

VIOLATION AND VOLITION:
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MOLESTED BOY
IN THE AMERICAN POST-WAR GAY NOVEL

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation considers representations of molested boys in the postwar American gay novel. It argues that gay novelists between the end of World War II and the early 2000s created a new genre, a kind of anti-bildungsroman of the molested boy. In this genre, the molested boy is presented as being on a trajectory toward an adult subjectivity that is withheld, missing, or incoherent. The genre arose as a narrative strategy to resist a dominant discourse of homophobia that conflated child molesting with gay adulthood.. Gay authors disrupted that conflation by refusing adult portrayal of the molested boys. The narrative emphasis of these novels is on the boys rather than on their future selves. In refusing the eschatology of adulthood, these novels insist on the boys as full and imminent beings, rather than proto-adults. The logic of recovery and healing is rejected as obscuring and devaluing the boyhood experience.

The introduction traces the genealogy of pedophiles and boy lovers in the later twentieth century, concluding that mainstream gay activism has done more for gay youth than organizations like NAMBLA. Chapter One considers Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, a novel which ends when the boy protagonist enters adulthood, and James Baldwin's

Just Above My Head, in which the molested boy experiences an incoherent adulthood. Chapter Two considers Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* and Dennis Cooper's *Try*, both novels about boy protagonists whose survival depends on their continued sexual availability to the adults around them. Chapter Three begins by examining how Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin* suspends adulthood through an extended adolescence; it concludes by showing that Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance* can portray both the molested boy and his adult self because homonormativity has redrawn the boundaries of public and private. The conclusion reiterates the arguments of the dissertation through the lens of abjection.

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Introduction: I'm Sorry

“I was aware of my sexuality at nine, which makes nonsense of an age of consent of twenty-one... Ian said he told his mother he was a homo at the age of five, and Jimmy told Michael that at twelve he was hanging around Glasgow bus station hoping some man would ‘shove it up him’—a youth intent on corrupting the middle aged.”

-Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk*

“I apologize for telling you this story.”

-Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation*

1. Apology/Apologia

The words “apology” and “apologia” share the same Ancient Greek root meaning “to speak in defense”—yet “apologia” has retained that originary meaning, while “apologize” has generally come to mean “to express regret,” and while the noun “apology” in contemporary English can go either way. Before I undertook this project, I wondered how those two senses had coalesced in a single word, how “apology” had become a contronym, meaning both itself (to defend something and explain its necessity) and its opposite (to declare something indefensible and ask forgiveness for its having happened). But now I think I understand. This study is primarily about the representation of molested boys in the postwar gay novel. Every molested boy, however, must have his pedophile, and so this becomes a study of the pedophile’s representation as well. The molested boy and his pedophile, the sometimes subtle, sometimes

overbearing interplay of the inevitable and the indefensible, become the occasions of my two-faced apology, my defense and my regret.

To bring up child molesting is awful. It ruins conversations and dead-ends cocktail chatter. It ties an anvil to pleasantries and heaves that anvil over the side of a boat into murky water on a night with no moon. I thought I could avoid certain unpleasanties because I am only dealing with *representations* of child molesting. Nowhere in this manuscript, except in a few discussions of historical and contemporary understandings of child sexuality, will you find any real children, and yet... Whenever I have mentioned the topic of this dissertation in company, my interlocutors have unleashed a corrosive flood of second-hand stories. I will no longer even mention my topic in public, so loath am I to expose myself to the risk of this unwelcome set of overdetermined narratives. Repeatedly, I have found my boundaries invaded and my limits violated. It may be an odd thing for a literary theorist to say, but: please, no more stories.

One example stands out as exemplifying this push-me pull-you of defense and regret. Early in my research, I told a friend about this project, and he told me the following story: A friend of his attended an all-boys Catholic school where the priest who instructed the fourth grade class (roughly nine- and ten-year-olds) rewarded the students by allowing them to “go under his desk.” The students loved this reward, and would compete for the opportunity to fellate their instructor. When this was discovered, the teacher was fired, but the friend of my friend has suffered lifelong psychological damage, and blamed his struggles with sexual addiction on the abuse. I asked my friend if he believed this story, and he responded that he did.

I, on the other hand, simply cannot accept that a group of twenty or so nine- and ten-year-olds all *loved to suck cock*. Whitewashing a fence is one thing; wanting to give your teacher a blowjob on a regular basis is another. But what I found truly disturbing in the story is the

simultaneous embrace and disavowal of pedophilic desire. There is no way to tell this story without imagining a fairly large and diverse group of boys actively and gleefully engaged in sex with an adult before the story turns cautionary. The structure is like *Venus in Furs*: you can masturbate to Severin's masochism in the middle, or you can self-righteously approve of Severin's refusal of masochism at the end, or you can do both and absolve yourself of guilt over masturbating since the proper order is restored in the end. The story of the Catholic school not only embraces what it condemns, but it offers a free pass for future sexual voraciousness. It furnishes grounds for both pride and justification. I can hear the shameless boast: "I've been sucking cock since I was nine," but also the desperate plea: "I'm like this because I was molested." Defense and regret; apologia and apology.

As I tried to absorb the stories that well-intentioned friends directed my way, I struggled with the new directions my research was taking. Initially, I was interested in satiric authors and texts that treat the taboos surrounding pedophilia as a way to poke fun at piety and high moralism—novels like Henry James's darkly amusing *The Turn of the Screw*, foul-mouthed poetic projects like Joe Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendy*, and films like Todd Solondz's misanthropic *Happiness* or Pedro Almodovar's irreverent *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* I wanted to explore works that treated moral crusaders as objects of fun in a camp or proto-camp manner—but as the project took on its own shape, I found myself deeper and deeper in earnest tales of misery and horror. Instead of writing another piece of jocular prose attacking Henry James's repressed governess, I found myself trying to get through the next chapter of Samuel R. Delany's nightmarish *Hogg*. I kept thinking of Judith Lewis Herman's warning in *Trauma and Recovery* about the trauma one experiences from listening to the traumatized. I am grateful to the dissertation group that supported me as I began to feel the very same disgust as the pious moral

crusaders I had set out to ridicule. As I went to that weekly meeting, I often found myself quite literally unable to speak what I had read. I have to thank them for letting me pass through a time when I became the prude I had set out to mock.

Moreover, as the project took on a coherent shape—first shrinking only to novels, then to novels published between World War II and the present, then only to novels by gay men—I began to recognize a fascinating pattern. As distressing as I found some of these narratives, I realized that my authors were doing something crucial and honorable. Each of these novels resists the dominant trope of futurity that traditionally surrounds molested boys. Futurity (the term is Lee Edelman's) both de-sexes children and displaces the present child in favor of the potential adult. Futurity devalues the boy as a boy because futurity is only concerned with the man he becomes. The traditional (read: masculinist, patriarchal, heteronormative) narrative would have the molested boy mature into a homosexual adult whose homosexuality is proof both of his perverse nature and its corrupt origins. In its Latin roots, the very word “molestation” means to bother or disturb; indeed, child molestation was a disturbance of normal psychosexual development. In this sense, the traditional molestation narrative exemplifies the iconic Foucauldian critique of the repressive hypothesis as well as his notions of surveillance, biopower, and the disciplinary society: the molested boy must tell his story; his story must be a story of corruption; and the story of his corruption must become a cautionary tale that reinforces the dominant discourse of male sex, masculine gender, and heteronormative kinship. Futurity is a bedrock both of homophobia (which refuses the existence of a gay child) and of psychology (which focuses on the recovery of the adult from the childhood trauma).

Rather than worrying about who these boys will become, these texts focus on the boys as they are. These novels reveal the shape of their own genre, an anti-bildungsroman in which the

promise that the child will become an adult is refused. Each of these novels arrives at a moment where the adulthood of the molested boy is *unrepresented* in some significant way. In Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Joel reaches adulthood in the moments *after* the novel has ended. In James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*, Arthur's boyhood is carefully portrayed, but his adulthood is reported second hand and inconsistently. Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* and Dennis Cooper's *Try* both feature protagonists who remain boys throughout the novel. Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin* traces the path of Brian and Neil towards recovery from molestation, but ends with them literally caught in the act of a reparative reenactment of their abuse. In Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance*, Max exits the narrative as an adolescent as if to escape its corrupting power. Thus, while each novel engages the reader's expectation of seeing molested boys as damaged adults, that future moment, stigmatized and corrupt, is ultimately withheld.

Onward now from rationale to regret: Part of the argument that will run through these pages is that the pedophile is abject, and that his abjection is radiant, engulfing those who come into contact with him (and his representation).¹ The molested boy is pulled into the abjection radiated by the pedophile, and as readers, we too are drawn into this expanding sphere of abjection. In working through these texts, my primary allegiance has been to Queer Theory, and Queer Theory is no stranger to abjection—in fact, it often enjoys the frisson of proximity to the abject. While feminism and gay liberation (the two movements from which Queer Theory arose) have often insisted on normalcy, pride, respectability, and cohesion, Queer Theory has enjoyed a certain sense of naughtiness and incoherency, indeed as a way of enacting its fundamentally deconstructive sensibility. Queer Theory routinely rejects what the dominant discourse presents as coherent or reasonable in order to clear a space for its own queer claims. And yet, in

¹ In opposition to this dominant construction of the pedophile are the “radical pedophiles” who advocate for the embrace of pedophiles as a cultural good.

confronting basic questions about sexuality, maturity, and consent, I have found myself deep in the spaces of abjection, wondering how much I can tolerate, and finding spaces of sexual difference that repel and disturb me. Indeed, contra Gayle Rubin, some sex may simply be “bad.”

To enter this dissertation—and really, Chapter Two should be avoided by the squeamish—will be to enter some fairly disturbing territory. Certainly, the novel is an art form that typically attracts readers who seek out emotional intensity and extremity of experience, yet this project has brought me to places I had never expected to go. The most striking emblem of this is Ziggy, the protagonist of Dennis Cooper’s *Try*. Raped repeatedly since the age of eight by one of his adopted fathers, pimped out for child porn, attracting the sexual attention of his other adopted father, and generally subject to endless sexual and physical degradations, Ziggy writes a ‘zine for other molested boys called *I Apologize*. At first I was bewildered. Isn’t Ziggy the one who deserves the apology? Why isn’t Ziggy angry, or at least hostile? After spending years with Ziggy, I think I understand, and I feel myself in a similar position as an author, if not as a sexual subject. When Ziggy calls attention to his abuse, he knows he is tracking mud into your psychic house. Whether your mind is full of white carpet that will never be fully cleaned, or whether your mind has put down drop cloths for multiple readings of de Sade, it remains remarkably rude to track in mud. Like Ziggy, I put forth questions, situations, and histories that are deeply disturbing. I hope that I protest too much, and that you, Reader, will find none of this troubling or distressing, or at least not in ways that force you to close this dissertation or lose sleep. But suspecting that you will be troubled and distressed in the ways that I have been, I apologize.

