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# Reorienting Patrilineal Epistemology

Jack Radley

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# **Reorienting Patrilineal Epistemology**

Jack Radley

Washington University in St. Louis

May 3, 2019

## Abstract

My work explores how father figures – biological and cultural – transmit knowledge. I draw on personal anecdotes, popular fictions, and political realities to challenge the way masculinity is concocted. Traditionally, masculinity has been taught through what I term “patrilineal epistemology,” whereby the grandfather has taught the father, who teaches the son, who will teach his son, ad finitum. *Santa Daddy*, *Untitled (My Father Never Taught Me How to Shave)*, and *His Son’s Countenance Would not Bear the Same Fate as the Bare Face of His Watch* focus on the lesson of shaving to reify alternatives and explore shared physiognomies between father and son. *The Daniel Boone Line* looks at the political implications of whose progress is privileged by these persistent pioneers. *Bedtime Stories* juxtaposes Shel Silverstein’s adult material with his iconic children’s illustrations to explore blurred the lines of intimacy and challenge the unconscious processes by which boys are fashioned into men. My work reorients this transference of knowledge to queer these constructions.

## Learning My Lesson

*My father never taught me how to shave. Instead, one Christmas, a Gillette 3M razor appeared in my stocking. I was eager to yield the tool; my upper lip wished Jesus had been born a few months prior. The razor was never discussed, but promptly probed. Rudolph's nose was red... slightly below, so too became my philtrum. Fumbling through Youtube videos proved festive, as the crimson blood fit the palette of poinsettias.*



**Fig. 1** Jack Radley, *Santa Daddy* (still), 2019, 4K Digital Video, dimensions variable

*Santa Daddy* positions Santa as a surrogate for my father, who deferred conversations about masculinity to a fictional man who climbed down our chimney once a year. The film depicts St. Nick lathering my face with shaving cream, as my foamy



**Fig. 2** Jack Radley, *Santa Daddy* (still), 2019, 4K Digital Video, dimensions variable

beard begins to emulate his. Santa then proceeds to shave me, cutting me my face. My blood drops onto

the adjacent poinsettias. Santa nurses me with a glass Coca-Cola bottle to wash the shaving cream off of my face. This evokes Coca-Cola and Gillette's influence on Santa's iconography through a series of early twentieth century advertisement campaigns targeted to men.



**Fig. 3** 1931 Coca-Cola *Saturday Evening Post* advertisement **Fig. 4** 1953 Gillette advertisement

The film culminates in a scene in which I lay nude on Santa's lap in a pose that evokes Michelangelo Buonarroti's 1499 *Pietà*. The *Pietà* depicts another parent-child relationship of lamentation and loss. The cut on my face parallels Jesus' wound, or stigmata, on his chest.



**Fig. 5** Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1499  
Marble, 68.5 in × 76.8 in



**Fig. 6** Jack Radley, *Santa Daddy* (still), 2019, 4K Digital Video, dimensions variable



**Fig. 7** Jack Radley, *Untitled (My Father Never Taught Me How to Shave)*, 2018, 4K Digital Video, dimensions variable

*Untitled (My Father Never Taught Me How to Shave)* documents an absurdist performance, in which I individually tweezed every hair of my upper lip over the course of two hours. Slow-paced, the film reifies alternative methods of hair removal that require less technical prowess, but greater pain. The work draws Viennese Actionism, an avant-garde movement in the 1960s and early 1970s in which artists pushed the limits of performance through self-inflicted pain, using their bodies as the primary medium. Valie Export's 1973 *Remote Remote* documents the artist slowly, painfully cutting her cuticle, in response to the societal pressures put on women to have groomed, clean nails. The film does not hide the blood and pain that Export endures, and it culminates in her soaking her fingers in a bath of milk.



