritative reading. Instead the queer and the uncanny unite to disrupt the trauma narrative that structures so many tales of childhood sexual abuse, highlighting the instability of cultural notions about children and sexuality and challenging the dominate victim tale. This chapter has deepened our approach to the queer uncanny, incorporating more fully elements of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to demonstrate how doubling and repetition might play out in troubling texts.

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<sup>196</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 38. Emphasis in original.

### Chapter Three

#### **“This Ordinance Which is Not One: The Performative Potential of the Queer Uncanny”**

I admit that when I first thought to write about the domestic partner registry in the university town where I live and study, my intention was to skewer it and to unleash my pent-up and not-so-pent-up hostility toward the notion of same-sex marriage in the first place and toward the particular substance-less municipal ordinance in the second. The ordinance seemed inane at best and dangerous at worst. (Inane for offering no rights or obligations for registering; dangerous because what easier way for homophobes with violent tendencies to obtain the names and address of gays and lesbians?) As I begin working with the idea of the queer uncanny and applying to other texts, like films and novels, I kept returning to my fiery disregard for this ordinance, unsure now that my derision was well-placed. This final chapter takes us out of the realm of film and literature and into the law as I apply the lens of the queer uncanny to this municipal domestic partnership registry ordinance that by its own terms provides no rights to registrants but which upon further analysis turns out to offer evidence of the performative potential of the queer uncanny.

After the State of Kansas passed an amendment to its state constitution specifically defining marriage as a civil contract between a man and a woman, thereby denying to same-sex partners any of the benefits or obligations of marriage or civil unions, the City of Lawrence developed a domestic registry which allows two people (same-sex or other-sex) to

register their names officially with the city.<sup>197</sup> Beyond the criteria required for inclusion on the registry (which include being residents of the city, being over the age of eighteen, and agreeing to be in a “relationship of mutual dependence,” the registry produces no rights and it requires no obligation beyond the criteria to be registered.<sup>198</sup> In other words, the registry exists simply to exist as a registry on which people have registered.<sup>199</sup> But just as “[t]he existence of a sexual continuum does not strip sexuality of its politics” so too does the existence of a “no legal rights clause” in a city ordinance not necessarily strip the ordinance of

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<sup>197</sup> The amendment to the Constitution of the State of Kansas was enacted in 2005. Article XV, Section 16 states: “(a) The marriage contract is to be considered in law as a civil contract. Marriage shall be constituted by one man and one woman only. All other marriages are declared to be contrary to the public policy of this state and are void. (b) No relationship, other than a marriage, shall be recognized by the state as entitling the parties to the rights or incidents of marriage.” Constitution of the State of Kansas. Art XV; Sec 16. Available online at <http://www.kslib.info/constitution/art15.html>. Accessed 20 March 2011.

<sup>198</sup> Chapter 10, Article 2, Section 10-201 of the Code of the City of Lawrence, Kansas, 2011 Edition. Full text of the City Code section dealing with the domestic registry is available online at [http://www.lawrenceks.org/city\\_code/system/files/chapter10.pdf](http://www.lawrenceks.org/city_code/system/files/chapter10.pdf). I have been unable to locate any registries similar to the one adopted by Lawrence, Kansas – i.e., is one in which the primary main objective is registration, with an explicit denial of additional rights or obligations – at the city, county, or state levels. Most offer some, if not full, rights. The Domestic Partnership Registry of the City of Columbia, Missouri, extends rights to all city accommodations and facilities to domestic partners and their off-spring to the same extent they are offered to married spouses and makes specific reference to the registry being available as proof of relationship for health care visitation and employee benefit plans. Chapter 12, Section 70A et seq of Columbia Code of Ordinances. [http://www.gocolumbiamo.com/Council/Columbia\\_Code\\_of\\_Ordinances/index.html](http://www.gocolumbiamo.com/Council/Columbia_Code_of_Ordinances/index.html) Accessed 03 February 2011. Others, such as the domestic partnership ordinance of the City of San Francisco, California, grant fuller rights: “The purpose of this ordinance is ... to afford to domestic partners, to the fullest extent legally possible, the same rights, benefits, responsibilities, obligations, and duties as spouses.” San Francisco Administrative Code. Chapter 62, Section 62.1. Available online at <http://www.sfgov2.org/index.aspx?page=29> Accessed 2 May 2011. A comprehensive list of cities and counties offering domestic partnership registries is available online at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cities\\_and\\_counties\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_offering\\_a\\_domestic\\_partnership\\_registry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cities_and_counties_in_the_United_States_offering_a_domestic_partnership_registry) or at [http://2fwww.hrc.org/issues/marriage/domestic\\_partners/9133.htm](http://2fwww.hrc.org/issues/marriage/domestic_partners/9133.htm). Both accessed 03 March 2011.

<sup>199</sup> Proponents of the registry tell me that some private companies will use the registry as proof of partnership to confer particular benefits (e.g., medical) on registered couples, but as of now no one has been able to point me to any company that has changed its policies as a result of the registry. Many companies already offered such benefits based on internal documentation for which the registry provides an air of officialness, while others remain resistant despite the registry.

its political ramifications.<sup>200</sup> Of course, the immediate analytical off-shoot of the registry for any student of contemporary gender and sexuality theory is that it perpetuates the notion (albeit in an intensely false way) that the “right” thing to do” as a couple is to – well... be coupled and then to seek external authority state sanction of that relationship in some form. This is a bow to Edelman’s notion of reproductive futurity insofar as it reifies and resanctions the mythos of the reproductive couple but it is also evidence of a certain sort of reproductive logic in that even this sterile act is seen as pushing forward the progressive lesbian and gay agenda in preparation for the birthing of a brighter future for the Child to come.

### **How to Do Things with the Queer Uncanny**

Here is where the crux of queer theory becomes apparent. While it would seem at first glance that a queer theoretical approach would do nothing if not castigate and deride the agents who managed to get this local ordinance passed and those couples who have registered their partnerships under its schema, we must not lose sight of the essence of queer theory, that coiling and recoiling upon itself, forever evading a certainty with regard to motive or outcome, and always working to dethread, denaturalize, and defy normative logic. By introducing the concept of the queer uncanny to the analysis it becomes apparent that this seemingly benign, impotent, and toothless municipal ordinance may be doing exactly the sort of work that Berlant, Sedgwick, et al have described as the very essence of queer: appealing to and working at the site of “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”<sup>201</sup> To read this ordinance as meaningless and as ineffectual is to do so at the very high risk of relying on an implicitly identitarian politics in

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<sup>200</sup> Gilbert, Sky. “Everybody in Leather: Renegade Queers Pronounce the End of Gay.” THIS Magazine. Jan/Feb 2000. 12-14.