2. Are Pedophiles Queer?

In the paradigmatic narrative of the molested boy who becomes a homosexual adult, homosexual sex tends to overwhelm violent or coercive sex as the defining corruption, the “nature erring from itself” (Shakespeare, *Othello* 3.3.227). In effect, molested boys become homosexual adults because homosexuality is a contagion. In order to understand how molested boys become objects of contempt or pity instead of fully human subjects, we have to consider the interlinked and overlapping histories of homosexuality and pedophilia as identity categories. Until the 1960s, homosexuality and pedophilia were both considered sexual deviances, often overlapping. The age of consent had been steadily rising since the turn of the century, as adolescence became a clearer (and increasingly protected) status. In the 1970s and 1980s, radical pedophilia emerged as pedophiles advocated for the acceptance of pedophilia, both straight and gay. Gay pedophiles and boy-lovers made common cause (most visibly under the aegis of the North American Man Boy Love Association, or “NAMBLA”) within the gay rights movement. NAMBLA argued that there should be no age of consent, while mainstream gay activists argued for equality in age of consent laws for same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Starting in the 1980s, homophobic discourse began to aggressively conflate pedophiles and gay men. Mainstream gay activists began to reject the inclusion of pedophilic and boy-loving groups, such that by the mid 1990s, NAMBLA had been largely removed from the contemporary gay rights movement. Increased public concern over child pornography and child molesting led to significantly tougher laws through the 1990s, and by the 2000s, voicing radical pedophilia in the public sphere had become almost impossible. In the 2000s, gay identity became clearer within mainstream discourse, and the conflation of pedophiles and gay men had been largely severed in the public discourse, though it remains a powerful ideology of the right wing. Moving into the 2010s, gay

men and lesbians are frequently depicted as parents, their proximity to children causing virtually no anxiety in mainstream media.

As I finish this dissertation in the wake of the Paterno/Sandusky scandal at Penn State, no one seems entirely surprised that this young century's most notorious child molester was a paragon of masculinity—in fact, masculinity seems to have been less a cover than a fig leaf for Sandusky. In 2012, few would continue to deny the widespread sexual abuse of children by officials of the Catholic Church. Document after document has demonstrated not simply a practice of abuse, but rather an extensive culture of enabling, protecting, procuring, and covering-up. While the Catholic Church has tried desperately to blame its pedophilia scandal on the presence of homosexuality, neither Penn State, nor the NCAA, nor the Louis Freeh report have tried to scapegoat homosexuality to save face for Penn State. What was a moral panic (to use Stanley Cohen's theorization) or a scandal (to use Ed Cohen's theorization) in the 1980s is now largely a settled matter for U.S. culture. There have also been no suggestions that these molested boys are suffering from a taboo around child sexuality, rather than from the toxic results of coercive sex. The overlap between homosexuality and pedophilia in the mainstream press has dissipated at this point—as one would expect within the newly dominant homonormative discursive regime.

And yet the haunting specter of conflation looms large, desperately needing exorcism, even when absent. Consider the response to an article in the *Huffington Post* in which Cindy Abel hypothesizes that homophobia allowed Sandusky to get away with molesting boys. She notes the notorious homophobia of Penn State athletics, and speculates that the molested boys may have also been silenced by fear of being perceived as gay (or may have worried that being molested *could mean* that they were gay). Here is a comment from “EmilieR”: “This behavior is

not the definition of ‘gay’—it is the definition of ‘pedophilia’. Gays have enough problems without being equated with pedophiles. Slow down. Edit.” This typifies the responses to Abel’s article, and led to her responding to the responses. Abel’s response is longer than her initial article. “My premise is that the *false belief* that pedophilia and homosexuality are connected is what caused action to be even slower than it may have been had that belief not existed” (par. 17). What’s interesting is that while no one in the comments sections conflates homosexuality with pedophilia, they angrily accuse Abel of having committed precisely that error. In this article and its responses, everyone is so concerned about the conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia that no one is able to draw a distinction clear enough for anyone else to be sure that the conflation has been avoided.

Nor has the distinction between pedophile and gay man been cleanly drawn even in gay academic and scholarly sources. Consider this passage from the introduction to David Halperin and Valerie Traub’s 2009 anthology *Gay Shame*:

For the growing numbers of people who have come to feel alienated from gay pride and who have had increasing difficulty finding a place for themselves in its civic pageants, with their contingents of gay policemen, lesbian mothers, business leaders, corporate employees, religious devotees, athletes and politicians, *Gay Shame* offers a refuge, a site of solidarity and belonging. It willingly embraces those queers whose identities or social markings make them feel out of place in gay pride’s official ceremonies: people with the “wrong” bodies, sadomasochists, sex workers, drag queens, butch dykes, people of color, boy-lovers, bisexuals, immigrants, the poor, the disabled. These are the queers that mainstream gay

pride is not always proud of, who don't lend themselves easily to the propagandistic publicity of gay pride or to its identity-affirming functions. (9)

Do “boy-lovers” and “people of color” really belong on the same list, as they appear in the passage above? It sounds like Halperin and Traub are announcing “Gay Shame” as an equivalent for the way we often use “queer” as a catchall term for a range of marginalized Others. Or rather we might draw the new boundaries this way: if “queer” once included all people outside of *heteronormativity*, “Gay Shame” would include those queers who could not be countenanced by *homonormativity*. There are not, in fact, any entries in the anthology that support or defend boy-lovers or pedophiles. And yet, this anthology, whose table of contents is a who's who of Queer Theory, seems to open with an obvious embrace of, if not pedophilia, ephebophilia at least. And why no corresponding term for women who seek out girl partners?² Are they any less shameful? Or are they simply less vocal? The two most prominent sex radicals of the 1980s and 90s, Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin, both embraced consensual intergenerational sex. Pat Califia has reversed his position.

Halperin and Traub's embrace of boy-lovers comes at the end of a century-long evolution of attitudes about pedophilia that encompasses a familiar conflict between gays and feminists. Tracing the emergence of a pedophile identity, Steven Angelides discusses how the sexual science of the late nineteenth century regarded the pedophile as an extremely uncommon person, and had no particular concern in policing him (272). From the 1950s to the 1970s, “dominant psychiatric discourses downplayed the severity of sex offences” (277), and in fact, tended to reverse the terms of child and adult when it came to sexual offenses. The child was seen as the

² When I looked for a North American Women/Girl Love Association, to see if such a thing exists, there were multiple sites that denounced the existence of NAWGLA, though I could find no actual proof of the organization. A Dutch woman-girl site, “Butterfly Kisses,” is often referenced as a girl-lover site, but it is now defunct.

aggressor, taking the adult lead, while the adult was seen as particularly weak-willed and child-like (278). In what might be considered the low-water mark of post-Victorian apologies for pedophilia, Gertrude J. Williams and John Money's 1980 anthology, *Traumatic Abuse and Neglect of Children at Home* (including articles originally published in the 1960s and 70s), suggests that the lines between incest and non-incest are fuzzy, though Money's examples struck me as fairly odd. Consider this one: "The mother who has an orgasm from suckling, while her infant at the breast has an erection, could be accused of incest" (412). Even if we take this statement seriously, does the fact that rape and breastfeeding might both be under the umbrella of incest really suggest that reasonable people will have the same response to breastfeeding and rape? Even while allowing them both into the house of incest, wouldn't a reasonable person punish rape and not a fortuitous orgasm while breastfeeding? Williams and Money begin the section on *abusive* incest by attacking what they see as the two foundations of "the code of avoidance": "One...that childhood is a period of innate sexual innocence.... The other is that children are born in original sin and are...recruitable to sinful ways" (411).

Williams and Money include accounts of incest that persistently minimize violence and excuse coercion. A chapter called "Children Not Severely Damaged by Incest" includes two case histories, one of a boy and one of a girl. The girl, at thirteen, begins to receive sexual attention from her father. She tells her mother in an attempt to prevent the evening approaches, which leads her father "to get drunk, be more vicious with her mother, her brother... and with herself." To prevent his rages, she allowed him "to have intercourse until he would reach orgasm. Additionally, he would sometimes use his fingers in her vagina" (Yorukoglu and Kempf 462). The next sentence defies credulity: "He was never brutal" (463). My guess is that the authors intend to say that the sex did not involve accompanying violence, such as punching,

strangulation or hair-pulling, but the sex itself (and the tantrums leading to it) seem clear acts of brutality. The discussion of this case history bizarrely concludes that “one might speculate that Oedipal fantasies may be even more harmful than the actual physical consummation of either mother-son or father-daughter incest in cases the child is merely performing the mechanical act of intercourse at the parent’s request...” (464). Dr. James Henderson, in a chapter called, “Incest: A Synthesis of Data,” writes that, “daughters apparently collude in most incestuous relations. ...[T]hese girls play an active and initiating role in establishing the pattern and...are apparently unlikely to report the liaisons; when they do it is generally because they are angry at their fathers for some other reason or jealous of their father’s relation with another woman” (435). Interestingly, while the 1980 anthology devotes five of its fifty chapters to incest, the 1982 reprinting as an abridged paperback does not include the sections on incest. The section on incest is missing, but not retracted: “Readers interested in pursuing the topic of incest are referred to the hardback reference volume” (xii).

Starting in the 1970s, however, the consensus that pedophiles are rare and unworthy of attention yields to two opposing strands of resistance: (1) radical pedophiles working for pedophile liberation, and (2) radical feminists insisting on the pedophilia of patriarchy. Indeed, Tom O’Carroll’s 1980 *Paedophilia: The Radical Case* uses a feminist analysis to advance the radical pedophile agenda. He insists on the possibility of sex with children as a positive experience for both children and adults:

What I hope to show, however, is that there is much in consensual pedophilia, as opposed to child molesting, that presupposes a gentle, almost *feminine* type of sexual expression, rather than one which conforms to the masculine stereotype of dominance and aggression. (56)

O'Carroll found his way to pedophile activism through an alphabet soup of 1970s activism, settling on the PIE (Pedophile Information Exchange) as his home. O'Carroll makes an argument that children's rights should include the right to consensual sex. One chapter concludes with "Child's Sexual Bill of Rights, which has been formulated by the Childhood Sensuality Circle of America" (150). While I would agree that "every child has the right to accurate sex information" or that "Each child has the right to fully enjoy the sensual pleasures he may feel without guilt or shame," the Bill quickly becomes less about the child and more about adult access to children. "Every child has the right to a loving relationship, including sexual, with a parent, sibling, or other responsible adult or child, and shall be protected and aided in doing so by being provided with contraceptives and aids to prevent venereal disease" (151), hardly sounds like it has the interests of a six-year-old in mind. O'Carroll approvingly quotes a young legal scholar named Hillary Rodham in his larger use of the philosophy of John Rawls to justify a child's right to consent. I found myself unpersuaded.

