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Othered Ambitions: The Conflation of Villainy and Homosexuality in 20th Century American Media

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OTHERED AMBITIONS:

THE CONFLATION OF VILLAINY AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN 20TH CENTURY

AMERICAN MEDIA

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Dedication

To My Grandmother, Donna Harrington

Who Taught Me How to Laugh

Love You Best

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Abstract

Othered Ambitions:

The Conflation of Villainy and Homosexuality in 20th Century American Media

By: Sherard Harrington

University of New Hampshire

April 2022

This work sets out to examine the ways in which homosexuality and villainy have been conflated throughout the 20th Century in American media, and the ways in which that conflation has been reinforced and challenged. My observations about the villainous connotations of homosexuality hold despite the ways in which the boundaries of homosexuality have changed throughout the century. A homosexual is anyone who experiences romantic or amorous affection for someone who presents with the same gender presentation and/or who experiences attraction aversion for those who present with the opposite gender presentation. A villain breaks the law seeking to restructure society or to continue to question the moral expectations of that society; they appear disaffected to a greater degree, and their animosity towards society is less understood because that animosity points to the systemic injustices in power structures that that society benefits from

obfuscating; homosexualized villains seek to destroy or upend societies that have admonished them for their homosexuality, the impetus of which cannot be understood without acknowledging that the society they are attacking is rigidly heterosexual—a power structure that their society has hidden.

   The Talented Mr. Ripley by Patricia Highsmith, published in 1955, is a novel that epitomizes the conflation of homosexuality and villainy. It remains unclear to readers whether Tom Ripley is villainous because he is harboring the secret of his homosexuality. Highsmith's novel is a psychological thriller in which Tom Ripley poses as a friend of Dickie Greenleaf to receive funds to travel to Europe to bring Dickie back to his parents in America, Tom's homoerotic attraction to Dickie and his lavish lifestyle derail this mission, causing Tom to murder Dickie and assume his identity. In this chapter, I perform close readings of Highsmith's novel to examine the ways in which gender fatalism, homosocial desire, and cruel optimism permeate the text. Gender fatalism, homosocial desire, and cruel optimism are utilized to reposition the novel as well as two film remakes of the novel, *Purple Noon* (also known as *Plein Soleil*) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* to create excellent examples of homosexualized villainy.

   Another Country by James Baldwin and *Vanishing Rooms* by Melvin Dixon depict a continuation of the conflation of villainy and homosexuality while layering conceptions of race as othered and vilifying as well. African-American literature in the 20th Century describes Black experiences that are tangled with issues of racial inequality that grew from racial structures developed in the 19th and 18th centuries to explain, affirm, and uphold a society whose top echelon benefitted from the ideologies of white supremacy, and are therefore extensions or prodigies of slave narratives. In *Another Country*, Rufus' disaffection by society speaks to his homosexualized villainy, while Dixon's response novel *Vanishing Rooms* portrays Jesse's

disinheritance from Metro. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which insult and (hetero)sexualized spaces shape the rejection and disaffection of characters, who then become more susceptible to vilification.

I examine three graphic narratives that demonstrate a literary awareness of the conflation of homosexuality and villainy: *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf, *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger, and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris. With these three, one may see an illustrated trajectory of homosexualized villainy questioned and ultimately separated. The literary trope of the conflation of homosexuality and villainy is so pervasive it crossed medium boundaries into graphic narratives and video games, yet graphic narratives more apparently embraced the separation of villainy and homosexuality. *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf attempts to absolve homosexual serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer of his homosexuality as an impetus for murder but fails to consider the (heterosexual) societal pressure placed on Dahmer which he then internalizes; *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger portrays an affable homosexual villain thereby complicating the readers' relationship with villainy and viciousness; and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris presents homosexual saviors who are monsters but who are not monstruous. These three narratives navigate conceptions of homosexuality and villainy that complicate the traditional trope of conflation.

Finally, I consider the ways in which a film can be framed as homosexual by examining marketing, the concept of the *auteur*, and the intended audience. I examine two paradigms of homosexuality in film: homosexual spaces through the trope of road trips across natural landscapes, and literal villains in 1960s-1990s Disney films. I argue that the trope of road tripping creates a sense of adventure, propelling the plot, through removing homosexual characters from homosexually-friendly urbanscapes and transplanting them onto suburban- and

ruralscapes. A byproduct of this trope is that gender performance that does not match a person's sex is seen as unnatural in more bucolic settings. An examination of Disney villains in late 20th century films demonstrates the ways in which ambitious individuals who overperform or blur their gender identity are quickly and unequivocally villainized in films that simultaneously establish hetero-romantic relationships as normal and desirable for children.

This dissertation examines some of many examples of the conflation of villainy and homosexuality in 20th century American media. The conflation makes it difficult for readers to identify homosexual role models. Further areas of study include Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its subsequent graphic novel and television series, as well as Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, and subsequent film. This is a rich subject area that invites further analyzation.

Introduction

This work sets out to examine the ways in which homosexuality and villainy have been conflated throughout the 20th Century in American media, and the ways in which that conflation has been reinforced. My observations about the villainous connotations of homosexuality hold despite the ways in which the boundaries of homosexuality have changed throughout the century. For the purposes of this work, a homosexual is anyone who experiences romantic or amorous affection for someone who presents with the same gender presentation and/or who experiences attraction aversion for those who present with the opposite gender presentation. This includes figures in literature and film who clearly form homosexual bonds with one another, and also others who form homosocial bonds which avoid censure by by audiences that might find actual homosexuality too appalling for portrayal. To give a sense of how nuanced this identity can grow to be, Griffin writes:

> Historical research suggests that men and women now recognized as homosexual understood their sexuality differently in their own time. […] The term "homosexuality" itself was only beginning to make its way out of the medical texts and into the larger public consciousness. Historian George Chauncey points out that in urban America at the beginning of the twentieth century, men who had sex with other men did not consider themselves all part of one category. One group self-identified as "fairies," effeminate men who tended to take the "submissive" role in sex (although not always). On the other hand, many men

self-identified as "queers," more conventionally masculine men who nonetheless

did not consider themselves "normal" because of their sexual object choice

(showing that this term has also chanced meaning over time). There was even a

third category—the "normal" men, or "trade," who engaged in sex with other men

but did not self-identify as somehow outside the hegemonic norm because they

maintained the dominant penetrative role in sex. (76-7)

Griffin identifies homosexuality with men as he embeds his research in George Chauncey's work, which examines sexuality in the Progressive Era, when the zeitgeist of female sexuality was still embedded in the Victorian Era repressed notion that female sexuality did not exist outside of the (heterosexual) male gaze, if at all. My work recognizes that the term homosexual has a cold, clinical connotation which is nevertheless comparatively better than the many names of insult that have been affixed to homosexuals throughout the years—some of which have been reclaimed. I also consider the societal structures of gender, and the societal structure of sexuality, but opt to consider together female and male homosexuals in spite of a context in which white heteronormative patriarchal society continues to value male identities. There are, I argue, benefits for political advocacy in understanding female and male homosexuals together. In this, I follow Jasbir Puar who illustrates the ways in which white homosexuals have in navigated a white heteronormative patriarchal society more impactfully than those homosexuals who also identify with a racial minority. Differences among homosexuals exist. As bell hooks notes, white American women have had victories in fighting for gender equality that were unavailable to African-American women. Despite its many limitations, advocacy work for homosexuals as if they were a coherent group has served to elevate all. I note this even as I also examine racial, gendered, and class intersections that operate in the material examined here.

The definition of a villain is as nuanced as that of homosexuality. A villain is not an outlaw, who is more aptly a miscreant or bandit who breaks the law, generally to survive and ultimately with the intention of reentering society with their ill-gotten gains. Similar to mafiosos (racialized as white) and gangs (racialized as minorities), outlaws are extralegal, operating outside of the bounds of society but always with the eventual expectation of rejoining that society. Monetary gains are their driving force, through which they may gain access to society's excess. A villain has been rejected from the community. A villain breaks the law seeking to restructure society or to continue to question the moral expectations of that society; they appear disaffected to a greater degree, and their animosity towards society is less understood because that animosity points to the systemic injustices in power structures that that society benefits from obfuscating; homosexualized villains seek to destroy or upend societies that have admonished them for their homosexuality, the impetus of which cannot be understood without acknowledging that the society they are attacking is rigidly heterosexual—a power structure that their society has hidden. A villain knows societal hierarchal boundaries, understands them, and rejects them; it is a willful defiance. Further, whereas outlaws are more often understood as real disaffected straight white men, connected to a place (usually the American southwest), villains are more often understood as stateless imaginary characters. Puar considers the ways in which the foreigner is homosexualized and characterized as a terrorist, writing, "[…] the terrorist is also *a priori* constituted as stateless, lacking national legitimization and national boundaries. In the political imagination, the terrorist serves as the monstruous excess of the nation-state," which remains true of the villain (99). "It is not that we must engage in the practice of excavating the queer terrorist, or queering the terrorist," Puar writes, identifying the impossible separation of queerness and terrorism; "rather, queerness is always already installed in the project of naming

the terrorist; the terrorist does not appear as such without the concurrent entrance of perversion, deviance" (xxxii). Put simply, Goodrum writes, "In a genre where the protagonists are often seen as 'intent on retaining the status quo,' as Matthew Wolf-Meyer argues, changing societal structures is problematic," maintaining the perverse deviance of the antagonist, who is likely a queer villain (6). Villainy is a slippery affectation that identifies everything that the protagonist is not, or is not reaching towards, which is usually a reward in the shape of money, fame, or an attractive female trophy.

Gender and villainy is a fascinating study of power and inequality. While I group male and female homosexuals together, women have long been removed from ideological conceptions of villainy in ways that reflect the desires and affect of a patriarchal society. Even in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, witches are not themselves demons, but are in the service of demons or the devil and are at best, therefore, demonic. In the story of Adam and Eve, Eve is the not the villain, but the recipient of a serpent's treachery; Helen of Troy lacked the agency and therefore the capacity of duplicitousness found in spy/courtesan/prostitute Mata Hari, whose danger to society and nationhood is directly tied to her promiscuity; Princess Peach, in early iterations of the video game *Super Mario Brothers* was devoid of agency—she neither aided in her kidnapping out of a malicious boredom nor worked to aid in her own recovery. Her sole identity was "reward" for Mario by virtue of the video game player. If unhappiness with the status quo of a patriarchal society acts as a threshold for villainhood, why are there not hordes of villains, gendered female? Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* writes:

> Though both feminism and the patriarchal culture that is its constitutive outside
> have played roles in strengthening the association between emotion and women,

the weight placed on this association also creates nervousness, with "women's

feelings" imagined as always easily prone to turning ugly. (33)

As owners or expressers of easily turned ugly feelings, women are a disaffected group in society.

However, the same patriarchal society has coded their feelings differently from that of villains, in

that patriarchal society removes women's agency by making women objects of desire. In other

words, villains are unwanted. Women, as objects of desire, are precluded from joining most

villainous communities; even homosexual women, for whom it could be said stand as

competitors for heteronormative male audiences in the quest to "rescue the girl" have, through

the erasure of their agency within their own sexual desires, continue to act as an object of sexual

desire in spite of their sexual disinterest in heterosexual relations. Men are encouraged to find

lesbian porn sexually gratifying by removing the agency of the participants, who if given agency

might find this male interloping gaze sexually undesirable. Women have traditionally become

villainous through their lack of sexual appeal to a male audience. Their entrance to villainhood

has been marked by warts, poor posture, advanced age, greying hair. The object of their desire is

youth. Their villainy is made by a patriarchal society that values women who are young (i.e.

capable of childbirth) and devalues women who are old (i.e. no longer capable of producing

heirs). If society valued women for more than their physicality, then these hag-like witches

would not traverse the countryside poisoning princesses or stealing their voices or youthful

appearances to ensnare a male suitor. As such, there is a distinction between villains gendered

female and villains gendered male: a female villain is the opposite of a female "hero" in that she

is prepared to harm another woman, children, or small animals in order to achieve her ultimate

goal of continuing to be objectified for her physical attributes, whereas male villains range from

competing with the hero to gain a female suitor's hand, to the wanton destruction of society at large. The spectrum of villainy is made more expansive for men.

Minority identities are another notable intersection with villainy in that they are more easily conflated. The treatment of minority identities is synonymous with the treatment of villains. A villain lives outside of the social structure, and therefore—like immigrants or minority identities who have traveled to no longer be subjugated—are never really from "here," and carry with them the mark of a foreigner or outsider to the established society through language or clothing and therefore continue to be subjugated. Neither heroes nor villains are frequently presented with friends or family, but for very different reasons: heroes leave their homes and families in search of adventure or find themselves parentless and that absence acts as a catalyst and reasoning for beginning a hero's journey, whereas villains arrive rejected from their families, as the possibility of insult due to their identity is perpetually present. It is the same emotional harm and possibility of insult that prevents villains from establishing long lasting emotional connections with anyone—they are always alone, reinforcing the anomaly of their unhappiness with the white heteronormative patriarchal society. To be black, therefore, is to be policed more by society for expected villainous activity.

Villains act in a willful defiance to a white heteronormative patriarchal society; they understand their own displacement by this society and instead of accepting their demoted status in society, they use their ambitions to challenge it. Ignored until demanding to be seen, villains represent a willfulness in a disaffected and forgotten group of society. Ahmed's conception of an actualized individual who resists patriarchal heteronormative structures is that of a feminist killjoy. A feminist killjoy is in many ways villainous in that they are ostracized, deemed unhappy, and work to change society in ways that do not benefit those already in power. While

cisgendered heteronormative white men represent lawful goodness—as they are the ones whose predecessors have written the laws and benefit the most directly from the perpetuity of those laws—a feminist killjoy represents a neutral goodness or a true neutral affectation in that they question the existence of these laws, and work to uphold equitable ones while simultaneously working to dismantle the inequitable ones. A villain, however, represents a darker identity; they are neutrally or chaotically evil, which is to say that they pursue evilness and their rational is not always understood by the law abiding protagonist. They can be seen as beyond reason. Villains are neither public nor private until they demand to be seen, announcing their presence, and when they are seen they are dispossessed.

Villainy is not an identity that is created or bestowed overnight. A repetition of disaffection is required to achieve the status of villain. Because laws in America were written by white straight men to maintain power already held by white straight men, villains in the eyes of the lawful are individuals who must circumvent or defy the laws written to oppress them in order to live, to thrive or to survive. This ranges from acts of civil disobedience to those of malignant and deadly intent. A sex worker is made villainous. Martin Luther King, Jr. is made villainous. A woman who rebuffs a sexual advance is made villainous; a man who practices a non-Christian religion can be made villainous—the list of identities who live outside of the systemic protections afforded to the small ruling class is extensive, but this is historically not uncommon. The ratio of slaves to slave owners in the antebellum Carolinas offers a small insight into this ability. But what generally makes a villain is not one action, but rather a series of actions that are unlawful; a lifetime of dedication to working against the systemic structures that benefit the status quo perpetuated by a white patriarchy that has deemed itself lawful, just, and desirable. To be a villain is to be experienced in nefarious deeds over time.

A villain challenges the status quo. Understood as troublemakers, a villain demands a change in society. Feminists quickly became villains at the end of the 20th Century in America by demanding the structural overhaul of the American patriarchal society; so too did leaders of the LGBTQIA+ movement, and leaders of the Civil Rights movement, because they required what appeared to be the wanton destruction of a society engrained in a sexist, heteronormative, and racist hierarchy that protected and uplifted the cisgendered white heterosexual man, who more often than not finds himself to be the "knight in shining armor," or the hero. Whether or not one is prepared to read horror in this change often relates to how vested one is in the power attributed to that hero compared to how much power that hero would have to relinquish or share afterwards. Villainy, therefore, often depends on perspective, but is almost always identifiable by a refusal to accept the society that has rejected them.

I use affect, gender, queer, trauma and postcolonial literary theorists to read *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith, *Another Country* by James Baldwin, *Vanishing Rooms* by Melvin Dixon, *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf, *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger, and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris. Queer and gender theorists have much to say about the structures that continue to reinforce societal imbalances based on sex, gender, and sexuality; I found their intersections with race, nationality, and spatial understandings indispensable. I also analyze these readings with an affect theory lens; what becomes paramount with these villainous characters is not who they are but how they are perceived by other characters. This difference is that of affect. Didier Eribon's *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* examines the ways in which alienating insults affect both homosexual and racial minority communities, leaving a lasting effect on individuals' lives. Eribon identifies the necessity for homosexuals to grapple with "the closet," or deciding whether or not to self-identify their sexuality to the people in their lives. By

having this decision to make, with every passing stranger or acquaintance, homosexuals gain a public perception of secrecy when they chose not to reveal their homosexuality—even though they may risk physical harm by choosing to reveal their homosexuality—that moves them closer to villainy. Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* illuminates the power structures surrounding gender but also race and sexuality by showcasing the invisible structures of society that inherently benefit some at the expense of others and incentivize some trajectories while punishing others; an expert on affect, Sara Ahmed has made a career out of explaining the forces between objects and the ways in which those forces create effects in society, known as affect, writing "the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy" (43). By understanding the ways in which homosexuality is perceived, and by studying that perception, Ahmed brings to light the implied structures of society and allows the reader to see how heterosexuality can be rewarded and homosexuality punished. Lauren Berlant's conception of cruel optimism is vital in this work; cruel optimism is a desire or orientation towards a person or object that is unhealthy because the person or object is unobtainable or will soon be lost. A crush on someone who does not return those romantic feelings and who, it is known, would never return those feelings would be a form of cruel optimism. Several characters in these literary works develop those feelings for same-sex partners whose potential rejections cause these characters murder them. Being attracted to individuals these characters already plan to kill is a severe form of cruel optimism. Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* examines the ways in which national discourse enters these conceptions, particularly those of race and sexuality; her examination of the queer terrorist in nation building rhetoric informs the way in which the homosexual villain becomes characterized in literature. Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* and Kathryn Bond Stockton's *Black Bottom, Black Shame* create trauma informed

lenses with which to read characters and their presentation to others in the works and to the reader themselves, as does W. J. T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* prove fruitful in locating the slave narrative in the American consciousness. Adrienne Rich, Eve Kofosky Sedgewick, and Judith Butler's ideological contributions have shaped this work in ways explicit and implicit.

In Chapter 1, I examine the conflation of homosexuality and villainy in Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and the films the novel later inspired, *Purple Noon* directed by René Clément and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* directed by Anthony Minghella. Highsmith's novel follows Tom Ripley as he lands in Europe under false pretenses with the mission to bring Dickie Greenleaf back to the United States, but due to his homosocial desire for Dickie represented in his cruelly optimistic attachment for him, he murders him instead and attempts to assume his identity. The films that follow the novel struggle with ways to represent Tom's and Dickie's sexuality on camera—Clément heterosexualizes Tom's desire, while Minghella does not. Highsmith, homosexual herself, conflates Tom's homosexuality with his villainous activities. Tom's homosexuality does not self-actualize; rather he remains in a sphere of homosocial desire, illuminating Eribon's statement that, "it is an insurmountable paradox: the gay man who decides to speak openly leaves himself open to ironic remarks or condescension, or sometimes to rebuffs, whereas the gay man who prefers to remain silent finds himself in an uncomfortable, impossible situation" (54). Highsmith invites the reader to acknowledge Tom's villainy but to also sympathize with him—a challenge that left Clément and Minghella searching for ways to make Dickie unsympathetic.

In Chapter 2, I examine race and sexuality in James Baldwin's *Another Country* as well as Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms*. Baldwin's novel examines Rufus' rejection from society, which he in turn internalizes and turns to suicide, marking the focal point around which other

characters, Ida, Vivaldo, Eric, and Cass, navigate. Baldwin highlights racial, gender, and sexual power structures that privilege some while insulting others, leading to precarious outcomes for those at the bottom of the power structure. Dixon's novel acts as a response to Baldwin's. Set more than a decade later, Dixon reexamines the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality only to discover that the same forms of structures and structure sanctioned violence remained in spite of hard won social equality advancements. The novel follows an interracial homosexual couple, Jesse and Metro, as well as Jesse's friend and dance partner Ruella as they absorb and never truly relinquish the insults affronted them by others in power. Baldwin and Dixon further exemplify the ways in which constructions of public and private spaces continue to benefit identities that are above insult, namely whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality, leading characters who are incapable of accessing these realms of power into a willfulness that further alienates them from societal acceptance. Due to the nature of insults and the ability to be insulted, the conflation of villainy and homosexuality essentially remains.

In Chapter 3, I examine the separation of homosexuality and villainy in three graphic narratives: *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf, *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger, and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris. With these three graphic narratives, readers can pinpoint the authors' grappling with the trope of conflating homosexuality and villainy and these authors attempt with varying degrees of success to separate them. This chapter shows that this literary trope is so powerful that it transcends medium boundaries. *My Friend Dahmer* by Backderf recounts his high school years with serial killer and homosexual Jeffrey Dahmer, providing Backderf ample opportunity to conflate homosexuality with villainy—Backderf attempts to separate them, however he continues to show that the society Dahmer is raised in remains staunchly homophobic. That homophobia encouraged heterosexuality and made

homosexuality punishable by violence. For Dahmer, learning and exhibiting that violence against homosexuals becomes not only possible but also sanctioned. Backderf claims that Dahmer's homosexuality is not what makes him kill, but Backderf overlooks the compulsory heterosexuality that encouraged the cruel optimism that Dahmer associates with his own sexuality. Homosexuality is not why Dahmer kills, Backderf argues, but Backderf does not offer any other explanation. I argue that an unexamined reason is homosexuality's affect; Dahmer's same-sex attraction, which is horrendous in his strictly heterosexual society, causes him to kill the objects of his affection. In the interests of Chapter 3, only the first 200 episodes of webcomic *8-Bit Theater* by Clevinger are examined. In *8-Bit* Theater, video game monsters erode the vice associated with villainy before the reader is introduced to homosexual villain Garland, whose evil plans are substantially more considerate than malevolent, creating an atmosphere of farce. Clevinger fills the conflict in the plot with evil intent by the kidnapped Princess Sara, who exhibits an active and dynamic role in opposition to the objectified heterosexual reward princesses video games had presented for years; Hemovich writes, "gender stereotyping and misogynistic undertones have a long-standing tradition in video game culture," which Clevinger sets about challenging (207). By displaying an overtly homosexual yet ineffectual villain, Clevinger further chips away at the ideological conflation of the two, while also elevating an intelligent and purposefully malicious female villain who fights patriarchy rather than heteronormativity. Finally, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Ferris examines a homosexual protagonist who—along with some other main characters in the work—are graphically depicted as anthropomorphized monsters, demanding that the reader reexamine stereotypes of monster creatures and the roles that they play in society's imaginary. Providing the reader with a homosexual protagonist who nevertheless exhibits villainous and monstruous features allows

readers to question the ways in which these various roles and identities orient themselves towards and away from each other. In Ferris' work, I also examine a secondary character who is also homosexual and who is depicted as a longstanding homoeroticized monster, Frankenstein. The literary works in this chapter challenge the conflation of villainy and homosexuality by complicating understandings of villainy and by introducing elements of monstrosity, which echo the statelessness of villains by including the physical human body. Chapter 3 invites questions of a villain's otherness to not only be national but to also be physical.

In Chapter 4, I examine setting and homosexuality in films *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*; *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; and *Boys on the Side*, as well as homosexual villainy in Disney films *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *101 Dalmatians*. I consider the role of the *auteur* and how this older ideology benefits queer identifications of films, but does not prevent queer readings of films, which I have preferred throughout this work in relation to films (e.g., *Purple Noon, The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *My Friend Dahmer*) and print. Then I examine homosexual migrations to urbanscapes—Eribon reminds us that, "the city was always considered by conservative discourse as an exemplary place of perdition, the cauldron of sexual freedom, and thus of the corruption of bodies and souls"—and how this creates cinematic conflict by taking homosexuals out of the city and interacting with more conservative communities in what have been referred to as "road trip" films (43). Finally, I examine the association of heterosexuality with nature and natural interactions as well as its supernatural occurrences that propel the plot in Disney films, and the overperformance of gender in villains that lends to their homosexual readings. The overt representation of heteroromantic desire in films that are publicly presented as lacking sexuality speaks to Lauren Berlant's public/private heterosexual division examined in depth in Chapter 2; Martin and Kazyak write of Disney

characters, "[they] frequently defy their parents, their culture, or their very selves to embrace a hetero-romantic love that is transformative, powerful, and (literally) magical. At the same time, these accounts are sometimes held in tension with or constructed by understandings of the naturalness of heterosexuality" (324).

My work is meant to highlight the ways in which homosexuality has been vilified throughout the 20th Century in order to inform the reader of contemporary tropes that may seek to perpetuate this conflation. Understanding the way(s) in which a culture discourages homosexuality arms readers with a capacity to question or challenge narratives that perpetuate this conflation. Maahen Ahmed writes, "monsters have an unprecedently strong presence in contemporary life, with fictional and real monsters (usually humans engaging in monstrous acts such as serial killing […]) being prominent in the media, permeating public discourse as well as culture," and although homosexuality is no longer considered monstrous by a larger percentage of the American nation, those ties occasionally remain (5). Puar writes, "Hate crimes against gays and lesbians are still rationalized through these very same terms: is not the expression of 'a socially appropriate emotion in socially inappropriate ways' the crux of the 'gay panic' defense?" to which one must ask, what is a socially appropriate emotion to homosexuals (45)? How does affect effect them? Villains are people too, and should come from a range of identity markers; however, when a villain continues to be overrepresented with an identity marker, it becomes a cultural question of why.

1. Sexuality and Villainy in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

Every gay man starts off learning to lie. – Didier Eribon

The Talented Mr. Ripley by Patricia Highsmith, published in 1955, is a novel that epitomizes the conflation of homosexuality and villainy. It remains unclear to readers whether Tom Ripley is villainous because he is harboring the secret of his homosexuality. Highsmith's novel is a psychological thriller where Tom Ripley poses as a friend of Dickie Greenleaf to receive funds to travel to Europe to bring Dickie back to his parents in America, Tom's homosexuality and homoerotic attraction to Dickie and Dickie's lavish lifestyle derail this simple mission, causing Tom to murder Dickie and assume his identity. In this chapter, I perform close readings of Highsmith's novel to examine the ways in which gender fatalism, homosocial desire, and cruel optimism permeate the text. Gender fatalism, or the projected outcome of an individual based on their gender identity, allows Tom and Dickie a freedom, safety, and credibility that is denied to Dickie's love interest, Marge. Homosocial desire, or a deep albeit not necessarily sexual attraction to a person of the same gender, allows Tom more space to hide his homosexual attraction to Dickie; and cruel optimism, or an attraction to a person or object that can never be healthily achieved or maintained explains Tom's motive for murdering and assuming Dickie's identity. These concepts reverberate and echo into two film remakes of the novel, *Purple Noon* (also known as *Plein Soleil*) directed by René Clément in 1960 and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* directed by Anthony Minghella in 1999. Clément's film attempts to omit Tom's homosexuality

entirely, but in so doing increases the homosocial desire between Tom and Dickie, while Minghella's film portrays a Tom whose cruel optimism is homosexual desire, thereby moving closer to the novel and to the conflation of homosexuality and villainy.

Flowers and Mirrors: Surfacings of Tom's Homosexuality

The scenes wherein Dickie confronts Tom about his homosexuality demonstrate Tom's positionality as an outsider who may lose his connection to Dickie if he is honest about his attractions. Attaching Tom's homosexuality to the dangers of disownment, Highsmith presents a Tom aligned with queer villainy whose feelings of shame and rejection may overcome him and become feelings more severe than guilt caused by homicide. A close reading of Dickie catching Tom wearing his clothing is one scene that examines affect, gesture, and cruel optimism in a way that positions Tom as wanting Dickie even though this desire is dangerous and leads to Dickie's eventual death. Highsmith writes:

> He went up to Dickie's room and paced around for a few moments, his hands in
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> his pockets. He wondered when Dickie was coming back? Or was he going to
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> stay and make an afternoon of it, really take her to bed with him? He jerked
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> Dickie's closet door open and looked in. There was a freshly pressed, new-
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> looking grey flannel suit that he had never seen Dickie wearing. Tom took it out.
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> He took off his knee-length shorts and put on the grey flannel trousers. He put on
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> a pair of Dickie's shoes. Then he opened the bottom drawer of the chest and took
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> out a clean blue-and-white striped shirt.

He chose a dark-blue silk tie and knotted it carefully. The suit fitted him.

He re-parted his hair and put the part a little more to one side, the way Dickie

wore his. (78)

The reader sees Tom's obsession with Dickie, and as Dickie is unavailable and unobtainable,

Tom reaches into Dickie's closet not for Dickie's most commonly worn items, but for a freshly

pressed, new-looking suit and clean shirt out of the bottom drawer. Tom is imitating Dickie, in

this passage, but more meaningfully he is caricaturizing him through a mimicking gestural and

sartorial proximity. Highsmith continues:

"Marge, you must understand that I don't *love* you," Tom said into the

mirror in Dickie's voice, with Dickie's higher pitch on the emphasized words,

with the little growl in his throat at the end of the phrase that could be pleasant or

unpleasant, intimate or cool, according to Dickie's mood. "Marge, stop it!" Tom

turned suddenly and made a grab in the air as if he were seizing Marge's throat.

He shook her, twisted her, while she sank lower and lower, until at last he left her,

limp, on the floor. He was panting. He wiped his forehead the way Dickie did,

reached for a handkerchief and, not finding any, got one from Dickie's top

drawer, then resumed in front of the mirror. Even his parted lips looked like

Dickie's lips when he was out of breath from swimming, drawn down a little from

his lower teeth. "You know why I had to do that," he said, still breathlessly,

addressing Marge, though he watched himself in the mirror. "You were

interfering between Tom and me—No, not that! But there *is* a bond between us!"