<sup>201</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Tendencies. London: Routledge, 1994. 8.

which the ordinance is judged either as a colossal failure for its inability to provide rights or as a mere stepping stone toward the advancement of a neoliberal gay agenda. I have so far attempted to demonstrate in this dissertation that while there is no set method or route to taking up the position of the queer in the regime of reproductive futurity, as Edelman calls us to do, there are myriad texts circulating in our culture that offer us at least the suggestion of what such taking up might look like when examined through the lens of the queer uncanny. The queer uncanny is not the key or map certain; it is, rather, the particular set of moments and circumstances when our epistemological antennae might be most piqued and our options for new – and queer – ways of thinking most possible. Where Freud leaves in the dust any sense that the uncanny might be useful or usable on the social or political scene, the queer uncanny is inherently agitative at the levels of the individual and the community, the psyche and the social, concerned not only with the moments and instances in which the uncanny arises but also the ways in which those moments can serve as nodes at which the options for knowing, sensing, and acting can proliferate.

Many theorists like Judith Butler, who work at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and language, are hesitant to predict the transgressive potential of any act: “The incalculable effects of action are...a part of their subversive promise [...and...] subversiveness is the kind of effect that *resists calculation*.”<sup>202</sup> To great degree, this must-needs be true for any act (transgressively intended or not) takes place within discursive fields and discursive recuperation or subsumation of the act back into standard discursive terms is ever a possibility. But even accepting that any “performance” or node of the queer uncanny that might tend toward the transgressive or subversive is necessarily implicated by, located in, and to great extent (re)/(con)strained by larger matrices of hegemonic power does not necessarily

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<sup>202</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 241; see also Butler, “Critically Queer,” 29; emphasis in original.



preclude us from imagining and enacting (presently, anticipatorily, or even retroactively) events of potential subversion and transgression. As Lloyd puts it:

Even if we accept that there are incalculable effects to all (or most) statements or activities, this does not mean that we need to concede that there are *no* calculable effects. Without this possibility, political intervention may be construed as either totally meaningless (why bother?) or entirely spontaneous (it just happens). Critical reflection upon past, present or future practices is essential to the exploitation of the gaps within hegemonic norms that allow for potential transformation of social relations. At least one dimension of that critique is generated by an attention to context. This enables us to measure, to some degree, the efficacy of past practices but it also provides us with a (historically sedimented) resource base from which to draw ideas and practices about suitable political tactics for specific contexts.<sup>203</sup>

Although I have thus far attempted rather single-mindedly to demonstrate how the queer uncanny is a unique breed of animal, a useful lens and vehicle through which to effectuate “a radical questioning of social and cultural norms” which might proliferate not only the what but the how we know, I attempt in this chapter to demonstrate that the queer uncanny need not be too tightly yoked to any project that attempts to thwart the regime of reproductive futurity in favor of taking up the displace position of the queer in socio-politics.<sup>204</sup> Instead I offer this syncretic approach which seeks to demonstrate the potential for the queer uncanny to be usefully mobilized to promote a rights-based identitarian agenda while at the same time incorporating a quite queer underpinning for that project.

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<sup>203</sup> Lloyd, Moya. 1999. “Performativity, Parody, Politics.” Theory, Culture and Society 16 (2): 195-213. 207. Emphasis added.

<sup>204</sup> Smith, “What is This Thing Called Queer?”, 279-280.

## Performativity and the Queer Uncanny

In the case of the local ordinance that is the subject of this chapter, we are firmly in the realm of the uncanny because what could be more familiar, housed as we are in the structure of reproductive futurity with its focus on heteronormative coupling, than two people “with a mutual commitment in which the partners share the necessities of life?”<sup>205</sup> And yet what could be more unfamiliar – to the point of verging on the nonsensical – than an ordinance that by its own terms offers no legal substance? What this tells us is that this simple little ordinance composed of barely thirteen hundred words is a viable text for analysis using the lens of the queer uncanny because not only is the ordinance itself a form of doubling with a difference in the ways that it produces the space for “marital doubles” but the section of the ordinance evacuating it of any substantive legal effect operates as a form of self-castration, in which the text disavows its own legal-narrative drive. The site of advancement for this jump to the queer uncanny as more than a moment or instance, but as a potentially political force, is in the notion of the performative, as begun by philosopher-linguist J.L. Austin and extended radically by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler.

It is not such a far stretch from Sigmund Freud to J.L. Austin. The reason that Freud and Austin come together in the first place for this chapter is that both seem to have something to say about the ways in which certain states of affairs are brought into being and then understood, Freud through his notions of doubling and the repetition compulsion, Austin through his notion of the performative utterance. Too, there is more than a little similarity between Freud’s speculative essay on the uncanny and J.L. Austin’s playful treatment of language in *How to Do Things with Words*. In *The Uncanny*, Freud works through the

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<sup>205</sup> Chapter 10, Article 2, Section 10-201 of the Code of the City of Lawrence, Kansas, 2011 Edition.

etymology of the two words (*heimlich* and *unheimlich*) only to discover that the two words, which are supposed to be opposites, actually end up meaning the same thing: “*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*.”<sup>206</sup> In similar fashion she sets out to look at what philosophers had set aside as a marginal pseudo-statements (performatives, an exception to the category of statements known as constatives), and ends up finding that instead of performatives being a subset of constatives, it is actually that constatives are a category of performatives. In both short works, there is a circling back to home and an over-turning of the expected – in Freud’s case, we learn that *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are not exact opposites after all; in Austin’s case we learn that constatives are a subset of performatives rather than the reverse.