**Fig. 8** Valie Export, *Remote, Remote* (still), 1973, 16mm film (9:49 min)

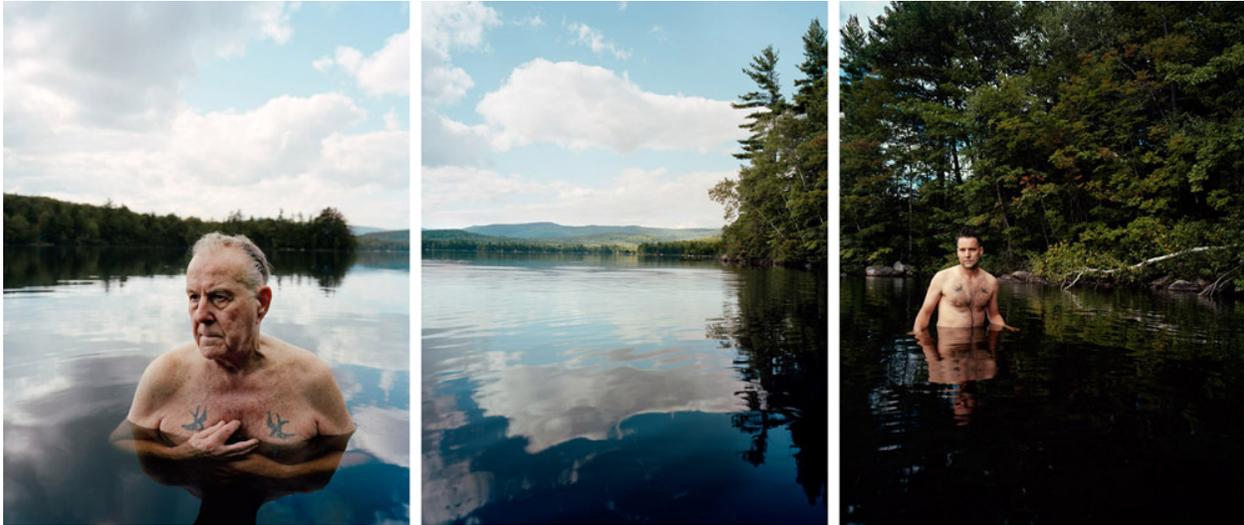
## Like Father, Like Son

American sociologist Daniel Bell writes that a man is “first the son of his father” (Landau 21). Re-encountering a family photograph on my mantel, I considered the extent to which I would or would not fulfil this prophecy. Making use of my tweezed mustache hairs as raw material, I attached the follicles to the upper lip of my childhood face in a photograph enlarged to the scale of my actual visage. *His Son’s Countenance Would not Bear the Same Fate as the Bare Face of His Watch* traces time, family, and physiognomy. Through familial photography, the work documents and portends the physical inheritance of the son, proposing the tension between masculinity as natural or cultural, learned or unlearned.



**Fig. 9** Jack Radley, *His Son’s Countenance Would not Bear the Same Fate as the Bare Face of His Watch*, 2018, Framed family photograph on shelf, C-print with artist’s tweezed facial hair, overall: 5’ x 8’.

As Gillian Wearing remakes repetitions of her mother donning public personae through photography, she explores how the lens lends itself to illustrating socially prescribed familial roles. Queer photographer David Hilliard traces the way in which he morphs into his father in his triptych, *Rock Bottom*. Hilliard cites their two tattoos as a commonality amidst the reflective psychology of the body of water in which they wade.



**Fig. 10** David Hilliard, *Rock Bottom*, 2008, C-print, 24 x 60 inches

### Cultural Father Figures

Before Shel Silverstein inhabited the bedrooms of countless children through buoyant poems and illustrations, he held a firm position on the pages of *Playboy*. Silverstein regularly contributed cartoons to the adult magazine throughout the 1950s, before his 1964 breakout success *The Giving Tree* launched his career as a children’s author. He has become what I term a “cultural father figure.” These figures author



**Fig. 11** Shel Silverstein and two *Playboy* Models

childhood experiences and guide parental rituals, including the way my father read to me. Silverstein imbued his children's stories with subliminal messages. After creating an archive of his oeuvre, it became evident to me that his work for children and adults were not isolated practices. A dark underbelly emerged between his children's poems about taking a communal bath or selling your sister. His cultural material has undoubtedly fashioned many young boys into men.