He turned, stepped over the imaginary body, and went stealthily to the

window. He could see, beyond the bend of the road, the blurred slant of the steps

that went up to Marge's house level. Dickie was not on the steps or on the parts of

the road that he could see. Maybe they were sleeping together, Tom thought with

a tighter twist of disgust in his throat. He imagined it, awkward, clumsy,

unsatisfactory for Dickie, and Marge loving it. She'd love it even if he tortured

her! (78-9)

This scene is an apex in this novel. Perhaps this allows Tom to enter the fantasy which follows:

to end Dickie's relationship with Marge—to end Marge's actual existence—and reaffirm

Dickie's relationship with Tom. In Highsmith's novel, Tom wants Marge dead, in this

imaginary, and he wants her to know before she passes that Dickie does not love her. Further, her

death at the imagined hands of Dickie absolves Dickie of her demise; "you know why I had to do

that," Tom gestures in Dickie's likeness, removing blame from Dickie and placing it onto Marge

in one swift movement of gender fatalism—reexamined later in this chapter—because of

Marge's identity and positionality as a woman in a patriarchal society, her death by Dickie would

be her fault for not maintaining his emotional wellbeing and happiness. (It must be said, to the

imagined satisfaction of Tom). Through Tom's perspective, Marge's existence revolves entirely

around Dickie's, and therefore Tom feels comfortable gesturing her death as he pretends to be

Dickie. Gibbs writes:

Gesture, then, is "a 'material carrier' that helps bring meaning into existence." So

sympathetic modes of communication not only persist alongside linguistic modes:

they also inhabit and actively shape them. These are not rudimentary, infantile, or

so-called primitive modes of communication: rather, they are the essential

prerequisites for, and working collaborators with, verbal communication. They

are not noise in the system: they are part and parcel of it. (Gibbs 199)

Tom coopts Dickie's gestures as a part of his verbal communication to himself, in which he plays both parts—Dickie the speaker, and Tom the audience—in order to hear what he wants Dickie to say and to see what he wants Dickie to do, which includes the insult and erasure of Dickie's love interest, Marge.

Tom's wearing of Dickie's clothing demonstrates a complex, psychological attachment that simultaneously pleases and displeases himself. Tom's private theatrics exhibit his true desires, and suggest his inability to achieve them. Highsmith continues:

Tom darted back to the closet again and took a hat from the top shelf. It was a little grey Tyrolian hat with a green-and-white feather in the brim. He put it on rakishly. It surprised him how much he looked like Dickie with the top part of his head covered. Really it was only his darker hair that was very different from Dickie. Otherwise, his nose—or at least its general form—his narrow jaw, his eyebrows if he held them right—

"What are you *doing*?"

Tom whirled around. Dickie was in the doorway. (79)

As Tom reaches for Dickie's clothing, one must consider Ahmed's words, "to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to 'whatever' is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival. What is around an object can become happy," which presents an understanding of Tom's obsession with Dickie's things ("Happy Objects" 33). Tom does not want Dickie's signet ring or his shirts or his shoes or his hat because they signify wealth or because Tom is a kleptomaniac who desires to own or store objects for the sake of owning or storing objects; Tom's desire towards these items represents the conduction through the items' proximity to Dickie, which in

turn makes acquiring of those objects a happy occurrence. Dickie is a source or object of happiness for Tom, and in Dickie's absence, Tom orients himself to whatever is around Dickie—rather notably, Dickie's clothing. Tom's imitation of Dickie through wearing his clothing brings him even closer to filling the absence left by Dickie; Stockton writes:

> Cloth and skin touch on each other's meanings since each is a surface—with an intense, complex, and variable coding attached to it—that may be the object of prejudice, violence, attraction, and invective. Each may be physically marked with a wound (torn cloth, torn skin) and each can elicit psychic wounds (self-loathing, for example) because of the shame it seems to carry. Each can also, in certain contexts, elicit pride—or sexual attraction and aesthetic delight. That is, there is beauty. (40)

Dickie's clothing is neither torn nor tattered, but is pristine and unworn, suggesting an intact wholesomeness or pride that Tom is lacking and seeks to complete through this action of metamorphosis. Dickie's clothing may be read as beautiful to Tom, whose attraction to Dickie spills out onto his belongings. Tom "loved possessions, not masses of them, but a select few that he did not part with. They gave a man self-respect," Highsmith offers, making clear that Tom receives feelings (here, of self-esteem) from objects (249). Shannon writes, "Tom's desire for objects transcends simple avarice, taking the form of a fetishism that defines his very sense of self. As soon as he has Dickie's things, he gladly engages in the 'annihilation' of Tom Ripley. His own personality is less significant to him than that which he finds in Dickie's possessions" (24). Tom does not explicitly desire objects that move him closer to wealth; he desires objects that explicitly move him closer to Dickie and further away from himself. Gibbs writes, "mimicry may represent the desire to disguise what one is (an animal avoids its predators; an Internet

predator pretends to be a teenager), or the desire to become something else (a human infant

identifies with its parents). It can mean either homage or hostility; it might signify sympathy,

seduction, deception, defense, or aggression" (193). In the case of Tom, all of Gibbs' suggestions

appear as truths in an iridescence of emotions; Tom sympathizes with, seduces, and deceives

Dickie. He is defensive of Dickie and defensive towards Dickie. Tom wishes to disguise himself

and develop a new identity as close to Dickie's as possible—so close that no one may tell the

difference—suggesting the happiness of Dickie's persona and the unhappiness of Tom's.

Shannon writes, "Tom's sexual longing is reserved for the objects he associates with Dickie and

an American dream he feels has been denied him; these objects fulfill his need for love,

friendship, and personal identity" (26). However, this longing is inherently futile; Ahmed

cautions, "happiness can arrive in a moment and be lost by virtue of its recognition" ("Happy

Objects" 33). Tom sees a version of Dickie in the mirror, and this pleases him, but it must

simultaneously displease him as he lives with the fact that he is not, nor will ever be Dickie—a

fact that he attempts to challenge by subsuming Dickie's identity—and he alone, in his own

clothing representing himself and his own identity, is not (and cannot become, in this

(heterosexual) society) reason enough for happiness. Tom cannot be happy with himself or his

life, so he reaches for Dickie's and acts like someone else, only to discover that this reaching

exacerbates the unhappiness Tom feels with himself because it is a reaching for something that

does not belong to him and will not accept him. Berlant refers to this phenomenon as "cruel

optimism." Berlant writes:

> "Cruel optimism" names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of
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> possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy,
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> or *too* possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely

inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well

endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence

threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the

continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's

sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the

world. This phrase points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which

is enacted in the subject's desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an

object or scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism

is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance*

of its loss. (94)

Tom's obsession with Dickie may be defined as cruel optimism because Dickie would not have

entertained Tom's advances provided his (hetero)sexuality and relationship with Marge, and in

the event that he would have entertained Tom's advances, no overt relationship would have been

possible while Dickie continued to entertain Marge. At best, Dickie would have offered Tom a

covert affair; an unfulfilled relationship ripe with shame, which would have been toxic for Tom,

Dickie, and Marge. In Dickie's murder, Tom maintains a clear and problematic attachment in

advance of Dickie's death, maintained even after the event—the thrill of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

is not in Dickie's murder but in how long it will take for Tom to be caught, if ever. Shannon

writes, "Tom ends the novel, not in the 'nightmare' Minghella's stage directions indicate, but

'not suspected at all' and even convinces the Greenleaf family to accept him as Dickie's heir,"

noting that this shift makes Highsmith's novel in a particular way more avante-garde than

Minghella's eponymous 1999 film (21). Even within Tom's imagination when he is caught

dressing up as Dickie, their attachment is cruelly optimistic as Tom cannot imagine a social

situation imaginary or otherwise in which Dickie openly promotes their homosexual relationship; Tom, as Dickie, exclaims to Marge, "No, not that! But there *is* a bond between us," in reference to homosexuality (Highsmith 79). Instead, Tom—who is controlling the narrative—offers Dickie verbiage to suggest the impossible, the sheer fantasy, and the toxic possibility of their relationship as an emphatic, yet unnamable bond. This scene of Tom wearing Dickie's clothing in a mimicking gesture meant to soothe Tom's rejection as Dickie abandons him to spend time with Marge doing unspeakable things in Tom's mind leads to the surfacing Tom's cruel optimism of Dickie.

This scene carries with it an additional sociocultural layer of homosexual villainy in Tom's subsummation of Dickie's persona. By toxically identifying as Dickie, Tom spearheads a legacy of homosexual, parasitic maladaptives in American culture, whose sociopathy in using, consuming, or discarding American men highlight their threat to society. Hannibal Lecter, in the 1991 five-time Oscar award winning film *Silence of the Lambs,* is another homosexual murderer who, in describing *another* homosexual murderer to an aspiring female investigator, states, "we begin by coveting what we see every day." The homosexual characters in *Silence of the Lambs* and Tom in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* exhibit cruel optimism in their desire to transform into someone else. This transformation may appear logical or natural for the homosexual, as when Alison Bechdel covets the gestures of a lesbian in a diner when she is still a child in the graphic memoir *Fun Home* but toxic to conforming to a heterosexual society, which is Bechdel's father's wish for her. Gibbs writes, "mimetic knowledge may be the earliest form of knowledge of both self and other, as the infant researchers Meltzoff and Moore suggest, and this is a knowledge made possible by the work of feeling," which is only alluded to by Tom through the insulting relative Aunt Dottie; rather, Tom is purposefully obscure about his childhood which is a

necessity for his grift to work, but mimetic knowledge allows Tom to hide his true feelings, for a time (196). The reader establishes Tom's feelings through his mimetic knowledge and the pensive, pansy, *pensée* of Highsmith's third person close narration of Tom.

The secret of Tom's homosexuality is a significant driver to Tom's motives in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Because Tom cannot be public with his homosexuality, the energy he commits to hiding this part of his identity consumes him, and the moments in which he fails to hide his homosexuality cause anger and bitterness in him. Eribon writes, "in any case, one thing that characterizes a gay man is that he is a person who, one day or another, is confronted by a decision to tell or not to tell what he is. A heterosexual man will not need to do this, being presupposed by the world to be what he is," summating a primary difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals in a society that privileges heterosexuality and discourages homosexuality; heterosexuals may arrive in a novel, film, or into a room without the burden of a secret whose exposure may result in physical violence or ostracization, or with a requirement of proof of their identity (52). Ahmed writes, "when you are heterosexual you might not be asked to explain how you became heterosexual. When you come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, you might be asked to give an account of yourself," illustrating the ease of heterosexual living as compared to the perpetual questioning habitual to homosexuality in a heterosexual culture (*Living* 121). Ahmed furthers this point when she writes, "Gill Valentine shows how the 'heterosexualisation' of public spaces such as streets is naturalized by the repetition of different forms of heterosexual conduct (images on billboards, music played, displays of heterosexual intimacy, etc.), a process that often goes unnoticed by heterosexual subjects," demonstrating a heterosexualizing of public spaces, which permeates into private spaces (*Living* 123). When Tom is discovered in Dickie's clothing, a transgression that speaks to his homosexual attraction to

Dickie in the privacy of Dickie's dressing room, Dickie's response is embedded in the notion

that homosexuality may not be tolerated in private spaces as well. Eribon continues, "let us go

even a bit further. The gay man who is obliged (or who chooses) to attempt to hide what he is

can never be sure that the person from whom he is hiding this 'secret' does not know it anyway,

or at least suspect it, while pretending to know nothing," suggesting that the dangerous secret of

one's homosexuality is not only at perpetual risk of becoming known, but that it may already

have been surmised (53). This causes a homosexual who maintains the masquerade of

heterosexuality to hold on to this masquerade even if its ruse has fooled no one but the

homosexual themself, consequently internalizing their denial of their own identity. Immediately

after Dickie has caught Tom in his clothes, Tom moves to confront Dickie to smooth over their

relationship. Dickie, just as within his death scene on the *Pipistrello*, is in a state of undress and

wishes Tom to copy him. Highsmith writes:

"Dickie, I'm sorry if it—"

The violent slam of the door cut him off. Dickie began opening his shirt

scowling, just as he would have if Tom had not been there, because this was his

room, and what was Tom doing in it? Tom stood petrified with fear.

"I wish you'd get out my clothes," Dickie said.

Tom started undressing, his fingers clumsy with his mortification, his

shock, because up until now Dickie had always said wear this and wear that that

belonged to him. Dickie would never say it again.

Dickie looked at Tom's feet. "Shoes, too? Are you crazy?"

"No." Tom tried to pull himself together as he hung up the suit, then he

asked, "Did you make it up with Marge?"

"Marge and I are fine," Dickie snapped in a way that shut Tom out from them. "Another thing I want to say, but clearly," he said, looking at Tom, "I'm not queer. I don't know if you have the idea that I am or not."

"Queer?" Tom smiled faintly. "I never thought you were queer."

Dickie started to say something else, and didn't. He straightened up, the ribs showing in his dark chest. "Well, Marge thinks you are."

"Why?" Tom felt the blood go out of his face. He kicked off Dickie's second shoe feebly, and set the pair in the closet. "Why should she? What've I ever done?" He felt faint. Nobody ever said it outright to him, not in this way.

"It's just the way you act," Dickie said in a growling tone, and went out of the door. (79-80)

This scene reaffirms the readers' questioning of Tom's heterosexuality—"nobody ever it said it *outright* to him, not in *this* way"—by underlining the frequency of the suspicions, and it is the moment in the novel in which Tom is made aware that he has been outed. The "outing," or revealing of Tom's homosexuality, is as significant of a moment if not more than Tom's exposure mimicking Dickie. Tom's most closely guarded secret is now made explicit; he does not deny it, but is desperate to understand what gave this secret away. Trask writes, "Tom does not readily grasp that acting itself connotes queerness […]. Acting in general is inseparable from queerness, Highsmith implies," reminding the reader that, in a white heteronormative patriarchal society, any effort towards announcing whiteness, straightness, or maleness is already an admission of absence; straight men do not have closets from which to be outed and therefore have no clear reason to act (604). This is why Dickie can embody such nonchalance so as to appear nearly asexual in the novel; Straayer writes, "it must be noted that Greenleaf's

heterosexuality is subdued in the novel, so much so that it remains in question. That Greenleaf is very private about his (hetero)sexuality, that he is latently homosexual, and that he is nearly asexual are all plausible conclusions" (121). The danger of Tom's homosexuality is not within the homosexuality itself, but in others' reactions towards it, including Dickie. Eribon writes, "mistakes can have painful consequences. The experience of physical violence or the obsessive awareness of its threat are so common in gay lives that they are mentioned in almost every autobiography and in numerous novels with gay male characters," highlighting what is at stake for homosexual characters who cannot successfully hide their identity, or expend the continuous emotional or intellectual energy required to understand whether or not their homosexuality is known or has been discovered, and whether that revelation decreases their safety, at any given moment (18). Soloman, writing of women who cross dress as men—also known as butches— states:

> Making aggression or toughness or chivalry or rebelliousness their histrionic own, butches reveal the arbitrariness with which traits are said to belong to men. Rather than copying some "original" image of masculinity, butches point to the embarrassing fact that there is no such thing; masculinity is an artifice no matter who performs it. (37)

While Tom is gendered male, his sexuality is different than Dickie's, and his dressing as Dickie reminds him that his affluent and privileged (heterosexual) lifestyle is an artifice. Dickie begins by reifying his heterosexuality, and after Tom affirms it, Dickie accuses Tom of homosexuality through a third party and exits the room after growling at him, creating for homosexual readers a Chekov's Gun that would foretell of violence later in the novel. Now that Tom's secret about his homosexuality is out, the real threat has been announced, creating a secondary subplot thrill

throughout Highsmith's novel of when or if Tom will be publicly discovered. Highsmith maintains those consequences, but subverts the danger so that it is Dickie who ultimately becomes the victim of violence; Tom shoots first. Tom is not a white, heterosexual man, but is rather a white, homosexual man and therefore lacks the total privilege in society that is inherent in Dickie, who may claim all three markers of societal influence. When Tom imagines himself as Dickie killing Marge, he explains to her why she needs to die, but he watches himself when he is addressing her. The violence he imagines inflicting upon her is similarly the violence he inflicts upon himself, or is aware subconsciously that he may be or might become an identical victim of Dickie's whims. However, he cannot admit to himself or even fathom an imaginary in which he and Dickie may be open about their homosexuality to a third party. Tom's necessary lies about his homosexuality in order to navigate a heterosexual world extend to his own psyche. The idea of homosexuality is so abhorrent to Tom that he will not even allow himself to *think* it, in the privacy of his thoughts. Instead, what exists in his imaginary is Dickie sleeping with Marge; heterosexuality can be imagined in the privacy of his thoughts, whereas homosexuality cannot (Highsmith 79). And in this menagerie, Dickie is unpleasable and Marge accepting of anything, further emphasizing the patriarchal divide in which Dickie has the availability of displeasure—the power to be displeased—in a sexual congress with Marge, again, heightened in the films in a way that is obscured in the novel. This toxic thought within this toxic imagination that is a result of the cruel optimism of Tom's obsession with Dickie is too much to bear for Tom, and he returns to his mimicry. Highsmith creates a pomp and circumstance in which Tom is now wearing feathered attire in his preening and peacocking game of mimicking Dickie.

In fact, the mirroring of Tom and Dickie presents itself earlier in the novel. Tom becomes aware of how alike he and Dickie could be before this pivotal scene. After meeting Freddie,

whom Tom finds physically hideous, but while still galivanting around Rome, Highsmith introduces the similarity of Tom and Dickie as though one were viewing a reflection of themself in the other; Highsmith writes:

> They sat slumped in the carrozza, each with a sandalled food propped on a knee, and it seemed to Tom that he was looking in a mirror when he looked at Dickie's leg and his propped foot beside him. They were the same height, and very much the same weight, Dickie perhaps a bit heavier, and they wore the same size bathrobe, socks, and probably shirts.
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> Dickie even said, "Thank you, Mr. Greenleaf," when Tom paid the carrozza driver. Tom felt a little weird. (63; 67)

Dickie, acknowledging the likeness that Tom bears in resemblance to himself, makes Tom feel "a little weird," and readers are once more left to speculate about the source of that weirdness: flattery, sarcastic jest, or a penetrative understanding of Tom's capacity to assume other's identities. Greven, considering masculinity in film, writes:

> One of the most interesting consequences of the double-protagonist split is the positioning of one apparently normative male character as a diegetic spectator of male beauty who, as the audience surrogate, is also a symbolic spectator. The alternate protagonist—in his pining for the main protagonist and in the manner in which he chafes against male dominion, often figured as the main protagonist's heady display of narcissistic omnipotence and concomitant efforts to maintain this reign—occupies the position of repressed homosexual voyeur, as Paul Willemen and Steven Neale put it. (33-4)

The similarity is applicable in Highsmith's text between Dickie, the normative male character, and Tom, the diegetic spectator of male beauty—"perhaps a bit heavier"—and repressed homosexual voyeur, in contrast to Freddie in whom Tom may find no beauty. Highsmith writes, "Tom thought he was hideous. Tom hated red hair, especially this kind of carrot-red hair with white skin and freckles. […] He was also overweight," all of which Tom takes in while Freddie is discussing skiing with Dickie in the Italian alps, which readers may understand as Tom's physical homosexual repulsion towards Freddie—finding him sexually unattractive—or as a furthering of Tom's jealousness of Dickie's life; Dickie's easy friendships and the trips to the Alps that his affluence can so easily provide (63-4). Tom is attracted to Dickie, whom he is able to mirror, but repulsed by Freddie, whom he may not. Straayer writes, "According to *Purple Noon* [also known as *Plein Soleil*], class is natural and unchangeable, located in certain people, not in their possessions," of which Freddie has none in neither films nor novel (118). Freddie has little or no possessions *and* he appears to have no class, to Tom, in spite of his affluence. "Even though Tom obtains Greenleaf's money," Straayer continues, "he can never assume his class. Hence the novel and film produce different discourses about both class identity and (repressed) homosexuality" (118). However, Tom's attraction to materials remain dependent upon the person(s) whom possess them and not the reverse. Tom is attracted to Dickie's items because they remind him of Dickie, who by proxy remind Tom of himself.

In a scene laden with Tom's shame and Dickie's intellectual and conservative upbringing, Tom confirms his homosexuality in a public space by his attraction to men who have very little material possessions at all. By creating a setting in which a group of men may see and be seen—particularly with Tom as object and voyeur—with Dickie as witness to it all, Highsmith allows a multiplicity of identities, societal expectations, and affectations to surface.

Tom and Dickie have left Italy for a quick getaway, boarding a train to Cannes, France at the request of Tom, where they are on the beach together watching an acrobatic practice the following morning. Highsmith writes:

"They must be professionals," Tom said. "They're all in the same yellow G-strings."

Tom watched with interest as a human pyramid began building, feet braced on bulging thighs, hands gripping forearms. He could hear their "Allez!" and their "Un – deux!"

"Look!" Tom said. "There goes the top!" He stood still to watch the smallest one, a boy of about seventeen, as he was boosted to the shoulders of the center man in the three top men. He stood poised, his arms open, as if receiving applause. "Bravo!" Tom shouted.

The boy smiled at Tom before he leapt down, lithe as a tiger.

Tom looked at Dickie. Dickie was looking at a couple of men sitting nearby on the beach.

"Ten thousand saw I at a glance, nodding their heads in sprightly dance," Dickie said sourly to Tom.

It startled Tom, then he felt that sharp thrust of shame, the same shame he had felt in Mongibello when Dickie had said, *Marge thinks you are*. All right, Tom thought, the acrobats were fairies. Maybe Cannes was full of fairies. So what? Tom's fists were clenched tight in his trousers pockets. He remembered Aunt Dottie's taunt: *Sissy! He's a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father!* Dickie stood with his arms folded, looking out at the ocean. Tom deliberately kept

himself from even glancing at the acrobats again, though they were certainly more

amusing to watch than the ocean. "Are you going in?" Tom asked, boldly

unbuttoning his shirt, though the water suddenly looked cold as hell.

"I don't think so," Dickie said. "Why don't you stay here and watch the

acrobats? I'm going back." He turned and started back before Tom could answer.

Tom buttoned his clothes hastily, watching Dickie as he walked

diagonally away, away from the acrobats, though the next stairs up to the

sidewalk were twice as far as the stairs nearer the acrobats. Damn him anyway,

Tom thought. Did he have to act so damned aloof and superior all the time?

You'd think he'd never seen a pansy! (98-9)

Tom begins by noting the clothing of the acrobats, and to himself takes stock of their physical

attributes. Enamored with their feat, he commends them, which catches their attention, and they

reciprocate. Dickie, whose ideological perception of Tom has shifted so that he now resees what

Tom sees through an overt homosexual lens, views Tom applauding foreign men in scant

clothing, and as Dickie further includes in this panorama men who are sitting grouped together

nearby, assumes the entire scene to have the affect of homosexuality. It becomes clear that

Dickie detests homosexuals, and he sours at their public display; it also becomes clear that Tom

has internalized the disgust that Dickie displays towards the men at the beach and the acrobats

and applies it to how Dickie envisions himself—if Dickie is to act derisively towards these men,

then so too will he act derisively towards Tom if and when Tom is ready to identify himself as a

homosexual to Dickie. What further complicates this passage is that, in defense of his own

homosexuality, Tom argues to himself that it is Dickie's aloofness and superiority that force him

to disavow homosexuality, thereby equating homosexuality and its acceptance with Others, in

this moment, working class individuals, in a scene further complicated by foreign identity; whether all of these men are homosexual or simply French is indistinguishable in Highsmith's novel.

Here, Highsmith provides Dickie with almost enough to offer plausible deniability. A reader could almost argue that Dickie's aloofness and superiority have nothing to do with Tom's homosexuality, which later adds to the ambiguous motivation of Dickie's murder. Dickie's upper class upbringing is clear in his citation of the poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth, which references an overabundance of wild daffodils—*narcissus pseudonarcissus*—Wordsworth encounters while walking with his sister in the Lake Distract of England. Daffodils are renowned for their golden yellow color, and Dickie's reference to the poem and to daffodils arrive in memory from the yellow of the acrobats' G-strings, moving in sprightly dance; it's possible but unlikely that Dickie's statement was not meant to shame Tom, but was rather a remnant from a sophisticated life that Dickie wished to leave behind by absconding to Europe, ironically siphoning his parents' wealth to do so. And/or, it may be a reference to the narcissistic vanity of the acrobats and other men on the beach in more revealing clothing than Dickie would care to see in a scene of homosocial masculinity that transgresses homosexuality. Greven writes to reconsider "narcissism as a potentially defiant, resistant, and even joyously heady mode of masculine performance that masochism is only right to emulate, embrace and join; indeed, narcissism may be preferable to masochism as a mode of queer masculine performance," further queering the scene (33). Dickie's heterosexuality comes with the privilege of not searching for homosexual connections in the world, and may more easily remove himself from the scene, whereas Tom's homosexuality require him to do his due diligence of emotional labor to see if these acrobats were in the same category as himself, or to

become attuned to moments in which he might reveal himself as non-heterosexual. Tom lingers.

Trask reminds the reader that it is Tom's failure that anchors this passage, writing:

> It is Tom who unwittingly "outs" himself on the beach in Cannes when he shouts
> "bravo" to a band of acrobats, attired (like Tom earlier in the novel) in "yellow G-
> strings," while Dickie calls them as he sees them, or rather implies their
> homosexuality in the simultaneously erudite and juvenile rhyme he misquotes
> from, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." […] His "coldly" *haut-bourgeois*
> "distaste" for what Tom refers to as the "fairies" seems so pervasive that he
> cannot bring himself to say the word, only to gesture toward it via a peculiar
> detour through Romanticism. In Wordsworth's poem, of course, "Ten thousand"
> refers not to fairies but to daffodils. Either Tom does not know the poem and thus
> mistakes the referent or he fills in the referent with the only term he can intuit. In
> any event he implicates himself in both a class and a sexual transgression. He is
> not schooled enough to know Wordsworth; he is all too familiar with fairies.
> (602)

Because homosexuality is a restricted topic, Tom must expend the emotional and intellectual

labor to decipher Dickie's true intention, which is coded through the affluence of Romantic era

poetry. And what is the emotion Tom feels then? Shame. Shame for being associated with

homosexuality. Thifault writes, "on some level, the event that leads Ripley to decide to murder

Dickie is the 'shame' he feels when Dickie implies that Ripley has a sexual interest in watching a

group of male acrobats in G-strings" (317). Tom proceeds to relive, internally, three other insults

that have stuck to him because of his homosexuality, thereby creating that shame. First, Marge's

overt suggestion of his queerness via Dickie to which Tom becomes defensive, and second, Tom

takes Dickie's negative affectation about the men around him as homosexual and applies it to the

acrobats, referring to them as fairies—a 19th Century insult that associates men not only with

femininity but further implies procreative deviousness, as fairies are gendered female but lack

maternity. Tom then remembers a third; Aunt Dottie's insult, sissy, which is a diminutive of a

diminutive whose root exists in familial ties—sister becomes sis becomes sissy—and by insisting

upon a lineage of sissiness, Tom's Aunt Dottie others his father as an incapable family member,

and thereby suggests that homosexuality might be genetic. Aunt Dottie's assertion gives space

for Tom's mimicry of someone else's homosexuality—his father's—which erodes the patriarchal

lineage by virtue of homosexuality becoming disparaging. Finally, Tom states, "you'd think he'd

never seen a pansy," a fourth accusation of homosexuality from the French *pensée*, or "thought,"

in the past tense, feminine reflexive of "to think," from which the eponymous flower gets its

name: a pansy is a flower for lovers who cannot be together, and so these lovers may see this

flower in remembrance of their love that could not coexist in the same time, place, culture, or

societal expectation. This final additional insult further refers to homosexuals as thinkers or

introverts, rather than doers or extroverts, in a heterosexualized society just before Tom does

something bigly, i.e., desperately and caustically hypermasculine: before he murders Dickie.

Straayer writes of this scene, "The suddenness of this shift from inward guilt to outward anger is

typical of Tom. Soon after the incident with the acrobats, Tom quickly proceeds from fantasizing

to enacting murder" (123).

  The conflation of villainy and homosexuality in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is possible

because of Tom's secret and fear of being outed by Dickie, which may appear as a repression,

but is better understood with the terms acceptance and denial. By holding onto the "secret" of his

homosexuality, Tom becomes willing to murder for the presumed appearance of heterosexuality,

which does not arrive with insult, providing a clear example of the conflation of homosexuality and villainy. Straayer notes that, "as long as Tom is Greenleaf, he does not have to worry about being called a sissy," pointing to the societal acceptance that Tom slowly gains at the end of the novel, wherein he is even able to maintain Dickie's wealth and ties with the Greenleaf family (126). Trask writes:

> Because her "fond[ness] of coincidences" and her sense that "the only good parts
> of a book are the explanations that are left out" lead Highsmith to disregard
> realism's implicit yet emphatic demand for causality, it has been hard for critics to
> locate the motives in her novels without resorting to the "real" history of postwar
> America's repressive conformism and its consequent psychic toll. Tom Ripley
> thus kills because he cannot express himself in healthier ways. (594)

Highsmith, no stranger to internalized homophobia, complicates the reading of Tom (and Dickie)'s motivations; there are no simple answers with this psychological thriller, however meaning-making is still possible. It may be that conceptualizing repression isn't. Gordon writes:

> The problem is that "repressed" is precisely what Ripley's homosexuality is not.
> For "repressed" is a word from the lexicon of neurosis and neither Ripley nor the
> writing that incarnates him is neurotic. To attempt to read the strange stories of
> Tom Ripley by the terms of neurosis is to miss entirely the radical importance of
> Patricia Highsmith. The psychological maneuver that both leads Ripley to murder
> and saves him from guilt is not neurotic repression but the maneuvers of the other
> grand category of the Freudian insight: psychotic denial. (18)

However, Gordon's examination precludes the fact that it is others who discover Tom's secret that ultimately lead to their death—not Tom's repression or denial of his homosexuality but the

repression of homosexuality writ large by others. This more closely aligns with Gordon's revelation; others shame Tom for his homosexuality, which Tom then denies. The result, however, remains death—the maintenance of Tom's deep, dark (homosexual) secret is what lays his foundation as a conning villain, for which other (homosexual) individuals who hold secrets may follow.