Prior to J.L. Austin’s short book *How to Do Things with Words*, “[i]t was long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ [could] only be to ‘describe some state of affairs,’ or to state some fact, which it [would] do either truly or falsely.”<sup>207</sup> Anything that fell outside of these parameters was considered exceptional and remained largely unclassified and unstudied until Austin picked up the matter and introduced the idea of the performative utterance. Designating the class of statements that “describe some state of affairs” or which “state some fact” as constative utterances, Austin then distinguishes performative utterances as those which do not simply describe and which are not subject to true/false claims but those which “do” what they say – that is, the utterance itself performs an action or brings into being a state of affairs. The example par excellence for Austin – and the one most relevant to the subject at hand – is the wedding vow “I do.” In uttering these two

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<sup>206</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 134.

<sup>207</sup> Austin J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ Press, 1975. 1.

small words, neither party at the altar is describing anything but is rather “doing” it.<sup>208</sup> As Austin pithily puts it, “I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.”<sup>209</sup> There is one caveat: performatives may be either felicitous or infelicitous, meaning that they may be successful or they may fail, depending on the immediate circumstances. If the officiant is not authorized to conduct marriage ceremonies, for example, the utterance “I do” will be infelicitous and the performative will fail.

At this point, Austin begins to follow the trajectory that we read in Freud’s essay on the uncanny. Where Austin began by explicitly situating what he calls performative utterances as outside of the usual scope of statements, he is now in murkier water and the two do not seem as separate as they did earlier in his essay. If some statements are performative, then we should be able to list and catalog them, and derive from them a list of verbs that do this sort of work. After working through a series of such problematic constructions (e.g., “Stop it at once!” and “I order you to stop.”), Austin introduces another moniker, the implicit performative, and suggests that perhaps all statements are at least implicitly performative.<sup>210</sup> In other words, any statements that portend to describe or which is subject to a true/false test is in some way performative such that “‘The cat is on the mat’ could be seen, rather, as the elliptical version of ‘I hereby affirm that the cat is on the mat,’ a performative utterance that accomplishes the act of affirming to which it refers.”<sup>211</sup> In this way, Culler rightly points out,

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<sup>208</sup> There may be some question about the sincerity behind the performative utterance, but whether a speaker utters the words sincerely or not is irrelevant to the creation of the relationship or state of affairs. The groom who says “I do” insincerely, feeling in his heart a murderous hatred for the bride, is no less married than the groom who gazes upon the bride adoringly. At the moment the words are uttered the state of marriage is produced; what brought them to that moment and what happens after that moment is not controlling.

<sup>209</sup> Austin, 6.

<sup>210</sup> Culler, Jonathan. “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative.” *Poetics Today*. 21.3 (Fall 2000): 503-519. 505.

<sup>211</sup> Culler, “Philosophy and Literature,” 505.

“Austin starts from a situation where performatives are seen as a special case of constatives – pseudo-statements – and arrives at a perspective from which constatives are a particularly type of performative.,” very much in the way that Freud starts with *heimlich* and traces its meanings to the point where “it finally merges with its antonym, *unheimlich*.”<sup>212</sup>

What has this to do, then, with the brief municipal ordinance that I earlier wished to skewer as ineffectual? Where Austin seems to find the failure (or “in felicitousness”) of certain statements merely a troubling side note, Derrida exalts in infelicitousness and finds the potential failure of statements and signs to be a necessary characteristic (i.e., “constitutive”) of all statements and signs. This potential for failure, existing as it does in every statement and sign, is not only to be read as insufficiency or as a negatively-nuanced short-coming. It is instead for Derrida and others a potential for movement, as any sign can be transported and transplanted into new and unexpected contexts – i.e., “citationally grafted.”<sup>213</sup> Differing from Austin’s rather implicit focus on the singularity of the performative event (e.g., the marriage vow, the boat christening), Derrida questions instead, “Could a performative statement succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable statement, in other words if the expressions I use to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* to an iterable model, and therefore if they were not identifiable in a way as ‘citation’?”<sup>214</sup> To broach this in the language of the queer uncanny would mean to “could a performative statement succeed if its formation did not repeat, return, or come back as a double, if it were not identifiable as referring to something other, similar, previous?”

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<sup>212</sup> Culler, “Philosophy and Literature,” 505; Freud, *The Uncanny*, 134.

<sup>213</sup> Derrida, Jacques. “Signature Event Context.” *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1985. 307-330. 319, 324-325.

<sup>214</sup> Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 325.

The couples who have signed up to be listed in the registry, despite accruing no benefits or obligations, legal or otherwise, other than being required to pay the appropriate registration fee to the city, are using what might be termed “loose performatives.” That is, unlike a performative act which creates a new situation or relationship at the moment of its utterance by an authorized utterer (e.g., “I now pronounce you man and wife”), the utterance of the domestic registry registrant and the municipal bureaucrat who marks the registration as official does indeed create a new relationship (“domestic partners”) but one without any immediate or weighty substance in the political or legal arenas. The loose performative has the imprimatur of felicitousness as the municipal ordinance that makes it possible was duly enacted and the two people so registering might clearly have followed the correct administrative procedure for registering. But that is all. Yet, because *some* type of new relationship is born in the process and because that relationship harkens to the heteronormative male-female relationship, there arises a sense that there is “something more” going on here.

Judith Butler builds on these ideas of the performative and citationality both in *Gender Trouble* and its companion or extension, *Bodies That Matter*. But before discussing Butler’s revolutionary work in this regard, it is necessary first to consider “Womanliness as Masquerade,” a 1929 piece by Joan Rivière which sets the stage for later work on identity and performativity. In the brief essay, Rivière asks “What is the essential nature of fully developed femininity?”<sup>215</sup> Following on the work of Sigmund Freud Rivière posits that the “mask” of womanliness is put on as a form of self-protection to hide the “possession of masculinity.”<sup>216</sup> While some have taken the essay and Rivière’s word choices (mask,

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<sup>215</sup> Rivière, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” 43.

<sup>216</sup> Rivière, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” 38.

masquerade) to suggest that identities are parts that we play or costumes that we put on, Rivière is actually suggesting something much more radical: “The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade.’ My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference: whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”<sup>217</sup> Rivière is suggesting that there is no essential nature, that behind the mask is nothing, that it is only in the putting on of the mask that the woman comes into being.