In 1975, Susan Brownmiller explained her concept of "rape culture": "It [rape] is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (5). Judith Lewis Herman's 1981 book *Father-Daughter Incest* has been the most influential text in this turn in the understanding of child sexual abuse. The term "incest model," often used to refer to Herman's work, now represents the conventionally accepted view of child abuse. According to the incest model, adult survivors of incest experience pervasive shame, a willingness to endure abusive relationships, depression, difficulty staying out of dangerous situations, and a lack of sexual pleasure. Herman traces the "seductive daughter" theory (38), and insists that daughters subjected to sexual abuse should not be viewed as seductive or predatory—rather their fathers bear full responsibility. Herman treats incest as a logical extension of

patriarchy (202), and advocates for equality between the sexes as the solution. The book concludes: “When men no longer rule their families, they may learn for the first time what it means to belong to one” (218). Herman also notes the pedophilic dimension of incest: “most sexual abuse begins well before puberty” (203). Interestingly Herman also regards incest as a continuum, calling sexualized attention from fathers whose “behaviors stopped short of genital contact” a form of “covert incest.” In hypothesizing that “overt incest [sexual intercourse] represents only the furthest point on a continuum—an exaggeration of patriarchal family norms, but not a departure from them,” (110) Herman comes close to Money’s concern that the boundaries of incest are difficult to define. However, Herman concludes that “overt and covert incest were harmful... but that overt incest was worse” (125). Herman often comes in for condemnation because of her support for the recovered memory movement and risible texts like *The Courage to Heal*. However, her own writings (both in *Father-Daughter Incest* and *Trauma and Recovery*) about sexual abuse are remarkably cogent, non-hyperbolic, and persuasive. By 1984, the Melbourne Alliance of Revolting Feminists had assimilated the abuse of children as a component of the rape culture, and wrote in their manifesto: “Just as all men are potential rapists, so are all men potential paedophiles” (qtd in Angelides 282).

The widespread identification of homosexuality with pedophilia in the social imaginary seems to have emerged only after the radical pedophile and radical feminist positions became entrenched. In the late 1970s, a subgroup of gay men adopted a self-conscious identity of “boy-lover,” but no corresponding identity of “girl lover” emerged for straight men. As Herman notes, heterosexual contact between men and younger women is enshrined by the hypocrisies and protections of patriarchy; the heterosexual men of the 1970s pedophile movements who identified themselves as needing liberation were mostly attracted to pre-pubescent girls, in some

cases including pre-verbal infants (making a mockery of the notion of “consent”). These heterosexual pedophiles made common cause with homosexual pedophiles, who rightly saw their interests as separate from the mainstream gay rights movement. Stephen Angelides traces the rhetorical association of homosexuality with pedophilia in the Anglophone world particularly to media representations in the 1980s in the wake of gay liberation and the burgeoning AIDS epidemic (286).³ Ironically, the success of gay advocacy for the decriminalization of sodomy and for equalizing age of consent laws (that is, not having a higher age of consent for homosexual sex) provided “the most fertile ground for such discursive manipulation” (286). Angelides continues, “The visibility of gay male paedophile rights and support groups only lent weight to the rhetorical and, indeed, historical association of homosexuality with the seduction of children, and thus to the conflation of homosexuality and paedophilia” (286). By the mid 1980s, mainstream homophobic discourse had collapsed the identity of gay men and pedophiles.

I understand boy-lover to be differentiated from pedophile in two ways. First, boy-lovers (as defined by Gayle Rubin, Germaine Greer, Karl Andersson, and by [most] literature of NAMBLA) are interested in pubescent and adolescent boys, not pre-pubescent boys.⁴ Second, boy-lovers see their relationships along a continuum from mutual to worshipful. Third, boy-lovers identify as being within the gay community, and invoke a gay heritage that includes notables like Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and André Gide. If one takes Herman seriously

³ In 1981, Hart and Richardson’s *The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality*, after a discussion of seduction theories, neatly sums up, “Concerns about homosexual men and woman being ‘potential seducers’ of children are of course compounded by the frequent confusion of homosexuality and pedophilia” (28).

⁴ In Gayle Rubin’s 1982 essay “Thinking Sex,” she presents a clear defense of boy-lovers, but lets the identity stand as self-explanatory. In the 2011 reprinting of the essay, she explains in a footnote: “...let me be clear that I was primarily referring to consensual male homosexual relationships between adult men and teenagers at a time when many of the adult partners were being prosecuted over the objections of their younger lovers” (385).

(along with the Melbourne Alliance of Revolting Feminists), there's no need for a girl-loving subgroup of straight men; the patriarchy is already "girl-loving." Indeed, scholars like Richard Mohr and James Kincaid persuasively conclude that our culture is rife with pedophilic desire, and there is no real reason for any sort of activist group to pursue an aim they have already achieved. Still, Kincaid and Mohr show that our culture sexualizes children, not that children are actually available for sex with adults. The difference is a bit like the one between Brooke Shields playing a prostitute at twelve, and Samantha Geimer being raped by Roman Polanski at thirteen. I would not go so far as to say Polanski put into practice the theory that Shields embodied; but heterosexuality is indeed always already "girl-loving," as disturbing as that phrase may be. By contrast, for all the value placed on youth by gay men, homosexuality is not essentially "boy-loving" in quite the same way.

The 1970s was the heyday of pedophile liberation and its search to create community. On one hand, it seems unsurprising that as almost everything about Western Culture was being questioned, ages of consent would be questioned as well. As feminism increasingly called attention to the plight of girl children, and developed the idea of rape culture, all women seemed to be subject to male dominance. But the politics of childhood sexuality are not drawn along clear left-right, liberal-conservative, progressive-reactionary lines. There have been attempts to simplify the narrative—such as Mary Eberstadt's version of events: that liberals hated the Catholic Church more than they loved their "Pedophilia Chic," and that the chance to take down the Catholic Church "logically created a whole new class of antipederasts" (qtd. in Last). In fact, things were much messier, and the divides between feminists, lesbian-feminists, anti-porn feminists, and sex-radical feminists reveal a far more complicated cartography of positions than "left" and "right" can map with justice.

The 1970s saw the creation of the Pedophile Information Exchange (PIE) in England. NAMBLA, the most visible advocates for pedophilia in the United States, was founded in 1978, but by 1980, they had been subject to government surveillance and prosecution, and the invasion struck many as unfair. Allen Ginsberg joined NAMBLA to protest what he perceived as government entrapment and persecution: “I became a member of NAMBLA a decade ago as a matter of civil liberties. In the early 1980s, the FBI had conducted a campaign of entrapment and ‘dirty tricks’ against NAMBLA members just as they had against black and anti-war leaders in previous decades” (170). Ginsberg is also clear that he is not sexually attracted to “hairless boys and girls” (170), and is clear that his support of NAMBLA “shouldn’t be distorted to apologize for rape and mental or physical violation of children” (171). NAMBLA very much saw themselves as part of the gay rights movement, and the group was included in gay rights marches as late as 1993, although after that, they found themselves unwelcome—mostly because Jesse Helms found that he could demonize gay groups by pointing out their inclusion of NAMBLA.

Until the early 1970s, there was not a great deal of distinction between the various factions who would now be called queer. In Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp*—a sociological study of female impersonators conducted in the late 1960s—it’s not entirely clear who would now be called transgender, gay, gender queer, or a drag queen—and to draw those distinctions is to commit an anachronistic act of disrespect—to insist that our current labels are the truth, and that their contemporary labels were false. As George Chauncey points out, child molesting and child recruitment have been attached to multiple negative stereotypes. Jews have long been represented as a threat to children, and in Chauncey’s genealogical tracing of the increased homophobia following the Second World War, “old tropes of anti-Semitic rhetoric...were especially influential in shaping depictions of homosexuals” (19). Uncoupling blended identities,

however, is both useful and impossible. The very word “queer” (once used by masculine gay men to distinguish themselves from effeminate “fairies” [Chauncey 101]) is valuable because it allows the both/and of non-normative sexualities. Awkward locutions like “a transwoman who is also a lesbian” are both necessary and frustrating. While we have the tool of deconstruction to trouble binaries, we are not able to think without categories, and we are hard pressed to create categories without binaries. Even the binary binary/spectrum (or binary/continuum) is suspect. However, the more difficult binary is not homosexual/pedophile (which is not so much binary as a Venn diagram), but child/adult.

Childhood itself has undergone a series of dramatic revisions between the early 1800s and the present. While the nineteenth century saw the development of the “Romantic Child”—and certainly, Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman both had relationships that may put them somewhere on the spectrum of boy-lover, depending on who defines “boy”—the twentieth century saw adolescence open up the new identity of “teenager.” As puberty began to start earlier, and children were expected to stay in school longer, “childhood” became a fuzzier and fuzzier term. And curiously, while business has embraced the teenager, offering adolescents films, books, clothes, and music targeted toward their newly formed identity, the language of sexuality has stayed oddly recalcitrant to the existence of people who are neither children nor adults, insisting only on clear regions of childhood and adulthood with no borderland that might need to be considered. The word “boy” has even come to be defined as a male person in the space between the onset of puberty and its conclusion (Greer 21). Strangely, both the literature on child sexual abuse and the advocates for pedophilia/boy-love continue to treat the world as neatly divided into adults and children, when the boundaries are in fact quite blurred by time, culture, physical development, maturity, and a host of other factors.