Heterosexual Male Power and Gender Fatalism

While a homosexual dominating or performing violence against affluent men is what makes characters like Tom Ripley so dangerous in the American national imaginary because it moves against the pre-established social hierarchy in which men have positioned themselves as perpetuators and not receptors of violence (excluding warfare), violence against women, people of color, and/or the less economically affluent have remained de rigueur. The death of Dickie Greenleaf, a young, rich, white American man moves against the social narrative that has allowed the countless deaths of individuals real and fictitious, particularly women, to propel a narrative. Highsmith crafts Dickie to be the victim rather than the hero, and this paradigm shift is what gives *The Talented Mr. Ripley* its draw. Thifault, considering Highsmith's work as an echo of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket,* writes, "both texts pose and depose rather simple symbolisms (black or queer = danger), asking us to read the contradictions as evidence of an experimental, ironic, self-referential strategy or as the product of casually inconsistent plotting in a narrative more focused on immediate sensationalism" (317). Critics have lauded Highsmith's ability to make Tom, a shifty homosexual conman, the sympathetic hero that the reader hopes for and invests in to see whether or not he will escape punishment for his deeds caused by cruel optimism and his homosocial desire for Dickie, but

seldom do critics examine how Highsmith suggests a fragility to white heterosexual masculinity (white or male = safety) by making Dickie the victim in a subversion of gender fatalism; the fact of which is overshadowed in the subsequent films *Purple Noon* (1960) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) by Dickie's abuse of Marge.

Gender fatalism is a societal construct that implies that one's gender, typically male or female, leads to future societal outcomes based on that gender. If one is gendered male, one has a future full of power and promise, aggression and dominance (if successful) whereas if one is gendered female, one has a future full of nurturing, caring, and demurring to those gendered male, including becoming the recipient of violence dependent upon the (un)happiness of those gendered male in her life. Ahmed writes of feminism and violence based on gender; the "you" of which is gendered female:

> Indeed, if you do not modify your behavior in accordance, if you are not careful and cautious, you can be made responsible for the violence directed toward you (look at what you were drinking, look at what you were wearing, look at where you were, look look). You can be made responsible whether or not you have modified your behavior in accordance, because gender fatalism has already explained the violence directed against you as forgivable and inevitable. (*Living* 26)

Gender fatalism may lead to abuse, culminating in death. In films *Purple Noon* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Dickie uses women in a way that is absent or obfuscated in the novel that speaks directly to the conception of gender fatalism. In Highsmith's work, the relationship between Dickie and Marge is understood from Tom's perspective, who is increasingly jealous of Dickie, but this relationship speaks very little of this social construct. Highsmith writes, "Marge was in

love with Dickie, *Tom thought*, but Dickie couldn't have been more indifferent to her if she had been the fifty-year-old Italian maid sitting there," and "the Dickie-Marge relationship was evidently just what he had supposed it to be at first, *Tom thought*. Marge was much fonder of Dickie than Dickie was of her" (50; 71 emphases mine). Dickie's attraction to Marge repulses Tom, and he prefers to avoid it; "what disgusted him," Highsmith writes, "was the big bulge of her behind in the peasant skirt below Dickie's arm that circled her waist. And Dickie—! Tom really wouldn't have believed it possible of Dickie!" (77). In this hyphenated absence exists Dickie's desire for Marge, which Tom does not or cannot process; Marge has, as the novel progressed, moved from "healthy" to "ha[ving] a good figure, if one liked the rather solid type" to this big bulged posterior that disgusts Tom (Highsmith 19; 48; 77). Throughout the novel, Dickie is cordial, if not caring, to Marge in a way that does not suggest his need to express superiority over her; her independence as a writer keeps her from depending on Dickie, emotionally or otherwise (Highsmith 54). Marge is, however, worried about their trip to Rome, which converts into anger, and this angst about Dickie and Tom's carefree or careless party lifestyle could be understood as her playing a small part of a nurturing role (Highsmith 70). However, Highsmith's Marge is not the receiver of substantial abuse that she is portrayed to be in the films. In *Purple Noon,* Dickie (Maurice Ronet) regularly and violently physically assaults Marge (Marie Laforêt); Dickie drags Marge across rooms and physically cages her on his boat— he ignores her displeasure and discomfort especially when it comes to his own sexual gratification, all of which is understood as forgivable for Dickie and inevitable for Marge. Marge appears resigned to the abrasive nature of Dickie in large part due to this gender fatalism. And Clément, the director of *Purple Noon,* prepares the viewer for this ill treatment early in the film with the foreshadowing of how Dickie and Tom treat a woman whom they pick up on the street

and offer a ride around town with; they openly fondle her breasts/physically assault her, and then discard her at her destination; a precursor that in *Purple Noon* both announces Dickie's penchant for self-centered heteronormative masculine debauchery and announces Tom's heterosexuality, making his obsession with Dickie fraternal rather than homosexual to a 1960s film audience. In Highsmith's novel, this scene of Roman street life debauchery is queer coded, which Clément sought to revise. Highsmith writes:

> [Dickie and Tom] walked with their arms around each other's shoulders, singing, and around a dark corner they somehow bumped into a girl and knocked her down. They lifted her up, apologizing, and offered to escort her home. She protested, they insisted, one on either side of her. […] Dickie got a taxi. Dickie and Tom sat very properly on the jump seats with their arms folded like a couple of footmen, and Dickie talked to her and made her laugh. Tom could understand nearly everything Dickie said. They helped the girl out in a little street that looked like Naples again, and she said, "Grazie tante!" and shook hands with both of them, then vanished into an absolutely black doorway.
>
> "Did you hear that?" Dickie said. "She said we were the nicest Americans she'd ever met!"
>
> "You know what most crummy Americans would do in a case like that—rape her," Tom said.
>
> "Now where are we?" Dickie asked, turning completely around.
>
> […]
>
> "It's worth it to see a nice girl home, isn't it?" Dickie asked, staggering a little.

"Sure it is. I like girls," Tom said protestingly. "But it's just as well Marge isn't here tonight. We never could have seen that girl home with Marge with us."

"Oh, I don't know," Dickie said thoughtfully, looking down at his weaving feet. "Marge isn't—"

"I only mean, if Marge was here, we'd be worrying about a hotel for the night. We'd be *in* the damned hotel, probably. We wouldn't be seeing half of Rome!"

"That's right!" Dickie swung an arm around his shoulder. (67-8)

Although Tom understands nearly everything Dickie says in Italian, which he is studying as the novel progresses, I argue that he is perhaps alarmed at being outed as homosexual by this stranger in his inebriated and paranoid state; "grazie tante" translates to "Thank you very much," in Italian, but "tante" is a reference to homosexuals and therefore potential insult in French— "aunt" (Highsmith 63). His carousing shoulder-to-shoulder in the late Italian night (not daylight as in *Purple Noon*) with Dickie is an example of homosocial desire with homosexual undertones, and the acknowledgement of this idea moves Tom to threats of sexual violence to reassert his masculine and heterosexual role in society, which Dickie ignores. Tom is masquerading as heterosexual and fears his ruse has fooled no one. For good measure, he reminds Dickie that he likes girls, said in protest—however, Tom's queer acting (acting queer) is lost or unregistered on Dickie throughout the conversation. Rather, Dickie cautiously defends Marge from Tom's subtle insults, but acquiesces that he wouldn't have been able to have this adventure with Tom if Marge were also there with them, enacting a nurturing and sensible persona among the trio. Shannon writes of Clément's rewriting of this scene:

> Highsmith's novel […] confuse[s] filmmakers, as Clement's *Plein Soleil* jettisons
>
> any trace of Tom's homosexuality. In fact, in a strange bid to remove all hints of
>
> homoeroticism, one scene depicts Dickie and Tom involved in a mini-*ménage a*
>
> *trois*, both ravishing the same woman at once in what is, ironically, the most
>
> homoerotic scene in the film. In *Plein Soleil*, Tom's motivation is simple greed,
>
> and the film ends with Tom's capture and a restoration of order that neither
>
> Highsmith's nor Minghella's *Ripley* entirely allows. (19)

However, the homosocial bond between Dickie and Tom is more complicated than this. Straayer applies Sedgwick's term to this moment, writing:

> In the film *Purple Noon*, homosexuality remains subtextual, coded primarily (but
>
> not entirely) through triangles involving the two men and a woman. For example,
>
> early in the film Tom and Greenleaf are visiting Rome. During a game of
>
> pretending to be blind, Greenleaf induces a woman to join them. They take her on
>
> a buggy ride during which she is positioned between them as they both kiss and
>
> fondle her. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that such triangulation is an
>
> instance of "homosocial desire" in which the desire of two (assumed
>
> heterosexual) men for each other is exchanged through a woman. (116)

By attempting to remove or obfuscate the sexual tension between Tom and Dickie that acts as a driving force and occasional flash point for Tom in Highsmith's novel, Clément's *Purple Noon* reaches for heteronormativity but paradoxically becomes queerer, as it—like Tom in Highsmith's novel—protests too much. Minghella's film demonstrates the slipping of Tom's façade that unequivocally reveals his homosexuality to the viewer, while Clément's film amplifies scenes of male bravado to such a fevered pitch that they become parody. Nevertheless,

Clément's portrayal of gender fatalism reminds viewers of the realities of male privilege and female inequality for which millions of individuals would fight against in later years. The intersection of homosocial desire and male gender fatalism allow Tom to find Dickie, exhibit a socially unacceptable attraction to him, and contribute to his grandiose belief that he can successfully assume his identity after Dickie's death.

In the 1999 film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* directed by Minghella, Dickie (Jude Law) projects emotional violence onto Marge (Gwyneth Paltrow) rather than the physical violence seen in *Purple Noon*. Marge warns Tom (Leonardo DiCaprio), stating, "the thing with Dickie— it's like the sun shines on you and it's glorious, then he forgets you and it's very, very cold," which arrives with a precursor; upon introduction to Tom on an Italian beach, she says, "And be careful of the sun. Your gray's in danger of turning a little pink," in reference to Tom's whiteness that reveals his foreignness in the exotic locale of Italy where those of affluence spend their winters luxuriating in the sun. Understood as an interaction of levity, this is Marge announcing Tom as out of place with the sunbathing upper class—a signal that she can see through his façade—but in this joke is also a warning about the dangers of the sun; a metaphor for life with Dickie. This advice, unheeded, fails to keep Tom from being burned by Dickie. Dickie's power as a pseudo sun-god like figure is not unusual; as a wealthy, young, heterosexual white man, Dickie has been groomed to seize and exert power while other lives orbit around him. Rich writes of gender fatalism:

> Kathleen Gough lists eight characteristics of male power in archaic and contemporary societies which I would like to use as a framework: "men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine

them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male

transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of

the society's knowledge and cultural attainments." (638)

Dickie, in the films, exerts this power over Marge. And Marge feels this pressure from other men

in her life in the novel; for example, Marge converts to Catholicism for a former boyfriend,

suggesting her compliance with the expectations of her gender in an unequal society—a pressure

that is nonexistent for Dickie (Highsmith 61). Both *Purple Noon* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

take this further by featuring a scene absent in the novel wherein Dickie, Tom, and Marge are on

Dickie's boat, the *Pipistrello* (the winged mammal known as the bat, in English), and

immediately succeeding an argument between Marge and Dickie, Dickie decides to—in his

view—cheer Marge up through a sexual advance, irrespective of Marge's desires and Tom's

presence. In both films, Dickie takes Marge below deck under the presumption of privacy, and in

both films Tom voyeuristically watches from up above on the exterior of the boat; in *The*

Talented Mr. Ripley Tom's act of voyeurism is itself subject to voyeurism by Fred (Philip

Seymour Hoffman), who builds a case of suspicion early on about Tom's homoerotic

motivations as he watches Tom watching Dickie. In *Purple Noon* it is Dickie who acknowledges

Tom's view of himself. The viewers are meant to understand this peeping Tom (the phrase of

which predates the novel) moment as a character flaw of Tom Ripley, who is obsessed with

Dickie and is incapable of looking away. Less overtly, this scene in both films operates under

Gough's characteristic of using women as objects in male transactions; Tom's wanting to watch

Dickie is overshadowed by Dickie wanting to be watched. Shannon considers this scene from the

perspective of Marge, writing, "This Marge is an independent and self-assured 1990s woman,

sexually confident enough to make love to her boyfriend below deck on Dickie's boat while two

male acquaintances (Tom Ripley and Freddie Miles) wait above. Such a sexually confident woman […] is more a creature of the 1990s than the 1950s" (20). Rather, Dickie in these films is telegraphing his ability to have sex with a woman, anywhere, at any time, as a reminder to Tom (and Fred) that he is powerful and sexually desirable. "Minghella even feels it necessary to invent the pregnant Italian mistress, as if viewers could possibly mistake Dickie's love scene with Gwyneth Paltrow's Marge as anything less than wholly (and wholesomely) heterosexual," Shannon writes, although after the mistress becomes pregnant she commits suicide—viewers are left to discern that in this society, by refusing to marry her (betrothed, as Dickie is, to Marge) Dickie has provided this woman with a scarlet letter from which she may never recover (20). This serves to tarnish Dickie's character, whose selfish actions in Minghella's film assist in the viewer's sympathy towards Tom, while simultaneously speaking to the dangers of heterosexuality for women, where Marge's out of wedlock sexual coupling with Dickie is wholesome but this nameless Italian mistress' is not. If Straayer might be remembered for coining the term, "Tom is a psychopath" (in reference to Tom's panicked and presumptuous murder of Freddie in Highsmith's novel), in relation to the film iterations, I assert that Dickie is a cad, and this is meant to distance viewers from Dickie's normative protagonist male beauty (127).

That Dickie's heterosexuality needs to be affirmed on screen speaks to Highsmith's subtextual display of Dickie's sexuality in the novel. Dickie's unquestionable (hetero)sexuality paired with Tom's perpetually in question (homo)sexuality has caused great consternation in Dickie's portrayals in film and analysis of his sexuality in Highsmith's work. Shannon writes:

> In Highsmith's novel, there is very little indication that Dickie is romantically
>
> involved with Marge, or any woman. Dickie rejects the idea of a sexual

relationship between Marge and himself outright, calling the notion "silly." […]

While Tom is clearly not a disinterested observer of this relationship, nothing

substantial ever comes of [Dickie and Marge's interactions]. […] In fact, the

novel's Marge even suspects at one point that Dickie is homosexual. (20)

Shannon is referencing Marge's letter to Dickie; Marge pens a missive to Dickie after his

disappearance (death) in the novel, having taken his absence as rejection. Marge writes, "Why

don't you admit that you can't live without your little chum? I'm only sorry, old boy, that you

didn't have the courage to tell me this before and *outright*" (Highsmith 181 emphasis original).

"Outright" is the word Highsmith uses when Dickie confronts Tom about his homosexuality

("Nobody ever said it outright to him" (80)). However, I argue that Marge doesn't actually

believe Dickie is homosexual, but is instead trying to get a rise out of him to get him to respond

to her. Marge continues, "What do you think I am, a small-town hick who doesn't know about

such things? *You're* the one who's acting small-town! At any rate, I hope my telling you what

you hadn't the courage to tell me relieves your conscience a little bit and lets you hold your head

up. There's nothing like being proud of the person you love, is there! Didn't we once talk about

this?" (Highsmith 181 emphasis original). Marge continues, "I'd just given you credit for a lot

more guts" (Highsmith 181). By inciting anger in Dickie, Marge is hoping to gain a response; it

is a ploy which Dickie, due to his death, cannot challenge. Tom, reading Marge's letter over

breakfast, is gleeful at her anger rather than anxious over the implication of Dickie's

homosexuality, and his own by proxy; "it was all he could have expected," Highsmith writes,

"and more" (181). Dickie's heterosexuality, rather, is so "natural" as to be beyond reasonable

approach. Tom, who has spent most of the novel apprehensive of inferences to his own

homosexuality, does not brood nor obsess when Marge accuses Dickie of being in a homosexual

relationship with him. He does not even register it. Tom knows on some level that Dickie is heterosexual, and does not take Marge's accusations with any semblance of gravity. Trask analyzes this difference as a manifestation of reader awareness and unawareness of characters Tom and Dickie. Trask writes:

> Indeed, despite their uncanny physical resemblance, Tom could not be more unlike Dickie in one respect. Whereas Tom is always at risk of exposure (showing up on the beach, for instance, in a "very revealing" "yellow and black G-string," Dickie never really gives anything important about himself away. Put different, whereas Tom possesses a knack for conjecturing motives, Dickie is equally adept at finessing his own. "The Italian police could never get to the bottom of Signor Greenleaf's emotional involvements," Tom muses. "He hadn't been able to himself." Simultaneously reminiscent of phallic prowess and schoolboy innocence, his very name confirms the view that Highsmith means for us to take of Dickie as both a permanent child (and thus a kind of emotional blank) and a supremely virile adult. (601)

Dickie's heterosexuality becomes both hyperreal and nonexistent, verifying Berlant's point that heterosexuality is so pervasive in cultural norms as to not appear at all, a feat that heterosexuality benefits from. Eribon phrases it this way: "when a gay person claims to be gay, a heterosexual person is obliged to think of him or herself as heterosexual, whereas previously there would have been no need to ask oneself any questions about one's identity or the social order that enables it. That is a state of absolute privilege," of which Dickie claims in Highsmith works and the films that followed (54). Martin and Kazyak write, "Heteronormativity structures social life so that heterosexuality is always assumed, expected, ordinary, and privileged. Its pervasiveness makes it

difficult for people to imagine other ways of life" (316). As a white, heteronormative male,

Dickie moves throughout these stories wrapped in that privilege, and the people in his life (with

the exception of Freddie and his father, two other white heteronormative males) orient

themselves around him because of that (heterosexual) gender fatalism. However, Highsmith still

points to moments of masculine fragility that ultimately result in Dickie's death.

Dickie's Death

As with the beach scene, which verifies Tom's homosexuality and is missing in Clément's

Purple Noon and shortened in Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* to tighten the double male

protagonist narrative and strengthen Tom's attraction to Dickie (and later Peter Smith-Kingsley,

a minor character in the novel), and the clothing scene, which verifies Tom's orientation towards

Dickie and Dickie's life through Dickie's possessions, the passage in which Tom murders Dickie

on his boat in the novel is a critical point that offers insight into Tom's motivations and

character. A close examination of Dickie's murder demonstrates the heightened homosocial

desire between Dickie and Tom, and Tom's cruel optimism towards Dickie. Tom's inability to

distinguish between initiating a romantic advance and ending Dickie's life is a reflection of his

attraction to Dickie (and Minghella's Smith-Kingsley) in advance of their loss—his desire is so

socially dangerous that he also feels compelled to murder those he desires. Highsmith writes:

> Tom nodded, letting his understanding smile speak for him. Actually, he was
>
> terrified. God only knew how deep the water was here. If something happened to
>
> the boat suddenly, there wasn't a chance in the world that they could get back to
>
> shore, or at least that *he* could. But neither was there a chance that anybody could
>
> see anything that they did here. Dickie was swerving very slightly towards the
>
> right again, towards the long spit of fuzzy grey land, but he could have hit Dickie,

sprung on him, or kissed him, or thrown him overboard, and nobody could have

seen him at this distance. Tom was sweating […]. He felt afraid, but it was not of

the water, it was of Dickie. He knew that he was going to do it, that he would not

stop himself now, maybe *couldn't* stop himself, and that he might not succeed.

"You dare me to jump in?" Tom yelled, beginning to unbutton his jacket.

Dickie only laughed at this proposal from him […]. Tom kept on

undressing. […] "I'll go in if you will!" Tom shouted. "Will you?" He wanted

Dickie to slow down.

"Will I? Sure!" […] "Come on," Dickie said, nodding at Tom's trousers

that were still on.

Tom glanced at the land. […] He picked up the oar, as casually as if he

were playing with it between his knees, and when Dickie was shoving his trousers

down, Tom lifted the oar and came down with it on the top of Dickie's head.

(103-4)

Tom's loneliness and aloneness is heightened in this scene, as he understands that he is not

strong enough of an open water swimmer to make it to shore on his own; he is trapped in

Dickie's presence, whom he loves and wishes violence upon. And to overcome this feeling of

helplessness, Tom displays a bravado that backfires—as a part of his ruse in this new façade he

is presenting to Dickie to reaffirm his masculinity and therefore separate himself from his own

sexuality, he pretends as though he can swim safely in this water, and Dickie believes him. Tom

is caught in his own lie. The eroticism of this scene is clear. Highsmith, in this pivotal scene of

murder, intertwines homoeroticism, intimacy, and death; Tom murders Dickie as he is disrobing.

In the novel, Dickie's death is the result of Tom's cruel optimism towards Dickie, in which he can neither possess him nor withstand his rejection. Dickie, the object of Tom's desire, is not only undressing but is urging Tom to do so as well, "nodding at his trousers." It is precisely what Tom wants and doesn't want; he is urging Dickie to "slow down" and he is glancing not at Dickie's body, but at the safety of land—Highsmith allows for this hesitation to be read as Tom wishing for a safer environment and/or scanning the horizon for witnesses, just as Highsmith allows readers to consider Tom's desire for Dickie to slow down as a means for Tom to better control what becomes the murder scene. Straayer writes, "Although I have repeatedly characterized Tom Ripley as desiring upward mobility, the kiss-or-kill moment described above complicates any assumption that this *the* reason he kills Greenleaf" (123). In *Purple Noon*, however, Dickie's death is partially the result of self-defense, as Dickie has deposited Marge upon the shore and has turned his abusive and violent gaze onto Tom and Tom—realizing that his options are to fight for his life or surrender and potentially drown—chooses to fight. Clément overlays onto this a scene of gambling in which Dickie cheats to lose to Tom, and Tom insists that he cannot be bought, making the scene one of socioeconomic status and pride. In the 1999 film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Dickie's death is closer to Highsmith's second person close narration. Shannon writes, "the film suggests that Tom Ripley's impetuous murderous rage is linked to society's demand that he suppress his homosexual desire. […] Dickie's unmasking of Tom's true identity is too painful for Tom to endure, and the spurned man explodes in a blinding rage" (19). He kills Dickie because he is homosexual and cannot withstand Dickie's rejection.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined conceptions of homosexuality and heterosexuality, one conflating with villainy and the other conflating with power for men and violence for women in the *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith and the subsequent films that it inspired, *Purple Noon* by René Clément and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Anthony Minghella. Highsmith's homophobia and extreme attachment to her character Tom complicates a reading of this novel. Gordon writes:

> No one is better qualified than Highsmith—whose depiction of hidden homosexuality in the foxed Fifties is still in print today—to describe Tom's misery; to appreciate the psychological pressure to deny homosexuality, even in the face of a great love. It is a pressure so great that suicide is dwarfed by it. And so is murder. (18)

Denial, repression, cruel optimism, desire, and fatalism all work to present a novel that became immensely popular that nevertheless conflated villainy with homosexuality. "Every gay man starts off learning to lie," Eribon writes, not because homosexuals enjoy or are as adept at manipulation as Tom thinks he is, but rather because, in a rigidly heterosexual society, they had to in order to survive (100).

In closing, it is worth noting that various writers have interlocked the names of these characters in strange and telling ways. Some have written about Tom and Greenleaf; others, Ripley and Dickie. Some have furthered commented on Highsmith's unusual habit of signing autographs with Ripley's name, creating a further coalescence not only of Tom who becomes Dickie, but of Highsmith who becomes Tom. Trask goes as far as to psychoanalyze Dickie Greenleaf's full name, and the name of his boat; Trask writes, "Marge shows him Dickie's boat, the 'Pipi,' which Tom finds 'indiscernible' from the boats docked around it. 'The boats looked

very much alike, but Marge said Dickie's boat was larger than most of them.' While it may be 'short for Pipistrello,' Highsmith assures us, there is nothing diminutive about Dickie's 'Pipi,'" which furthers an examination of Dickie's not-so-latent (heterosexual) virility (601). Why *Pipistrello*, Italian for bat, when Highsmith had been an infamous cat ally, and thought highly of snails ("Machado")? We can presume that Dickie named the boat for its ability to glide seamlessly on the water, or for its keen sense of auto-location; and we the readers might assume that Highsmith—in this psychological thriller—was offering a sinister hint of the macabre; an omen of what was to pass on this winged creature of the night. I argue, rather, that it has to do with blindness. For in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Highsmith has constructed characters who are all cunning, intelligent, or affluent—bats who rule their class or stalk their prey—who are also exceptionally short-sided, blind as bats. Dickie never suspected that Tom would put him in mortal danger; Tom did not think beyond a series of short-term ruses and impulsive murders; while Marge, the wisest of the trio, was led to believe that Dickie was still alive.

2. *Another Country* and *Vanishing Rooms*: Gender, Race, and Sexuality

I was brown, visibly different but with no real account of that difference; no real sense of where it or I was coming from. I kept feeling wrong, being treated as in the wrong, but I did not know what was wrong. Something was wrong. How to acquire the words for this something? – Sara Ahmed

I propose the somewhat controversial notion that slave narratives as a literary concept have not ended in America, as structural and institutional racism has not ended with the abolishment of slavery; rather, America's white heteronormative patriarchal society has continued to subjugate many identities, including the Black identity, which has paved a pathway for these individuals to more easily become villains rather than heroes. African-American literature in the 20th Century describes Black experiences that are tangled with issues of racial inequality that grew from racial structures developed in the 19th and 18th centuries to explain, affirm, and uphold a society whose top echelon benefitted from the ideologies of white supremacy, and are therefore extensions or prodigies of slave narratives. For W. J. T. Mitchell, the centrum is that of human being commodification:

> The central issue is clearly the reduction of human personhood and individuality
> to the status, not just of mere instrumentality and servitude, but to commodity,
> object of economic exchange. In his analysis of the fetish-character of
> commodities, Marx imagines what it would be like if the commodity could speak.
> The deepest answer, I suggest, is contained in the nexus of narrative, memory,

and slavery. It is not just that the slave speaks of a time when he was a

commodity, but that his speaking itself becomes a new form of commodity. (196)

Mitchell is arguing that the slave's ability to participate in philosophical dialogue—a shift in

expected communal contributions from proletariat physical labor—in the form of a slave

narrative that overlays the slave experience upon widely held Christian systems of morality that

overturn ideals of good and evil becomes itself a commodity that may be bought or sold, and

thereby enters a capitalistic society as something with monetary value. This is a different

perspective of slave commodification that further embedded the slave narrative into the

following generations. Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings* approaches slavery from an almost

diametrical yet equally useful ideological perspective:

> Unlike more recent trauma histories where there are still living survivors, the
>
> history of slavery presents the challenge of a missing archive, not only because of
>
> its generational distance but also because even in its time it was inadequately
>
> documented, or more precisely, systematically undocumented given restrictions
>
> on literacy for slaves, and governed subsequently by racisms that have suppressed
>
> subaltern knowledges. This traumatic history necessarily demands unusual
>
> strategies of representation. (38)

Instead of relying upon the fraction of slave narratives that have entered the market, Cvetkovich

is concerned with the vast amount of sociological data that has been silenced and ultimately

erased in the annals of time, thus creating a vacuum for which the restrictors—namely, a white

American ruling class—were offered an opportunity to fill. Understood together, Mitchell

suggests that the economical machine that makes slave narratives and their iterations beyond the

legal abolishment of slavery valuable thrived in the memory of slavery, while Cvetkovich raises

the possibility that this memory is not solely or entirely predicated on Black thought, and that

Black representations of Black culture necessarily require counter-cultural depictions of itself.

Mitchell draws attention to a societal structure that benefits from reproducing its own top-down

representations of Black bodies and Black (non-)agency, while Cvetkovich urges an

understanding of this structure as perpetuating systemic racism that would require actors to fight

against this representation in order for these actors to develop any agency at all. When Baldwin

published and shed light on some subaltern knowledges of the Black community by making them

palatable to a white audience that had preconceived expectations of the Black community, he set

out to challenge and rebuild those tropes and expectations. Arguably, he was successful enough

to have his work echoed in future generations; in this chapter, Baldwin's novel *Another Country*

will be discussed concurrently with a novel that responds to it thirty years later: Melvin Dixon's

Vanishing Rooms.

Feminism in Another Country

Utilizing feminism to analyze the relationship of the women in *Another Country* enriches the

understandings of varied intersections of identities, which better demonstrates how certain

characters are destined to become and/or remain willful, and therefore villainous. Baldwin scripts

class, racial and gender boundaries onto the characters of Cass and Ida in order to illuminate

societal restrictions that more easily vilify some and exonerate others. Because of Baldwin's

observations and critics of gender inequality, one may consider him to be a feminist. To define

feminism, Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life* builds upon hooks' work:

> I want to take here bell hooks's definition of feminism as "the movement to end
>
> sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression." From this definition, we learn

so much. Feminism is necessary because of what has not ended: sexism, sexual

exploitation, and sexual oppression. And for hooks, "sexism, sexual exploitation

and sexual oppression" cannot be separated from racism, from how the present is

shaped by colonial histories including slavery, as central to the exploitation of

labor under capitalism. (*Living* 5)

The parallels of gender and racial inequalities are made clear through hooks' writing, and

Ahmed's emphasis on the continuation of the movement suggests the continued inequalities of

these power dynamics. In Baldwin's Ida, we see a woman who must manipulate a society that

has structured itself against her race and her gender in order to survive; her success represents a

toppling of that structured system and therefore all actions she takes toward achieving her

dreams constitute a threat to that society. Baldwin encourages the reader to compare Cass to Ida,

who are both subjugated by a patriarchal society but whose race and class differentiate one from

the other, and whose achievements and failures are received according to that structure, which

demands Cass to be a private and faithful steward to her husband's lineage and Ida to be and

remain not private, but invisible. Baldwin explores the nuances of intersectionality within

femininity by contrasting Cass and Ida, from which one may further understand the basis of

villainy.