In early works, Judith Butler extends Rivière’s brief essay, asserting that it is the performance of gender that constitutes the subject in the first place; in other words, there is no subject prior to the performance. In *Gender Trouble* Butler concerns herself with a critique of feminism that centers on effacing a feminist politics that understands identity as anything but a creation of the social and the political. The argument produces the idea of the performativity of gender itself. In other words, gender is not a constative statement about what is or is not but is a performative insofar as gender is created in the doing; one is not a girl, then, but is rather “girling.”<sup>218</sup> The subject is constituted by and in the performance and the performance may both comply with and work against any essentialized, naturalized of “authentic” or “originary” identity. The radical proposition then moves us from a grammatical construction in which a “noun verbs” (i.e., the subject does something) and instead into a construction in which the “verbing” is central. This “verbing” offer more possibility for dynamicism and hence change because it reflects not only the retroactive installing of the subject as the doer (“verb-er”) but also implies the possibility of context. As with Austin, there are particular routes to felicitous or infelicitous performatives of gender,

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<sup>217</sup> Rivière, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” 38.

<sup>218</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 232.

dependent on the cultural and social contexts in which the subject lives, so that one may not perform one's gender in any way one chooses and achieve a "valid" gender anymore than saying "I do" to a dog would produce a valid marriage.

Yet as Butler imagines performativity, it is this dynamicism where we find potential, despite our inability to predict outcomes:

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.<sup>219</sup>

Butler continues to offer insight into this matter when she asserts that it is discourse and power which constitute any "I" or other notion of identity because "there is not "I" who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse."<sup>220</sup> The intelligibility of an identity develops through the performance and citation of cultural norms. Butler is specifically concerned with the use of the term "queer" as a pejorative term which "produc[es] a subject *through* that shaming interpellation" and its subsequent taking up by individuals and groups wishing to resignify the term and leverage it as a fluid, variable term.<sup>221</sup> It is important to Butler's schema that the term has not simply been redefined and restabilized but rather that it remains a "site of collective contestation."<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Butler, Bodies That Matter, 241.

<sup>220</sup> Butler, Bodies That Matter, 225.

<sup>221</sup> Butler, Bodies That Matter, 226.

<sup>222</sup> Butler, Bodies That Matter, 228.



## Word Recognition and the Queer Uncanny

It is already a well-worn path to recognize that one of the primary conflicts over same-sex marriage is just that: the word “marriage.” In the courts, a definitional argument has prevailed since the first relevant challenges in the early 1970s.<sup>223</sup> Even a quarter century ago, commentators like Mary Ann Glendon were prescient enough to predict that the use of the definitional approach to marriage might be the bugaboo above all others in future legal battles over marriage in which the crux of the argument would be to view “same-sex marriage not as prohibited but rather as outside the scope of marriage altogether.”<sup>224</sup> In other words – no pun intended – two people of the same-sex cannot be married because the definition of marriage is the union of two opposite-sexed people.<sup>225</sup> Such definitional issues, whether circulating in the lay or legal communities, have hardly kept people of the same-sex from developing

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<sup>223</sup> Myriad courts have relied on the definition of marriage. For example, in *Jones v. Hallahan* the court relies on a dictionary-based definition: “In all cases, however, marriage has always been considered as the union of a man and a woman and we have been presented with no authority to the contrary ... appellants are prevented from marrying ... by their own incapability of entering into a marriage as that term is defined.” 501 S.W. 2d 588, 589 (Ky. Ct. App. 1973). In other cases reference is made to tradition and history, especially with an eye toward Judeo-Christian biblical history, as with *Baker v. Nelson*: “These constitutional challenges have in common the assertion that the right to marry without regard to the sex of the parties is a fundamental right of all persons.... The institution of marriage as a union of man and woman, uniquely involving the procreation and rearing of children within a family, is as old as the book of Genesis.” 191 N.W.2d 185, 186 (Minn. 1971).

<sup>224</sup> Glendon, Mary Ann. “Marriage and the State: Withering Away of Marriage.” *Virginia Law Review*. 62 (1976): 663-719: 677.

<sup>225</sup> Two people who are unmarried can, through the aid of a savvy attorney and the expenditure of both time and money, approximate many of the rights and obligations attendant to the civil marriage contract – health care decision-making, property ownership and transfer, child parentage and custody, et cetera. An entire industry has grown around this very task as attorneys, accountants, and financial planners have assisted unmarried couples to structure and manage their relationships in ways that mimic marriage and as individual couples have become more aware of these issues. See, for example: Clifford, Denis, Frederick Hertz, and Emily Doskow. *A Legal Guide for Lesbian and Gay Couples*. Berkeley CA: Nolo, 2010; Burda, Joan M. *Estate Planning for Same-Sex Couples*. Chicago: American Bar Association, 2004; and Hertz, Frederick. *Making It Legal: A Guide to Same-Sex Marriage, Domestic Partnerships and Civil Unions*. Berkeley CA: Nolo, 2009. In fact, other than these matters which have legal defaults provided by statute to married couples saving them the time and expense of explicitly addressing these issues through the employment of a lawyer and the creation of several documents, the only element of the marriage relationship that seems to remain unique to the marriage relationship is the imprimatur of morality and licitness the marriage contract grants to the sexual act.

relationships that mimic to one degree or another traditional marriage and to use language (like married, commitment, spouse, husband, wife, family) that cites, refers to, and recognizes an iterable though not identical model. In other words, this relationship that seems like the normative male-female pairing but which of course is not, this doubling with a difference, exists not just in and of and by its own creation (as the language of the ordinance would have us believe: “Registration pursuant to this Article creates no legal rights, other than the right to have the registered Domestic Partnership include in the City’s Domestic Partner Registry pursuant to this Article.”<sup>226</sup>) but as a double or reiteration of a chain of repeated and recognizable relationship forms extending back centuries.

Perhaps the key here is the one word that is used by both proponents and detractors of same-sex marriage on a regular basis: “recognition” – as used in the oft-banded phrases “recognition of relationship rights,” “same-sex marriage recognition,” “legal recognition and protection,” and the like.<sup>227</sup> Merriam-Webster defines the term as:

**1** : the action of recognizing : the state of being recognized:

*a* : acknowledgment; *especially* : formal acknowledgment of the political existence of a government or nation

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<sup>226</sup> Chapter 10, Article 2, Section 10-208 of the Code of the City of Lawrence, Kansas, 2011 Edition.