I screenprinted imagery from Shel Silverstein's oeuvre onto cotton fabric. Through the direct translation of his mark from the page to the fabric, I retained the integrity of Silverstein's original illustrations. Additionally, I divided the quilt into horizontal bands that explore motifs including love, violence, and drinking. This bilateral arrangement echoes the spread of an open book. In each diamond pattern, an exploration of the topic through children's literature and adult material lies adjacent to a toile pattern motif of synthesized sources. Toile is a pattern traditionally used as decoration to create complex scenes of individual images. Stripped of Silverstein's textual captions, the intentions of the author become less clear. Viewers cannot discern the origin of the material, reifying the ambiguity in our approach to his work.<sup>1</sup> I used puff additive in the ink of the border imagery to approximate the embroidered line.

Quilting is a medium of generational inheritance. Typically, knowledge of quilting has been passed on in the family, as in the case of the most iconic quilters, Gee's Bend. In constructing patches and patterns, the child constructs their relationship with the parent through the exchange of knowledge, which parallels the epistemological exchange of inherited masculinity. Until six months ago, I had never quilted, by learning to do this through the internet,

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<sup>1</sup> Though Silverstein works across media, I have chosen not to include his photographs, songs, etc to limit my investigation into his contributions to popular culture, not his personal biography.

and through the help of local expert Casey York, I have experienced yet another surrogate of familial pedagogy.

D.W. Winnicott discusses transitional objects as items used to provide psychological comfort for children, especially at bedtime, in his 1971 *Playing and Reality*. The quilt pacifies the child, holding the place of the father figure. It is not purely an aesthetic object, but also a tactile object for use and wear.