Cass' corporal safety depends upon her diminutive placement within American society;

as a white woman in the 1950s, she is expected to limit herself to her home and pre-approved

social venues, or to be accompanied by an appropriate male chaperone. Cass' life as a housewife

requires her to shield herself from the public sphere. When Cass arrives at Rufus' funeral in a

predominately Black neighborhood, she realizes that she is without a head covering, so she

frantically searches the area for a shop that might carry something respectful for entering a

church; a metaphorical shielding through clothing. She considers stopping someone to ask for directions, but "she realized that she was mysteriously afraid: afraid of these people, these streets, the chapel to which she must return" (Baldwin, *Another* 117). Cass experiences fear because she does not feel connected to this neighborhood; the stark racial division plays a significant role in her anxiety, as well as a class divide exacerbated by structural racism. The affect of social expectations are such that her status as a middle class white woman in any Black neighborhood becomes suspect. Her fear of transgressing this social boundary separates her from her surroundings, which has become dangerous in her fear of the unknown—Ahmed writes, "it is a white female body that is assumed to be vulnerable and in need of protection from others [...whereas] a brown body is not perceived as a fragile female body" (Ahmed, *Living* 34). Were Cass Black, and venturing into a white neighborhood, her fear of crossing an unspoken social boundary would still exist, however her body would no longer be perceived as delicate. The first interaction Cass has after registering her fear is with a Black salesclerk who approaches Cass, wearing "a violently green dress," which Baldwin uses to further emphasize this divide between white and Black bodies (*Another* 117). This is one intersection of race and gender: Cass's whiteness and femininity make her appear weak and protectable, whereas this salesgirl's Blackness obscures the gendered femininity that otherwise would have been coded as weak and protectable in a white heteronormative patriarchy; the salesclerk's Blackness means that she may be employed, on a Sunday, and prevents her the protections afforded to women like Cass. Stockton writes, "[...] historically, Black women have often been blocked from (the bourgeois ideal of) feminine passivity, whereas Black men have often been blocked from (the bourgeois ideal of) masculine activity," which Baldwin demonstrates here and for whom the concept of masculinity is discussed later in this chapter (83). Baldwin's emphasis on this dichotomy of

women highlights racial disparities in America, but in so doing he later demonstrates a moment of vilification of Black women. He brings this ideology directly to Ida when she is at dinner with Cass and Cass muses that she does not know what one replaces a dream with; before Ida answers, "reality," Cass looks to Ida and sees her in a new light; Baldwin writes, "then Cass sensed, for the first time in her life, the knowledge that Black people had of white people […] and, for a second, she hated Ida with all her heart" (*Another* 357). Previously Cass was unaware of the emotional and intellectual labor that non-white individuals have to expend in order to exist in society, and by acknowledging this difference Cass must also recognize that Ida is external to the white heteronormative patriarchy and is therefore an outsider and potentially dangerous by virtue of her foreignness. Cass does not want to view Ida, because to see her would be to recognize disparities within society, which Cass then despises. This moment reveals the ability that Cass, who holds more societal power than Ida, has to unsee Ida as a benefit of said societal power—a microcosm of race relations in America in which a dominant White society is not made to recognize the minority Black society that the former subordinated. Cass' hatred of Ida is made possible by Ida's identity as neither fragile nor (white and therefore not) feminine to the bourgeoisie. Cass is further enflamed by Ida's advantage of societal knowledge of white culture that Cass cannot reciprocate, thereby giving Ida an advantage that Cass is without. In a speech Baldwin gives at the University of Chicago in 1963, Baldwin says:

> […] the only people in the world who understand Americans, are what we like to
>
> refer to as the darker brother; that's me. And I understand you, because I've had
>
> to watch you, outwit you: I changed your diapers; I served your brandy; I've
>
> known what you were frightened of when you called me nigger. I had to know it,
>
> if I were going to live. ("The Moral Responsibility of the Artist")

Baldwin in this speech and in his fiction emphasizes the question of race, and answers the

question of who carries the emotional burden of racial inequity; Baldwin is asserting that white

Americans enforced the social construct of race, and therefore they are the ones must make

whole the "Race Problem" that white Americans are often more comfortable relegating to

minorities as another form of outsourced (emotional/intellectual) labor; African-Americans are

made to reconcile racial inequities in America that they themselves did not create, holding

competing cultural ideals of themselves (e.g. DuBois' Double Consciousness) to survive in

society, and risking anger and resentment by taking up space to tell one's own story. This

additional labor and consciousness of its presence speaks to a societal imbalance that often

breeds anger and resentment at multiple ends of its spectrum: Baldwin, in this example, shows

this anger in Cass. Cass vilifies Ida for knowing how the world works and trying to succeed in it

despite her social status—the prerequisite for all villains is the refusal to "know" and therefore

accept one's place at the bottom of a social stratum, thereby challenging the boundaries and

social strata of society itself.

When examining Ida's positionality, one may consider Ahmed's conception of

Willfulness, in which a character or person whose identity places them in a minority is

reprimanded or read as troublesome for demanding equity. By demanding a shift in societal

power dynamics, Ida is inherently understood as dangerous, because those in a position of power

may understand sharing power as a subtraction or negation. This demand is shocking because it

is coming from a person who is not thought to socially exist. Quoting a Zora Neale Hurston

scholar, Ahmed writes:

As James Saunders notes, "The emphasis is on 'willful' because for so long, so

many black women have not been considered to be in possession of their own free

wills." Any will is a willful will if you are not supposed to have a will of your

own. A willful will is what you will need when it is presumed you do not have a

will of your own. (*Living* 78)

Ida is not presumed to have a will because Ida, as a Black woman in Cass's eyes, lacks agency.

Baldwin implies this early and often in *Another Country* through Cass's objectification of Ida as

doll-like in nature—an object designed to be objectified. When Ellis approaches her and asks

what she would like to do with her life, that it must be more than becoming head waitress, Ida

responds first with bitterness, and then hesitation before declaring her will: to be a singer

(Baldwin, *Another* 161-2). This bitterness and seizing the opportunity to express it further

irritates Cass; Cass does not presume Ida to have the capacity for anger, and when this anger

fractures Cass' worldview, Cass becomes hostile in retaliation. Ahmed writes:

The angry black woman can be described as a kill-joy; she may even kill feminist

joy, for example, by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics. As

Audre Lorde describes: "When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces

so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are 'creating

a mood of helplessness,' 'preventing white women from getting past guilt,' or

'standing in the way of trusting communication and action.'" The exposure of

violence becomes the origin of violence. The black woman must let go of her

anger for the white woman to move on. ("Happy Objects" 39)

The message is clear between Cass and Ida; Ida is not allowed to bring up the inequalities she

feels because of her position in life—vis-à-vis her race—that deny her the privilege of Cass'

white femininity, namely dreaming; a privilege that Cass was unaware she possessed until Ida

drew attention to it. Cass presumed the right of affluence as natural until she truly saw someone

who is regularly denied that right, and who dares to draw attention to it. Class and privilege are forms of remembered forgetting; the ability to take for granted one's advantages is desirable, and being reminded that it is an advantage is a reminder that it may be revoked, thus stirring feelings of anger, insecurity, and fear. This is why Cass' emotion towards Ida is hatred; a kill joy is a villainous character who reminds society that their gains may one day be lost by presenting themselves as a person who has lost or been denied that privilege. The proof is in their visibility.

Cass is able to suppress Ida, but Cass herself is suppressed by patriarchy. Baldwin writes, "[…] the world's judgment, should it ever be necessary to face it, would condemn Cass yet more cruelly than Ida. For Ida was not white, nor married, nor a mother. The world assumed Ida's sins to be natural, whereas those of Cass were perverse" (Baldwin, *Another* 345-6). Ida becomes a natural villain whose slide into impropriety could be understood as inevitable, while Cass is an unnatural one; Ida cannot fall from grace because, lacking whiteness, marital status, or children to affirm her value as a woman, she has no grace from which to fall. While some readers may use this opportunity to sympathize with Cass, Baldwin asks readers to sympathize all the more with Ida, who hasn't anything to lose. In this way, Baldwin's attention to the intersectionality of gender, race, and social class demonstrates a fundamental questioning of an ideological villain pipeline that presents some characters—more often poor, racially othered, and ill-fitting within affluent constructions of gender roles—as already destined for villainous behavior.

Achieving Happiness

Desire, and the quest of achieving that desire plays a significant role in Baldwin's and Dixon's works. Desire sparks characters into action, and the inability to achieve those desires marks a character as unfulfilled, and as a consequence those characters become undesirable themselves.

Happiness and the appearance of happiness is one of those desires; all characters who are unhappy are expected to reach towards happiness, and characters who cannot obtain happiness are not emulated by the reader. However, throughout the twentieth century, what happiness consists of ideologically reinforces an upper-middle class white heteronormative patriarchal status quo whose affect are antithetical to some character's sense of personal well-being; even by achieving these goals, some characters realize that this version of happiness could never apply to them.

Some characters appear to the reader as inherently disaffected—unhappy—or are introduced as disaffected and whose appearance throughout the work reinforces and maintains their lack of belonging; Rufus and Ida are two of these characters. Some characters appear to have been in the past, present, and likely future, always unhappy. Ahmed examines the process and flow of these affects and argues that instead of being reactionary to exterior events, people arrive always-already in a state of complex emotions that are then read or reinforced by their exteriors. Ahmed writes:

> If bodies do not arrive in neutral, if we are always in some way or another moody, then what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation. This second argument challenges for me Brennan's first argument about the atmosphere being what is "out there" getting "in": it suggests that how we arrive, how we enter this room or that room will affect what impressions we receive. After all, to receive is to act. To receive an impression is to make an impression. ("Happy Objects" 36-7)

Readers are introduced to Rufus when he is already at a low point, meandering through New York City, where "[strangers] could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor could they have borne

the sight of Rufus, but they knew why he was in the streets tonight, why he rode subways all night long, why his stomach growled, why his hair was nappy, his armpits funky […]" (Baldwin, *Another* 4). This kind of social rejection and lack of community plagues Rufus and reinforces the impression he develops of other people, perhaps making it all the easier for him to form an aggressive and abusive bond with Leona; as Rufus sees himself at the lowest stratum of society's hierarchy in large part due to his race, when Leona lowers herself to uplift Rufus' ego, he concludes that she must be worth less, and therefore worthless. Gibson writes of the positionality of Rufus in *Salvific Manhood*:

> When Baldwin begins *Another Country*, he paints a very dark picture of Rufus
> and hurries the reader into a confrontation with the drummer's abjection. Within
> the first fifty pages we learn that Rufus is "one of the fallen…one of those who
> had been crushed on the day, which was every day, these towers fell"; we learn
> that the first character we meet, Rufus, is "entirely alone, and dying of it." (125)

Rufus is on the edge of society, and Gibson argues that this positionality is in no small part due to his emasculation by said society. Gibson writes that "Rufus's newfound madness is heavily rooted in his preoccupation with having his black manhood surveyed and regulated by a power-stripping white gaze," which surfaces in Baldwin's writing as several white characters with whom Rufus interacts—including Leona and Vivaldo—referring to him as "Boy," and through impressing a paternal affection onto him that suggests that he is incapable of navigating the world as a productive adult, a contributing member of society, and as an individual (121). Ultimately, his maladaptive behavior retroactively reinforces the impression that society has of him; he is belittled, he becomes belittled, and then he learns to belittle. He is treated as though he is less than a human being and in turn he responds as such and then this treatment is reinforced,

eventually leading Rufus to the conclusion that there are no redeeming qualities about himself or

others. This is a trope that Baldwin explores at great length. When Vivaldo asks Ida to meet his

family, she declines, stating that, "I know that I am not about to be bugged by any more white

jokers who still can't figure out whether I'm human or not," and when Vivaldo quips that she is

behaving unchristianly, she responds, "it's the best I can do. I learned all my Christianity from

white folks," emphasizing twice the way in which affect produces action, reaction, or inaction

(Baldwin 279). Ida doesn't believe she will be treated kindly by Vivaldo's family, so she

responds sourly to his suggestion, and is then read as sour. For Rufus, this is a self-fulfilling

prophecy in which he is first vilified by society, then becomes a villain in society's eyes, and

forever remains a villain to society. Characters throughout these novels are predestined to be,

become, and remain—simultaneously—pariahs, who never achieve well-adjustment in society,

or, who never become happy.

Happiness is denied to these characters. Even though contemporary happiness is not a

neutral state of emotion, this happiness remains elusive for these characters in particular because

of their varied minority statuses and more notably because of their non-whiteness. Ahmed writes,

"happiness relates to the idea of being lucky, or favored by fortune, or being fortunate," as a

memento that a perpetual state of happiness—*they lived happily ever after*—is to live illogically

on one side of Fortuna's wheel in a contemporary etymological shift from the word's original

root that referred to an action either positive or negative; happiness has the same origin as

happenstance or happening, which is luck blind, meaning that over time the word has dropped its

negative connotations and therefore its neutrality ("Happy Objects" 30). Happiness was a neutral

state of being, a position in which good or ill-fortune may occur, and over time it came to have a

positive affect, and to not be happy or achieve happiness meant that a character was unsettled,

unlucky, unfortunate, or represented an omen of negativity: a harbinger of further dissatisfaction. Unhappiness also means that a character is unable to relate to or approve of society at large, as happiness equates to an agreement with the fortune of the status quo and unhappiness to a desired change with the status quo. Unhappiness means that something is wrong and action must be taken, whereas happiness encourages stasis, or even a reversal to a previous time. It is perhaps no coincidence that whiteness and maleness transformed in the same progression as happiness; while they were once nothing more than states of being, they have come to signify luckiness, fortune, and the status quo. Persons without those signifiers who attempt to reach for them are contemptuous for transgressing the state of being assigned to them by society, and those who call attention to this system to elevate their state of being to the neutrality expressed by whiteness or maleness are labeled as unhappy troublemakers: Cass, in not exhibiting contentedness to only mother a clear patriarchal line for her husband is read as an unhappy troublemaker when she initiates an affair; Ida who wishes for better societal treatment than her race and gender afford her and a prominent career in the public sphere is read as an unhappy troublemaker; Eric and Jesse who each attempt to navigate a domestic, homosexual relationship are unhappy troublemakers for failing to heterosexually partner. In this way, Ahmed's argument that "happiness becomes proximity to whiteness," is expanded to include other signifiers of a white heterosexual patriarchy, and happiness incentivizes itself to encourage people to conform to itself (*Living* 52). Ahmed documents this incentivization, or perpetual prearrival, of unhappiness in the following social struggle between parent and queer child: "the father is unhappy as he thinks the daughter will be unhappy if she is queer. The daughter is unhappy as the father is unhappy with her being queer. The father witnesses the daughter's unhappiness as a sign of the truth of his position: that she *will be* unhappy because she is queer" ("Happy Objects" 43,

emphasis mine). In other words, everyone wishes to be happy, but happiness is specific to a society's culture and values, and that society can apply societal pressure to enforce selected paths of happiness for selected people, and discourage other paths of happiness accordingly, even closing paths of happiness for certain groups of people indefinitely. That happiness is denied to African-American characters in *Another Country* and *Vanishing Rooms*.

The controlling of that future happiness begins with one's history and memory; one's narrative. The way in which these characters arrive unhappy and continue to remain unhappy is due to their minority status. Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*:

> In every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory,
> that is, to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery. This was as true in
> Africa as in the Americas. A slave without a past had no life to avenge. No time
> was wasted yearning for home, no recollections of a distant country slowed her
> down as she tilled the soil, no image of her mother came to mind when she looked
> into the face of her child. (155)

A slave has no past, and truly has no future if one conceptualizes the future as an improvement of the present. A slave has their cultural history striped from them, and must depend upon their slave owner's imaginations of the future, which does not make room for the slave's future happiness. In Ghana, when asked about the discussion of slavery in America by a chief, Hartman's colleague explains, "Only the blacks were slaves […] if you are black and in America, people know that you came to the country as a slave" (197). Hartman clarifies that race and slavery in America is more complicated than this, but concedes that time still has not healed the societal rupture and social stratum caused by slavery that was not erased by the abolishment of slavery (197). In other words, slave narratives persist because the affects of slavery continue

to circulate in America. The pursuit of happiness becomes a marker of whiteness and heterosexual patriarchal will; those of early American slave owners. Further, happiness expresses itself as a dominate will—everyone who moves towards happiness and therefore a willfulness to achieve happiness within the parameters of society's cultures and values (choosing the "correct" path of happiness) is not recognized as willful at all; rather, attempting to redefine those parameters in a way that does not benefit the affect of society or attempting to find an alternative path towards happiness is understood within the negative lens of willful, or unhappy, such as the queer daughter which Ahmed illustrates. Ahmed writes, "Marilyn Frye argues that oppression involves the requirement that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself. For Frye, 'anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous.' Perceptions can be sticky," suggesting that, those who are not destined for preestablished forms of happiness courtesy of preapproved identity markers should withstand their truncated plight with pleasantness or risk being read as entering the room, the street, or the novel as not merely unhappy, but also dangerous (*Living* 54). People who challenge the status quo that has constructed a sense of happiness for some are understood as threatening that happiness, and hatred or ostracization of them becomes warranted. Stickiness is the term that Ahmed uses to examine affect's ability to transfer from person to person, object to person, object to object, and person to object, as well as affect's perpetuation; with all of these characters, their perception as unhappy and/or dangerous because of that unhappiness remains with them, and marks them forever as rejectable from society.

To be African-American, gendered female, and/or homosexual in mid-century America was to be villainized by society, and therefore to be denied happiness. Perceived as unhappy and unlucky, anyone who challenged the white heteronormative patriarchal status quo that truncated

societal affluence and the dreams of others were perceived as troublemakers who could never be satisfied or at peace.

Setting, Insult and Social Structures

Over the course of the longue durée of the 21ˢᵗ century, many minority and ethnic identities have migrated to American cities in order to increase their opportunity to find gainful employment, establish an independent lifestyle, or to build a stronger community with like-minded individuals. These identities include African-Americans, women, and homosexuals. Those who are not at the top of the societal hierarchy often must travel to a place where they hope to no longer be subjugated, and that place has historically been a metropole wherein they might at least find a like-minded community that may increase their social safety net. The societal hierarchy from which these minority identities emerge range in size from national to nuclear—all attempting to escape a hostile rural or suburban landscape in which one's rights or culture is restricted, even within other forms of minority identities. Hartman notes, "flight was the most common response of threatened communities everywhere. Predatory states produced migrants and fugitives as well as slaves" (226). Eribon, in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* considers family structures and the nuances of racial and homophobic insults:

> A black youth will most likely live in a black family, and thus, to the extent that
>
> he or she is subjected to racism, will likely be supported by his or her family
>
> through that experience. A gay youth is rather unlikely to live in a gay or lesbian
>
> family, and the insult and stigmatization found in the exterior world are likely to
>
> be found in the family as well. (62)

A black gay youth, therefore, might have familial support against racism but not against homophobia, and may find the urbanscape in which they grew up in simultaneously inviting and alienating. The stigmatization of being outted to one's family and/or disowned within one's nuclear community is one of a myriad of reasons that homosexuals moved toward city centers, where homosexuals can more easily construct communities that diffuse or subvert stigmatization. The settings of James Baldwin's works are often New York and Paris not because he did not travel elsewhere, but because they represented those tensions of invitation and alienation. When Eric in *Another Country* suggests that he and LeRoy leave the rural south, he names New York, Chicago, and San Francisco as destinations, forecasting the stark difference between rural and urban homosexual acceptability that will be examined in depth in a future chapter (Baldwin, *Another* 203). Setting, and particularly the public/private divide, construct possibilities for societal hierarchies to be reinforced through the possibility of insult.

Examples of homosexual familial confrontations are nearly absent in Baldwin, with the exception of Ida alluding to Rufus' desirability to men and women while failing to speak for Rufus' agency in that desire, but Dixon approaches this fraught social interaction with Ruella, whose brother Phillip makes known his homosexual relationship with Abdul while they are in prison (*Another* 83; 138). While Ida does not discuss Rufus' sexuality while he is alive, and distances herself from it in his death, Ruella takes a more accepting approach of her brother. Ida approaches this moment when she presses Eric about his friendship with Rufus, searching for a reason why no one stopped Rufus from committing suicide; Ida is separated from her brother by her heterosexuality, which she experiences not as privilege but as a form of distance, however, that privilege does not exist for Eric. Eric expresses guilt about failing to be a good member of Rufus' community by not being available to him, in the end, and Ida's response is:

"Oh." She looked at him from very far away. "You may have wanted more form

him than he could give. Many people did, men *and* women." She allowed this to

hang between them for an instant. Then, "He was terribly attractive, wasn't he? I

always think that that was the reason he died, that he was too attractive and didn't

know how—how to keep people away." She sipped her drink. "People don't have

any mercy. They tear you limb from limb, in the name of love. Then, when you're

dead, when they've killed you by what they made you go through, they say you

didn't have any character. They weep big, bitter tears—not for *you*. For

themselves, because they've lost their toy."

"That's a terribly grim view," he said, "of love." (Baldwin, *Another* 265)

This is one of only two passages in which Ida discusses Rufus' sexuality; here, Rufus'

bisexuality makes him capable of being destroyed not by one sex, but by two. Ida sees Rufus as a

passive object who sustains but not participates in homosexual acts. In the other instance Vivaldo

says, "I just don't see why it should matter to you […]. So [Eric] likes a roll in the hay with a

man. So what?" to which Ida responds, "He wanted a roll in the hay with my brother, too. […]

He wanted to make him as sick as he is," suggesting that if Eric had succeeded in sleeping with

Rufus, he would make him sick as well, asserting both fears of contamination and insult against a

homosexual lifestyle (Baldwin, *Another* 323). Arguments of and anxieties around moral

contagion speak to the fears surrounding vice, villainy. and homosexuality, in which being black,

poor, or homosexual—or being in contact with those who were black, poor, homosexual, or not

"from the right side of town" or "from a good family" increased the likelihood of a social status

transmission of devaluation. The sickness Ida speaks of is not physical, but mental and societal,

which leads a character down a path towards villainy. As Ida speaks through her grief, she

accuses the very same Eric of not being a better friend to Rufus; Eric is expected to be closer to Rufus due to their homosexual identities and Ida less so due to her heterosexuality despite her familial bond. Baldwin infers through Ida Eribon's notion that the ties of the homosexual community—again, safer and more public in urban settings—are stronger than familial ties. This distance in *Vanishing Rooms* is physical, as Phillip and Abdul may achieve close proximity in prison while Ruella, despite her tacit support of their union, may only visit them from the outside. The absence of familial discussion, support, or dissent is clear in Baldwin and while Dixon complicates this briefly in *Vanishing Rooms*, the fact remains that the further away from whiteness and heterosexuality a character is identified to be, the more likely they are in these novels to be rejected from various forms of generational wealth or community; like most villains, they appear distanced, alone, or othered.

Homosexuals can occasionally pass as heterosexual or asexual in a heteronormative society, in ways that other identity markers cannot so easily be obscured, adding to the affect of slipperiness that surrounds homosexuality in popular culture, as homosexuals decide whether or not to "out" themselves to each new person in any social interaction. A homosexual is a person who, Eribon writes, "is never done with the necessity of choosing to be himself or herself in the face of a stigmatizing society," and therefore publicly or privately self-identifies/confirms their identity—perpetually—throughout their lives as a part of a social performative script constructed for homosexuals and omitted for heterosexuals (113). Ahmed utilizes the metaphor of a road or pathway to describe heterosexuality: a well-worn path becomes easier to use and more difficult to diverge from, so much so that the road's existence is no longer questioned but understood as normal, natural, and/or easy, from which constant divergence becomes wearing on its traveler, thereby assuring its positionality as status quo. It is easier and often safer to remain silent about

one's homosexuality because that silence implies the path of heterosexuality, even though a future outing could be understood as deception. Heterosexuality, whiteness, and patriarchy work to make themselves synonymous with being, so as to minimize the amount of emotional or intellectual labor involved with questioning themselves; these shortcuts aid the travelers along these paths. Heterosexuals don't have to think about their own heterosexuality, its announcement, or the warmth of its reception; the affluence of whiteness is the ability to not have to think about one's race as a race; men have eschewed thinking critically about gender inequality or the ways in which they hold societal and financial power made unavailable to women. Questioning the ways in which these paths have been paved involves emotional and intellectual labor that its users may avoid. Holders of absolute privilege do not like to be questioned about their absolute privilege, and seldom care to share their privileged status, which they have understood as their innate and rightful path. Those who converse the paths of racial minorities, of being gendered female, or of homosexuality are subjugated, and when they are presumed as leaving their given paths and passing or masquerading as white, male, or heterosexual, they become subject to social punishment.

Further, Eribon's conception of insult suggests that despite the relative safety implied within intimate relationships—i.e. two individuals—there is always the possibility of emotional harm; insult removes the possibility of privacy for the insulted. Eribon refers to insult as a "way of looking me over and a way of dispossessing me," which illustrates that to be insulted is to be seen—recognized—and then, attacked or forsaken (16). An example of this occurs when Metro calls Jesse a "nigger" while they are making love, during a tender and vulnerable moment for Jesse, who narrates:

I kissed him. I kissed him everywhere: forehead, eyes, nose, lips, neck, nipples,

navel, and there. I held him tight. His penis responded to my caresses, and I

kissed it again and again. Metro held me, his thighs tight, his fingers knotting my

hair. His moan, my moan, some kind of song from his deep chest and mine. But it

wasn't a song and his chest wasn't filling with desire or love that could hold

safety and assurance for us. It wasn't that, but his teeth edging like a razor on one

word: "Nigger."

     I froze. My stomach churned with sudden fear and heat. I reached for the

light. I couldn't say anything. I looked at him. My words were slow in coming.

"What did you say?"

     "I said, 'nigger.'"

     "You mean that, Metro?"

     "You wanted it low, didn't you? You wanted it dirty. Yes, I meant it."

     "But I don't understand what you mean."

     "You wanted to ride the rough train, huh? Well, ride it, nigger."

     "You goddamn son of a bitch."

     "No, I'm Metro, remember. You call me that. You want it low. You want

me to take you there. Down under. Well, down under you ain't nothing but a

nigger. A coal-black nigger." (Dixon 113-4)

Metro brings a public insult into a private sphere, looking Jesse over and dispossessing him in

spite of their intimacy, thus suggesting to Jesse that nowhere is he safe from emotional harm.

The ability for multiple identities to be insulted reinforce a white heteronormative patriarchy

which elevates itself beyond reproach; both Metro and Jesse are homosexual, an insultable

identity, but only Jesse is insulted based on his lack of whiteness. Similarly, either could one day refer to the other as a "faggot," despite both claiming a homosexual identity. Eribon writes that, "in insult, it is one's inner sanctum that is threatened, one's heart of hearts, what the spiritual tradition calls the 'soul.' If a well-targeted insult provokes such a strong echo in the consciousness of the person at whom it is directed, it is because this 'soul' has been created through socialization in a world of insult and inferiorization," suggesting that insults are reiterative utterances that are effective only through socialization designed to subjugate or other a person or persons (66). Insulting names are insulting because society has stigmatized them as such, and through public repetition have survived. Thus, insults carry the weight and tradition of societal norms within them. When they are leveled in private spaces they become more damaging because they remove a perception of privacy while decreasing the ability of public dissent or amplification aimed towards the insulter. Cvetkovich writes, "[…] sexual trauma seems to be in danger of invisibility, especially due to the gendered divide between private and public spheres," and Metro sexually traumatizes Jesse by insulting him, in this instance based on his race rather than sexual orientation, in a way that is publicly invisible, allowing Metro's insult to remain unchecked (30). Metro is Jesse's chosen family, and he offers support for Jesse's homosexuality, but he insults his race. An insult is damaging to the recipient, but it is also a performance that usually prefers an audience to reify decanting social strata—you are *this* and therefore I must not be *this* and as *this* warrants public shaming whereas I do not; my social stratum must be above yours in our shared social hierarchy. Without public amplification, within the private sphere, insult works primarily to remind the recipient that in no space may they feel safe or unguarded, and it secondarily reminds them that in a society of two, they may consider themselves to be at the bottom of a dichotomous social hierarchy. In other words, insult is a

public facing negative socialization, made worse when administered privately because of the ability for it to seep more deeply into the consciousness of the recipient and/or lower their standing to the lowest possible place, to the point of achieving invisibility. Jesse has imbibed a socially traumatic insult; he knows what it means to be called a "nigger," and ultimately represses this sexually traumatic exchange with Metro. It resurfaces as a flashback dream, further emphasizing the trauma of the moment: nowhere is Jesse safe from insult (Dixon 114). Rufus is insulted by his sister Ida for his homosexuality, and Jesse is insulted by his lover Metro for his race. For identities that represent a minority perspective—those that cannot claim a trifecta of white, heterosexual, and male—the threat of insult is perpetual in both public and private spheres.