Might we not consider the multiple models for childhood in the same way that historians have considered multiple models for homosexuality? The history of childhood is well mapped, but as Sedgwick reminds us, models are not successive, but cumulative. Is childhood a stage one outgrows? A core one builds a personality around? A state of dependence that opens onto autonomy? A series of delays? In Elayne Rapping's 1996 *The Culture of Recovery*, the author expresses dismay at the apparatus of self-help and recovery movements that have divorced the political from the personal. As she journeys through twelve-step programs and self-help groups, she finds repeatedly that these new organizations see no structural problems, only personal problems, or interpersonal problems that extend only as far as the boundaries of one's own nuclear family, workplace, or circle of friends. Along with this new isolation of the individual from the group, the people she encounters are constantly discussing their inner child. As these inner children are "healed" by adults in self-help, one wonders if anyone is actually an adult. If one's "inner child" takes on a reality within an adult's identity, does one ever mature? Is one ever fully an adult? Where are the actual children, when adults spend their days catering to the imaginary ones they carry inside?

The ruptures between Gay Liberation and Queer Theory is carefully mapped in Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed's *If Memory Serves*. They note the ways that AIDS ended a certain kind of liberationist thinking about what LGBT people could have, and inaugurated a melancholic thinking about what LGBT people had lost. They attribute the beginning of the "so called antisocial turn in queer theory" to Leo Bersani (8), particularly his essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Bersani turns the assumptions of Gay Liberation on their head, starting with his aggressive and untenable statement: "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it" (197). Bersani's essay is curious, as Castiglia and Reed note, because he

consistently treats anal sex as the only sex gay men have (50), and this gay sex is really straight sex (50), with bottoms as disempowered as women in Dworkin and MacKinnon's structure of heterosexuality-as-rape (51). In Bersani's essay, one finds a gay community that consists of nelly bottoms, doing their best to "turn off the camp" in eager pursuit of butch tops. This sounds like the gay community of Jean Genet in the 1950s, not the gay community of the 1980s. Bersani approves of the "self-shattering" aspect of sex, and suggests that it may be the result of primary masochism that develops as a way to embrace the helplessness of the infant. It is this "self-shattering" that offers Bersani a potential point of progress. But this sudden appeal to infancy as the foundation of sexuality is unsettling (and Freudian). In tracing a trajectory for infantile masochism to adult "self-shattering"—at what point is one a consenting adult?

And it is precisely this decades-long transition from helpless infant to autonomous adult that is so distressing for the social imaginary. Where is it, on that sliding scale from birth to graduating college, that one develops the ability to do things like consent to sex? With the exception of radical pedophiles, there is a Western consensus that prior to puberty, children cannot reasonably consent to sexual contact with adults, and sexual contact between children and adults is inherently damaging to the child. However, from the onset of puberty to the age of majority, there is wide contestation. NAMBLA describes boys as being anywhere from twelve to nineteen years old, including in their list of "Fifteen Famous Men Who Had Lovers" John Addington Symonds's affair with a nineteen-year-old and André Gide's experience with a fourteen-year-old (NAMBLA).

To uncouple homosexuality from pedophilia requires an analysis of the discursive regime that has joined them. Do we make anything more of W. H. Auden's affair with a thirteen-year-old when he was the boy's schoolmaster (Sutherland) than we do of Edgar Allen Poe's or Jerry

Lee Lewis's marriages to thirteen-year-old girls? If patriarchy is *already* girl-loving, are boy-lovers simply the mirror image of an existing structure in heterosexuality? In all of these erotics, one finds that the boundaries are dangerous wherever one puts them. Any threshold creates distinct problems, threatening either to rob people of agency or compel them to premature consensuality. We age in analog, not binary.

But are pedophiles and boy-lovers *queer*? Certainly pedophiles are not gay—or certainly, the gay community has excluded pedophiles—but this was not always the case. In the wake of the sexual revolution, a good deal of sorting out was yet to occur. Gay men and lesbian feminists found themselves at odds over pornography, promiscuity, sadomasochism and a number of other topics. Perhaps the most interesting interrogation was performed by the Canadian magazine *Body Politic*, which ran Gerald Hannon's 1978 profile of three pedophiles. What the author found was not the set of predatory monsters that the Catholic Church scandals have conditioned us to expect, but rather a set of juvenile men, who rather than forcing their sexuality on adolescents, seemed to be one of the boys. After spending a weekend on a camping trip with a pedophile and his boy lovers⁵ he writes:

I felt out of it. I mean sometimes I think farts are funny but I don't think a *lot* of farts are funny. And it's been a long time since I listened to people telling dirty stories. Or quarreled about who could beat up whom. And I think it was probably then that I realized you practically *had* to be a pedophile to love kids—kids at their most outrageously banal, kids when they're not being "nice" the way schools package them for mom and dad—and me, for that matter. (157)

⁵ This slightly confusing locution, meaning "boys who are lovers" rather than "lovers of boys" reveals how excluded queer youth are from the category of "boy-lovers."

I actually found myself nodding along. Having taught adolescents and children, I understood his dismay at a man who had no desire to escape from the childishness of children. But as I found myself lulled by the banality of pedophilia, I would suddenly find myself shocked by passages like this one:

And though the twelve to fourteen bracket defines Peter's prime area of interest, he is, like most of us, willing to experiment: 'The youngest? Seven, I think. He wasn't a very bright little fellow, but he just loved sucking.'" (155)

The article also included interviews with the boys, who seemed more or less to regard the relationships as nice, but certainly not commitments, romances, or exclusive partnerships. In the wake of the John Wayne Gacy murders and Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign, *Body Politic* went looking for a banal face for pedophilia. They seemed on the lookout for something equivalent to the image of gay couples doing the dishes and their taxes. The overall conclusion is that uncoercive (as opposed to violent) pedophiles are (1) mostly harmless, (2) a bit immature, and (3) not really within the gay community.

Hannon's article, however, was published within the same year as the murder of twelve-year-old Emanuel Jaques—a homicide perceived by Canadians as a specifically gay crime and reaffirming the equation of homosexuality with pedophilia in Canada. A government report recommending that sexual orientation be included in the Ontario Human Rights Code had been submitted before the murder, and had been expected to pass. After the murder, the recommendation was dropped. *Body Politic* was subjected to police raids because of Hannon's article, and according to one of the magazine's founders, "The Publication lost its government grants and faced two full trials. It [*Body Politic*] was acquitted twice on charges of distributing 'immoral, indecent and scurrilous' material. But the trials, which dragged on from 1978 to 1983

had detrimental effects, I think, on our ability to respond to other things sometimes” (Silversides 13). Certainly, to be wrapped up in an obscenity trial just as AIDS was emerging was no small distraction from important work.

Interestingly, the *Body Politic* article is the only “disinterested” account of pedophilia that I have encountered—one genuinely interested in where pedophiles might fit and who they are. Most accounts are either by advocates of pedophiles, attacks on advocates of pedophiles, or sensational accounts of pedophiles and their crimes. One also encounters a good number of “mysopeds”—or pedophiles whose attraction to children includes wanting to hurt, maim, or kill them (Holmes and Holmes 103).⁶ In fairness, the criminal justice literature would be hard pressed *not* to be sensational.

The *Body Politic* article had the misfortune of coming in the middle of a period in which sexual radicals had not figured out how to counter the attacks from the backlash to the initial successes of the gay rights movement. Anita Bryant was certainly using children to her ideological advantage, and how precisely does one argue that children are not harmed by the sexuality of adults? In homonormativity, certainly, the private and public domains of homosexuality are as clearly demarcated as they are for heterosexuality. But there was no homonormativity in 1978, and Bryant’s rhetoric of seduction argued not only that homosexuals are predators, but that children are remarkably sexual, impressionable, docile, and willing. The rallying cry of “consenting adults” has been remarkably successful in certain discursive communities—why not expand that sense of consent to children? To a great extent, children are the last (or lasting) subalterns; they cannot speak for themselves. Kathryn Bond Stockton writes that when we think of children, “The child is precisely who we are not, and in fact, never were. It

⁶ The authors’ term, “mysoped,” is actually an incorrect formation. The correct form would be “misoped,” although the OED prefers “misopedist.”

is the act of adults looking back” (5). Stockton considers many delays, and the most primary delay may be the ability to speak in the public sphere.

Ann Cvetkovich carries the interrogation of futurity to even greater extremes, offering her own lesbian present as a possible response to her childhood abuse, and in fact, welcoming her lesbianism as a salutary response to a painful experience. “As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer” (90). Cvetkovich claims that a deeply homophobic discourse requires those in the “helping professions” to obscure the predominance of lesbians in their ranks (91). The logic of molested girl=lesbian is not as totalizing as the logic of molested boy=gay man, in part because lesbians are not routinely suspected of molesting girls, and those who abuse girls are widely assumed to be men.

The question “Are pedophiles queer?” sets the stage for how we think about intergenerational sexual contact when one of those generations is dangerously close (legally, physically, or psychically) to childhood. In this study, I focus on texts in which the experience of child-adult sexual contact is destructive and leads to crisis or suffering. The characters in these novels reflect cultural moments and the perspectives of the novelist; they offer little to help us decide whether NAMBLA ought to be allowed to march in Gay Pride Parades or whether LGBTIQ should gain a P for pedophile or a B for boy-lover. For that we must look elsewhere. Harry Hay presented the only defense of NAMBLA that I have found truly compelling. In 1994, shortly after the International Gay/Lesbian Association (ILGA) voted to expel NAMBLA in a bid to receive “non governmental consultative status” from the United Nations, Hay addressed the ways that youth had been left out of the movement: “When a NAMBLA youth delegate from Minnesota called for a Youth Caucus from the floor—a youth caucus includes ages 13-22—it

turned out that the youngest ILGA delegate was twenty-four” (305). Unfortunately, Hay does not say how old the NAMBLA delegate was, nor have I been able to find proceedings from that meeting. However, this would suggest that NAMBLA was in fact a voice for boys, and not just men. Hay further insists that *we* (and that “we” includes NAMBLA) are not the child molesters. Rather, “... the most common, yet unrecognized form [of child molestation] is the sexual coercion of Gay and Lesbian youth into heterosexual identities and behaviors” (308).

Again, the conflict is between the present and futurity—Hay insists that gay youth be included in the current process of gay activism, and not be postponed into the realm of activists future. For Hay, the molestation *is already happening* through compulsory heterosexuality. Hay also invokes his own childhood frequently. In his 1980 “Toward the New Frontiers of Fairy Vision...” he recalls, “I must have been about four when one night I inadvertently beheld my father’s genitals. I thought they were the most beautiful things I’d ever seen” (256). Sometime between four and eleven, Hay discovers Edward Carpenter’s *Walt Whitman Days* (257). But I don’t think that Hay, in announcing his appreciation of penises at the age of four, is suggesting that at four years old he would have been an appropriate sex partner for his father or any other adult.