**Fig. 12** Jack Radley, *Bedtime Stories*, 2019, Silkscreen on cotton quilt, 69 x 99 inches

# *Bedtime Stories*

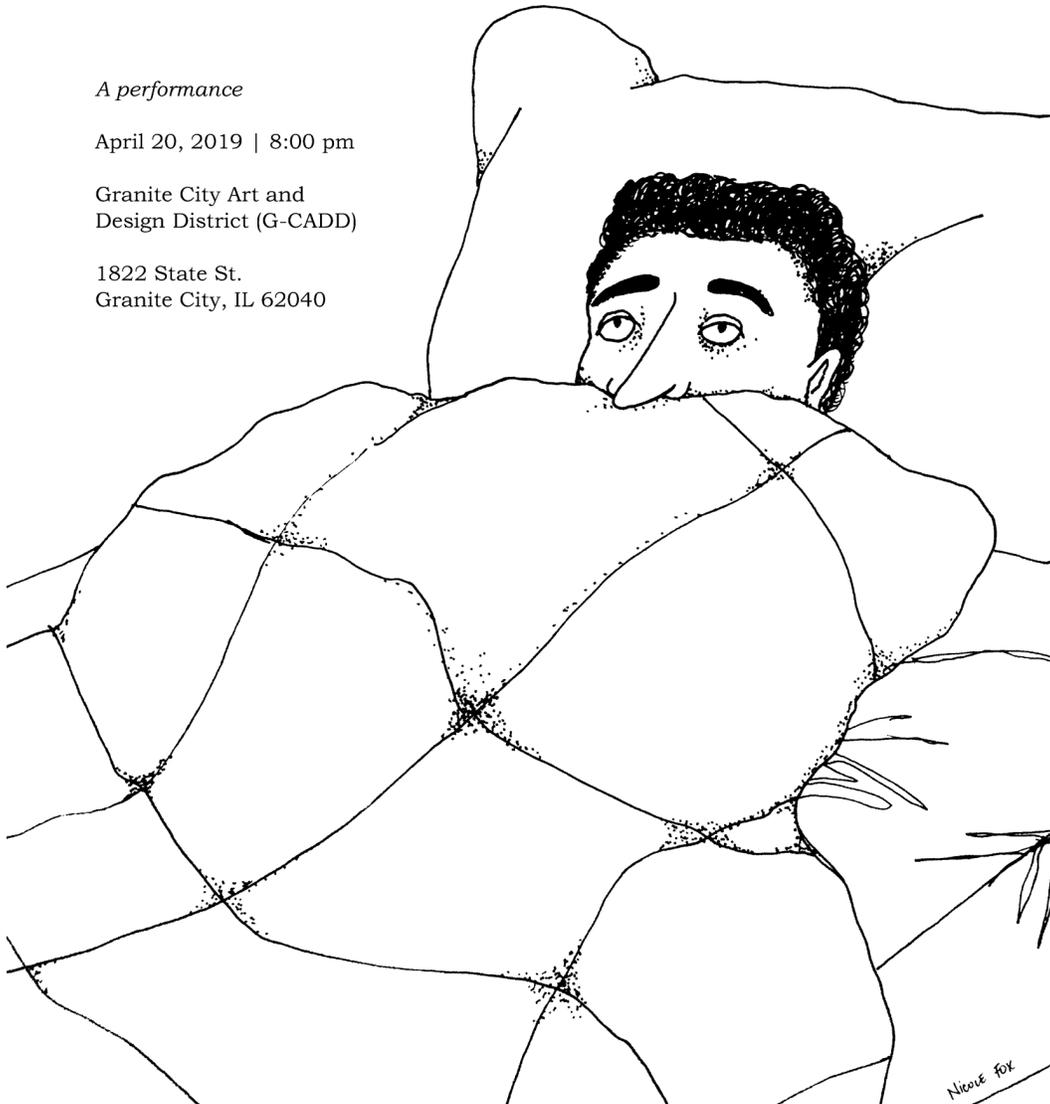
Jack Radley

*A performance*

April 20, 2019 | 8:00 pm

Granite City Art and  
Design District (G-CADD)

1822 State St.  
Granite City, IL 62040



**Fig. 13** Jack Radley and Nicole Fox, *Bedtime Stories* (poster), 2019, Silkscreen, 17 x 11 inches

*Bedtime Stories* began at 8PM, the bedtime of a child. Visitors indulged in sleepytime tea and spent time with the quilt, which hung from the ceiling of the upstairs, oak-paneled bedroom-turned-gallery at Granite City Arts and Design District on April 20, 2019. I entered the gallery, stripped down to my Calvin Klein boxers, and assumed the fetal position on a twin sized bed in an adjacent room. Then, an older man took down the quilt and tucked me into bed. He caressed my cheek, lingering perhaps for a little too long. His touch blurred the line between familial and sexual intimacy, as in Omer Fast's 2012 *Continuity*. After the older man exited, my father's voice echoed from two speakers in one of the closets, reading *The Giving Tree* to me as I fell asleep. As the story concluded, I entered a deep slumber for the rest of the night.

Masculinity is passed down, like the stories we tell our sons at night. These stories are unconsciously processed during sleep. The surrogate man's touch triggers something in my unconscious, and as the lights go out, the phantom memory of my own father emerges in the latent infusion. The formation of male identity occurs subconsciously. This elusive and suggestive bedtime companion, fatherly and sexual, mirrors the role of Silverstein himself.



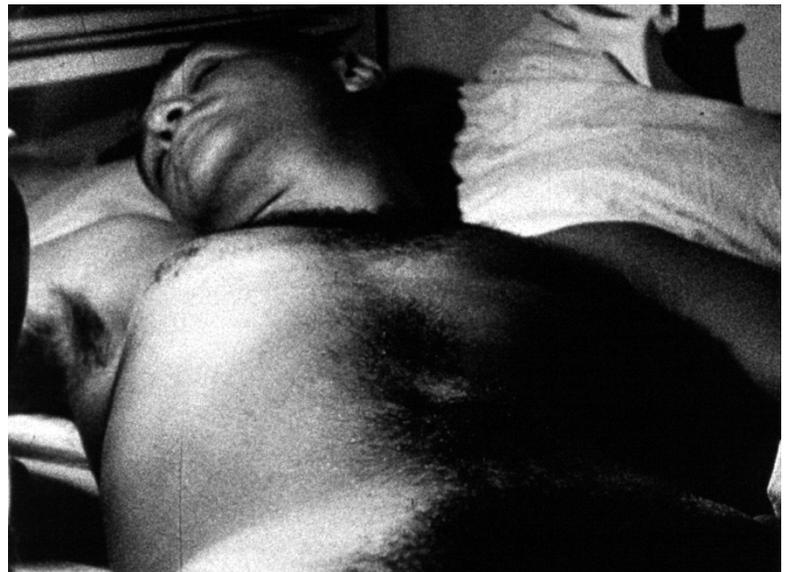
**Fig. 14** Jack Radley, *Bedtime Stories*, 2019, Performance at G-CADD, April 20, 2019