<sup>227</sup> The term appears widely in treatment of same-sex marriage and relationships, from the written communiqués of gay rights organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and groups that oppose same-sex marriage to law review articles. See for example: “Marriage and Relationship Recognition.” Human Rights Campaign website. <http://www.hrc.org/issues/marriage.asp>; “Social Issues: Marriage.” Focus on the Family website. <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/marriage-and-family/marriage.aspx>; Lawhorn, Chad. “Domestic registry approved: 4-1 vote makes Lawrence only city in state to recognize gay partnerships.” Lawrence Journal-World. 23 May 2007. [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/may/23/domestic\\_registry\\_approved/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/may/23/domestic_registry_approved/) and Simson, Gary, J. “Beyond Interstate Recognition in the Same-Sex Marriage Debate.” University of California Davis Law Review. 40.2 (Dec 2006): 313-383. My hooking on this term was inspired in part by the passing reference made to it in M.V. Lee Badgett’s excellent look at the ways that same-sex marriage has and has not altered the social, political, and cultural face of the Netherlands. Badgett, M.V. Lee. When Gay People Get Married: What Happens When Societies Legalize Same-Sex Marriage. New York: New York Univ Press, 2009. 87.

*b* : knowledge or feeling that someone or something present has been encountered before<sup>228</sup>

While fair to assume that the term is being used by advocates and detractors of same-sex marriage in the sense of subset (a) (“formal acknowledgement”), one cannot overlook the last part of the definition, which harkens to Freud’s definition of the uncanny as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”<sup>229</sup> The double in psychoanalytic theory is never an exact duplicate but is always a double with a difference and this is the case with same-sex marriage and same-sex relationships in general. And as the double produces awe, nervous laughter, or fear, so are these effects produced by same-sex relationships.

Because the heterosexual model is the unmarked standard, many gays and lesbians have entered into their relationships and adopted (or co-opted, depending one’s point of view) the terminology and social customs of the heterosexual model: solemnizing relationships through commitment ceremonies or “weddings”; using heterosexual terminology like “husband” or “girlfriend” or their near-equivalents “partner” or “companion”; and celebrating anniversaries and romantic holidays like Valentine’s Day with the same dinners, flowers, chocolates, and greeting cards. Saturated as American society is with the heterosexualized model of coupling, to see the image of two brides atop a wedding cake, to hear two men refer to each other as husband or partner, even to know that the possibility of such relationships being not comical but recognized socially and legally as existent and of note (if not of full or partial rights) produces a moment of social, cognitive, and legal uncanniness. For the subject

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<sup>228</sup> Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/recognition>. Accessed 29 April 2011.

<sup>229</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 124.

(of any sexual orientation) raised in American culture of the past many decades, these practices both make sense and do not make sense. Even among my progressive liberal gay and lesbian friends, the sight of two brides on a wedding cake produces giggles or a special “aww” (awe). For some, like the conservative far-right, these are indeed frightening images in the most culture-crushing way as Focus on the Family’s leader James Dobson has bluntly described: “Barring a miracle, the family as it has been known for more than five millennia will crumble, presaging the fall of Western civilization itself.”<sup>230</sup> The giggling, the awws, and even the fear of the fall of Western civilization itself are all legitimate because they are all responses produced in the face of the queer uncanny. And the responses all boil down to a question of epistemology, not only in the grand philosophical sense but in the minutiae of daily life. This minutiae is, of course, not minutiae at all for if theory of the past half century has taught us anything it is that the personal is political, that supposedly little things do indeed mean a lot, as Maggie Gallagher captures eloquently when she observes that

One thing same-sex marriage indubitably does is displace certain formerly core public understandings about marriage; such as, that it has something to do with bringing together male and female, men and women, husbands and wives, mothers with fathers. Husband will no longer point to or imply wife. Mother no longer implies father.<sup>231</sup>

In other words, the linguistic links – which serve as larger cognitive and social links – are rent asunder and we are back to the Symbolic and its constructed natured, various signifiers linked together into a durable web that serves to lend a sense of stability and order

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<sup>230</sup> Dobson, James. Focus on the Family Newsletter. Focus on the Family. April 2004. <http://prophecyfellowship.org/showthread.php?t=138165>

<sup>231</sup> Gallagher, Maggie. “(How) Will Gay Marriage Weaken Marriage as a Social Institution: A Reply to Andrew Koppelman.” University of St. Thomas Law Journal. 2.1 (Fall 2004): 32-70. 53.

and fullness to the central lack around which each of our individual psyches coheres. When the web weakens, most especially when the weakness is in the regions of the web which seem most certain, like gender and sexuality, we are forced to confront not only the matter at hand in all its apparently banality (“how awkward to address the invitation to Mr. and Mr.”) but the much larger and much more potentially costly disruption of our sense of our place in the Symbolic, what we might also term our *weltanschauung*.<sup>232</sup>

Given the already widespread confusion, not only among opposite-sexed partners but among same-sex partners, as to the correct usage and valencies of the various terms used to designate paired, mutually dependent relationships (marriage, civil union, domestic partnership, and the like) the queer potential of this little ordinance, bound as it is by the city limits, is immense for it allows the possibility of mis-iteration, of deliberate production of moments of the queer uncanny, of potential widespread and society-shaking change based almost entirely on the repeated misuse of the term “domestic partner” or variants thereof which play on but not duplicate the usual normative meanings. The casual but incorrect perception of equivalences among the terms marriage, civil union, and domestic partner suggests the sorts of “promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language or which, in changing language, change more than language.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> The concern over how to address the invitation is not purely banal. With origins dating back to Immanuel Kant, cultural schema theory tells us that “[w]hen a person enters a familiar situation in his or her own culture, a stock of knowledge of appropriate behavior and an appropriate role he or she should play in the situation is retrieved. In other words, every interactant’s social world is usually constituted within a framework of familiar and pre-acquainted knowledge about various situations. This familiar and pre-acquainted knowledge is called cultural schemas (or schemata).” Nishida, Hiroko. “Cultural Schema Theory.” Ed. William B. Gudykunst. Theorizing About Intercultural Communication. Ed. William B. Gudykunst. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999. 401-418. 402.