The public/private division has long been utilized to reinforce traditional gender norms that have kept white women hidden from the public sphere under the proviso of safety and white men in positions of societal power within a public collective, but in examining this division, one also sees a reinforcement of heterosexuality as privately sacrament and publicly sacrosanct, while homosexuality is relegated to abhorrence. Both public and private spaces are understood in heterosexual terms—visibly and invisibly—which therefore moves to omit homosexuality. Berlant describes privacy as:

> […] simultaneously, a theoretical space imagined by U.S. constitutional and
> statutory law; a scene of taxonomic violence that devolves privilege on certain
> actual spaces of practical life; a juridical substance that comes to be synonymous
> with secure domestic interiority; and a structure of protection and identity that
> sanctions, by analogy, other spaces that surround, secure, and frame the bodies

whose acts, identities, identifications, and social value are the booty over which

national culture wages its struggle to exist as a struggle to dominate sex. (381)

Berlant's fascination with privacy revolves around a paradox: the public space is a heterosexual

space, but the private space is, too; national culture has differentiated them by a level of

heterosexual explicitness, where public spaces are covertly heterosexual and private spaces are

overtly so. Referencing a public memo about oral and anal sex drafted by Daniel Richman, a

clerk for Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, Berlant notes that, "but in almost referring

to heterosexuality, that sacred national identity that happens in the neutral territory of national

culture, Richman almost made the 'sex' of heterosexuality imaginable, corporeal, visible,

public," thus alarming his readers by his near reference to heterosexuality, which is meant to

remain above the reproach of discussion (382). Heterosexuality is not up for debate; it is the path

with the affluence to not be questioned or called upon to explain itself. Berlant emphasizes that

while sex is understood as automatically heterosexual and both as a public and private norm,

American national culture demands silence about its pervasiveness. Berlant is "telling a story

about preserving a boundary between: what can be done and said in public, what can be done in

private but not spoken of in public, and what can, patriotically speaking, neither be done nor

legitimately spoken of at all in the United States," which could be understood as heterosexuality,

heterosexuality, and homosexuality, respectively (383). This trichotomy moves to accomplish

several aims, namely: it normalizes heterosexuality; it distances homosexuality, leaving space for

insult; and it invites national discourse and conceptions of nationhood into sexual discourse and

vice versa—heterosexuality becomes patriotic while homosexuality becomes a threat to the

national imagination. Cvetkovich notes that "the natural and the strange or perverse apply to

sexuality and nationality equally," allowing an additional venue for insult to stick to some

(homosexual, foreign) but reflect off of others (heterosexual, patriotic) (151). Puar extends Berlant's idea to include race, writing, "more important, the private is a racialized and nationalized construct, insofar as it is granted not only to heterosexuals but to certain citizens and withheld from many others and from noncitizens," suggesting that the private is a constructed space—a paradise—a fabricated place or zone of respite meant to provide the impression of safety for a select few whom are most often white and heterosexual (124-5). Characters like Rufus, LeRoy, and Phillip exhibit fewer instances of privacy in *Another Country* and *Vanishing Rooms* compared to characters like Cass, validating Puar's point. Further, they also correlate with public good standing, or whiteness and heterosexuality dominating public spaces. Heterosexuality becomes a signifier of a good or upstanding citizen when compared to homosexuality. Hartman writes:

> In the twentieth century, the unregulated movement and assembly of black folks remained a matter of public safety. Gatherings that were too loud or too unruly or too queer—or venues like hotels and cabarets that welcomed black and white patrons; black-and-tan dives frequented by Chinese men and white girls or black women with Italian paramours or women who preferred dancing with each other—were deemed disorderly, promiscuous, and morally depraved. (*Wayward Lives* 247)

To be black, gendered female, or homosexual was to require public regulation for fear of moral depravity; private spaces that held gatherings like those Hartman proposes were horrifying to civil society, because they were spaces where villainous behavior could fester. For Jesse and Metro, Metro's insulting of Jesse reminds him of Jesse's promiscuous moral depravity, but not of his own. Whiteness similarly becomes a signifier of a good or upstanding citizen, whereas

blackness or any other racial identifier becomes a signifier of foreignness; even when those black or brown bodies have spent their entire lives within the cultural and/or physical sphere of that nation (e.g. African-Americans like Rufus raised entirely within the United States), they are rejected as non-representatives or dangerous members of that citizenship. Lacking good standing or citizenship is a tenement of villainy. Privacy requires status and/or wealth; the act of removing privacy places a character into a prison, low income housing, homelessness/the state of being unhoused, or an immigrant detention center, simultaneously perpetually public while physically or mentally divested from public consciousness like public heterosexuality itself. This is true in tandem with Puar's assertion that, "if we are to examine just one other coordinate of disenfranchisement, such as homeless youth, we see that LGBT youth constitute 25 to 40 percent of the total homeless youth population, an indictment of private liberty at home if there ever was one," illustrating that disenfranchisement affects heterosexual and homosexual youth differently; heterosexual youth do not live under the threat that their heterosexuality will cast them out of their homes, stripping them of their privacy and security (124). Further, private and public are not dependent upon literal, structured space(s)—they may be sociological or cultural in nature; in *Studio 54: The Documentary*, film critic Bob Colacello states of the late 1970s New York City night scene, "gay clubs were some of the first clubs that had disco music. But disco was black music, and it came out of black clubs. The beautiful models, the girls, would go to the gay clubs with the gay designers and hairdressers and makeup men, and then the straight guys would want to meet the models, so they would go to these clubs, and it all started blending," suggesting that a lack of privacy left a social group—Blacks—vulnerable to appropriation, and in the case of disco culture multiple strains thereof. The public/private divide is a social construct that has benefited and legitimized certain identities in certain spheres, namely whiteness, patriotism and

heterosexuality in public and private, while restricting and illegitimating others, such as

blackness, foreignness, homosexuality, often using the tools of (in)visibility and citizenship to

reinforce its own power structure.

Prisons fall into a separate category for Berlant, as a location that is neither public nor

private. A prison is a place to send unsavory citizens: debtors, Blacks, homosexuals, foreigners,

and any who challenge the structure of the American white heteronormative patriarchy by

breaking the laws created and reinforced by the American white heteronormative patriarchy,

which is then examined in *Vanishing Rooms*. Dixon explores the proliferation of race and

incarceration with Phillip, Ruella's brother, who is in prison on drug charges. Gladwell in his

essay "The Crooked Ladder" discusses how the American "War on Drugs" coincided with an

exodus of a European immigrant community-economy (i.e. mafias) and an influx of a black

community-economy (i.e. gangs) that encouraged the incarceration of the black community, and

thereby the extra-legal black community-economy, which Phillip is written into. Before the "War

on Drugs," mafiosos could enter a crime syndicate or family, rise in the ranks, launder that

money, and—if they survived this lifestyle outside of the law—retire as their spouse and children

reaped the benefits of their savvy. As demographics in American cities shifted and these outside

of the law pathways became dominated by African-Americans, the federal government

accelerated its crackdown on crime, thereby reducing the likelihood that black gang members

may one day retire, leaving their family well attended. Phillip wrote to Ruella from prison,

"being heroic and black ain't easy. 'Specially if you a man. Ain't nothing here but men. black

men, Puerto Rican men, even one or two white boys" (Dixon 77). Dixon, through Phillip, calls

into question the relationship between heroism and blackness, by revealing the lack of legal

economic availability to the black community and the increased punishment of the extra-legal

black economy that narrows the possibility for black citizens—and in particular black earners—to be upstanding citizens, which then increases the black population in the American prison system. Further, Dixon is calling into question the relationship between heroism and black masculinity, in a patriarchal society that preferences men as earners; Phillip notes that prison is full of black men, with the occasional white boy, signifying that whiteness can outgrow the need for incarceration. White men, who are financially viable, are amassing wealth outside of the prison, while black men are not. Their heroism, Phillip is arguing, makes them sacrificial to the prison-industrial complex. If you are not a hero, or even an law-abiding citizen within the framework of laws and policing practices that embolden some while restricting others, then what are you? What could you aspire to become? This extends to black women as well. Hartman writes in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* of Esther Brown in the 1910s:

> She didn't need a husband or a daddy or a boss telling her what to do. But a
>
> young woman who flitted from job to job and lover to lover was considered
>
> immoral and likely to become a threat to the social order, a menace to society.
>
> The police detective said as much when he arrested Esther and her friends. […]
>
> The modes of intimacy and affiliation being fashioned, the refusal to labor, the
>
> ordinary forms of fathering and assembly, the practices of subsistence and making
>
> do were under surveillance and targeted not only by the police but also by the
>
> sociologists and the reformers who gathered the information and made the case
>
> against them, forging their lives into tragic biographies of crime and pathology.
>
> (235-6)

Black women who were not at work or at home—who dared to have a publicly leisurable life—were accused of vagrancy and prostitution and were arrested. Prisons are patriotic institutions in

the United States; no other country incarcerates people at the level that Americans do (World Prison Population List). That the black community is represented in overwhelming proportions in prisons is a marker of that patriotism; it reaffirms the privilege of privacy as a racial construct.

There is no place where an individual who is in a minority may be completely and unquestionably safe. Social structures that create majority and minority power dynamics prevent those who are in the minority from having a space in which to rest. On a national level, African-Americans have been relegated to prisons where they live lives that are simultaneously public-private without the comfort of freedom or privacy. Berlant explores the heterosexuality of public and private spaces, removing any setting for homosexuality. Eribon explores nuclear relationships in which one's racial minority may place oneself into the majority of the household but one's sexual identity revokes that union and therefore safe haven. Baldwin and Dixon explore this phenomenon thusly: even one's closest sibling, or lover, may dispossess the ones they love because of their minority identity—and the threat of that insult lives deep within every minority identifying individual.

Hierarchy and Miscegenation in Male Homosexual Acts

Referring to Leo Bersani's essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?," Cvetkovich writes, "Bersani recommends getting fucked for its capacity to produce 'self-shattering,' which is not strictly reducible to the physical experience of being penetrated but is a more profoundly psychic experience," and that self-shattering speaks to a struggle of identity with men who perform homosexual acts throughout Baldwin and Dixon that allow participants to insult fellow homosexuals and further self-shame a homosexual community by establishing a theoretical divide between the shattered (i.e. bottoms whose sexual acts are synonymous with feminine roles

in heterosexual encounters) and the whole (i.e. tops whose sexual acts are synonymous with masculine roles in heterosexual encounters) (61). To be homosexual or perform a homosexual act comes with a rationalization absent in heterosexual acts on a sliding scale from a more perceived masculine heterosexual role, e.g. topping or receiving oral sex, to a more perceived feminine role, e.g. bottoming or giving oral sex, that favors heterosexuality and shames homosexuality in the identical societal structure that favors sexually active men and shames sexually active women. Heterosexuality is in the room, defining sex, even amongst homosexuals. Cvetkovich continues, "Yet the fact that men like to get fucked only seems counterintuitive (or 'queer') if it is assumed that everyone really wants to be 'masculine' and on top or that the trauma of penetration must necessarily be negative," highlighting the suggested preference for societal, hierarchical power that comes with the positionality of masculine heterosexuality (63). To emphasize that power, there is also the continued public/private divide that makes masculine derived homosexual acts performed in group or public settings (masculine spaces) more legitimate than private or intimate ones (feminine space). Throughout Baldwin and Dixon, there is a pervasive exertion for men who socially participate in homoerotic acts to redefine them as masculine or non-homoerotic, and therefore normal. "That's different, Lonny. We was on top"; "[…] we picked up this queer, a young guy, […] he was scared green […] there were seven of us, and we made him go down on all of us and then we beat the piss out of him and took all his money"; "I must have been a bitch. They got their pussy, didn't they? Faggot pussy. They didn't care: Pussy is pussy, a nut's a nut. They would find any way to crack it" (Dixon 62; Baldwin, *Another* 112; Dixon 158). These are all representations of homosexual rape, in which the aggressors (in each case plural, reinforcing a fraternity of masculinity and legitimizing the violence as communal and societal) use force to achieve their own sexual gratifications, which

are defined as masculine or non-homosexual, and justify their homoerotic acts by participating in traditionally masculine sexual roles that can be extended to heterosexual encounters; the final quote comes from Lonny, who is absolving the aggressors of his own rape. The aggressors therefore can continue to classify themselves as heterosexuals, their behaviors justified as an extension of their male privilege or power, and may continue to insult or shame their homosexual sex partners as weaker, interchangeable, sexually duplicitous by virtue of multiple sexual partners in quick succession, and even as invalid citizens in the national, public space. Writing of nationality and sexuality Puar examines the public reception of a gay man who thwarted a plane hijacking:

> Indeed, exemplary of this transference of stigma, positive attributes were attached to Mark Bingham's homosexuality: butch, masculine, rugby player, white, American, hero, gay patriot, called his mom (i.e., homonational), while negative connotations of homosexuality were used to racialize and sexualize Osama bin Laden: feminized, stateless, dark, perverse, pedophilic, disowned by family (i.e., fag). What is at stake here is not only that one is good and the other evil; the homosexuality of Bingham is converted into acceptable patriot values, while the evilness of bin Laden is more fully and efficaciously rendered through associations with sexual excess, failed masculinity (i.e., femininity), and faggotry.
> (Puar 46)

Bingham, who is homosexual, performed a patriotic act and as a consequence of these two conflicting identities received a "homonational" reception that convulsed to reframe his homosexuality as a heroic, replete with cis-gender masculine norms that might suggest his wholeness, while Osama bin Laden, who is heterosexual, who is patriarchic and patriotic, and

who further is Caucasian by definition of ethnicity (i.e., Indo-European, which includes Arab groups and persons of North African ancestry) receives a reframed negative reception because of his opposition to American society, and that negative reception is both racialized and sexualized as the opposite of heroic. It becomes clear that it is not one's true sexuality, race, gender, or even national origin that provides or prohibits power; it is the stigma or perception of a sexuality, race, gender, or national origin that provides or prohibits power. One may be homosexual or perform homosexual acts but be perceived as heterosexual and therefore of a greater status. In *Another Country*, when Vivaldo is having sex with Eric, the following memory surfaces:

> It was his first sexual encounter with a male friend in many years, and his very
>
> first sexual encounter with a friend. He associated the act with the humiliation and
>
> the debasement of one male by another, the inferior male of less importance than
>
> the crumpled, cast-off handkerchief; but he did not feel this way toward Eric; and
>
> therefore he did not know what he felt. (384)

Through Vivaldo, Baldwin exhibits this societal norm: with two men performing homosexual acts, one is perceived as dominating the other and the two will not become or remain equal from their union. The male who dominates is the most masculine, wherein lies the most power and happiness, and that affect perpetually allows subjugation and insult of an equal or forced homosexual participant, who receives the stigma of homosexuality regardless of their actual sexual identity. But Baldwin subverts this idea by opening the door to the possibility in Vivaldo's mind that one could feel more than domination or self-shattering in a homosexual union. This examination of a capacity of love for another human being that does not have at its root a sense of societal competition and aggression and/or ownership is unique and rare in

Baldwin's works. The hierarchal sexual distinctions in the homosexual community exist

primarily to benefit the white heteronormative patriarchy.

The unhappiness that Baldwin elevates to the fore surrounding his Black characters has

been read as a form of self-hatred that marks Baldwin as a "lover of whites," who seeks to

miscegenate intellectually and physically his characters in direct opposition to writers like

Norman Mailer (Stockton 159). Stockton writes, "the (predictable) sign of this war is his

character Rufus Scott (in *Another Country*) who, in double-duty miscegenation, 'let a white

bisexual homosexual fuck him in his ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman, with

all that these tortured relationships imply," and such physical miscegenation extends to Ida and

Vivaldo, and Eric and LeRoy; further still intellectually, with Cass and Ida, and Rufus and

Vivaldo (159). Stockton writes:

> Here we find the switchpoint between black and queer more directly shaped by
>
> authors who think about the "problem" of miscegenation. This is a highly
>
> embodied switchpoint. It is embodied by black and white men who engage in
>
> homosexual miscegenation, even if it only occurs in their thoughts. Intimately
>
> sharing their signs with each other, if not always their actual bodies, they engage
>
> in (what they consider) shameful attractions and struggle with their attraction to
>
> shame. Frequently, they are awarded with violence, against their bodies or their
>
> minds. This sort of shame, we are going to be told, can fester in the mind like a
>
> rotting corpse. (150-1)

Nowhere is this clearer than when Vivaldo recounts several bisexual ménages à trois with Rufus

in passing, that brings to his memory objectifying a fellow military enlister's black penis while

abroad in Munich (Baldwin 134). "Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy

because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black," Baldwin writes, sublimating Vivaldo and Rufus to representatives of their respective races, but underneath this hatred was an attraction, and a shame (134).

Conclusion

This chapter is an examination of the intersection of multiple identities in Baldwin's *Another Country* and Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms* at a historical time in which the civil rights of Blacks and homosexuals weighed on the forefront of American consciousness. Quite notably, there are hierarchies within hierarchies. Eribon writes:

> We should add that if "subversion" is always partial, this is partly because a subject's position within relations of domination is never simple. There are always multiple hierarchizations, sometimes contradictory among themselves: a gay man may be in a dominated and vulnerable position within the hierarchy of sexualities while being well positioned to dominate in terms of his sex, his class, his ethnicity—that is, he could be a man, a well-to-do-man, a white man, and so on. To take another example, a black woman will perhaps feel more oppressed because she is black than because she is a woman and may therefore feel more solidarity with black men than with white women—and thus more inclined to struggle against racial domination and racism than against masculine domination and sexism. We need to try to conceive of the ensemble of systems of domination and oppression together as a totality, to think of these systems in their multiplicity and with all of their articulations. (127)

It is the multiplicity and totality of hierarchies and dominations in a classification obsessed society that this chapter aims to illuminate; illustrating a spectrum of intersectionalities in which two or more persons' shared identities in their sexuality, race, gender, or national origin is overshadowed for some by a perpetual threat of insult meant to subjugate and elevate but never equivocate, demonstrates the intricacies of the white heteronormative patriarchal social fabric—often shortened to white supremacy—which attempts to obfuscate itself by normalizing its practices and laying claim to visible public and private spaces, thus remaining in power by dividing and conquering all other minority groups by encouraging insult, and by creating paths to vilify any willful identities that rise to question this constructed social structure. By continuing to debase whole groups of persons, this societal structure has nurtured pathways for people to not only fail to succeed, but to fail to have the option of succeeding by virtue of their identity markings—the inability of Ida to dream, the inability of Rufus to live, and the inability of Jesse and Metro to have a safe and loving relationship; none of these were possibilities, and all of them received insults by virtue of one of their identities from another who shared a same identity, which aides in their depression. These minority groups have come to police themselves by examining other difference and identities within their groups, which serves to benefit the white heteronormative patriarchy, and perpetuates what is at its core, a new chapter of slave narratives. Instead of operating pathways of success for these identities, this societal structure has given way to a negative manifest destiny of what Ahmed refers to as "affect aliens" who are not favored by this society, who are discouraged from questioning this society, and whose only pathway for expressing ambition is in becoming a willful villain who is a danger to this white heteronormative patriarchal society—a person who does dangerous or villainous things, including miscegenation, unsanctioned violence, or who moves against traditional femininity by

rejecting motherhood or valuing career over marriage. Rufus, Lonny, and Metro, who do not

accept their lowered ceiling of ambition and who then turn to drug or alcohol abuse as aims to

alter a reality that has rejected them, are further punished either by the state (prison) or by their

own psychosis, resulting in death.

3. Detaching Homosexuality from Villainy: *My Friend Dahmer*, *8-Bit Theater*, and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. –Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

In this chapter, I examine three graphic narratives that demonstrate a literary awareness of the conflation of homosexuality and villainy. *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf is a graphic memoir that portrays homosexual serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer in his youth. Backderf makes attempts to separate Dahmer's villainous murder drive from his homosexuality, however he falls short by solidifying the ways in which heterosexuality is normalized in their society, forcing homosexuality to remain abnormal. *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger is an online comic that mimics video games and parodies the traditionally homosexualized villain as benign and affable rather than malicious and deranged. By presenting a homosexual villain whose kindness outstrips his misanthropy, and by presenting an ambitious and cutthroat kidnapped princess, readers are invited to rethink tropes of villainy and victimhood by questioning the ties between villains and villainous behavior. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris invites viewers to consider monstrosity as an additional tenement of othering, particularly complex as those who are depicted as monsters are valorized, including two homosexual characters, Karen and Franklin.

The literary trope of the conflation of homosexuality and villainy is so pervasive it crossed medium boundaries into graphic narratives and video games. With the upswell of popular culture consumed through visual forms of art in the latter half of the 20th century leading

into the 21ˢᵗ, it comes as no surprise that this trope entered video game and graphic art mediums. And the antiestablishment or underground sentiments of these communities more easily questioned the tropes that they had inherited from literature. Graphic narratives more apparently embraced the separation of villainy and homosexuality. *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf attempts to absolve homosexual serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer of his homosexuality as an impetus for murder but fails to consider the (heterosexual) societal pressure placed on Dahmer which he then internalizes; *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger portrays an affable homosexual villain thereby complicating the readers' relationship with villainy and viciousness; and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris presents homosexual saviors who are monsters but who are not monstruous. These three narratives navigate conceptions of homosexuality and villainy that complicate the traditional trope of conflation.

My Friend Dahmer

Derf Backderf's graphic narrative *My Friend Dahmer* is an autobiographical graphic narrative about homosexual serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer during his high school years, in which graphic artist Backderf frequently interacts with Dahmer and could not have predicted Dahmer's future killings. Backderf suggests that Dahmer's homosexuality is not a cause or conflation of villainy, however he overlooks the extent to which Dahmer is ostracized because of his internalized homophobia, a subset of Dahmer's cruel optimism. While Backderf describes a suppression of homosexuality that alludes to Dahmer's further ostracization, he rationalizes that Dahmer's homosexuality is not integral to Dahmer's misanthropy. Backderf points to rampant alcoholism and social isolation that encourages Dahmer to be left "alone, with only the voices in his head […] which would now grow louder and louder" (143). It is society's abandonment of Dahmer that nurtures this misanthropic behavior. Rather, in regards to Dahmer's homosexuality,

Backderf narrates, "He kept his homosexuality hidden from everyone. That was the norm. Many of our classmates were gay, and not a single one came out in high school. But Dahmer had another secret, a terrible secret. In Dahmer's fantasies, his lovers… …were dead. Dead men. Corpses," creating a stark division between homosexuality and necrophilia (54). Below Backderf's narration, Dahmer is imagining the jogger he covets is rigid on Dahmer's bed, fully clothed, and deceased, the result—in Dahmer's imagination—of cruel optimism, but if this fantasy is made true, Dahmer becomes a murderous gay villain (54).

What the gay rights movement and constructions of villainy have in common is that both identities are working to change a white, patriarchal heteronormative society; what varies is the motive, the degree of radicalism, and violence committed to do it. These differences are immense. Nevertheless, as homosexuality was perceived as antithetical to an American heteronormative society (heteronationalism) throughout much of the twentieth century, homophobia became a socially sanctioned activity, grown in fear of loss of culture—a cultural death. Within the umbrella of villainy at its more extreme is the potential for murder, and serial killings—a physical death. To a heteronationalistic culture, the threats of change embedded in the civil rights movement—including the sexual revolution—and in serial killers are both a form of death, and therefore both homosexuality and villainy act as a danger to a contemporary society that has convinced itself—in the face of perpetual human evolution—it should remain in stasis, and in the case of conservative cultures move towards a reversal of progression. Schildcrout, author of *Murder Most Queer*, an examination of this intertwined identity in American theater writes, "both the homosexual and the serial killer have occupied this position of 'monster' in the public imagination, and the 'gay serial killer' has been a particularly compelling and problematic monster, especially since the early 1990s, when the conflation of homosexuality and homicidal

violence found new resonance in popular culture," reifying the conflation between homosexuality and villainy and signaling its resurfacing in various media representations (156). Schildcrout continues:

> Homophobic discourse symbolically connects serial killers with queer people, equating their crimes with sexual lust. Serial killers usually do not murder for financial gain or out of emotions like love or hate. Rather, they possess a pathological, even physical urge to kill that must be satisfied on a regular basis. As Joyce Carol Oates put it in her 1994 profile of Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer operates "with no apparent motive for his monstrous crimes except the gratification of desire." The homophobic imagination equates this murderous desire with homosexual desire, viewing it as physical lust, removed from the romantic or social ideals attributed to heterosexuality. Both homosexual and murderous "lusts" are imagined as abnormal, unhealthy, monstrous desires that exist because of a lack of proper morality. And both are subject to much speculation and debate about causation: what internal or external forces make someone gay, and what makes someone a psychopathic killer? (157)

Backderf's next lines in the graphic narrative *My Friend Dahmer* continue Schildcrout's search for causation: "what spawned this perverse sexual hunger? What deep, fetid part of his psyche gurgled up this miscreant desire, so powerfully voracious it immediately devoured him whole?" (55). Backderf alludes to the overlapping of homosexuality, perversity, and violence in this consideration; this perverse sexual hunger that is fetid and gurgling. Backderf ultimately suggests that what Dahmer fanaticized about is "lying down next to his unconscious body," "fondling him," and "having 'total control' over him," and allows the reader to come to their

own conclusion about the connections between murder and homosexuality in this passage (58). At no point does Backderf state that Dahmer's homosexuality lives outside of his urge to murder men; it is possible that neither Backderf nor Dahmer could fully separate the same-sex preference and the murder drive. Nor does Backderf attempt to psychoanalyze Dahmer in retrospect or in his memory as a high school student—it could be an easy association to suggest that the only way in which Dahmer could engage in homosexual acts in a heterosexual society without fear of repercussion was to completely control his lovers; Backderf does not engage in such psychological conjecturing that would provide a clear and unequivocal separation between the two, or even conflate the two entirely. But the reader may surmise that Backderf's assertion that other classmates were also gay and that they came out later limits the possibility that the miscreant desire in Dahmer is caused by same sex objectification. Backderf does show signs of conflating the two elsewhere in what may be read as ignorance or negligence. However, by specifically refusing to accept outright and/or by questioning homosexual desire as a causation of Dahmer's murders, Backderf constructs a rift between an embedded homophobia that encourages the labeling of homosexual desire as monstrous.

Backderf utilizes three graphic techniques that heighten the complexity of his portrayal of Dahmer as villainous, in his psychopathy but not his sexuality, that permeate his work: Backderf escalates Dahmer's antipathy through his eyeglasses, which early film reproductions overlook; Backderf separates the diegesis and mimesis; and Backderf inserts two photographs into his illustration that highlight Dahmer's self-loathing and lack of belonging. However, in examining these final two graphic techniques, the reader may discover that Backderf's heteronormativity overshadows his examinations of Dahmer's homosexuality in significant ways.

Backderf's illustration of Dahmer's eyes and eyeglasses signify Dahmer's disassociation with society as the memoir progresses. Through graphic illustration, Backderf visually depicts Dahmer's separation from society by presenting his eyeglasses as reflective shields rather than windows through which an exterior world may be observed and absorbed. Earle writes:

> Of all the photographs of Jeffrey Dahmer that were published after his arrest and during his subsequent trial, several have particularly captured the public imagination but none more so than his arrest photograph. […] The single item missing from this photograph are his spectacles, present in almost every photograph of Dahmer during his childhood and adolescence, as well as in the majority of photographs taken in court and prison. The fact that he is not wearing spectacles in this photograph is most likely a simple omission, characteristic of arrest photographs. However, though the majority of photographs show him wearing them, in all four of the films made about his life and crimes, the Dahmer character rarely, if ever, wears spectacles. […]
>
> Spectacles are used in *My Friend Dahmer*, not only to maintain the realism of Dahmer's appearance (all of his high-school photographs show large-framed spectacles), but also in various guises as frames, mirrors and veils to conceal and reveal Dahmer's eyes at strategic points throughout the narrative. […] The clouding of Dahmer's spectacle lenses represents points within the text at which he allows his own self-creation to overcome that which is socially expected of him and become the key focus of his life. As I show, this clouding of lenses—and thus removal of eyes—becomes more and more prominent as the text

progresses and Dahmer moves further from the social ideal into the seeming

antithesis of the serial killer. (Earle 435-6)

Perhaps due to Earle's notation, when Marc Meyers directed *My Friend Dahmer* three years after Earle's publication, Dahmer (Ross Lynch) wears glasses. In the 2017 film, the tint of Dahmer's glasses occasionally obscures his eyes from the viewer, but not to the extent that Backderf illustrates in the memoir; instead, Dahmer's increasingly lumbering gait works to express his dissention into psychopathy on screen. Further, the hidden nature of his homosexuality—further examined in the graphic narrative below—is expressed in two scenes absent in the graphic narrative: first by his distraction from public heterosexuality as his male friends examine pornographic material in a grocery store as shoppers peruse in the background and Dahmer makes farm animal noises while jumping up and down behind a partition, and later as Dahmer seeks out the jogger he covets—a doctor—who examines him as a new patient to his practice for a hernia as a part of a standard physical checkup; in the next scene, Dahmer is at home, in the dark, masturbating to this memory.

The separation of diegesis and mimesis in the graphic narrative *My Friend Dahmer* is vital as the diegetic narration is cognizant of Dahmer's homosexuality and necrophilia, while the mimetic constructs an understanding of the societal exclusion that leads to Dahmer's villainy. El Refaie parallels the diegetic of the film notion of the meganarrator—Groensteen's *recitant*—alongside the mimetic *monstrator*, the individual(s) who create the imagery that accompany the text of the narration (56-7). El Refaie writes, "diegesis refers to the verbal storytelling by a narrator, while mimesis is the act of showing a story, for instance in drama, the opera, or film" (55). While the majority of *My Friend Dahmer* is drawn in Backderf's signature artistic style, he employs two photographs in mimesis in order to represent an unquestionable reality and

therefore establish a baseline for truth. More specifically, by juxtaposing photograph and a quoted phrase by Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf encourages readers to doubt Dahmer's narrative and believe presented photographic evidence, which parallels with Backderf's diegesis. The memoir begins with a photograph and seemingly, a lie; on page 8, just before the Preface, is a photograph—Jeffrey Dahmer at his high school in 1978, mouth agape, posture convulsed—and above it, as though in epigraph, is the quote: "'When I was a kid, I was just like anybody else.' – Jeff Dahmer" (Backderf 8). Backderf is more than coopting the authority of photography as a proxy of veritas; he is challenging the statement that Dahmer presents about his childhood as a falsehood, making this image with its accompanying text antithetical in that the photograph and the diction that precedes it are contradictory. While the diegesis here is a direct quote of Dahmer, it arrives from a contemporary or present Dahmer looking back over his childhood in the same way that Backderf does throughout the memoir; Backderf's contemporary diegesis pairs with a retroactive mimesis of graphic iterations constructed throughout the memoir (55). The reader sees photographic evidence of Dahmer pretending to have cerebral palsy in a photograph on a page where Dahmer attempts to normalize his childhood and therefore this unusual behavior through a statement meant to mask how far outside of community norms and understandings he existed. The positionality of this is quite significant: the reader enters this graphic memoir with the understanding that Dahmer's recollections are unreliable.