The bed is the dialectical site of sex and storytelling. Buzz Spector's "Finally" has additionally argued for the sexual nature of spending time with a book in bed. I explore this tension in my performance, recalling Tracy Emin's appliquéd tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963-1995*. Her work explores sexual and familial intimacy by detailing the names of 102 people with whom she has slept, from siblings to sexual partners. The tent creates an intimate environment that challenges the boundaries of touch and the language with which we regard female sexuality.

Audiences flowed in and out of the upstairs gallery to watch me sleep throughout the remainder of the night. The observation of my unconscious body, which they would have to approach to read the small font of the quilt, cast these viewers as voyeurs. This scenario recalled Warhol's 1963 "anti-film," *Sleep*, which depicted his then-lover John Giorno resting for five hours and twenty minutes. The film blurs the lines between witnessing an innocuous act with boredom and a



**Fig. 15** Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963-1995*, 1995, Appliquéd tent, mattress, and light, 122 x 245 x 214 cm



**Fig. 16** Andy Warhol, *Sleep*, 1963, anti-film (5 hr. 20 min.)

sexually positioned, unclothed male body with desire. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes describes the desire that emerges from watching, and scrutinizing, the body of a loved one sleeping (71).

Understanding how the legacies of cultural father figures shape the present is not new to my practice. In 2017 The St. Louis Metrolink proposed three new rail lines, in the wake of one historical rejection: a North-South line that would extend Metrolink access to North St. Louis and promote economic growth in a traditionally underfunded, underserved black community. Instead, one of the Metrolink's proposed lines, "Daniel Boone," would have connected Clayton, a wealthy, predominantly white suburb, to Westport Plaza, a commercial entertainment venue, while also perpetuating the laurels of the legendary pioneer.



**Fig. 17** Jack Radley, *The Daniel Boone Line*, 2017, Single-channel projection, dim. variable

Daniel Boone's 18th century frontier exploits ground the narrative for the tale about his triumphant valor and conquest of nature, strengthening our nation. George Caleb Bingham celebrates this power in *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap*, an American painting infused with religious motifs of Westward expansion and white superiority. However, less discussed is Boone's violent displacement and abuse of Native peoples on his road to progress, privileging the accolades of the white settlers over those of all others. The video projection utilizes a split screen to parallel plights of progress: our settlers are dropped off in a horse and carriage on the left screen paired with footage from the rear cart of the Metro.

Then, the pioneers board the metro and ride it until the Clayton stop, sticking out a bit from the local riders. In the final act of the video, Daniel Boone and company pillage through the planned route of the Daniel Boone line, paralleled with sites of North St. Louis.

## **New Networks**

My practice reifies rituals of masculinity and challenges the cultural father figures that propagate them. These heralded instructors are both popular and personal, mythic and real: from Daniel Boone and Santa Claus to Shel Silverstein and my own father. Through performative, time-based media I expose the underbellies of these men – a criticality recently paralleled by media outlets – as a means to dissect their messages and our faith therein. My practice challenges what I have termed “patrilineal epistemology.” Masculinity is traditionally learned on a vertical axis, in which the grandfather has taught the father who teaches the son, who will teach his son *ad finitum*. The power dynamics inherent in age, position, and maturity give preference to instruction over conversation. I redirect the dissemination of this knowledge through new networks to question these constructions. My work renders the male subject – at any age, of any identity – the authority on masculinity. Instead of inherited, masculinity is concocted; a shift in the axis of epistemology queers these veritable constructions.

Going forward, I wish to directly work with my subjects, such as my father and my peers, to investigate the dissemination of knowledge through peer-to-peer learning. Horizontal learning occurs between men on Internet chatrooms, where anonymity obscures age, rendering all authors authorities. In line with Jeanette Spicer’s practice, in which she collaborates directly with her mother, I seek to reify these relationships away from the keyboard.

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