<sup>233</sup> Derrida, Jacques. “This Strange Institution Called Literature: Interview with Jacques Derrida.” Acts of Literature. Ed. Derek Attridge. London: Routledge, 1992. 33-75. 55. Of course, the supposed equivalencies among the terms are just that – supposed. Because the terms do not designate precisely the same schematic of legal and social rights and obligations, their misperception as roughly

The city ordinance itself neither recognizes same-sex couples as married nor grants them any of the rights attendant to civil marriage; yet it is not without its performative force because it by virtue of its own existence calls into existence the category of “domestic partner” and creates a state of being in which one is “domestically partnered.” While no legal rights adhere, the status itself, drawing on the language of legally-laden domestic partner statutes and registries in other jurisdictions in the United States and around the world, resonates with nearly as much linguistic force as if it did come with a full panoply of rights and obligations. Some evidence of this is seen in the community response just prior to and after the passage of the Domestic Partnership Registry by the City Commission of Lawrence, when the full and relatively short text of the ordinance was widely available online and in print, after an online web discussion and an in-person public debate was held, and after numerous local newspaper stories laid out the details of the proposed registry. Although many people grasped that the registry offered no rights, except perhaps as proof of a relationship if required by an employer might offer partner benefits, many, like “mom\_of\_three,” a supporter of the registry: “If you are married, then you already receive the rights that the gay registry would possibly allow gay couples.”<sup>234</sup> An opponent of the registry, “b3” goes even further and asserts that “[e]very man and woman in this country already has equal rights, this will be granting a portion of the population additional rights.”<sup>235</sup> The greater

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equivalent can work to quell the struggle for political and legal rights, akin to the logic of “separate but equal.” (The phrase is from the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 16 S. Ct. 1138 (1896), in which separate facilities for African-Americans and whites were allowed, provided they were roughly equal in quality. This doctrine was overruled by the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686 (1954), in which the Supreme Court ruled that separate educational facilities for whites and blacks were inherently unequal.

<sup>234</sup> “Domestic Registry Debate Set for Tonight: Comments.” May 22, 2007.

[http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/may/22/domestic\\_registry\\_debate\\_set\\_tonight/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/may/22/domestic_registry_debate_set_tonight/)

<sup>235</sup> “Domestic Registry Debate Set for Tonight: Comments.” May 22, 2007.

[http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/may/22/domestic\\_registry\\_debate\\_set\\_tonight/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/may/22/domestic_registry_debate_set_tonight/)

bulk of readers who commented on the many news stories published in the local city paper recognized that the registry provided no legal benefits but felt that it “would indicate that the city is welcoming and supportive of its gay community members. In my mind the primary benefit is symbolic,” admitted Maggie Childs, then head of the local chapter of the Kansas Equality Coalition.<sup>236</sup> Readers posting in the comments section following the stories often felt similarly to “lawyerlee,” who expressed support for the registry because “[i]n a perfect world, same sex couples would be able to marry in this state. Since that isn’t possible right now, I would fully support any step in that direction, such as this registry.”<sup>237</sup> Opponents of the registry also saw it as a “first step by a gay and lesbian community to promote a ‘pro-gay agenda’ at City Hall,” and Reverend Leo Barbee of the conservative Victory Bible Church advised city commissioners that “[i]t would be best to stop it now.”<sup>238</sup> The symbolism was not lost on some members of the city commission, like Commissioner Boog Highberger, who commented that “I think this will help some people feel they are full citizens.”<sup>239</sup> As Butler suggests,

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to

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<sup>236</sup> Lawhorn, Chad. “Domestic Partnership Registry Considered [sic].” Lawrence Journal-World. 22 December 2006. [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2006/dec/22/domestic\\_partner\\_registry\\_considered/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2006/dec/22/domestic_partner_registry_considered/)

<sup>237</sup> “Domestic Partnership Registry Considered: Comments [sic].” Lawrence Journal-World. 22 December 2006. [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2006/dec/22/domestic\\_partner\\_registry\\_considered/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2006/dec/22/domestic_partner_registry_considered/)

<sup>238</sup> Lawhorn, Chad. “Opponents Don’t Derail Domestic Registry.” Lawrence Journal-World. 13 June 2007. [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/jun/13/opponents\\_dont\\_derail\\_domestic\\_registry/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/jun/13/opponents_dont_derail_domestic_registry/). Close readers may note that this story was published after the Lawrence City Commission passed the registry proposal on May 22, 2007. After passage, city proposals go through at least one reading with public commentary before becoming city law.

<sup>239</sup> Lawhorn, Chad. “Domestic Partnership Registry Would Be 1st in State.” Lawrence Journal-World. 08 January 2007. [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/jan/08/domestic\\_partnership\\_registry\\_would\\_be\\_1st\\_state/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/jan/08/domestic_partnership_registry_would_be_1st_state/)

include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements that not only perform an action but confer a binding power on the action performed.<sup>240</sup>

In the case of the Domestic Partnership Registry, no legal rights are conferred yet a relationship that did not exist precisely in this form prior to the Registry is allowed fertile ground in which to flower, *alongside* and in form if not substance mimicking the legally-recognized form of marriage between two opposite-sexed partners.

And there in Commissioner Highberger's comment lies the queer uncanny again, prone as it is to doubling back in on itself, prone as it is to attending to multiple meanings. The registry will help *which* people? And who are *they* who might be full citizens, at least in affect if not effect? Facially, Highberger was likely referring to gays and lesbians and to the City's attempt to include them as fully as possible in the realm of equal rights, given the high authority of the state constitution which prevents same-sex marriages or any version thereof: "I think the registry will help gays and lesbians feel that they themselves are full citizens." Yet, if the power of the queer uncanny is taken seriously, if the power of repetition and doubling might indeed have socio-political effect through their productive abilities vis-à-vis their performative aspects, Highberger is also referring to the anti-registry members of the community as well as to the homophobes living in the city (the two groups are not necessarily the same) for they are the ones who might for the first time feel that the domestic partners, as individuals and as a unit, are "full citizens." While the domestic partners have not by this ordinance gained any legal rights, they have gained a linguistic right to refer to themselves as "domestic partners" (or any similar nomenclature indicating two people "with a mutual

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<sup>240</sup> Butler, Bodies That Matter, 235.



commitment” and as they do that among their friends and in the larger public there begins to be a melding process.<sup>241</sup> They “look” like a traditional husband and wife unit, they serve as doubles of the normative marriage relationship, but with a difference: they are both of the same-sex. Where Freud’s analysis might end with recognition that would be frightening or would produce nervous laughter, an analysis using the queer uncanny sees in this doubling political potential in the form of normalization. “First comes love, then comes marriage” is queered into first come the terms, then comes (perhaps) the substance.