However, a queered reading of *My Friend Dahmer* quickly dismantles the theory that Dahmer is lying and therefore an unreliable diegetic. Dahmer is projecting an insult onto the gay community, which for him and the heteronormative community is normal, further echoed by his lack of belonging and erasure in the second photograph within *My Friend Dahmer*, considered below. Backderf writes in the Sources section beyond the Epilogue, "Dahmer's descriptions of

his youth, in his own words, are more reliable than any other source. Once caught, Jeff was remarkably forthright with the police, unlike most serial killers […]. Dahmer was truthful and coherent," which suggests therefore that Dahmer's own words about his childhood which Backderf chooses to begin the graphic narrative with are true (200). Rather than a lie meant to mislead reporters, authorities, or a rewriting of history to convince himself, what readers see on this page is Dahmer cruelly parodying his family's homosexual interior decorator, Stan Burlman, whom Dahmer's friends—including Backderf—prank phone call and otherwise mock and parody (100). Eribon writes:

> Insult is more than a word that describes. It is not satisfied with simply telling me
> what I am. If someone calls me a "dirty faggot" (or "dirty nigger" or "dirty kike"),
> or even simple [*sic*] "faggot" (or "nigger" or "kike"), that person is not trying to
> tell me something about myself. That person is letting me know that he or she has
> something on me, has power over me. First and foremost the power to hurt me, to
> mark my consciousness with that hurt, inscribing shame in the deepest levels of
> my mind. This wounded, shamed consciousness becomes a formative part of my
> personality. (16)

Here, I argue, Dahmer is insulting Stan Burlman as a way to gain power over his own life. By insulting someone else who is homosexual, Dahmer is able to distance his own homosexuality from the detection of his friends. As noted in a previous chapter, Eribon writes, "Mistakes can have painful consequences. The experience of physical violence or the obsessive awareness of its threat are so common in gay lives that they are mentioned in almost every autobiography and in numerous novels with gay male characters," which readers see not only in Dahmer's being bullied by boys in varsity jackets, but in Dahmer's bullying of classmate Ray, who Backderf

later in diegesis but never in mimesis announces as homosexual too, in tandem with his death (Eribon 18; Backderf 121-3; 207; 88-9, Figure 1). Backderf fails to consider that Dahmer is the recipient of violence due to his homosexuality and therefore Dahmer is enacting violence upon other homosexuals, as is permitted and at times encouraged in a rigid heteronormative society; it holds the possibility of self-preservation or protection. This heteronormativity is so powerful that even Backderf incidentally comments on it. Backderf writes, "But what struck me most about Dahmer was that stony mask of a face, devoid of any emotion. […] He wasn't on my radar screen. […] He was now. I was fifteen. And like most fifteen-year-olds, the hormones had kicked in big-time. I thought about girls from dawn till dusk," while mimetically illustrating himself asserting the male gaze, objectifying a faceless female passerby. This suggests that, by not being female and therefore objectifiable, and/or by not reinforcing the power structure of the male gaze by joining or reinforcing Backderf's objectification, Dahmer fails to matter to Backderf unless he is making a spectacle of himself by mocking someone else (51, Figure 2). The second photograph in *My Friend Dahmer* is one in which Dahmer sneaks into a National Honor Society photo, for attention, and is blotted out by a teacher (Backderf 116-7). Backderf considers this to be a "symbol of Dahmer's wasted youth," but does not emphasize the ways in which this erasure of Dahmer's face acts as a symbol of banishing Dahmer from the rest of society, adults and teenagers alike (117, Figure 3). Dahmer, in essence, is executing an extreme form of internalized homophobia, which Backderf does not seem to recognize.

Backderf's argument is that it was the lack of support from adults who ushered or at minimum aided Dahmer's misanthropy, and in so doing Backderf overlooks Dahmer's homosexuality as an impediment to that support system. In searching for an answer as to who or

what made Dahmer a serial killer, Backderf provides social isolation and the answer, but fails to consider ways in which homophobia worsened that isolation. Backderf writes:

> I'm often asked why I never spoke up. Why I didn't try to get Dahmer help. You have to remember, this was 1976. You never "narced" on a classmate. It simply wasn't done. Besides, my friends and I, we were just clueless small-town kids, wrapped up in our own lives. And none of us had a hint about what was really going on in his head. A better question is… …where were the damn adults? (66-7)

This shifting of blame speaks to the power of societal pressure that Backderf found himself in. The affect of assistance and care were such that adults are meant to intervene on Dahmer's dangerous path towards murderer without the input from his classmates/cohort, and by failing to do so, Backderf places the onus of Dahmer's misanthropic upbringing entirely upon them. As children in 1976 in Midwestern America, "clueless" and "wrapped up in their own lives," Backderf and his friends benefited from a heterosexual culture that Dahmer did not, that Backderf expected adults in Dahmer's life to reiterate to him to create happiness. Eribon writes:

> Being true to oneself is doubtless easier for heterosexuals. This is not to claim that heterosexual lives have no rifts in them or that all heterosexuals are people who live with a happy sense of self-adequation. Yet, perhaps a certain stability is ensured by family life, along with the powerfully heteronormative context of professional life and, when you get right down to it, the entire sexual order that makes heterosexual behaviors seem legitimate and "normal." (114)

Legitimacy and normalcy are heterosexual, while homosexuality is illegitimate and abnormal, furthering Dahmer from the rescuing of his anti-social behavior by others in his life. Backderf's

diegesis quotes Dahmer's interview with Nancy Glass for *Inside Edition* in 1993 in which

Dahmer states, "I had normal friendships in high school," which begins a chapter wherein

Backderf narrates that "the kids that did notice Dahmer……had little but contempt for him,"

providing a mimetic between the ellipses of two high school males slamming Dahmer into a

locker, with one out of frame shouting, "outta my way, 'dumber'!" (28; 31). Paradoxically, the

violence sanctioned publicly by heteronormative masculinity becomes normal, whereas the

violence Dahmer begins to exhibit privately becomes abnormal. Dahmer, through Backderf,

exhibits this darker part of himself early in the novel when he invites a gang of teenage boys who

disbelieve him about his hut where he dissolves animals in jars of acid and states, referring to

one of those jars, "it interests me. What's inside a body," and this assertion works to alarm the

reader, who likely understands the foreshadowing of this statement in Dahmer's career as a serial

killer, and to create a separation between Dahmer, whose fascinations and social nature is

simultaneously macabre and introverted and the other boys around him, who are always an

extroverted collective, some of whom performing socially cruel acts against Dahmer (23).

Dahmer's private musings are alarming, whereas the gang of boys act as a normalizing

masculine force. Believing this hut and these jars to be acts of bravado, the boys disbelieve him

until he proves that he is being truthful—at which point they call Dahmer a "freak" (Backderf

26). Further, homosexuality is abrasive within a heteronormative family structure in which the

happiness of all individuals is dependent upon the ability to couple heterosexually, now or in the

future for children, for themselves and/or their offspring, in order to perpetuate the same

patriarchal heteronormative family structure. Dahmer's homosexuality is never discussed with or

amongst the adults in his family; Backderf represents Dahmer's emotional needs as unfulfilled

by his parents, and by his high school teachers who misread his loitering as productiveness.

Dahmer is presented as seen and unseen by those around him; the simulacra of productive

student and entertainer/class clown, coupled with a teenage toxic masculinity that foregoes

empathy or emotional labor prevent a connection that could possibly have alerted someone to the

dark path that Dahmer navigates. Backderf's defense and assertion that adults are the only ones

who have a vested interest in a safe society amounts to the saying, "Boys will be boys," wherein

young men are freed from any emotional responsibility to those around them.

Dahmer's social status is perpetually in flux, but what remains clear is that Dahmer is an

outsider or prop. Readers see Dahmer's inability to make lasting friendships as a part of his path

towards sociopathy through Backderf's illustrations that prove more complex. Schildcrout writes

of Dahmer's antisocial positioning:

This odd detail from Dahmer's youth is also depicted by the writer and artist Derf

Backderf in *My Friend Dahmer*, his autobiographical graphic novel about being

high school classmates with Jeffrey Dahmer in Ohio in the 1970s. Backderf and

his friends encourage Dahmer in his strange act, and in one incident they pay

Dahmer to give a "command performance" at a shopping mall, twitching and

shouting at unsuspecting patrons. The teens laugh at Dahmer's grotesque

shenanigans, but once the show is over they don't invite Dahmer to be part of

their evening plans. The incident highlights how Dahmer, as an awkward outsider,

performed a comically exaggerated version of his "freakishness" in order to win

the attention of his peers; but this attention does not translate into actual

friendship, and Dahmer remains nothing more than an amusing yet creepy

spectacle for the other teens. (161)

And truly, Dahmer is the center of attention even as he is isolated from his peers; Backderf

writes in the Epilogue, "there were a dozen or so guys in the [Dahmer] Fan Club at any given

time, rotating in and out. In this story, I winnowed it down to the four principals for the sake of

the narrative," suggesting that there were many teenage eyes on Dahmer, none of whom were

"narc"ing to adults (205). Backderf goes as far as to note that "My cartoon Dahmer was so

ubiquitous, he became something of a bizarro school mascot!" while commenting later that

Dahmer's being bullied is what Backderf felt was a "regular occurrence" (118; 210). Dahmer is

fetishized but never accepted among his peer group; he is neither welcomed into the group nor

completely isolated from the group, so long as he proves entertaining for them as an actor or

victim. The result is that Backderf places Dahmer in what he refers to as the lower-caste of his

high school society, with other misfits and sore thumbs, one of whom is Figg. Backderf writes,

"Figg was the last of the lower-caste psychos (some of whom were serious drug users) with

whom Dahmer stayed in contact after high school. These friendships, if they could be called that,

would all peter out by the end of the summer. […] This was the last friendship Dahmer would

have in his life," calling into question Dahmer's ability to maintain healthy relationships with his

peers (218). Backderf downplays for the sake of a cleaner narrative, the amount of peers who

surround Dahmer—while deeply questioning the lack of adult supervision in Dahmer's life—and

makes clear to the readers that he is bullied, without examining the social structures amongst

teenagers gendered male that would lead to Dahmer's ostracization.

At the crux of Dahmer's homosexual and more sinister drives lies what Berlant has

coined "cruel optimism," and Backderf's illustration thereof signifies that Dahmer's

homosexuality is neither the cause nor result of his misanthropy, aiding in the separation of

villainy and homosexuality, in spite of Backderf's overlooking of how heteronormative

masculinity ostracizes Dahmer. Through Dahmer's struggles with deciding to take a life, or not—via mimetic by Backderf—the reader may derive Dahmer's struggles with cruel optimism, rather than his homosexuality as the impetus or part of a generalized homogenous evilness that drives him to murder. Berlant writes that cruel optimism, "names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. […] Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss," which Backderf applies to Dahmer through illustration (94). Dahmer's case is Berlant's theory in the extreme—Dahmer covets homosexual acts with the dead, thereby giving him complete control and perhaps disallowing him from becoming the victim of homosexual violence as long as he remains the victimizer, because there is no place, private or public, in which Dahmer feels safe. Eribon writes:

> Feminism […] has shown that not only the categories of public and private but also the reality of public and private spheres function to assign roles; as places, they create a division of labor between the sexes (the public sphere for men, the private sphere for women—although within it they will find a private life of their own denied to them). Similarly for the division between sexual orientations: public space is heterosexual and homosexuals are to stick to the space of their private lives. One might notice, for instance, that all the forms of masculine sociability (the life men lead with other men), along with being fundamentally misogynist, are also based on the exclusion of homosexuality. (102)

Eribon writes in parallel to Berlant; while never citing Berlant, Eribon revives in this passage a lighter ideological and spatial version of Berlant's "Live Sex Acts," used to consider the works of Baldwin and Dixon in chapter 2. Notably, Eribon suggests that private spaces can become

homosexual spaces while Berlant articulates with more accuracy the ways in which heterosexual societal expectations creep into private spaces creating implied heterosexual spaces. By marking public spaces as heterosexual, both theorists make clear the possibility of encouraging the homosociability of men bullying homosexuals. With public spaces marked as overtly heterosexual, and private spaces marked as covertly heterosexual, society has structured itself in a way that makes it easier for Dahmer's social circle to exclude Dahmer's homosexuality.

Dahmer's potential internalized homophobia as evidenced by Backderf intentionally or otherwise is not a means to an ends that fully explains Dahmer's murderous spree. While internalized homophobia plays a significant role in a queer reading of Backderf's *My Friend Dahmer*, the separation between villainy and homosexuality that Backderf attempts is nevertheless an important distinction from previous writers about Dahmer and his life, who had continued to compress homosexuality into a self-loathing evilness that validated self-harm. Schildrcout writes:

> In his analysis of narratives about serial killers, David Schmid argues that true crime writers inevitably focus on some "deviant" aspect of the killer's life as an explanation for his or her murders, since the public needs to be able to exclude the killer from the real of the "normal." But they enforce a double standard when it comes to sexually motivated crimes. So true crime writers represent Ted Bundy, who murdered and engaged in necrophilia with numerous women, as "an aberration that told us nothing about heterosexuality at all," while they attribute Jeffrey Dahmer's crimes to homosexuality itself. Indeed, Schmid finds in these narratives "the assumption that extreme violence is a normal part of homosexuality."

In their attempts to explain the murders of Jeffrey Dahmer, many true
crime writers place the blame on *internalized homophobia*—that is, the gay man's
loathing of his own homosexuality. While this assertion may be correct, Schmid
maintains that true crime writers use it to support, rather than challenge, the
homophobia of their readers, since they never address the origin of the loathing.
The implication, then, is that "to be homosexual is so disgusting and traumatic
that of course one would murder again and again in order to assuage one's guilt
about being gay." […] Schmid challenges true crime writers to examine the social
origins of this homophobia, thus implicating American society itself as the source
of Dahmer's self-loathing. (157)

Schildcrout's suggestion through Schmid that true crime writers offer internalized homophobia
as a motive is lost or missing in *My Friend Dahmer*, further separating the graphic memoir from
the true crime writer genre; Schildcrout does not offer Berlant's concept of cruel optimism as a
motive, but given its emphasis on desiring the unachievable, for which both murder and
homosexual desire apply in 1970s Midwestern America, cruel optimism may offer a more robust
examination of Dahmer's fate. Earle notes of *My Friend Dahmer*, "this is the story of a serial
killer that is about neither the crimes, nor the chase, because we already know the story. If the
life and crimes of Dahmer were not already well known, Backderf's comic would not work to
the extent it does. *My Friend Dahmer* is the 'prequel' so to speak, and every action is
overshadowed by our knowledge of what comes later" (435). Rather, "this comic tells the story
of those who knew Dahmer during his adolescence and the first murder, to recreate the
claustrophobic small-town environment in which these two men grew up and to show, to some
small degree, that the man we assume is a monster to the core was once an ordinary boy," who

did not express desires for the unobtainable in a white heteronormative patriarchal society (Earle 430). In the wake of the continuously unanswered question of what makes a person a murder, monster, or by projection of continued success a villain, Earle writes, "What makes *My Friend Dahmer* so compelling and disturbing as a text is that Dahmer really does appear to be an 'Average Joe'; [Backderf] proves the point that 'evil is unspectacular and always human'" (435). Backderf does so no more clearly than in the Epilogue, in which he first hears that someone he went to school with is a serial killer and when asked to guess, Backderf guesses Figg first; Dahmer is his second guess (224).

8-Bit Theater

8-Bit Theater by Brian Clevinger utilizes the tropes of villainy as conflated with homosexuality that flourished in literature and film and proliferated the naissance of a new form of media: video games. Offered as a web comic using sprite video game aesthetics, Clevinger presents a traditional white patriarchal heteronormative world—normalized in video games played by millions of children—that he then subverts in unique and interesting ways to empower gender equality and question the ties of villainy and homosexuality. *8-Bit Theater* showcases considerate monsters, villainous royalty, and a campy homosexual villain, all of which forces the reader to rethink the traditional structure of heroes and villains in video game plot.

A sprite video game is a two-dimensional animated cartoon constructed of tiles or pixels and is centered around the mobility of a character or set of characters who advance across the screen to achieve a goal or accomplishment; a quest. Sprite games were early in video game development, and the gender and racial disparities were strong, reinforcing white men as heroic saviors, women objectified as rewards or relegated to supportive roles (e.g. healers), and erasing

or stereotyping non-Caucasian races; even when developed and distributed in majority non-white

nations, they emphasized a proximity to whiteness by illustrating characters with Eurocentric

features. They reinforced heterosexuality through quests that gravitated towards a heterosexual

coupling: a blue collar worker and his brother set out to rescue a kidnapped princess held captive

by an anthropomorphic turtle in his castle; a lone country boy begins a quest to save the kingdom

by saving the princess who has been kidnapped by a prince; a lone country boy begins a quest to

save the kingdom after he finds a mystical, speaking sword that has chosen him, reifiying his

right to conquest and subjugate creatures presented as monsters throughout the countryside—

heroism performed to save the nation through sanctioned violence—with the expected reward of

fame, and heterosexual coupling. This woman typically does not have the option to express any

agency in accepting or denying her suitor (an anachronism in 20th Century America that pushes

the video game back to a different time and place—a fairy tale land), and offers riches as that

rescued woman is often royalty; she signifies the height of value. She is never not white.

Clevinger begins to bend these tropes by creating an expectation of villains and monsters

who lack menace or animosity. While still depicted and understood by the reader as villainous or

monstruous through physical attribute, Clevinger creates enemies to the heroes that have such a

depth and emotion that, when presented, allow the reader to sympathize or empathize with the

villains and monsters. Cohen writes, "the co-optation of the monster into a symbol of the

desirable is often accomplished through the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects with

a liberal dose of comedy: the thundering giant becomes the bumbling giant," which Clevinger

readily uses (50). The first encounter the Light Warriors, or presumed heroes of *8-Bit Theater*,

face is with a thundering giant whose attempt to attack Fighter is thwarted by Fighter simply

running away; the giant's response is to say, "Hey…" as a drop of sweat appears on his forehead,

denoting his confusion or incompetence; his bumbling (5). This prepares the readers for an even

more comical interaction with a "random encounter," or a pop up of enemies that occurs at

mathematical odds as characters move through a video game world (10-14). Six monsters appear

in front of Fighter and Black Mage and insist upon being fought. Fighter and Black Mage begin

an argument with each other, to which the following dialogue takes place:

> Monsters: We ain't got all day, y'know.

> Black Mage: Sorry guys, just one second.

> Monsters: Make it quick.

> Fighter: Those monsters are gonna eat us alive!

> Monsters: Human flesh? Raw?

> Monsters: Oh, heavens no.

> Monsters: How barbaric!

> Monsters: What does he think we are, monsters?

> [Beat.]

> Monsters: Well, yeah, we are monsters. But we're not monsters about it. (12)

Failing first to attack at will to gain the upper hand, these monsters have demonstrated the

morality that is pervasive throughout comic books and video games wherein henchmen who

have arrived en masse attack the protagonist one at a time, or solely in defense. Clevinger takes

this further—these monsters' monstrosity is then neutralized by the propriety in their disgust of

eating human flesh. By stating, "Well, yeah, we are monsters. But we're not monsters about it,"

they establish the dissonance between their physical identity of Monster, a creature outside of

humankind whose orientation as "Monster" begins within the protagonist and resonates outwards

towards themselves. They separate their non-human identity from malicious acts, both of which

are understood as monstruous. This separation prepares readers to encounter villains who are not villainous (i.e. committing horrifying and dangerous acts against a white heteronormative patriarchal humanity). Clevinger presents a world in which the monsters and villains have room to become likeable, even affable, eroding the expectation of white heteronormative patriarchal order that understands all monsters as monstruous and all villains as villainous.

Garland is such a villain in *8-Bit Theater*. By being affable, homosexual, and villainous, Clevinger uses Garland to lambast the expectations of queer villainy and therefore of a traditionally white, heteronormative patriarchic hegemonic order. How Garland chose a path of villainy is left unclear. However, Eribon's notations on Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's un/intentional homophobia that flattened homosexual characters into a stereotype can shed some light; Eribon writes that Sartre and de Beauvoir, "lump homosexuals (because they keep so many 'secrets' about themselves, because they pretend, because they seem so rarely capable of choosing authenticity) with those who practice 'bad faith,'" which makes it easier to conceive of a secret carrying homosexual as someone capable of nefarious plotting with a motive to change society, to murder someone and subsume their identity, or to participate in seedy sexual activities in dirty, broken down buildings, interchangeably (109). Garland may be deeply homosexual, but he is neither nefarious nor malicious with any real efficacy, failing to be of "bad faith." Garland's villainy or evilness is expressed predominately through his clothing and its affect, and not his actions. Gazing into a mirror, he states, "Ah yes, the ol' bad guy outfit still fits like a charm. Not many arch-fiends can say that," suggesting a move towards villainy both through his fascination/attention to clothing and the precise kind of clothing that he wears (53). However, Garland fails almost immediately to instill fear in the reader when, in response to Princess Sara, who has been eavesdropping and who states, "By Bahamut's flame, what are you

doing?" Garland's responds with, "Eek!" ([53](#)). A parody of the "Hang in There, Baby" cat poster can be seen in the background, wherein the cat has been replaced with an impish demon. This poster is later replaced by Princess Sara in an attempt to manifest a greater level of fear in the Light Warriors in preparation for their arrival, who are there to rescue Princess Sara; in her redecoration of Garland's lair, she has replaced it with a menacing picture of Garland that he believes, "doesn't even *look* like him" ([107](#)). This replacement speaks to Stockton's examination of clothing in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*. Stockton writes:

> Perhaps unbeknownst to the one who wears it, a beautiful black cape, for instance,
> may be read as a stigmatizing skin. In other words, there is a reason that blackness
> (in the form of characters and/or signs) appears in these novels. It is a hint of the
> dangers of clothes that are highly complicated, highly specific, not so benign,
> semiotic cloth skins. (64)

Garland falls completely—obliviously—into Stockton's categorical construction: Garland fails to read his career of so-called vice and villainy as stigmatizing, in spite of an appearance that suggests to the readers his dangerous persona; his cape is purple instead of black, signaling his homosexuality, but the message is the same as he works to maintain his "slim nefarious figure" and never takes off his helmet, thereby remaining masked in his semiotic sartorial ([53](#)). Garland is both homosexual and a villain, and yet he fails to enact the vicious misanthropy that readers expect of this combination; if Garland is a homosexual villain and he's not so bad, then either homosexuality or villainy must not be as ruthless as previously thought. Later, White Mage—the lone female character who saves the world from total annihilation and who rescues the Light Warriors time and time again during their typical quests—views another cat poster on Garland's wall in which a kitten stands in a coffee mug and she states, "We are *clearly* dealing with a

deranged individual," believing Garland to be such a wicked and maleficent individual that the posters act as parody rather than inspiration, a farce to the reader who understands otherwise (133-A). Clevinger underscores this with the blind violence that Black Mage, a supposed Light Warrior and hero whose face also remains hidden by his oversized wizarding hat, is willing to inflict upon the world. Rather, Garland finds himself reaching out to others and building a social network, albeit of other failed villainous characters, who are similarly disappointed by his lack of malfeasance, and who team up with the idea of using their combined strength to overcome the Light Warriors. Clevinger satirizes this video game trope: heroes challenge enemies such as low level bosses who are anthropomorphized or metaphorical monsters, who (after defeat) return to challenge the heroes again at a later point, echoing Jeffrey Cohen's second thesis in his manifesto on monster culture that the monster always escape. Nevertheless, they are built to succumb to the hero(es), returning to the subjectivity of their Monster title. Garland's bumbling and benign nature is effective enough as a villainous masquerade to the Light Warriors, whom readers discover are just as bumbling themselves, having assumed the identities of the true Light Warriors (87). Garland's homosexual villainy becomes familiar and sympathetic rather than dangerous to the reader, thereby eroding the expectation that his homosexuality is the root to his malice.

Princess Sara is more effectual in evilness than Garland, her kidnapper, in an archetypal twist that challenges a longstanding and well-documented gender imbalance in comics. By tutoring Garland in evil, Princess Sara becomes both an expert and the true villain opposite of Garland's ersatz villainy, in an illustration of feminist power. Considering the role of women and comics, El Refaie writes, "women had traditionally been excluded from the English-language comics industry, with all titles, even those explicitly directed at young girls, written and drawn

almost exclusively by males," referring to the extent of which comics have been a male dominated and generated art form (31). In the Introduction to their *Gender and the Superhero Narrative*, Goodrum, Prescott, and Smith note that, "Not surprisingly, for much of the medium's history, female characters have played an ancillary role to the male protagonists" (16). Hemovich considers the legacy that Princess Sara enters:

> Gender stereotyping and misogynistic undertones have a long-standing tradition in video game culture. The kidnapping of Mario's love interest, Pauline, in *Donkey Kong* was among the first video game to invoke the "damsel in distress" paradigm and was a familiar trope already firmly embedded across other popular media platforms in 1980s television and film. The theme continued, most notably with the subsequent advent of Princess Peach to the *Mario Bros.* franchise; she, the only female character, is captured thirteen separate times [Birdo, a secondary anthropomorphic female character, was introduced in *Super Mario Bros. 2* in 1988; she weaponizes the eggs she lays against the protagonists, connecting her lack of nurturing motherhood to monstrosity]. Princess Zelda from the iconic *Legend of Zelda* series faced similarly restrictive characterizations in that the male protagonist, Link, must repeatedly rescue her throughout the entire franchise. (207-8)

Princess Sara in *8-Bit Theater* is introduced as a damsel in distress character who, through this familiar trope, is expected and expecting to be saved, but nevertheless exhibits an autonomy that is missing in Hemovich's examples of 1980s video games. *8-Bit Theater* fails the dated but nevertheless benchmark Bechdel Test (there are more than two women in the comic, but they do not talk to each other about a subject other than men); however, Clevinger makes significant

strides by placing women in positions of power by turning the "damsel in distress" paradigm on its head; Puar writes, "although feminist postcolonial studies have typically theorized women as the bearers of cultural continuity, tradition, and national lineage, in the case of terrorism, the line of transmission seems always to revert to the male body," and in Princess Sara the reader sees the bearer of cultural continuity, tradition, and national lineage at its pinnacle as the continuation of the nation, but they also see a female body that emanates terrorist transmission (98). In Garland's castle, Princess Sara's first line to him is, "God you're bad at this," deflecting immediately any tremor of distress (52). When Garland threatens her with harm by summoning a demon to do his bidding, she asks, "What're you gonna have him do? Poke me in the ribs?" to which Garland replies, "Oh heavens no. I'm nefarious, not cruel," reiterating Clevinger's separation of Monster and monstrosity while advancing the strength of Princess Sara (52, Figure 4). Clevinger, exploring Rebecca Solnit's terminology, "mansplaining," after Princess Sara has been "rescued" (i.e. realizes that she is losing the false flag battle against the Light Warriors and makes herself found) and is returning to the castle, presents the following scene in which Red Mage turns to Fighter and says:

> Red Mage: Okay, now let me make sure I've got all this straight. We're up
>
> against a giant […]. And now you and I have to brainstorm an ingenious plan
>
> of attack.
>
> Princess Sara: Ahem. I am here too, y'know. I could you help with your little
>
> attack plan. Seems like you need the help, really…
>
> Red Mage: Please, Princess Sara. The Light Warriors are talking now.
>
> Princess Sara: You'd better hope to whatever God you follow that this giant kills
>
> you before I have the chance to do it more painfully.

Fighter: Did you say something, Princess Sara?

Princess Sara: Oh heavens no. What could I possibly contribute to your man-talk.
Other than logic, reason, and a clear and decisive path to certain victory, but
I'm sure you nimrods have enough testosterone to headbutt your way through
to something not entirely unlike success. (152)

Rather, it is Princess Sara alone who defeats the giant (155-6). Through her actions and through her speech, Princess Sara defies the concept of the damsel in distress by asserting her ambitions for power, control, and violence. Previously, she is the one who approaches Garland as he watches *The Golden Girls* in his suit of evil armor in front of an image of Garland's certificate of completion from "Barry's Correspondence School of Arch-Villainy," and states, "y'know, I've been kidnapped about half a dozen times and this is by far the most inept job I've ever seen," referring to the lax security that includes an unlocked front door and a wide open back door, allowing her to so freely meander through Garland's castle, and in light of this Garland asks her to assist him in improving his kidnapping abilities, to which Princess Sara replies, "well, ordinarily I don't like assisting foul servants of the dark in their vile plots to rain destruction upon all the world……but if something's worth doing, then it's worth doing right," to which Garland exclaims "Yaaay!" and Princess Sara thinks, "Sucker" (54). Clevinger in this comic constructs a dialogue between kidnapper and kidnappee in which the kidnapper is not enforcing or reinforcing a situation of absolute power; Garland begins this scene by enjoying a homosexual-friendly comedy show about the camaraderie of four elderly women, in front of an academic certificate in evilness that was achieved via correspondence, and when he asks for Princess Sara's assistance rather than punishing her for his own ineptitude in failing to imprison her it becomes clear to the reader that Garland is ineffectual as a villain in large part due to his

affability, and Princess Sara enacts more agency than a kidnapped princess trope might permit.

Similarly, when Princess Sara later asks Garland if he plans to burn the forest down to remove it

of the forest-imps that have been plaguing his castle, she has inexplicably changed into more

villainous attire (Garland's response to Princess Sara's suggestion—"Oh gosh no! Think of all

the innocent little animals who would lose their homes! That's just plain mean"—furthers the

inverted dichotomy of malicious capacity) (78). Her new clothing signifies her transition to the

side of villainy, to which she is more effective than Garland. Sara Ahmed writes:

> What passes through the passing around of happy objects remains an open
>
> question. After all, the word "passing" can mean not only "to send over" or "to
>
> transmit," but also to transform objects by "a sleight of hand." Like the game of
>
> Telephone, what passes between proximate bodies might be affective precisely
>
> because it deviates and even perverts what was "sent out." Affects involve
>
> perversion, and what we can describe as conversion points. ("Happy Objects" 38)

Garland asked Princess Sara for tips and assistance in her kidnapping, but the affect created an

opportunity for Princess Sara to usurp Garland's kidnapping and various evil plots in their

entirety; Garland transmits his villainy to Princess Sara, who perverts it into a truer and more

malicious form. This meeting point is of note because before it, Princess Sara had not considered

attacking her own kingdom although readers discover that Princess Sara's father is an inept and

vacuous leader, and Princess Sara's competence would benefit her nation if her were father

usurped (161-163). Princess Sara commits to evil and villainous means with the intent of saving

her kingdom from her father, a patriarch whose self-described qualifications for his role end at

nepotism (163). Princess Sara therefore becomes what Sara Ahmed would refer to as a "willful"

character or as possessing Willfulness, as discussed in a previous chapter; Princess Sara's

exasperation and mock fragility can be understood through Sara Ahmed's warning, "these experiences are wearing: you come to understand how you are judged as being wrong for pointing out a wrong" (*Living* 73). Sara Ahmed writes:

> It is important, however, that we not reduce willfulness to againstness. There is a family of words around willfulness (*stubborn, obstinate, defiant, rude, reckless*), which creates a structure of resemblance (we feel we know what she is like). This familialism also explains how easily willfulness is confused with, and reduced to, individualism. We need to resist this reduction. The reduction is how willful subjects are dismissed. (*Living* 83)

Princess Sara may be received as an individual working against her father, or as an individual filled with negative emotions or commentary, but through Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of willfulness, one may look deeper into Brian Clevinger's representation of Princess Sara as a substantively more nuanced positioning of good versus evil and hero versus villain/damsel.

Brian Clevinger's prolific online comic *8-Bit Theater* engages in dismantling several video game narrative tropes including the conflation of villainy and homosexuality by humanizing monsters through comedy, propriety, kindness, and motive. Actual monsters fail to perform monstruous acts. Villains treat their captors with consideration and friendship. And a princess uses darkness and villainy with the intent to better her society. By providing homosexual villains who lack the maliciousness standard of this title, and by simultaneously offering a multiplicity of villainous motives including those whose results are meant to be positive and impactful for a society, Clevinger destabilizes the automatic connection between homosexuality and villainy, thereby successfully challenging this paradigm.