Rather, statements about childhood sexuality from activists like Hay, or the quote from Derek Jarman that opened this chapter, seem to me to serve multiple functions—none of them pedophilic. First, they insist that children are not blank slates: sexual desire occurs on a timetable that is human, not ideological, and efforts to prevent children from contact with homosexuals and exposure to knowledge about homosexuality are futile. Second, they insist that sexuality is wholesome, and that those who would suppress it are the abusers. Third, they demand that gay kids be supported and nurtured in their development of a homosexual identity. Jarman is indeed

advocating for sexual contact between adults and adolescents—but his larger point is that the adolescents seeking that contact already exist. When his nine-year-old sexual activity is interrupted, he is having it with another nine-year-old. Hay and Jarman are critical of the notion that children are sexual innocents who must be quarantined from sex and sexuality. They are advocating for the children they were, not demanding sexual access to today’s children. Support, acceptance, and nurturing of gay youth has emerged in the past ten years or so, but not in the ways that Jarman, Hay, O’Carroll, or NAMBLA imagined.

Today, the most visible contact between younger gay people and older supportive adults is virtual, and conducted through the *It Gets Better Project*, initiated by Dan Savage. On one hand it supports and recognizes gay youth, but on the other it insists that adulthood is the appropriate realm of sexuality. The project is wonderfully conceived as a PR campaign, though less successful as a support mechanism. Multiple children have contributed videos to the campaign—apparently unaware that they are the ones being told to wait for “it” to get better — and still gone on to commit suicide. The “it” is clearly everything about life, but the “gets better” casts a curious futurity, celebrating gay adulthood, possibly for the first time within mainstream culture (Barack Obama made a video), as a place of arrival rather than a destination that marks failure. Still, new media tends to offer privacy and protection to adults that it does not to younger people. The *It Gets Better Project* is a decentered and viral project, but one that indicates that the best contact between grownups and gay youth is virtual. In the *It Gets Better* pledge, one promises, “I’ll provide hope for lesbian, gay, bi, trans and other bullied teens by letting them know that ‘It Gets Better’” (par. 1). Refreshing in its recognition of just how brutal youth can be for queers, the project is distressing in its evident acceptance of bullying and abuse of gay teens as an unchangeable fact. *It Gets Better* recreates the exact frustrations Harry Hay expressed: it

moves teens out of the realm of activism and into the waiting room of activists future. As Elayne Rapping found with the self-help movements of the 1990s, *It Gets Better* tends to focus on personal growth, while treating structural problems as insurmountable. In the distressingly and unwittingly solipsistic words of a bullied fourteen-year-old: “It starts with you, and it ends with you.”

On one hand, *The It Gets Better Project* is the anti-NAMBLA, encasing queer youth in a cloak of suspension as they wait for a presumably *better* adulthood. On the other hand, it provides a veritable catalog of underage boys, on whose videos one can comment. But if we look for organizations that are less concerned with sexual access to queer youth for adults, and more concerned with improving their lives, and giving them voice, there are now many organizations that support queer youth as *actual* people, rather than potential people. The Gay Straight Alliance Network, founded in 1998, now boasts more than 880 clubs in high schools and middle schools (par. 1) —allowing people from the ages of twelve to eighteen to speak for themselves and wisely finding a space in which members are welcome to remain ambiguous in their identifications. There is also a growing response to homeless gay youth. The Trevor Project works to prevent suicide among queer youth, whom it defines as those occupying the ages of thirteen to twenty-four. It’s hard not to notice that this is roughly the age group that Harry Hay was distressed to find unrepresented by any gay group but NAMBLA. That is, efforts to make queer youth sexually available to adults have done little to improve the quality of their lives, while the mainstream gay movement has done much by creating opportunities for them to have a viable life in the present.

Ultimately, I believe that pedophiles and boy-lovers are *not* queer, but for different reasons. Pedophiles—defined as adults who sexually pursue pre-pubescent children—do clear

harm. In all the literature I have read advocating for pedophilia, the concern for the sexual freedom of youth always looks like a cover to have legal sex with them. In other words, the movement that claims to speak for youth, does little to give voice to youth, and frequently seeks access to youth without regard for the consequence to them. NAMBLA's web page on "Youth Views and Issues" states that "NAMBLA was formed at a meeting of 30 men and 2 teenaged boys, all concerned about the scapegoating of man/boy love" (par 1.), but then almost immediately makes clear that those boys are less than active members: "NAMBLA does not claim to speak for youth. But we do advocate letting them speak for themselves" (par. 3). The most recent article in their archive of youth speaking for themselves is a creepy and anonymous letter from a twelve-year-old written in 1984. The article is eighteen sentences long, and uses the name "NAMBLA" eleven times. It feels about as original to the author as Jonathan Krohn's fourteen-year-old version of conservatism. In NAMBLA, the B seems unable to speak convincingly for itself.⁷

Richard Yuill and Dean Durber surveyed three decades of literature from three sources: (1) "boylover"s [quotations their own], (2) case studies on child sexual abuse and (3) narratives by survivors of abuse. They ultimately dispense with children altogether, placing the problem within the policing of the adolescent boy's body, which "can be viewed as neither that of a child nor that of an adult... a transitory body...it already exists in a marginalized space of dangerous mutability" (271). They conclude that "both CSA [Child Sex Abuse] professionals and boylovers... want to use it for their own gains... [they] want to discipline the boy's body to support the pre-written endings of their own narratives" (271). Like Angelides in his review of the image and identity of the pedophile, Yuill and Durber note that the contested space is not the

⁷ The official NAMBLA logo actually has the "B" as a lower case "b."

pre-pubescent body, but the adolescent body—quarantined on one side, eroticized on the other, and sexualized on both. Neither side can allow the adolescent boy's body to be the boy's, and here we find that all the drama over the age of consent and children's rights seems to collapse in the specificity of the adolescent himself. Yuill and Durber reach a conclusion similar to my own—that once the (adolescent) body has been predetermined in its narrative, it disappears. In the texts they consider, of course, there are real people who may re-evaluate, reconsider, or live inside of the stories of abuse and eroticism. Speaking of these adolescents, they write, “this kind of body is hard to claim, enjoy and hang onto” (271). This is precisely what we see in the novels I consider in this study.

In Bruce Rind's 2001 study “Gay and Bisexual Adolescent Boys' Sexual Experiences with Men,” the author laments the dominance of the father-daughter incest model as the paradigm “narrowly dictating how adult-minor sexual relations” (345) are viewed. Rind interviewed 126 gay and bisexual men, twenty-six of whom reported sexual contact with an adult male when they were between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Rind finds that the twenty-six were “as well adjusted as controls in terms of self-esteem and having achieved a positive sexual identity” (345). These boys (as recalled by their adult selves) had all developed their sexual identity prior to the contact, and more often than not, were the initiators (359). Rind finds no difference between younger and older adolescents, though it seems counterintuitive to regard a twelve-year-old and thirty-five-year-old initiating a ten-year relationship (363) and a seventeen-year-old and a forty-year-old having sex on Fire Island (367) as being in the same category (especially considering that they could be the same people at the beginning and end of a five year interval, though they are not).

Rind's analysis appeared in the same year as the film *L.I.E.*, which provides the exact opposite perspective, and more or less endorses the conventional wisdom on the nature of boy love. In the film, Big John is a retired cop, who begins to turn his ephedophilic attentions toward fifteen-year-old Howie. With Howie's mother dead, and his father about to be convicted of fraud, Howie is an easy target, with no protecting adults in his life. As Big John spends more time with Howie, he falls in love with him, but recognizes the damage that he would do to Howie by seducing him, and remains strictly a mentor without sexualizing the relationship. Contra Rind, the logic of the film suggests that boy-lovers recognize the damage that they do, and that the ultimate act of boy love would be to keep one's pants zipped. As beautiful as the film is, Big John would seem a curious boy-lover, from the perspective of actual boy-lovers. Big John's decision to protect Howie by *not* seducing him would be an unrecognizable decision to anyone within the discursive regime of boy-lovers as represented by NAMBLA or O'Carroll. Still, there is more division among ephedophiles and pedophiles than their advocates might suggest. In Philip Jenkin's *Beyond Tolerance*, the author notes the divide among online pedophiles as to the nature of their proclivities. Some posters are "radical" pedophiles, who (like Tom O'Carroll) insist on pedophilia as healthy, natural, and consensual. One post on a web service for pedophiles writes, "Kids are beautiful and must be protected... from the *right* people. Not those who love them most (us)" (125). Another contributor describes the orgasm reached by his four-year-old daughter through cunnilingus as proof that children should and do have orgasms (132). However, other pedophiles are clear on the damage being done to the children they are seeing in the images they are downloading. "GET REAL! they're [sic] children" (131) writes one poster. Others comment on the conflict they feel between wanting to see the images and knowing how the child was harmed by the making of the images. While Jenkins has not seen the images and relies on

descriptions from posters, these images are not “relational” pornography, but images of children engaged in often sadistic and painful sexual acts. *L.I.E.*’s Big John recognizes that his desires cannot be fulfilled without inflicting damage, suggesting that he is not a self-affirming boy-lover or radical pedophile. In the tradition of American film, his sympathetic nature is confirmed by the murder that punishes him. In mainstream discourse, there is a good pedophile: a dead one. I will return to this question of the “good pedophile” in Chapter Three.

It is frequently noted that the age of consent in most of America in 1900 was ten years of age, and this dates back to the medieval practice of forbidding “raptus” of maidens under the age of twelve—a fortune-hunting form of princess-kidnapping that may have involved rape. It is hard to determine exactly when the notion of “consent” gained the meaning it has for us now, but for centuries, the concern over child sexual abuse was primarily over the “damage” to the (girl) victim in terms of (her) marriageability. Marrying the molester/rapist was considered the appropriate response to rape/molestation for thousands of years. Over time, the decree that a maiden under twelve could not be *abducted* gradually became the law that a girl under twelve could not *consent* to sex. Age of consent laws were raised steadily over the course of the twentieth century, usually settling somewhere between sixteen and eighteen, though in some places and times reaching a high of twenty-one. The logic of age of consent laws prior to the twentieth century was more or less to create an unequivocal space of inviolability—that below ten or twelve is simply too young. The logic of current age of consent laws seems to be the opposite—anyone over the age of consent is definitely old enough to consent. A single age of consent will always create problems—one is no more ready to have sex the day after a twelfth birthday than one is entirely unready to have sex the day before an eighteenth birthday. Regarding statutory rape, Susan Brownmiller argues that

offenses committed against children below the age of twelve should carry the maximum penalty...young persons above the age of twelve and below sixteen remain particularly vulnerable to sexual coercion by adults who use a position of authority, rather than physical force to achieve their aim... the law ought to be flexible enough to allow prosecutorial discretion...with corresponding lesser penalties as the outer age limits are reached. (383)

Philip Jenkins takes a similar stand:

Seventeen-year-olds are not children, and it is ludicrous to try to impose upon them the same limitations that apply to seven-year-olds. We might consider a sliding scale of seriousness, so that offenses involving younger children are treated severely while official reaction diminishes as the age of the subject increases. We cannot carry on pretending that sexuality is a mysterious force that descends on a person suddenly on his or her eighteenth birthday, prior to which the individual remains in pristine innocence. (220)

Jenkins is speaking about people portrayed in pornographic material, but the principal is the same. In fact, Jenkins and Brownmiller—both staunch anti-pedophiles—both seem to be on the side of the boy-lovers in holding out the age range of twelve to seventeen as a *not-always-wrong* age for consensual sex with people eighteen and older.