### **Celebration through Castration**

What makes the Lawrence Domestic Partnership Registry so queer is that it can be read to celebrate sexuality in a way not contemplated by most other domestic partnership statutes in other jurisdictions and quite possibly outside of the regime of reproductive futurity. That is perhaps not the best way to understand how the domestic partnership schemes work in other municipalities; better, perhaps, to suggest that sexuality is not foregrounded or that is even disavowed in favor of a progressive liberal focus on families, commitment, respect, and equality. It is customary for a statute or ordinance to contain a preface of findings section in which the governing body lists a number of rationale for the law that follows.<sup>242</sup> For example, the ordinance in Iowa City, Iowa, a university town not unlike Lawrence, Kansas, starts with the assertion: “It is appropriate and fair that certain of the societal privileges and benefits now

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<sup>241</sup> Chapter 10, Article 2, Section 10-201 of the Code of the City of Lawrence, Kansas, 2011 Edition.

<sup>242</sup> These are variously termed preambles, findings, or declarations of intent. They are used in statutory interpretation to give context to the law and to provide both the executive and judicial branches assistance in enforcement and interpretation, although they are not “the law” and are not of themselves enforceable. See American Jurisprudence 2d. Eagan, MN: West Group, 2001. Vol. 73; and Singer, Norman J. Statutes and Statutory Construction. 6th ed. Eagan, MN: West Group, 2000. Vol. 1A, §20.12.

accorded to members of a marriage be extended to those who meet the qualifications of a domestic partnership.”<sup>243</sup> Ann Arbor takes this a bit further:

Many persons today share life as families in enduring and committed relationships apart from marriages... The City of Ann Arbor has an interest in strengthening and supporting all caring, committed and responsible family forms.<sup>244</sup>

The City of San Francisco is even more forthcoming about sexual orientation:

The purpose of this ordinance is to create a way to recognize intimate committed relationships, including those of lesbian and gay men who otherwise are denied the right to identify the partners with whom they share their lives.<sup>245</sup>

It is clear from the language of the Iowa City, Ann Arbor, and San Francisco ordinances that the domestic partnership schemes contemplated in those municipalities are meant to address inequalities in legal and social recognition of non-marital relationships, most especially those involving lesbians and gays. The Lawrence registry does offer state imprimatur to at least the titular status of a two-person relationship, suggesting that such relations are of some value. The chosen name for the relationship and the registry itself reveals this: domestic partnership. Domestic suggests the home and family, domesticated and tame, while partnership suggests intimacy, union toward a common goal, and single-mindedness. But other than a titular status, the Lawrence Domestic Partnership Registry offers no preambles, no mention of families, and no references to equality or rights. In fact,

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<sup>243</sup> Iowa City, Iowa, Code. Ch 6, Sec 2.6.1 (1994).

[http://www.sterlingcodifiers.com/codebook/index.php?book\\_id=320](http://www.sterlingcodifiers.com/codebook/index.php?book_id=320)

<sup>244</sup> Ann Arbor Code. Ch 110. Section 9:86 (2000).

<http://library.municode.com/index.aspx?clientId=11782&stateId=22&stateName=Michigan>

<sup>245</sup> San Francisco, California, Municipal Code. Section 62.1 (1990).

<http://www.sfgov2.org/index.aspx?page=29>

the Lawrence ordinance is oddly sterile in this regard, eschewing the language of reproductive futurity, marriage, family, and the future except for the brief – and multiply interpretable – reference to “a relationship of indefinite duration, with a mutual commitment in which the partners share the necessities of life and are financially interdependent,” language which might just as easily describe long-term roommates or friends as a couple replicating the romantic and social connection of marriage.<sup>246</sup> Not only does the ordinance not proffer the neoliberal rights and identity-based context that anchors so many other domestic partnership ordinances and statutes around the nation, but the ordinance on its face repudiates the notion that that is the purpose of the ordinance, in effect proclaiming to do something while doing nothing. Or conversely, doing nothing while indeed doing something. So here we have the same sort of dislogic that we explored earlier in closing scenes of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mysterious Skin*; moments in which the queer uncanny arises not in the form of the double but in the form of self-castration in which the economy of terms of the text itself turns back on itself and disrupts narrative or logical expectations.

The castrative section in this ordinance reminds of us Hélène Cixous, who in her essay on Freud’s treatment of the uncanny, referred to textual footnotes as “typographical metaphor[s] of repression,” elements of a text that refuse refusal, instead returning, interrupting, erupting on the page.”<sup>247</sup> Though relegated to smaller type font and cast to the bottom of the page as mere notes, it is in the footnotes that readers and scholars find the most engaging elements of any article or work. Similarly, the Lawrence Domestic Partnership Registry begins life as one sort of creature and ends up being quite another. Though lacking preamble, the registry ordinance reads nearly identically (or at least not far afield) from

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<sup>246</sup> Chapter 10, Article 2, Section 10-208 of the Code of the City of Lawrence, Kansas, 2011 Edition.