My Favorite Thing is Monsters

My Favorite Thing is Monsters by Emil Ferris presents what become queer heroes, rather than a singular queer villain. By depicting actual monsters as characters throughout the graphic narrative, Ferris connects to a wealth of cultural information specific to each form of monster/creature, while conveying a general sense of difference from cultural and societal norms that allows readers to underscore these characters' humanity despite their inhuman appearance.

Karen Reyes, like Dahmer and Garland, begins *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* friendless. Her inability to be social with her classmates is another signifier of her homosexuality and therefore potential villainy—she is ridiculed and on the path of misanthropy. Eribon writes of social exchanges, "in all such conversations the gay [individual] will feel excluded. [They] will have the experiences of being 'different,' but will be obliged to hide this difference on pain of being excluded from the group," and that difference is visually constructed on a page where Karen, who has the visage of a weregirl, carries upon her back what appears as a heavy speech bubble full of her classmates—who are not depicted as monsters—framed as though in a yearbook, ridiculing her for her difference (103). However, by the end of this initial volume, Karen has developed several friendships, including those of a ghoul and a Frankenstein-monster character.

Emil Ferris brings the discussion of monstrosity to the forefront, provided that so many central characters are intentionally illustrated as monsters. Ferris highlights individual and specific societal woes through the monsters that are chosen for each character. Maahen Ahmed writes of monsters:

> In accordance with their Latin root, *monstrare*, they point toward something: the
> Other, abnormal fantasies, or ordinary desires, since desire itself is the ultimate
> other that one strives in vain to absorb in oneself. Yet, *monstrare* also implies

teaching and is thus related to the monster's other etymological root, *monere*, which means to warn. Here, good comics monsters teach us about the romantic inclinations forming and driving their characterization and the medium of comics itself. (3)

Ferris uses various monster identities to point towards something, to teach, and to warn, crafting simultaneous narrative critiques about society that are more often than not interwoven. Sandy's spectral persona, e.g., points towards her severe malnutrition caused by her low economic status; Ferris further teaches readers how invisible the poor can become in a society that rewards capitalistic success, and warns readers not to overlook the humanity in others, by demonstrating how characters are incapable of seeing Sandy. Karen's brother's slight resemblance to Count Dracula foretells his youthful lothario tendencies, diametrically opposed to Sam "Hotstep" Silverberg's mummified visage that speaks of his age and unfinished business related to love and/or lost possession(s) and—prior to the advent of equal rights—"his wife" is answerable to both conceptions. Later, this chapter will examine Karen's weregirl identity and Franklin's Frankenstein's monster identity. The intersectionality of the monster identity is well documented, thereby creating an important area of examination. Cohen writes:

> The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstruous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (41)

Maahen Ahmed writes, "Gender, queer, and race studies have also turned to monsters as figurations of social identity constructions and mechanisms of othering. This vast scope implies that the cultural work done by monsters, while rich, remains unwieldy and difficult to sum up" (4). While most monsters discussed in this work are metaphorical, Ferris' work presents monsters embedded in longstanding cultural myth, further overlaying meaning and intentionality in their reading. These monsters are seldom monstruous, but through their Othering bring to the fore their wants and desires in a rich cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual, and gendered tapestry.

Ferris illustrates Karen with a weregirl depiction and a trenchcoat and fedora, illustrating the complexity of her identities. By presenting with multiple identities, Karen resists the flat interchangeable depiction that homosexuality and villainy had once carried. Eribon writes:

> Authenticity is to be found in the decision to assume the burden of being what one
>
> is: to be gay not simply as it were *en soi* (which is to say according to the gaze of
>
> others, of society), but rather *pour soi* (that is, having assumed the identity for
>
> oneself as a project of freedom). That social gaze establishes for all gay people,
>
> even ones who are not out, the *en soi* of homosexuality: the image and the "role,"
>
> the "discreditable" identity, assigned to them. (111)

Further, Eribon notes, "indeed, much of the difficulty with 'authenticity' for a gay person lies in the difficulty in identifying with an 'identity' that is necessarily plural, necessarily multiple: it is an identity without identity, or, better, an identity without an essence—an identity to be created," (111). Rather than the compression of a homosexual culture enforced by heterosexual norms, homosexuality requires the acceptance of a plurality of identities. Sara Ahmed writes:

> The queer child might be described as an unconventional child, who has to struggle against her family to come out. In the case of a brown migrant family, the family is imagined as a dead weight: there is an expectation that her family will be more oppressive, less tolerant; less supportive of her freedom. To be directed toward happiness is to be directed away from your family, who come up in the national imaginary as what or who are holding you back or holding you down. And then custom and culture become things that this brown queer child has to leave behind; happiness is assumed to require getting out. Translation: happiness becomes proximity to whiteness. (*Living* 52)

While Ahmed may likely be speaking of her own intersectional experiences as a homosexual raised in Australia within a Pakistani familial household, these words are transcribable for Karen, who is partially Indigenous and whose adolescent sexuality complicates the relationship between her and her brother, who demands that she see herself *en soi* rather than *pour soi*.

Karen's lycanthropic visage is a prescient visual example of Eribon's distinction. Readers familiar with the folklore of lycanthropy understand the specific means of Othering that Karen underscores, which include questions of domesticity, hospitality, duality, and—to use a minority identifying phrase—passing. Werewolf lore speaks to a domestic failure in which a host cannibalizes expected guests. Cohen writes, "Lycaon, the first werewolf in Western literature, undergoes his lupine metamorphosis as the culmination of a fable of hospitality," originating this monster's myth in Lycaon, King of Arcadia, who invites Jupiter into his home, serves him his servants' body parts as a meal, and as punishment is turned into a wolf who retains traces of his former shape; neither fully human nor animal, Lycaon expresses a bifurcated nature that others the shifter regardless of their human or animal company (45). This duality to monster myths is

common, and Maahen Ahmed reminds one that, "the monster not only defines but also questions notions of the human and humanity. It consequently offers insight into practices and effects of othering," using its role as outlier, other, or in a rare perception guardian to uphold a mirror to the societal structure of humanity and allow humans to see themselves and their interactions with one another through what they are not (6). Cohen writes:

> Every monster is in this way a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves. The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed.
>
> Primarily these borders are in place to control the traffic in women, or more generally to establish strictly homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional. (46)

Ferris' decision to depict Karen as a weregirl is profound. In Karen's perspective, she has the benefit of walking amongst society while hiding this deeper part of her dual nature that only surfaces occasionally, while the opening scene of the book in which the community arrives to attack Karen brandishing domestic weaponry (irons, telephones, etc.) speaks to lycanthropy's root in Lycaon and his failure to successfully serve others—a role that quickly became feminized in the patriarchal West as domesticity became feminized in the patriarchal West, which Karen may be understood as rejecting. Karen's duality is born out of the need to pass in her society; needing to present as heteronormative so as not to be ostracized further by her classmates and family, she then represses what is illustrated as the monster within her, *pour soi*, which transforms visibly during moments of high emotion such as when she is feeling threatened or

when she kisses the girl she is attracted to, Missy, in a stairwell. Ostracized by society, with a monster's appearance, Karen is not malicious and does not require slaying by a heroic figure for the safety of humanity.

Similarly, Ferris uses Franklin, illustrated as Frankenstein's monster, as a means to further explore a separation of homosexuality and villainy. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley is a queer coded text that Ferris uses to challenge the notion of homosexuality as monstruous to society with the potentiality for villainy. Franklin is introduced to the reader as an interrupter of sexual assault and therefore as a savior to Karen. Karen depicts herself as having transformed into a complete werewolf with sharp claws hovering over the heads of four boys who the readers later understand as bullies; Karen, teeth bloody over their dismembered bodies, says, "Ok, all right! This wasn't exactly how it went this morning…it was more like this…" before reverting back to a weregirl wherein she is first bullied—pushed around, spit upon—and then threatened with sexual violence; beneath the elevated tracks, these classmates give orders to "spread her legs…and hold them down," and Karen "knew it was [her] last chance" to resist them by fighting back, which prompts her attackers to transition from sexual violence to physical violence (Ferris). Karen narrates before the attack, "right that minute I knew the bullies wanted to hurt my soul in a way that they hoped would turn my body into *a coffin*" (Ferris). "How about a stick instead of a dick?" they ask, "Huh freak?" (Ferris). The aggressors—plural, reinforcing as with *My Friend Dahmer* a fraternity of masculinity and legitimizing the violence and insult as communal and societal—attempt to use force to achieve their own sexual gratifications, which are defined as masculine and therefore their right in public as well as private spaces. Before they can hit her, Franklin grabs the hands of two of the boys and the first line spoken to him is, "Ya dumb nigger! Let go a me now!" (Ferris). As noted in a previous chapter, Eribon writes, "in

insult, it is one's inner sanctum that is threatened, one's heart of hearts, what the spiritual

tradition calls the 'soul.' If a well-targeted insult provokes such a strong echo in the

consciousness of the person at whom it is directed, it is because this 'soul' has been created

through socialization in a world of insult and inferiorization," to which both Karen's ("freak")

and Franklin's ("dumb nigger") souls have been attacked (66). This scene is one of sexual,

physical, and emotional violence, which Franklin ends by rationalizing the outcomes of an attack

on Karen (i.e. that her older brother would seek revenge) that convince her bullies to flee. It is

clear that despite Franklin's scarred face, ominous demeanor, and blackness, Karen does not fear

him. Rather, Karen narrates, "Franklin helped me stand up […] his hands fluttered all around me

straightening my clothes, dusting me off and pecking at me like a pair of pretty brown neat-freak

birds," as Franklin's hands multiply and sprout angelic wings (Ferris). Rather than being defined

as an onlooker or stalker and entering the narrative with an affect of danger, as a villain, Franklin

arrives as a heroic rescuer.

Ferris' representation of Franklin—depicted as Frankenstein's monster—is more

artistically influenced from the 1931 film than the novel by Mary Shelley; Baumann writes,

"much of the most iconic visual imagery associated with the Frankenstein story comes not from

Mary Shelley's novel but from James Whale's film," to which *Monsters* pays homage (93).

Shelley's character Viktor Frankenstein created a "monster," or perhaps mythic humanoid, who

is a parody of beauty and the act of parodying subsequently makes him grotesque; the creature

does not pass, despite being comprised of several individually beautiful parts (53). The failure to

pass is perhaps not lost on James Whale. Baumann writes of the director:

> Whale was gay, and openly so, a rare thing in a Hollywood straightjacketed by the
>
> recently enacted Motion Picture Production Code of 1930. His undeniable and

eternal contribution to the story of Frankenstein is a profound understanding of

what it means to be persecuted and despised for merely existing, a feeling that he

channeled into the representation of the monster as a sympathetic and

misunderstood creature who just wants to be loved by his creator and find a mate

who is *like him*. (Baumann 89)

Baumann suggests that the "story is at heart about men procreating without women, and the

passionate hatred that binds man and monster together is often charged with an erotic energy"

(93). Despite Viktor's amorous zeal for Elizabeth, *Frankenstein* is a queer coded text, and this

reading has been elevated in film. Cohen writes, "The monster embodies those sexual practices

that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster"

(47). As monsters inhabit realms of the imaginary, they come to embody possibilities and paths

that are closed or forbidden by a white heteronormative patriarchal society; one of those paths is

homoerotic and/or homosexuality itself. Ferris utilizes parts of this history in the depiction of

Franklin.

There are two substantial differences in Ferris' reincarnation of Frankenstein's creature

through Franklin. Ferris reinvents this mythic humanoid with subtle differences that further

promote his digression from potential villain. "In Shelley's version," Baumann writes, "the

monster is destructive because he had no one to guide him—evil, she suggests, comes from a

lack of nurturing," and Franklin comes from a nurturing household and nurtures Karen (93-4). In

Whales' film *Frankenstein,* apathy is what makes the creature murderous: a little girl befriends

the creature, and the creature—failing to empathize or recognize the fragility of life in the little

girl—kills her. Considering this scene, Baumann writes:

But the point is that the innocent eyes of children do not see a monster, a tradition that continues in film, perhaps best represented in *The Monster Squad* (1987), in which the Frankenstein monster betrays his monster kin (Dracula, the Wolf Man, etc.) to team up with a little girl and become her beloved protector. This is a major departure from Mary Shelley's vision. (94)

Ferris follows the 1987 dark comedy's depiction of an empathetic creature, suggesting that associating the affective looks of whiteness and masculinity with a character is not a reliable method of determining upstanding character or goodness (Figure 5). This shallowness is particularly important because of its implementation on children: in order to more quickly understand who is the hero, and who is the villain, children are encouraged to view visibly darker or gender nonconforming individuals as suspicious others; this trope is then challenged in later 20th century film and literature. The second difference is that Ferris overlays Frankenstein's creature onto a Black young man, inviting questions of race (and insults of race) onto this creature. Ferris is neither the first to represent a Frankenstein's creature inspired character as empathetic, nor as African-American—*Blackenstein* was produced in 1973. And Baumann writes, "many versions of *Frankenstein*—not the least of which is Mary Shelly's novel—have a homoerotic dimension to them," which signifies that a homosexual reading of Frankenstein's monster is equally nothing new (93). But also in Frankenstein's monster does one read alienation, anti-social behavior, and even a strain of misanthropy; and a simultaneous desire to be loved and accepted. In Frankenstein's monster, one also reads the very making of a villain. That this villain is then heroic in Ferris' *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, highlights the separation between homosexuality and villainy.

Conclusion

This chapter is an examination of the growing separation of villainy and homosexuality as represented in three graphic narratives in the 21st century: *My Friend Dahmer*, *8-Bit Theater*, and *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*. While some characters are more literal monsters than others, the label applies in each, as each graphic work represents a homosexual character who must navigate their homosexuality as a profound and vilifying difference from the heteronormative societies in which they live. Cohen writes of monsters:

> Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them. (52)

As homosexuality and villainy both are so monstruous to a white heteronormative patriarchal society, their subsequent depictions may more easily be understood if they are veiled as monsters—humanoids, or creatures, who are both human and Other, related to here yet not from here, or terrorizing to the status quo of society for reasons that appear unclear to that society, which then must perform the emotional labor to understand itself and its cultural norms in order to squarely place the monster outside of itself. Cohen writes of the placement of monsters:

The habitations of the monsters (Africa, Scandinavia, America, Venus, the Delta

Quadrant—whatever land is sufficiently distant to be exoticized) are more than

dark regions of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons

of liberation. Their monsters serve as secondary bodies through which the

possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can

be explored. Hermaphrodites, Amazons, and lascivious cannibals beckon from the

edges of the world, the most distant planets of the galaxy. (50)

These habitations—which more and more become cityscapes in the American imaginary—will

be explored in the next chapter on films and homosexuality. However, through these graphic

narratives one may see a growing separation between homosexuality and villainy.

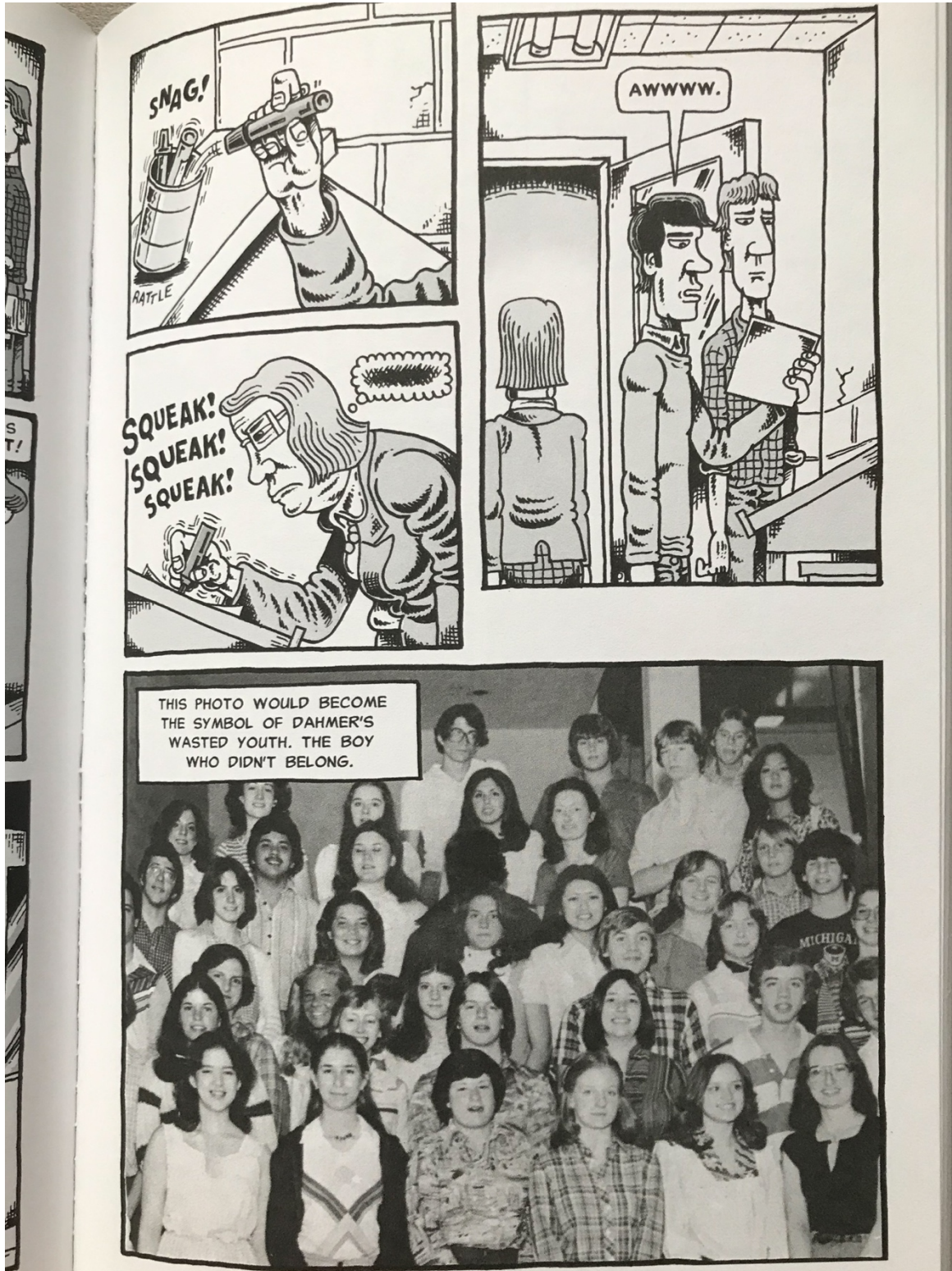Figure 1: *My Friend Dahmer*

Figure 2: *My Friend Dahmer*

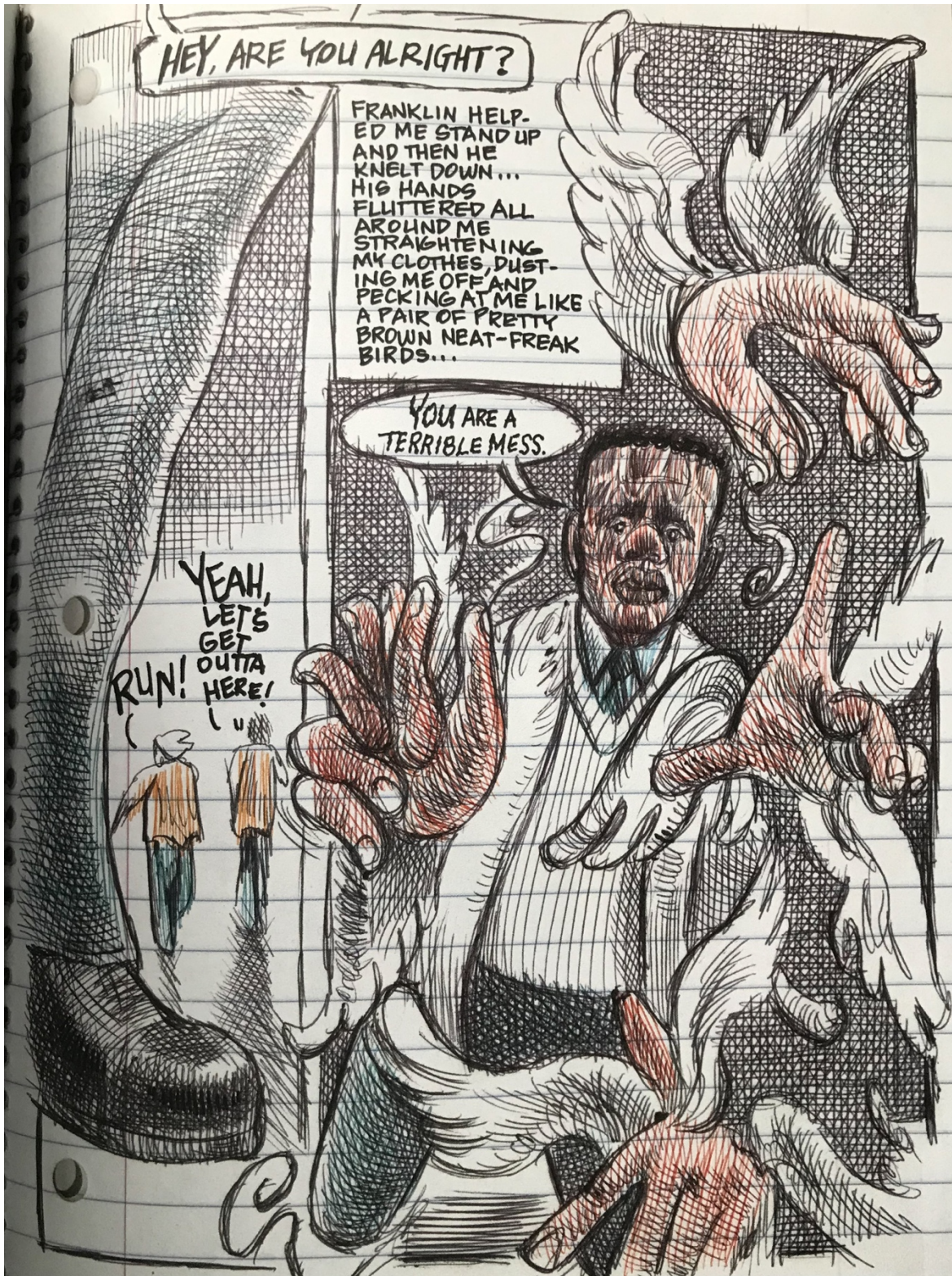Figure 3: *My Friend Dahmer*

Figure 4: *8-Bit Theater*

Figure 5: *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*

4. Homosexuality and Villainy in Film

Hollywood feels like it should be ours, and hence, Hollywood becomes carried with gay subculture like something of a subcultural phantom limb. Hollywood "needs" to be on our side because our collective sense is that it has always been there. And yet, was it not a limb we never actually possessed? […] If Hollywood was ever really "ours," it was largely—if not exclusively—because we "read" it that way. This has produced a historical affective attachment, and yet one that may be fundamentally unsustainable. – Alex Evans

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which a film can be understood as a homosexual film. I consider marketing, the concept of the *auteur*, and the audience. Further, I examine two aspects of homosexuality and film: homosexual spaces through setting and the trope of road tripping, and villains in 1960s-1990s Disney films. I argue that the trope of road tripping creates a sense of adventure, propelling the plot, through removing characters from homosexually-friendly urbanscapes and transplanting them onto suburban- and ruralscapes. A byproduct of this trope is that gender performance that does not match a person's sex is seen as unnatural in more bucolic settings, and this enhances the perception of villainy that these characters produce for locals. An examination of villains in late 20th century films demonstrates the ways in which ambitious individuals who overperform or blur their gender identity are quickly and unequivocally villainized in films that also establish hetero-romantic relationships as normal and desirable.

Authenticity and Purpose

The definition of a gay film remains as fluid as the definition of homosexuality itself,

complicating readings of films as homosexual, or not. The conception of the *auteur* gives an idea

of validity in measuring the queerness of a work, such as when the director, producer, or featured

actor(s) are homosexual, but this concept is expressly limiting when examining works of

cinematography. Griffin writes, "[…] defining one's self according to sexual orientation was not

yet totally commonplace by the time Walt Disney began producing cartoons. Many still

considered 'acts of sodomy' simply as sinful actions and not indications of a personality type,"

and considers the intersection of capitalism and marketing products towards a homosexual

consumer as a more effectual naissance of clear and unequivocal homosexual identity in film

(76). The business of film is—at its core—a business, and once executives realized that money

could be made announcing the subculture of homosexuality in film, they set about doing so.

Evans writes:

> Despite having played an extraordinarily central role in the lives of pre-liberation
>
> gay men, acting as what Brett Farmer has called "a veritable lingua franca," by
>
> the 1980s, Hollywood was the subject of stinging attack and abandonment by its
>
> erstwhile paramour. […] Drag and, more generally, cross-dressing were of course
>
> the focus of some excitement in the early 1990s. In the academy, drag became a
>
> central totem of Queer Theory, just as the broader political and cultural movement
>
> known as "Queer" used cross-dressing as a central strategy in its "in-your-face"
>
> activist deployments. In cinema, a broad range of films, from the mainstream to
>
> the margins, explored transvestism in all its forms: from overtly gay subcultural
>
> drag to feminist reincarnatory gender-bending to straight male angora fetishes.
>
> What is perhaps most remarkable about drag's cinematic ubiquity at this point is

the sheer variety of cultural, artistic, and industrial positionings attached to this

range of cinematic products: from the independent, art-house, lyrical film-making

to be found in Sally Potter's *Orlando* to the populist Disneyfied sentimentality of

Mrs Doubtfire or the quirky farce of *The Birdcage*. (41-2)

In spite of the fact that the homosexual community identifies so strongly with the imaginary

escapism that film is adept at constructing, the industry had presented a cold shoulder.

Hollywood had turned its back on the homosexual community—Evans refrains from stating it,

but by the 1980s, the AIDS crisis was in full swing in America—and by the 1990s Hollywood

had re-remembered the gay consumer. Griffin originates this moment in the 1970s, when lesbian

and gay activists led a national protest of Florida orange juice, which presented homophobic

Anita Bryant as its spokesperson at the time, and Bryant was decruited, but similarly showcases

its true advent in the 1990s when alcohol companies—the foundation of gay bars—launched

targeted marketing campaigns to the gay consumer (228). Evans writes of these marketing ploys,

"this is a factor of which lesbian and gay audiences tend to be only too aware, however, and

hence, it was noted of the sudden queer surge that '[t]here is uniform agreement that Hollywood

producers are choosing to do drag-themed projects for reasons relating more to the wallet than

the soul,' as reviewer Erika Milvy put it" (44). Marketing has been one of the ways that a film

has been considered homosexual, but it has not been universally accepted.

The conception of the *auteur,* or attaching to a film an artistic author whose intellectual

imprint is unique to that person, challenges rather than affirms the definition of a homosexual

film. Given that films are productions that can have multiple artistic inputs, it can be more

difficult to identify an individual "author" whose life experiences ground the film in an

"authentically" homosexual perspective. The ideological shift away from the *auteur* in film

studies celebrates the teamwork aspects of films, for example by the high production value works attached to household names like Steven Spielberg, Joss Whedon, and Michael Bay who do not create these works by themselves; however, it makes it more difficult to identify a work as minority identifying outside of the film's plot. Is a film woman-led because the screenplay is written by a woman, produced by a woman, or because it was directed by a woman? In the case of homosexuality, Evans echoes Medhurst in arguing for a return to the idea of the *auteur,* writing, "although auteur models of cinematic criticism had generally been judged in film theory to be 'superseded' by the poststructuralist turn, gay spectators might still quite reasonably use their knowledge of queer authorship in their fashioning of particular responses to the text" (43). Griffin uses the idea of the *auteur* to examine the Disney oeuvre, writing of illustrator Andreas Deja, who illustrated characters such as Triton (Ariel's father) in *The Little Mermaid*, the titular character in *Hercules*, and Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast*:

> Deja's acknowledgement of the effect his sexual orientation has on his work marks a new era in reading subtext into Disney. His comments give legitimacy to reading these characters through a "gay sensibility" because they have been "authored" by an openly gay man, regardless if the "homosexual author" is the formal overseer of the entire project. Yet, as the influence of "muscle queens" on some of Deja's work indicates, the "authorial" position allows a specific reading influenced by a specific sociocultural identity—*not* a free-floating "queer" reading. (170)

Deja used his knowledge of gay life and culture to inform his artwork in films that were meant to be for children and therefore sexless. As discussed later, these films are full of heterosexual inferences, which makes them not sexless but full of heterosexual messaging. Deja, who was

open about his homosexuality and using homosexual sources and references, allowed viewers to rethink the films that he had worked on as homosexual based on the concept of the *auteur*. Previous to Deja, Griffin points to Howard Ashman, playwright and lyricist, whose musical imprint on *Beauty and the Beast* retroactively encouraged a widespread analyzation of the film as social commentary on the AIDS crisis. After Ashman's death of complications related to AIDS, *Beauty and the Beast* was then subversively read as a film that examines AIDS via the curse placed on Prince Adam (aka, Beast) that caused great consternation among the townsfolk, even though Ashman had little influence over the plot of the film. Ashman's *auteur* sensibility can further be found in *The Little Mermaid*. Griffin writes:

> [Ursula's] campy nature is due at least in part to the words that Ashman gives her
>
> to perform. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ashman provided Ursula with a solo number,
>
> "Poor Unfortunate Souls." In the number, Ursula uses various methods to
>
> convince Ariel the mermaid to sell her soul—from looking penitent and saintlike
>
> to shimmying madly with excitement. [The ballad] is an unmistakable sendup of
>
> the campy female impersonation number." (174)

Ashman, who is also openly homosexual, provided the character of Ursula a song that requires a undulation along the scale from feminine to masculine and back again. Because of Ashman's homosexuality, this is understood as a gay influence. The idea of the *auteur* provides a valuable lens through which to consider films through affinity, such as a film by an African-American *auteur*; Goodrum writes, "calls for diversity in comics run alongside, and sometimes intersect with, those in film and television. As movements such as #OscarsSoWhite have shown, many audience members want more than just a token display of diversity" (8). *Auteur* is a way for

readers to conceptualize films that have traditionally been understood as heterosexual or sexless as homosexual.