So if twelve to seventeen remains a contested area, then how can we oppose boy-lovers? They simply ask that *some* of those boys, aged twelve to seventeen, be considered able to consent to sex. And yet, I find myself—against Halperin and Traub—feeling that boy lovers should not find themselves welcomed into the queer fold. I keep returning to the point made by Yuill and Durber, that while the body of the adolescent should be left to the adolescent, the

eroticization of the adolescent is a distinct problem. The boy lover, in insisting on the desirability of boys, reduces them to their sexuality in the same the way that a more puritan impulse would quarantine their sexuality.

There has been a proliferation of organizations since the 1990s that support gay youth without insisting on a certain kind of eroticism. While these groups may seem assimilationist, naïve, or bourgeois (against the separatist, knowing, and radical nature of boy-lovers), they also seem to leave open possibilities for adolescent sexuality rather than foreclosing on them. I have made Hay and Jarman spokespeople for the idea that we must not abandon queer children and youth; they are the most vulnerable of our community, and frequently subject to violence, abuse, and coercion. However, I do not see insisting on the right of adolescents to have sex with adults as being the key to improving their lives. The voices of queer youth are making themselves heard through organizations dedicated to both enshrining their youth as youth and creating a space that allows them to live unabused (I initially wrote “unmolested”) for their sexual preference in the present. Boy-lovers have not succeeded in improving life for the demographic they insist they claim to care deeply about, while queer adults and queer youth have made incredible strides by insisting on their value as whole people, rather than sexual objects. And as Rind points out, there’s something of a paradox in his study of adolescent-adult sexual contact. The primary predictor of a positive memory of the event is the boy’s decision to initiate it.

I wanted to introduce this study with the questions of how pedophiles and ephebophiles fit into the larger rubric of queerness for two reasons. The first is that it lays the groundwork for understanding that there is a difficult and overlapping relationship between those who identify as and those who have sought liberation for gays, lesbians, queers, boy-lovers, and pedophiles. I hope this discussion demonstrates how and why the spaces between these identities are vexed,

even if each constituency is generally clear on its boundaries. Second, I want to make clear my own allegiance to queer youth. In tracing the history of the twentieth century's attitudes towards pre-adult sexuality, it's clear that these attitudes have been volatile and contradictory. More importantly, these attitudes have often obscured the actual experience of youth, focusing instead on adult sexual access to youth, adult responses to having lived through childhood abuse, and adult efforts to quarantine youth sexuality.

3. A Postwar *Straight* Novel

Khaled Hosseini's enormously popular novel *The Kite Runner* illustrates significant problems in how molested boys are represented. The novel opens with Amir and Hassan, two boyhood best friends of unequal status. Amir is the son of a prominent and wealthy man, and Hassan is the son of a household servant. After Amir witnesses Hassan being raped and fails to intercede on Hassan's behalf, Amir becomes ashamed. Hassan willingly endures the rape in order to retrieve a kite for Amir. Amir removes Hassan from his life in order to remove his shame. Hassan seems entirely incapable of shame himself and reacts like a confused puppy in his devotion to Amir. The radiance of Hassan's abjection drives Amir to push Hassan further and further away. Amir falsely accuses Hassan of theft to completely purge his world of Hassan. Amir discovers that even with Hassan's departure, the abjection remains. Amir and his father leave Afghanistan as the Soviets are invading, and Amir grows to adulthood in the United States, while Hassan remains in Afghanistan.

The abjection of molestation that has engulfed Amir is not mitigated by his relocation. As an adult, Amir discovers that Hassan has been killed by the mujahedeen and that Hassan's son Sohrab is now being held and serially abused by the same man who raped Hassan as a boy. Amir

travels back to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in order to rescue Sohrab. At the end of the novel, a traumatized Sohrab is barely able to speak. Amir is able to do penance through the cartoon violence he endures while rescuing Sohrab, and Amir's dignity is restored. *The New York Times Book Review* said this about the book's simplistic ending:

When Amir meets his old nemesis, now a powerful Taliban official, the book descends into some plot twists better suited to a folk tale than a modern novel. But in the end we're won over by Amir's compassion and his determination to atone for his youthful cowardice. (Hower par. 8)

I was not won over. What I find truly disturbing is how deeply abject the molested boys remain. The narrative arc is Amir's—the reader shares Amir's shame and hopes for Amir's redemption. Amir is the site of identification.

Hosseini essentially makes the molested boy disposable and interchangeable. Hassan is abjected—thrown from the narrative by Amir—and then killed by the narrative, though not before replacing himself with a son, whom Amir can then use to redeem himself. Every trope of futurity and generational replacement is engaged, with the effect that the reader feels nothing more than *weltschmerz* for Hassan or Sohrab. The narrative does not turn on the molested. Rather the question is whether Amir can redeem himself. Molested boys come and go, but a straight boy's struggle to a guilt-free manhood is eternal. Amir's transition from shameful to honorable behavior makes the molested boy *utilitarian*. The molested boy is the site of damage and the repository of negative emotion.

The novels I consider in these chapters are by turns distressing and confusing, but not one of these novels ever treats the molested boy as a utilitarian figure in service to a heteronormative protagonist. The molested boys you are about to meet will not be supporting characters, or

devices to highlight the purity, nobility, or kindness of their rescuers. Indeed, these boys will rarely be rescued. They will be full people, and they will be complete in the present. I hope that this alone is reason to read on.

I'm sorry. Let's get started.

Chapter 1: The Fissured Bildungsroman:

Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* & James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*

1. James Baldwin & Truman Capote

In 1948, Truman Capote met James Baldwin in Paris. Capote was a *wunderkind* with a quickly developing reputation, while Baldwin was struggling to establish an identity as a writer. Baldwin told Capote how badly he wanted *not* to write a “problem novel.” Capote responded, “Jimmy... your novel is about a Negro homosexual who is in love with a Jew. Wouldn't you describe that as a problem?” (Clarke, 204). Capote's description bears no resemblance to the plot of Baldwin's debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. If this anecdote is accurate, then Baldwin had been working on a novel with explicitly gay content, and Capote's quip persuaded Baldwin to write a coded gay novel rather than an explicit one.

It is tempting to read this encounter as a pivotal moment in American literary history. At the almost exact midpoint of the twentieth century, two of the United States's most prominent writers encounter each other and talk shop. Capote camps it up with Baldwin, helping him find his way forward, while Baldwin allows Capote to step into the role of mentor and guide. However, the only source for the remark and the meeting is Capote himself. Capote never even makes it to the indexes of the various biographies of Baldwin. I may have my own camp motive for casting doubt on the veracity of Capote's account. If they never met in Paris, then I could be the first to introduce them. But then, I should be clear: I doubt the remark, not the meeting.

It may be more interesting to consider their lives' parallels, rather than their meeting. Baldwin and Capote were almost exact contemporaries. Baldwin was born a scant three months

before Capote. Baldwin died just three years after Capote. The surnames Baldwin and Capote both came from an adoptive father. Neither author had a positive relationship to his new father, though Baldwin's was more heated and violent. Joseph Capote actually seemed to be something of Truman's defender against his mother, though never in a way that earned the younger Capote's gratitude. Both Capote and Baldwin found literary champions in high school English teachers, though neither Capote nor Baldwin attended college. Both were short men, both gained wide followings based on their loosely autobiographical first novels, and both became sought-after public figures, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.

In placing *Just Above My Head* (1979) next to *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), I hope to perform something of a perverse juxtaposition, placing their careers (Capote's first novel, Baldwin's last) in what I hope will be a productive sixty-nine, mutually satisfying and offering what I consider the best versions of each author. Both novels trace the growth of a queer boy toward his queer adulthood, although they both suddenly fail at the moment the protagonist's adulthood should arrive. Both books are in the tradition of a *bildungsroman*, tracing the trajectory of a youth's development into adulthood, but both books suddenly and curiously reject that tradition by refusing to represent the adult subjectivity into which the protagonist arrives.

Very little has been said about the vacuums presented by the missing adult versions of these two books' protagonists. In fact, I find it curious that no one seems to have been distressed by—or even noticed—the vacuum that I am identifying. In order to make sense of these absences, I plan to comb through the reception that each book received, starting with the earlier book. I will consider the reception of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in great detail for two reasons. The first is perhaps the more obvious: I want to trace the conversation that I am about to enter. The second is perhaps less obvious, and one I did not expect. The reception of *Other Voices, Other*

Rooms seems an almost perfect avatar for the historical understanding of homosexuality in the United States of America during the period this dissertation encompasses. After a detour to consider the history that Capote's novel will have made visible, I will turn to the reception of Baldwin's last novel, laying the groundwork to return to the central question that drives my inquiry: why do the adult versions of these youthful protagonists disappear?

2. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1948

The initial responses to *Other Voices, Other Rooms* were not kind. On the first of December 1947, a month prior to the novel's publication, *Library Journal* used the adjective "queer" twice in a ninety-two word review. The review concludes: "Not recommended for libraries." *Publishers' Weekly* declared that the book offered a "queasy fascination" (56). Carlos Baker concluded his January 18 review in the *New York Times*: "The story of Joel Knox did not need to be told, except to get it out of the author's system" (BR5). Orville Prescott's January 23 review in the same paper is only a touch gentler: "It isn't a good novel in spite of its spectacular qualities, because it is all mood, all beauty and sound and fury, like Poe's hollow poem, 'Ulalume'" (23). Writing in the summer 1948 issue of *The Sewanee Review*, Henry Rago called the novel a "pure example of sentimentality: the *unearned* experience" (519, emphasis in original). After dismissing Capote's assumed biography in the book as "an unexplained gratuitous exhibition," he declares that to take the book seriously is to "divorce yourself from anything either intelligent or humane" (519). Leslie Fiedler, assessing the state of the novel in the Summer 1948 issue of *The Kenyon Review* writes that "there is *emptiness* at the center" of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (523, emphasis in original). Asking how the novel should be interpreted, Fiedler tries out a few morals for the story: "that there is no escape from evil? that all

falls are predetermined? that there is no freedom?" but can settle on none of them as satisfactory (523). Fiedler concludes that a well-written novel implies choices in the writing, and therefore must imply choice for the characters. Curiously, Fiedler affirms Diana Trilling's assessment (which I shall consider shortly), and declares that the "assumptions of Capote's story deserve the style of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, self-effacing, under-written, resolutely *dull*" (523, emphasis in original). What Fiedler is requesting here is a novel about homosexuality that will control for all variables by excluding the various other axes of identity (namely: gender, age, race) that *Other Voices, Other Rooms* invokes.

Elizabeth Hardwick alone hated the book on its own merits. She called it "a tinkling funeral bell for some of our recent Southern fiction" (376). Without a trace of homophobic distress, she dismissed the novel as a decadent theft of Carson McCullers's setting, style, and characters.

Diana Trilling's January 31 review in *The Nation* seems to be the clearest and most forthright formulation of what the vast majority of reviewers found so reprehensible about the book, and I will quote from her review at some length.

... I find myself deeply antipathetic to the whole artistic-moral purpose of Mr. Capote's novel.... I would freely trade 80 per cent of his technical virtuosity for 20 per cent more value in the uses to which it is put. (78)

Trilling goes through her annoyance with the arcane behaviors of the characters before summarizing her understanding of the book's true meaning and purpose:

At the end of the book the young Joel turns to the homosexual love offered him by Randolph, and we realize that in his slow piling up of nightmare details Mr. Capote has been attempting to recreate the emotional background of sexual

inversion. What his book is saying is that a boy becomes a homosexual when the circumstances of his life deny him the other, more normal gratifications of his need for affection.

Well, I am not equipped to argue whether or not this is a sound explanation of the source of homosexuality. Nor does the question interest me here. Much more interesting, it seems to me, is the implication of Mr. Capote's book that, having been given an explanation of the cause of Joel's homosexuality, we have been given all the ground we need for a proper attitude toward it and toward Joel as a member of society. For what other meaning can we possibly draw from this portrait of a passive victim of his early circumstances than that we must always think of him in this light—that even when Joel will be thirty or forty, we shall still have to judge him only as the passive victim of his early circumstances? But this is surely a very dangerous social attitude, since, in exactly the same sense in which Joel is formed by the accidents of his youthful experience, we have all of us, heterosexuals no less than homosexuals, been formed by our early experience. Is no member of society, then, to be held accountable for himself, not even Hitler? (79)

More than any of the other reviewers, Trilling is clear that her distaste for the novel is her distaste for homosexuality, as well as the social permissiveness that might accompany the acceptance of homosexuality. I find myself repeatedly jarred and titillated by that final sentence.

The mass murder of Jews is being compared here to what, exactly? Can a man's occasional (or frequent) indulgence in anal sex (or oral sex or frottage) with another man really compare with the slaughter of six million Jews? What can homosexuality possibly mean to

Trilling if accepting it means a kind of moral relativism and determinism that cannot even condemn Nazism? As easy as it is to poke fun at Trilling for the sheer excess of her statement, I actually find myself grateful to her for playing her hand so clearly. While most of the other reviews couch their homophobia in terms of disgust or annoyance that need no explanation, Trilling is quite clear about the location of homosexuality within her moral schema. Without the condemnation of particular actions, independent of motive or personality, she cannot conceive of morality. One could argue with Trilling, invoking Martha Nussbaum's clear demonstration that the law has never been interested in ignoring the sort of personal motivations that Trilling insists should be left aside when coming to judgment. But rather than argue with Trilling, it would be better to allow her words to reveal just how wide a penumbra of vice surrounded the dense flame of homosexuality in the 1950s imagination.

As George Chauncey has argued in *Why Marriage?*, the intensive criminalization of homosexuality in the United States of America did not begin until the 1920s. Until the 1930s, gay life was more of an oddity than a moral breach. The attacks on homosexuals and homosexuality reached a fever pitch between the 1930s and 1960s. As post-holocaust America began to feel a certain affection for Jews—conferring whiteness on the Jewish body and finding a new, muscular, industrious face for Judaism in the Zionists fighting to establish and then maintain the state of Israel, the figure of the homosexual replaced the figure of the Jew as the leering bogeyman threatening its children. As Chauncey reminds us, “the government dismissed more homosexuals than communists at the height of the McCarthy era” (12).

1948 was also the year of the Kinsey Report, and even as Kinsey was asserting that “[i]t would encourage clearer thinking on these matters if persons were not characterized as heterosexual or homosexual, but as individuals who have had certain amounts of heterosexual

experience and certain amounts of homosexual experience” (617), the American imagination was crystallizing its image of the homosexual. Chauncey writes that immediately following the Second World War, “homosexuals were depicted in ways that drew on patterns of demonization that had become familiar and habitual through their widespread use to demonize Jews as well as communists” (18-19). Like Jews and Communists, homosexuals were supposed to constitute their own world-controlling cabal: a “Homintern,” in the words of one congressman (19).

Police and press campaigns warned “that by engaging in homosexual behavior, a man had demonstrated the refusal to adjust to social norms that was the hallmark of the psychopath” (19). The attacks on Kinsey following his assertion that homosexuality is not in fact an identity, but rather a widespread and relatively harmless facet of most males, underscores just how clearly the homosexual had taken on a kind of ill-bounded monstrosity. It’s doubtful that Diana Trilling was particularly concerned with any specific meaning to homosexuality (despite the fact that she contrasted it to her own heterosexuality), but rather perceived it as a gelatinous moral failing, bound to ooze over into all aspects of one’s life.

It’s quite easy from this side of the twentieth century to point out that Trilling’s leap from “homosexuals can’t help themselves” to “Hitler can’t help himself” is risibly enormous when one considers what it is that the homosexual and Hitler, respectively, cannot help himself to. But before we smugly toss Mrs. Trilling’s prejudices into the dustbin of homophobias past, we should note that it is not just her understanding of homosexuality that maps neatly onto mid-century America’s; it is Capote’s representation. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is quite easily summarized as a novel about a lonely gay transvestite named Randolph who procures a twelve-year-old boy named Joel under false pretenses, and isolates him until the boy comes to accept his overtures of love. Capote seems complicit with Trilling in suggesting that homosexuality’s vague

boundaries are something to be feared. In both Trilling's hyperbolic analogy and Capote's depiction of Randolph, we see homosexuality's penumbra casting light into very dark corners.

Trilling treats *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as an argument for the acceptance of homosexuality. She expresses the concern that "Our fiction, in other words, is taking the lead in opting for a world of irresponsibility" (80). She concludes, "Were we to ask fiction, as we once did, that it base its claim to artistic stature on its moral stature, most of the writing gifts we celebrate today would fall into their proper place as merely feats of literary athletics" (80).⁸

As much as critics may have objected to the content of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, it was not alone in its treatment of homosexuality, and 1948 seems to mark a tipping point for American readers. Previously, homosexuality had been the province of the pulp novel, the privately circulated novel, the European novel (Proust and Gide especially), or poetry. But in 1948, Random House published *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; E. P. Dutton published Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*⁹; and the W. B. Saunders Company published Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Two years before the Mattachine Society first insisted on homosexuals as an identity group deserving protection (D'Emilio 9), gay authors (and a team of sexologists) were bringing portraits of gay men to America's readers.

Though the reviews betrayed what we would now call a persistent homophobia, they also initiated Capote's reputation as a writer who could not be ignored. Robert Stanton's bibliography of Capote lists fifty-two reviews of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* from 1948. Tallying up Stanton's assessment: eight were unobtainable, twelve were unfavorable, ten were mixed, and twenty-two

⁸ Again Trilling may not be far off. Christopher Pullen finds the trajectory toward moralizing narratives around same-sex desire in new media as beginning in 1948—though he invokes Vidal, not Capote, as the fountainhead of the focus on memoir and reality to the exclusion of fictions and fictionalization.

⁹ In the 1990s Random House was printing Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, again bringing the two rivals together under one roof.

were favorable. Even the negative reviews tend to point out that Capote is an extremely gifted writer despite having written a very bad book. Prescott's otherwise disapproving *Times* review concludes that Capote is "a new writer of substantial talent."

While it may look like Capote's literary reception had put him at risk of going unread, his status as a gossip-page favorite suggests otherwise. On its literary pages, *The New York Times* seemed willing to accuse the author of writing frivolous fiction, but elsewhere, the *Times* engaged in some frivolity of its own. On February 18, it published this catty little report under the subheading "Capote Corner" in its gossipy "People Who Read and Write" section:

On the word of the Random House people, the Truman Capote (Ca-POE-tee) novel, "Other Voices, Other Rooms" is stepping along at the rate of 700 copies a day, and already a Capote legend is in the making. It is a reticent author that doesn't get a legend going about himself these days, wherefore Random (1) denies that its boy's name a few years back was Roosevelt Capote and that, a year hence, it might be Dewey, or Taft, or Staltonstall Capote, and (2) neither affirms nor denies the following tale: It seems that the youthful Mr. Capote, although not without personal means, once worked as office boy at *The New Yorker*, which gave him a lunch period of something less than an hour. Mr. Capote, discovering that an hour didn't give him time for lunch at Twenty-one, quit. (BR8)

The same section gleefully reported a rumored feud between Capote and Gore Vidal on March 21. The inciting event was *Other Voices, Other Rooms* having been selected by a group of reviewers (including Orville Prescott) to be included in a group of books "to be treasured":

This puts Mr. Capote out ahead of Gore Vidal, with whom, it is rumored, he has been feuding. The rumor goes on to say that the feud reached something of a

climax when Mr. Vidal complained that merely because he is the author of three novels the critics have failed to note that he is younger—and more precocious—than Mr. Capote.