<sup>247</sup> Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms,” 537.

similar municipal registries around the country with reference to definitions and requirements that the two people be of the age of consent, that there be some relationship of interdependence, that the two partners be citizens of the municipality, and general instructions for otherwise establishing and ending the partnership. Then, nearly eighty percent of the way through the ordinance, practically the closing scene of the ordinance, some eleven hundred words into an ordinance that is only a scant thirteen hundred words long, comes the castrating short thirty-word sentence: “Registration pursuant to this Article creates no legal rights, other than the right to have the registered Domestic Partnership include in the City’s Domestic Partner Registry pursuant to this Article.”<sup>248</sup>

This illogical disruption evacuates the entire ordinance of the very substance for which we look to the state and the law – rights – and by doing so situates the ordinance potentially outside of the realm of the normative and Symbolic understandings of marriage, partnership, and by extension the future. By doing so, the ordinance de-symbolicizes itself by its own terms, makes of the terms of its body an empty vessel to be filled, as we have seen, with the various epistemological stakes of the various constituents who believe they have a stake in the matter, whatever their political or sexual proclivities. The queer uncanny arises and we gaze upon this ordinance that does and does not, that allows at one and the same time the inclusion and exclusion of various forms of two-person coupling, that alerts us to the citation of normative marriage followed closely by the disavowal of that citation in favor of something that is double with a difference.

What the queer uncanny allows us to do with this short municipal ordinance is to read it as an open text, one which seems to have taken the channels of power that exist and to dislodge them from their intended purposes. Ordinances, statutes, and court decisions have

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<sup>248</sup> Chapter 10, Article 2, Section 10-208 of the Code of the City of Lawrence, Kansas, 2011 Edition.

the gravity of “mattering” but can be revised as “real, truly live places” in a sense far beyond the “real, truly live” sanction of the law. The chicanery of the American marital system in which the civil contract of union between two people is the crux or nexus for an entire system of rights and obligations, most of which have little or nothing to do with the union state itself, is not simply challenged but openly mocked. Sexuality is celebrated by virtue of being enshrined and embedded in language that portends order and formality but which turns back in on itself, castrating that order and formality and opening a space for the play of linguistic and legal concepts. The ordinance does exactly what legal and social theorists like Nancy Polikoff have long been urging; it evacuates the union of two people of any attendant rights or obligations, reducing the union to its simplest form, stripping away concerns about inheritance, health care, economic dependency, and the like and leaving only two people who presumably have a desire to cleave themselves to one another in a way that surpasses regulations, legal presumptions, and social approbation, and the logic of reproductive futurity, leaving only the couple in its past, present, future time-bounded-lessness.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Polikoff, Nancy. Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage: Valuing All Families under the Law. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

## Conclusion

### **“The Way We Play: Directions for the Queer Uncanny”**

The tag line for Atlantis all-gay cruises and resort vacations is “Atlantis: The Way We Play.” It is an apt phrase for marketing, drawing as it does on a supposed “we” of gay men who through some implicit shared sense of oneness or community have developed a “way of playing” that is unique or somehow different from how “they” play. The inclusiveness of the statement is alluring (like the all-inclusive nature of the resorts or the cruise vacations aboard the Allure of the Seas boat) and as a queer theorist I might be tempted to castigate and dismiss the tag line as yet another capitalist play on the identitarian politics that seems to have overtaken lesbian and gay studies and activism.

But as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, that really would not be a very queer theoretical approach at all because it would be too abrupt and too elementary. Indeed, if there is one thing queer theory does do, it is play, seriously: play with, play at, put into play, play both ends against the middle, play out. When I play with this tag line “The Way We Play,” when I put it into play in the framework of the queer uncanny, I discover that it is quite queer indeed. If (qua Edelman) the queer is structurally located in that position where the future is inoperative as a compulsory framework and if the sinthomosexual maybe a type of queer who locates jouissance in the node of the sinthome that is play, reveling, disavowing, then perhaps this *is* the way we (should) play: no future (other than the departure date, when vacation is over), no Child actually or figuratively framing the day, a moment of time outside and next

time to heteronormative time (qua Halberstam), a time-space-context in which the world is topsy turvy and expectations are upended.

But of course the inevitable return to what is persistently and annoyingly called reality, the responsibilities and obligations and preparation of the “real world.” The return perhaps need not be so bleak or oppositional. If the queer uncanny allows us to experience multiple valencies simultaneously, keeping the frame blurred and just slightly out of focus, could it alter the face of the experience of the subject? Could it create for us a route, a passage, to be and not to be at the same time? To exist outside of normative time-space while also traversing the normative? To undermine the persistence and rigor of the Child’s demands, to make as our goal neither capitulation nor resistance but a vibrating existence on the cusp?

This all sounds a rather grandiose way to describe a simple beach resort vacation in which much of my time is spent lounging around the pool, sipping cocktails, and trading bon mots with my buddies. But again, that is the point. To locate the unusual in the usual, to defamiliarize the familiar, to locate in the usual, regular, and expected, all the little fissures, fractures, and open spaces where new knowledges might take root. For some of my friends, the Atlantis vacations are just fun vacations and my queries into the uniqueness of their experiences are detractors. There will always be those who insist that “over the rainbow” is just a place in dreams. Taken seriously, however, these experiences become incredible opportunities. What if the elements of the queer uncanny that I experience at the Mexican resort return with me to my farmhouse? What if the amazing experience comes back with me not as a series of vacation snapshots and a few anecdotes about jellyfish stings or high waves or over-consumption? What if the promise of “The Way We Play” delivers a type of play that

is not contemplated in the terse economy of terms of the phrase itself? If I move about the resort, newly secure that everyone about me shares a facet of my identity that is not so fully shared by others in my “real life,” can I take that feeling (or the way I respond to that feeling) back with me to Kansas? The queer uncanniness of the experience may follow me, I may be able to recreate it, or it may desert me. Depending on how I bring it back, it could lead to personal violence or personal salvation, my transferring the topsy turvy feeling back home may result in my making an assumption that results in my being harmed or even killed; but it may also result in a new connection. As with the performativity of gender, the results are unknown not completely unpredictable.

Dorothy Gale’s insistence that Oz was a “real, truly live place” just as real, true, and alive as the Kansas farmstead; Neil and Brian’s investing their childhood experiences with a valuation beyond survival; and the implicit avowal of sexual jouissance in a municipal ordinance that portends to be about a social relation: these clue us into the ways that the queer uncanny – doubling, repeating, dislogic, circling – challenge the normative not straight-on but from many fronts and across multiple borders. Where this may take us as we read novels, watch films, live our lives in all the various ways that we may choose to do that, is impossible to know. That, finally, may be the point at the heart of the queer uncanny: not the knowing but the not-knowing, not the certainty but the mystery.



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