However, for the sake of this chapter, I am interested in films that lend themselves to Griffin's "free-floating 'queer' readings." While *auteur* examinations of films are a useful way to queer them, any film that is received by an audience may be read as homosexual, heterosexual, or both. To wait for a film employee to announce their homosexuality in order to identify a film as homosexual is to ignore the cultural reception of films as storytellers of culture.

Homosexual Road Tripping

Location is an important aspect in homosexual life, and in this section, I examine films that utilize the "road trip" trope to emphasize this importance. With films *Too Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995)*; The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994)*; Boys on the Side* (1995)*;* and *Transamerica* (2005), viewers consider the ways in which the city—setting for vice, crime, and homosexuality—is left to travail the heteronormative countryside.

Homosexuals often have difficulty living in the more conservative rural landscape of America, and therefore find themselves gravitating towards metropoles like New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Boston, or even international destinations like Paris, London, and Berlin that have longer histories of homosexual acceptance or culture. Eribon writes, "[…] the impulse to find an 'elsewhere' is, for gay people, linked to a kind of malaise, to an uncomfortableness in their very being. The impulse to flee is a way of escaping that feeling. Geographic distance, the search for different locations, the effort to inscribe oneself in a new space, are all conditions for reconstructing oneself," which homosexuals must do after learning heterosexual cultural norms (254). But this very malaise and discomfort presents a friction that serves well within a film plot trajectory: a homosexual city dweller living a comparatively

discriminatory-free lifestyle identifies a reason to travel across a rural or suburban landscape in which heterosexuality is either embedded or suppositioned, interact with people whose moral values are diametrically opposed with theirs, and win the community over in order to continue their odyssey to their final destination—most often, another urban locale. This theme has the unintentional side effect of furthering the association of nature, or what is deemed "natural" even in the most inhospitable biodomes, with heterosexuality.

The city acts as an origin point or a destination point; a place to dream about or reach towards; a place that constitutes a *where*, as compared to suburban and rural locations that represent a nowhere, past, a thoroughfare between two cities, or more aptly a destination with conservative moral values. Eribon writes:

> Those who seek to leave their birthplaces and the places where they spent their childhoods in order to live in more welcoming cities are numerous. Marie-Ange Schiltz writes, speaking of recent studies, that "in comparison to studies of the general population, it seems that the departure from the family household and the attainment of economic independence are much more precipitous among young homosexuals. This flight surely leads, in most cases, to large cities." (19)

Cities, in spite of their dirty and criminal reputations, are read as warmer and safer than the families that some of these homosexuals grew up in. In an earlier chapter, I examined the ways in which families, even racial minority ones who experience regular forms of insult in a white heteronormative patriarchal society, may pressure individuals within that family to adhere to those exterior pressures of heterosexuality or face ridicule, insult, or rejection and expulsion from the home. This outplacing of homosexual lives does not only appear as disaffected or unhoused youths. Birdsall writes:

Woven into [James Beard's] *American Cookery* is a kind of secret record of twentieth-century gay migration to cities from across the country and beyond its shores. Shaw with Egg Dressing traveled from Iowa to Los Angeles along with Bob Balzer, the queer wine writer and high-end grocer. Lemon Cake Pudding was an old recipe Frank Hearne (Emil Kashouty's partner) brought to New York after fleeing family in Texas. Lebanese American Emil lent James a handful of his mother's Middle Eastern recipes: Lentil Soup with Chard and Lemon (*Adas bi Haamud*) and Kibbeh Naye. James chronicled dishes queer exiles kept alive.

(311)

Birdsall's choice of words—fleeing and exile—is exemplary, as these homosexuals were exiled within their nation-state (and Beard himself would be "exiled" from his alma mater for his homosexuality) and fleeing towards the cities. These metropoles were centers of culture, then, because individuals from the countryside made them so, and their relative safety is metaphorical if not literal. Eribon writes of the traditionally foreigner-welcoming urban landscapes, "this explains why a true mythology of the city developed within gay culture, within the collective homosexual imaginary, from the end of the nineteenth century onward (and perhaps even earlier). Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, New York, San Francisco: these became wonderful symbols of a certain freedom […]," due in no small part to the multiplicities of cultures that created a more inviting space to a homosexual identity (20). James Baldwin, offering a speech in Chicago in 1963, received the following question from an attendee: "Mr. Baldwin, why [is it] the American artist—in general—has always retreated and has divorced himself from the American political life and sociological experiences of this country, and they invariably end up in Paris or some corner of Eastern Europe instead of fighting and steering this country towards her destiny,

which is coming?" The attendee, in 1963, was likely unaware of Baldwin's homosexuality or would not have addressed it so publicly, in an auditorium, but instead crafted a question addressing Baldwin's identity as an artist—a steward of culture—whose absence from America spells a specific kind of cultural dread, by then referred to as a "brain drain," after the mass emigration of scientific thinkers and intellectuals leaving central Europe due to the events related to World War II. This attendee overlooks the inhospitality that American political life and sociological experiences may sometimes offer a person whose identity precludes them from white heteronormative patriarchal hegemony. Baldwin replies:

> Well, I'll try to repeat the question. The question is essentially, "Why have American artists taken so little responsibility over the cultural and political life of America, and why have so many of them fled to Europe?" That's a hard question to answer, too […]. But I'll tell you what I think. One of the reasons American artists flee to Europe is again a very obvious fact, I think, but so obvious that it's unnoticed. The principle, the root reason—I think—is that man is a social animal; now that sounds like A, B, C, but if one says "Man is a social animal," then one has got to ask oneself questions about the society in which he operates, in which he's creating; the principles which govern that society—that's the work of every writer in that society—the principles which govern and still govern American society are mainly utilitarian. So that, a writer at some point in his life, has to flee from this cacophony of football players, and popularity contests, and success, in order to sit down someplace where he can find out what he thinks.

[…] All American artists have been through this. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote his publishes from London, in 1861; I quote, "United States may be fit for many excellent purposes, but they are not fit to live in."

Baldwin's answer is that these artists—for Baldwin has constructed a dichotomy of artists and football players so that the conception of an artist carries with it an omitted reference to sensitivity and non-assertive masculinity, and below this stratum a reference to effeminacy and therefore homosexuality—seek a society that accepts them for who they are, and receiving this acceptance, they are granted the safety to create the cultural artifacts whose absence so concern the attendee. Within this argument, there is a clear distinction of "here" and "there," with the former most often standing for suburban and rural landscapes and America, while the latter most often stands for an urban landscape or an international some*where*; hence, "Paris or some corner of Eastern Europe," which more likely means Berlin, Vienna, or Moscow but whose cultural relevance is flattened to a not "here." Further, the cultural understanding that homosexuals who are not born and raised within urban settings must move themselves to these locales spikes the public perception that homosexuals may be conflated with the foreigner; they are more frequently not from "here," wherever "here" may be. Eribon writes, "of course the city is also a social world, a world of possible forms of socialization. Along with anonymity, it provides the possibility of surmounting loneliness," for which the homosexual is driven to overcome, in a patriarchal society that structures itself upon their omission and oppression (21). Nevertheless, this is a dangerous thing to do, as Sara Ahmed notes, "to be identified as a stranger is to be identified as not being from here, or not being entitled to be here; you are identified as someone who endangers who is here," regardless of whether that "here" is urban, suburban, or rural (117). Homosexuals are drawn to urban landscapes not because they are urban, but because they offer a

more accepting socio-cultural lifestyle, in which they may find fellow homosexuals and friends with whom they may share the secret of their sexuality without fear of ostracization, and may even find a life partner.

Homosexual characters who move across the rural landscape are suspicious and susceptible to extra policing. These characters, by blurring strict gender lines, become villainous to a white heteronormative patriarchy. Road tripping is a trope in films that speaks to the spaces in which homosexuals are villainized. In *To Wong Foo,* three men who perform in the New York drag artistry scene decide to try their luck in a drag competition in Los Angeles—Vida Boheme (Patrick Swayze) and a reluctant Noxeema Jackson (Wesley Snipes) take on protégé Chi-Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo), selling their two airplane tickets and purchasing a used car to transport them from one metropolis to another; in *Priscilla*, drag queens Anthony Belrose (Hugo Weaving) and Adam Whitely (Guy Pearce) invite reluctant Bernadette Bassenger (Terence Stamp), a transexual, to drive across Australia from Sydney to Alice Springs for a drag show contract. Reentering rural and suburban spaces, the drag queens become spectacles by nature of their outlandish gender performance. Cohen writes:

> Given that the recorders of the history of the West have been mainly European
> and male, women (She) and nonwhites (*Them!*) have found themselves repeatedly
> transformed into monsters, whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity
> and whiteness, or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought. Feminine and
> cultural others are monstruous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but
> when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack.
> (47)

These characters, then, become feminine culturally othered monsters on the move across America, creating anxiety in the societal consciousness. In *To Wong Foo,* this is represented in a scene where a police officer, Sheriff Dollard (Chris Penn), pulls their car over for a routine traffic violation but crosses a professional boundary by flirting and groping Vida Boheme, at which point he discovers that her genitalia is male and feels, that he has been tricked; his romantic interest in Vida not based on her personality, but on her female heterosexual presentation, or more aptly, Rigney writes "the construction of a woman's body is related to issues of power and control," to which Sheriff Dollard hyperpolices by his access to power as a white heterosexual man (7). More to the point, he then takes it upon himself to pursue Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi well outside of his jurisdiction to punish them; his pursuit is extrajudicial, and yet he feels vindicated in this chase. The reason Sheriff Dollard feels vindicated is because a gender transgression is worse than a traffic violation in a white heteronormative patriarchy, and anyone who appears to flaunt those norms must be reminded, at any cost, of their failure to adhere to those norms. Fear remains a powerful tool in maintaining the social order. Rigney writes of *Boys Don't Cry*, a film wherein a transexual is violently assaulted in middle America, "The film suggests that the source of Brandon's demise is his outrageous confidence in his ability to pass as male. His crime is a crime of arrogance: to violate gender norms while not expecting punishment. This attitude arises out of a culture that regularly and publicly punishes those who do not fit into the conventional categories of male and female or masculine and feminine," for which these drag queens do not by failing to present physically according to the gender assigned to them at birth (14). At the core of Dollard's anger is a searing homophobia and a fear that Vida will trick other heterosexual men along her journey. Examining *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert,* Simpson writes:

> *Priscilla* is a curious example of a film which is both very "gay" and very
>
> straight. Raucous drag queens, fierce frocks, blue language, and a hilarious
>
> collision of Sydney Culture with Outback Nature—but no homosexuality, thank
>
> you very much. Only Terence Stamp's sour and feisty transsexual Bernadette (i.e.
>
> a "woman") is allowed a hint of a sex life.

Evans notes that both films are "road movies," and although filmed concurrently, *To Wong Foo*

continues to have a remake or rip-off reputation, making it appear less artistic but its central idea

more financially viable; "what is most prized in 'the industry,'" Evans writes, "is financial

certainty, and remakes often seem to offer such a possibility" (42). *Priscilla* is an independent

film, and received a warm reception for its subject matter and exotic (to American and European

markets) landscapes. *Priscilla*, as suggested by Simpson, presents a "gay" film of homosexuals

interacting predominately with nature and with heterosexuals; this road trip is across Australia

rather than the United States, pitching an "exotic" local to American audiences. Hartman writes:

> My colleagues had turned into pranksters […]. Road trips have a way of doing
>
> that to people. Venturing out from the known world, wandering for days on end,
>
> and arriving at unheard-of places fueled the desire to leave our old selves behind
>
> and tricked us into believing it was possible. The more ground covered, the more
>
> liberated you became. All the moorings fell away. (*Lose Your Mother* 213)

Road trips allow the restrictions of society to fall away, and for a feeling of renewal or

reinvention to occur for the road trippers, but they also become dangerous when the individuals

in the vehicle must interact with local, traditional, and/or conservative individuals who find their

towns or states threatened by foreign interlopers. Road trip films reinforce the divide between

safe spaces and dangerous spaces for homosexuality, which then illustrate the locations in which homosexuals may be vilified.

Heterosexual Romance and Homosexual Villains in Disney Films

Late 20th century Disney films have represented a stark reinforcement of homosexuality conflated as villainy in their portrayal of characters to children, such as *The Little Mermaid* (1996), *Aladdin* (1992), and *101 Dalmatians* (1961). This is well documented; what I use this for, here, is to retroactively reinforce the conflation of villainy and homosexuality and/or their intentional uncoupling throughout the other works that I have examined previously.

Several Disney films which are intentionally marketed to children have a G (for General) rating, which precludes any nudity or displays of sexuality, nevertheless display clear and unequivocal depictions of heteronormativity that allow their protagonists to be read as heterosexual, and their heterosexual lifestyle as good or natural. By presenting heterosexuality as normative and attached to the protagonist(s), the performances of the villains in these works become more easily homosexual as a means to affirm just how important heterosexuality is to these societies. Karin Martin and Emily Kazyak state through their research that, "[…] by elementary school, children understand the normativity of heterosexuality. That is, by elementary school, children have a heteronormative understanding of the world," and use this knowledge as the impetus to study the heteronormativity in top grossing G-rated Disney films to examine whether or not children are learning about the affect of heterosexuality through these films (316). They are. In fact, several films they examined presented heterosexual coupling as the crux of the plot. They write, "In *The Little Mermaid*, for instance, the entire narrative revolves around the romance between Ariel, a mermaid, and Eric, a human. The same is true of movies like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *Santa Claus 2*. There would be no movie without the hetero-romantic story

line for these films," which present heterosexuality to children in settings of romance or nature, as "characters in love are surrounded by music, flowers, candles, magic, fire, ballrooms, fancy dresses, dim lights, dancing, and elaborate dinners. Fireflies, butterflies, sunsets, wind, and the beauty and power of nature often provide the setting for—and a link to the naturalness of— hetero-romantic love" (Martin and Kazyak 323-4; 325). By contrast, there are no sweeping romantic scenes of two princesses or princes kissing read as wholesome or natural. Awareness of gender through transgression is dangerous, because it emphasizes the privileges that accompany maleness, and further denotes that these privileges are not "natural" or inherent based on gender, but are rather based on gender performance. A part of what makes drag queens comedic is the illogical abdication of male power; a part of what makes drag kings threatening is the seizing of male "power." Crossdressing, therefore, is a common feature of Disney films, but is used predominately to the comedic effect of men crossdressing as women. As all elements of nature become heterosexualized, even vast and sweeping landscapes, they are read by children (who become adults) as safe havens for heterosexuality and spaces absent of homonormativity. Heterosexual desire, then, paradoxically propels the plot while portraying itself as innocuously absent because of its imprint onto natural settings and storylines; (heterosexual) love is magical and important while also predestined and expected. Sara Ahmed writes, "we might also describe the domination of children as a primary technique for the domination of people. As Eli Clare puts it, 'What better way to maintain a power structure—white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, a binary and rigid gender system—than to drill the lessons of who is dominant and who is subordinate into the bodies of children'" (73). The binary and rigid gender system, meant to reinforce a heterosexual pairing, begins its training in children.

Villains then become the individuals who, opposed to heterosexual heroes and heroines, fail to heterosexually couple, whose queer identity arises from their exaggerated gender performance. One of the lessons children may learn from Disney films is that they may act within their gender identity, but transgressing it would align them with dangerous individuals. By failing to identify with the gender assigned to them by others—the gender usually assigned to them by virtue of their sex—children risk aligning themselves with the villains rather than the protagonists. In adulthood, this appears as an affinity or a self-identification. Griffin writes:

> The fascination that many gay men have with Disney villains is precisely over how they theatrically perform their gender roles, to the point where the "naturalness" of their gender can be called into question. Although the vengeful Queen in *Snow White* and the evil sorceress Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* are ostensibly gendered female, they both wear clothing that completely covers almost every inch of their bodies, including cowls or hoods that cover their heads. Only the hands and face are exposed, leaving the rest of the body cloaked. […] In other words, these villainesses look like drag queens. (97-8)

Maleficent and the Queen in *Snow White*—Queen Grimhilde—both wear a substantial amount of black and purple, as well as floor length capes that are designed to keep their bodies in mystery. These two villains wear an extreme amount of makeup (if anything identifies a villain, it is a strong, high-arched eyebrow), further covering themselves up and thereby creating a parody of femininity by that extremity, compared to princesses who have more "natural" appearing make up. Neither Maleficent (Figure 6) nor Queen Grimhilde (Figure 7) expose any hair, another identifier of gender. Eribon writes, "throughout the ages, homosexuality has given rise to a proliferation of devalorizing and degrading images, especially caricatures (but also images from

film or television, which often simply provide in different ways images close to those from the tradition of caricature)," to which Maleficent, Queen Grimhilde, and Cruella applies (70). Beyond their clothing, these three are active and willful in their actions—they are only demur when they are attempting to deceive, and are otherwise ambitious, masculine, and extreme in their actions—and they are older women who are single. Who have failed to heterosexually couple. This is what makes them true villains. Maahen Ahmed might refer to these villains as monstruous, writing, "as deviations—as too much or too little of something, […they] signal the shunning of norms and give form to the impossible," or the unnatural (3). None of these villains announce themselves as homosexual, but Griffin refers to these villains as "gay-tinged" as their sexuality is never made clear. With few exceptions they fail to couple heterosexually; what becomes clear is that whomever they might be, they are not the characters viewers are invited to emulate. That they also fail to perform their genders successfully is no mistake. Ursula (Figure 8) from *The Little Mermaid,* for example, is modeled after drag queen Divine (Figure 9), who shaved half of his head to make more room for his expansive eyebrows. At Ursula's root is this extremity of gender performance. Cruella de Vil (Figure 10) from *101 Dalmatians* is another such example of a gay-tinged villain; an aggressive careerwoman who attempts to keep Anita Radcliffe in her employ (and away from a role as housewife), she will stop at nothing for the sake of her own career, including developing a line of dog fur coats. Adams writes:

> Her masculine attributes could not be more exaggerated, as Leonard Maltin notes
> in his book, *The Disney Films*. Maltin states that Cruella "revels in the stylistic
> exaggeration of reality" with a "bony and angular" face. He calls her design a
> "caricature." But a caricature of what? A stylistic exaggeration of what reality?

Certainly not the ideal of femininity. Perfectly flat-chested, Cruella struts around

in two-tone hair, drives a mile long convertible like a bat out of hell. (183)

Cruella, in overperforming aspects of masculine gender performance, becomes a caricature of a

business*man*. Villains in Disney films represent their homosexuality through their overperformed

gender performances. Like Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Cruella has an attachment to

clothing (referring to her new coat as "my only true love, darling") as a means of representing

herself. These villains exaggerate their gender performance, and by exaggerating reaffirm their

villainhood.

These films promote themselves in an air of asexuality, thus further damning

homosexuality as inappropriate or too adult for children, as they simultaneously reinforce

heterosexuality. Homosexual children must learn and later unlearn heterosexuality, and later

learn homosocial behaviors whereas heterosocial behaviors are abundant in these films. Martin

and Kazyak write:

Parent-child relationships are portrayed as restrictive, tedious, and protective. The

child is usually escaping these relationships for the exciting adolescent or adult

world. […] Cross-gender friends are often literally smaller and a different species

or object in the animated films, thus making them off limits for romance. […]

Same-sex friendships or buddies are unusual for girls and women unless the

friends are maternal […]. The lead male characters, however, often have comical

buddies […]. These friendships are often portrayed as funny, silly, gross, and fun

but certainly not as serious, special, powerful, important, or natural. For example,

in *The Lion King*, Timon (a meerkat), Pumba (a boar), and Simba (a lion) all live

a carefree life together in the jungle as the best of friends, but Simba quickly

deserts them for Nala, a female lion, once he is an adolescent. (326)

The ability for lead male characters to have friends while lead female characters do not speaks to

Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality." Rich builds on Nancy Chodorow statement,

"heterosexual preference and taboos on homosexuality, in addition to objective economic

dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely—

though more prevalent in recent years" (636). This is further evidenced in cross-gender friends;

because these films work to promote heterosexual coupling, or hetero-romantic love, they must

be clear about who is romantically invested in whom; the result of which is that cross-gender

friends become forbidden or taboo, further reinforcing a binary gender divide.

Conclusion

Several of these villains are constructed or traced to homosexual *auteurs*, however, the effect on

children remains that homosexuality is vilified. Although illustrators like Deja and writers like

Ashman were openly homosexual and were creating homosexual characters based on their

worldview, by nevertheless marketing them as villains children learned how not to behave.

Griffin, writing of their lives at Disney, speaks of paradoxes and tensions wherein open

homophobia would be displayed and some departments would become so queer identified that

when one heterosexual person was fired they joked that it was sex discrimination (136). Deja and

Ashman constructed and/or wrote for heroes and villains alike, but whether or not the villains

continuing to be read as homosexual or gay-tinged played on their conscious is left unclear.

Perhaps, as Baldwin suggests, they weren't given time to think in their perpetuation of the

American dream of capitalism. This speaks to how pervasive heterosexuality has become. Even

in films that are inherently sex-less, gender performance, romantic coupling and heterosocial desire (e.g. the increased amount of male gaze eye popping that encourage children to understand that the female body is meant to be objectified) all work to make heteronormativity/sexuality possible, and homonormativity/sexuality impossible.

This chapter works to consider the ways in which film has perpetuated the conflation of homosexuality and villainy. By examining the concept of the *auteur*, one may consider the ways in which a film may be considered authentically homosexualized, however even this is not a reliable method as it still removes some forms of agency in the team based art of film. By examining setting and migrations in the gay community, this chapter shows a low hanging fruit from which Hollywood managed to pluck road trip films, removing homosexuals out of their homes in metropoles and back in the countrysides from which they had been exiled. Finally, this chapter examines gay-tinged villains in Disney films that are meant to be devoid of sex at all.

Figure 6: Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*

Figure 7: Queen Grimhilde from *Snow White*

Figure 8: Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*

Figure 9: Drag queen Divine, Harris Glenn Milstead

Figure 10: Cruella de Vil from *101 Dalmatians*

5. Conclusion

This work began as a quest for homosexual literary role models in 20th century American media. The impetus of this work came from reading Philip Kennicott's essay "Smuggler," in which Kennicott notes that there is a whole generation of homosexuals who grew up without any positive representations of themselves in literature, and a desire to verify Kennicott's thesis. As Beverly Daniel Tatum expresses in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* the importance of seeing someone who looks like you succeeding in a career, so too, I argue that need is expressed in the homosexual community; it is the searching for the path that is not communally shared with heterosexuals. That search has been, through the conflation of homosexuality and villainy, fraught with peril and danger in ways that reinforce the benefits of heteronormativity.

The conflation has also made it more difficult for heterosexual readers to find role models who are homosexual; homosexual heroes do not exist for homosexuals alone. Even though the conflation that persisted throughout the 20th Century has begun to separate, the remnants of that connection must be examined with the same critical lenses that consider the after effects of the women's liberation movement, the civil rights movement, and the labor movement before that— all of which were students of the ones that came before: what rights have been gained, and where there is still room for improvement. Most importantly is the realization that any gains achieved will continue to be under threat as long as they challenge a system that privileged a white, heterosexual patriarchy.

There are several books and projects that can expand on the ideas expressed in this work. Included here are some of the literary works I would reach for to next continue this research. I

have grouped them here to reflect works that I would place in conversation with. These represent future articles or book chapters.

     Beneath the Wheel by Hermann Hesse, *Strange Brother* by Blair Niles, *Maurice* by E.M. Forster, and "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" by Richard Bruce Nugent are three early 20th century works that may be examined together. Both *Beneath the Wheel* and *Strange Brother* feature a sympathetic lens towards homosexuality, and both novels end in tragedy. Forster worked to give *Maurice* an intentionally positive ending, but the novel would not be published until after his death in 1971. Nugent's short story does not make homosexuality villainous or punishable by tragic death, and Nugent as an author fell into the backrow of prominent Harlem Renaissance writers—that those two statements are the result of causation would be a part of this analysis' thesis. With *Beneath the Wheel, Strange Brother*, and "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" the authors attempted to de-vilify homosexuality, but were met with an unaccepting readership.

     Examining the conflation of villainy and homosexuality throughout James Baldwin's works is a fruitful research area. Baldwin's sensitivity to affect becomes clear across his fiction, non-fiction, drama, and speeches. In addition to *Another Country* (1962), *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is another mid-century novel in which there is a conflation of villainy and homosexuality. The ruination of Giovanni is a specific study of a homosexual villainous act in which Baldwin demystifies the repercussions of Giovanni's murder and cruelly optimistic relationship with David. *The Fire Next Time* (1963) holds two particularly strong arguments about love and sensuality: the lack of love promoting the vilification of African-Americans, and a plea to expand sensuality beyond (hetero)sexuality. Several Baldwin scholars, such as Ernest Gibson, Arnold Rampersad, and Edward Pavlic, may be advised. Baldwin remains a central focus in my work.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985) is a dystopian novel that centers

Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality as vital to the patriarchal political nation-state,

making heterosexual coupling patriotic and the failure for women to produce offspring terroristic

and punishable. By making the (dis)ability of women to give birth integral to the novel through

heterosexual sex, Atwood inspired a graphic novel and television series in which homosexual

characters are portrayed as villainous by virtue of their homosexuality. Atwood alarms the reader

by compulsory heterosexuality—it is what makes the novel dystopian—and therefore makes

heterosexual patriarchy villainous rather than homosexuality. *The Handmaid's Tale*, its sequel

The Testaments (2019), *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* adapted by Renée Nault

(2019) and the television series adapted by Bruce Miller (2017) all offer literary and popular

culture critiques on compulsory heterosexuality and by proxy the villainizing of homosexuality.

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis, 1991, and its subsequent film adaptation in 2000

would be a continuation of this work. Obsessed with his physique and clothing, Patrick

Bateman—like Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith—murders Paul

Owen and assumes his belongings and apartment to further his own desires. However, Patrick's

murder drive is not as connected to homosocial desire as Tom's; he is substantially more vicious

in his misanthropy, to the point of psychopathy. Patrick maintains a heterosexual façade, even

rebuffing homosexual advances from colleague Luis Carruthers, but his echoing of Tom is stark

enough to create grounds for examination. *American Psycho* does not clearly fall into the

purview of the conflation of homosexuality and villainy, but it does raise many similar questions

of perception, clothing, and space/identity usurpation.

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002), *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong (2003),

and *The Borrower* by Rebecca Makkai (2011) are all books that portray homosexual characters

who challenge the villainy-homosexuality conflation, and Makkai's *The Great Believers* (2018)

which is set throughout the 20th century all the more so. *Middlesex* and *The Book of Salt* offer

homosexual protagonists who must navigate hostilely heterosexual worlds that other and

displace them. Yet, by failing to turn to the vices of villainy or to accept the definitions that the

heterosexual world places upon them, these characters do not end in tragedy—like Rufus in

James Baldwin's *Another Country*—but rather in success. *The Borrower* features a protagonist

who kidnaps a runaway child (whose mother was forcing him to go to an anti-gay camp) and

goes on a road trip with him; not only does the book ask the reader what is good parenting of a

homosexual child who is susceptible to insult, but it also uses literature to examine the value of

literature in historicizing. It is a book with a librarian protagonist who navigates her relationship

with her kidnapee through books by sharing with him books that feature homosexual

protagonists. *The Great Believers* is a novel that connects the trauma of absence from World War

I with the AIDs crisis of the 80s that could be analyzed using Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of*

Feelings and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*. It is a novel about homosexual loss and

sorrow that humanizes rather than vilifies homosexual lives; while it could stand alone, it could

also be paired with *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (2021) by Anthony Doerr, which features a homosexual

librarian in rural America who saves several children from an ecoterrorist act. These novels from

the 2000s challenge the conflation of homosexuality and villainy.

      What Belongs to You by Garth Greenwell (2016) and *Less* by Andrew Sean Greer (2017)

may offer another literary analysis because of their divergent illicit homosexual relationships.

Read together, these two novels normalize and legitimize a range of homosexual relationships

and behaviors. *What Belongs to You* features a hustler who meets the protagonist in a public

place for sex and continues to extort him for financial gain. *Less,* on the other hand, is almost

conservative in its sex-less approach to the protagonist's romantic and emotional bonds with his love interest. Gritty and commercial, *What Belongs to You* and *Less* both portray homosexual relationships in ways that complicate the zeitgeist surrounding villainy and homosexuality; *What Belongs to You* validates relationships formed in homosexual cruising spots, while *Less* sanitizes homosexuality in ways comparable to hetero-romanticism seen in Disney films.

To continue my work with graphic narratives, there are further examinations that could be made with *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris, which contains other homosexual characters whom I did not examine in this work, just as with *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger; I did not begin to discuss Red Mage's cross-dressing and ambiguous bisexuality, which features periodically in *8-Bit Theater*, nor Black Mage's villainy and racialized otherness. There are also *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel (2008), *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006), *Blue is the Warmest Color* by Jul Maroh (2013), *Girl with Slingshots* by Danielle Corsetto (2004), *Finn and Charlie are Hitched* by Tony Breed (2009), and *Honor Girl* by Maggie Thrash (2015) which all act to separate villainy from homosexuality through creating homosexual protagonists who develop meaningful and positive same-sex relationships. *Fun Home* is the most renowned of this list, and offers the most complicated navigation of the homosexual-villain conflation, as Bechdel's father's homosexual acts are intertwined with seedier activities like supplying alcohol to minors and engaging in sexual activities with his students. *Fun Home* could be paired with Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim* (2008), which also features a homosexual relationship made even more taboo by a student-teacher dynamic. The older academic and younger coming-of-age relationship subtrope is reaffirmed by *Call My By Your Name* by André Aciman (2007). This does not speak directly to villainy, but does speak to the illicit nature of homosexuality in a heterosexual society; in these graphic narratives, an adult-

minor teacher-student sexual relationship is overshadowed by the homosexuality of those relationships. There are a substantive amount of graphic narrative works that speak to the analysis of the villainous homosexual trope.

These chapters are the beginnings of examining the deeper connections of affect, homosexuality, and villainy throughout the 20th century. By examining the ways in which these tropes are presented and recrafted, it becomes easier to identify them when they are relied upon again to establish a dichotomy of good and evil or hero and villain. This is just the tip of a great, big villainous iceberg.

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