To which Mr. Capote, an elderly gentleman of 23, replied: “Vidal? He’s 25 if he’s a day.” (BR8)

Considering that Esther Newton placed thirty as the onset of old age for gay men (27) in her study of homosexual subcultures (her study was of a later decade, though the findings are still useful here), the stakes are clear. Though before we accuse the young Capote of ageism, we ought not forget that Capote’s first lover was more than two decades his senior—and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is essentially a less than wholesome love story between a twelve-year-old boy and a man in his thirties. Still, it seems worth noting that the reception of the gossip pages suggests a visibility of gay culture that was not named as gay, and as such could operate clandestinely.

3. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* After 1948

In 1950, Carvel Collins was invited to write an article for *The American Scholar*, and he decided to take up the question of how Americans read novels. He took *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as his main focus. He focused on the “conflict going on in the United States over our fiction” as to whether fiction should be “educational and reportorial” or “an art” (108). He names the “naturalists” as the first camp. They expect that a novel will provide them with insight into the workings of a culture, region and society. Collins never quite names the other camp, though it is marked by a concern with the individual and the subjective—it seems as though the

naturalists are up against a renewed strain of modernism or aestheticism, not that the two were ever truly that far apart.

Collins defends *Other Voices, Other Rooms* from those “readers of the naturalistic persuasion [who have] attacked it” (113). Even as he refuses to evaluate the aesthetics of the novel (“I do not want to discuss here whether *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is a good novel”), he does think that “it should be evaluated on grounds other than its portrayal of a region” (113). Interestingly, Collins suggests that the majority of the attacks on the novel were about its failure as a naturalist novel, not—as the reviews I’ve surveyed suggest—as a homosexual novel. In defending the novel from sociological readings in favor of universal and subjective concerns, he seems to elide the concern that had hovered around the book from its initial reception: how does one read a novel about a boy becoming a homosexual or realizing that he is a homosexual? By lodging the psychological outside the “naturalistic,” Collins essentially evades the concerns brought forth by Trilling and Fiedler—relocating their critiques to an excess of concern with regional veracity.

Collins then proceeds to do a remarkable reading of the novel as a recasting of the Grail myth, with Joel as a new Percival or Gawain. Even Joel’s tomboy friend Idabel and his father Ed Sansom (whose association with boxing allows him to be Joel’s warrior father) take their place in this mythological paradigm. Collins suggests that the holy grail Joel seeks is adulthood, and that Joel fails. “Joel... is attempting to go through the episodes of initiation and grow into manhood. But the opposition is too great for him and he does not succeed in his quest” (115). Collins considers this failed quest to be a mark of mid-twentieth-century fiction, present in Faulkner and Joyce as well. But Collins is unique among Capote’s critics in baldly announcing that Joel fails to become an adult.

Collins seems dubious that his reading is of much use. “Is it effective to present Joel’s unfortunate development by the carefully detailed symbolic and mythic parallel outlined here? Can the reader profit from the novel’s use of this parallel even if no one has pointed it out? Now that the parallel is pointed out can the reader profit from it even though he does not know most of its details?” (115) Considering how deftly and brilliantly Collins reads the novel as an iteration of the grail myth, it is surprising to find him conclude that his reading is more or less beside the point, assuming the novel has one. (How might a reader “profit” from any reading of any text?) Collins’s reading did not become influential, and as impressed by it as I am, I will also treat it more or less as a novelty reading—well done, but best left where it lies.

In 1960, Ihab Hassan’s “The Daydream and Nightmare of Narcissus” explored Capote’s oeuvre by dividing the work into his “daytime” and “nocturnal” styles (5). *Other Voices, Other Rooms* falls to the nocturnal side. Hassan returns to the genre of the bildungsroman, but casts the novel as a narcissistic bildungsroman: “Joel is in search of an image which reflects darkly his own identity, his reality, and ironically, which becomes available to him only when reality is dispelled in the palace of pleasure, the secret house of dreams” (9). Joel’s journey is a journey to himself, away from heterosexuality, and towards his double: Randolph. Hassan is entirely unembarrassed by the novel’s homosexual representation, and is intrigued by Joel’s backward birth. He regards the ending of the novel as ambiguous: “we are not sure whether it is in triumph or defeat that Joel responds” to Randolph’s beckoning. Hassan dismisses a critic who has “objected to the self-contained quality of evil and guilt in the novel” (12). Hassan reminds us that “Capote’s work is, in its intentions, at least, a novel-romance, and that it attempts to engage reality without being realistic” (12). While not exactly affirming homosexuality, Hassan refuses to condemn it—not exactly sidestepping the issue, but insisting that these are questions of theme

and symbol, not social services. For Hassan, the best antidote to the fears evoked by child sexuality and homosexuality is to remember that neither is actually present. This is a novel; it should not be read as a case study.

Two years later, in 1962, Marvin E. Mengeling pompously brought Freud to Capote's first novel, glibly diagnosing Joel as an Oedipal failure. Mengeling's smug combination of positivism and Freudianism represent the worst offenses of both schools of thought. Of Hassan's exploration of narcissism in the novel, Mengeling writes, "Hassan... clutched a handy sub-theme... labeled it the primary theme, and [had] been consequently led into formulating an off-center value judgment concerning the work as a whole" (99). Mengeling declines to offer a value judgment on the novel's artistic merit, contenting himself to "exactly establish the propelling and predominant theme of this novel" (99). For Mengeling, the Oedipal conflict plays out as follows: after the death of his mother just as he is entering puberty, Joel seeks out his father "in hopes of satisfying the demands of his growing super-ego for guidance" (100). But when his father turns out to be an invalid, Joel's super-ego flounders, and Randolph "begins to prepare his [Joel's] ego for the reacceptance of a mother-image as the love object of the ego" (102). Joel "fails to assert his manhood" with Idabel, twice—once when she successfully resists his sexual advances and once when she has to slay the snake that paralyzes him—making him even more susceptible to Randolph. After his illness, "Joel has accepted Randolph as mother substitute" (103).

Mengeling insists on a sexual relationship between Randolph and Joel, writing that Capote "seems determined to carry Joel beyond mere fixation to the farther point of sexual consummation" (103). Having accepted Randolph as mother, Joel will "assume the position of husband, not child, in relation to Randolph, the mother image" (104). Mengeling (pace Hassan) reads the conclusion as a triumph and a defeat—he gets to have sex with his mother, but "in the

process, Joel's super-ego (in ironic counterpoint to Sansom's physical paralysis) has been crippled, and must now remain forever retarded and incomplete" (104).

Mengeling's reading is highly over-determined, and seems to suggest that Capote was informed by forces beyond his ken, forces that Freud not only understood, but had already unpacked. In a footnote, Mengeling writes, "It is because Randolph must assume the role of mother-wife to Joel that Capote finds it of dramatic necessity for Randolph to be of the effeminate variety" (106). Rather than using Capote's novel as the evidence for his argument, Mengeling figures Capote's hand as forced by the Freudian template at work. And far from Diana Trilling's demurral that she could not evaluate the veracity of the "process" by which Joel becomes a homosexual, Mengeling is happy to use this as a clear case study. Randolph doesn't just seduce Joel, he literally reshapes him as a homosexual in his image. Mengeling's reading is ridiculously simplistic, ignoring the complexity of both Freud and Capote.

By the late 1970s, critics were beginning to look for gay work to celebrate. Despite the novel's reception as a very gay book, Roger Austen wrote in 1977 that "Capote has played it safe by retreating far enough back into his Southern childhood so that Joel Harrison Knox, however gay he might be expected to turn out eventually, is allowed to remain sexless within the terms of the novel" (114). Very few contemporary critics had seen Joel as sexless, but Austen seems to be referring to the lack of overt sexual activity. Austen has very little to say about *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* in his book-length survey of the gay novel in America, except to expel it from his kingdom of gay novels. He agrees with William Nance that "Randolph can also be viewed symbolically, and should be... Surely Randolph speaks for all humanity—men as well as woman, heterosexuals as well as homosexuals—when he tells Joel that "What we want most is only to be held...and told...that everything is going to be all right" (115). Actually, within most

understandings of Western masculinity, this is very far from what all of humanity wants; indeed, this is precisely what *women* want. This kind of helplessness and eager dependency is the acute opposite of manhood.

Interestingly, this scene is almost directly reported as having happened in Capote's life after Newton Arvin had cancelled one of their weekends together. Andrew Lyndon recalled, "When he hung up, Truman started to cry, and he asked me to get into bed with him and cuddle—nothing sexual ever went on between us; he just wanted to be held and told that everything was all right" (Clarke, 127-8). Try imagining that scene in the biography of, say, Ronald Reagan after Jane Wyman has filed against him for divorce, and then return to the scene in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* with the idea that this is not a specifically gay experience, but rather a universal one. Austen seems to want to push Capote out of his study of gay fiction altogether, placing style over content in his final appraisal: "In short, Capote's appeal for many gay readers is probably based not so much on what he says as on the peculiarly delightful way in which he says it" (116). One is tempted to suggest that Capote is just a bit too queer for Austen's rigidly gay sensibility.

Bruce Bawer's 1985 assessment of the novel celebrates it as a reinvigoration of the bildungsroman, though he keeps a somewhat curious firewall between the adult and the child: "The heroes of his [Capote's] novels are invariably sensitive souls, aliens in the world of civilized, responsible adults, who are tortured by their inability to let go of childhood" (42). But while the last sentence of the novel (quoted by Bawer) suggests that Joel enters manhood when he accepts Randolph's invitation to his room, Joel is no more than thirteen at the end of the novel. "She [Randolph in countess drag] beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go... he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind"

(Capote, 231). James Kincaid points out that the age of twelve seems to hover in our popular culture as the last sexless year of life (70), so perhaps Joel has already been “sexed” by the time he arrives. Bawer claims that the theme of the novel is the “innocence of childhood, the tragedy of having to trade it in for the sordidness and disillusionment of adulthood” (42), but to whatever extent Joel is innocent, it puts him in danger. If this is indeed a story of a gay man initiating a gay boy into gay adulthood, then it’s hard not to see the approach as sexual and as welcome. Bawer focuses on this as a gay bildungsroman, but not as a sissy bildungsroman, which might yield more interesting results. But Bawer gives little time to the novel in what is a fairly short overview of Capote’s career.

In Claude Summers’s 1990 study of gay fiction, *Gay Fiction: Wilde to Stonewall*, Summers also seems disappointed in the lack of gay liberationist potential of *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*. Summers sees the scene where Joel approaches Randolph’s room as “disturbing rather than liberating, for the homosexuality that Joel finally embraces in *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* is distinctly unappetizing and utterly unconvincing” (132). One wishes that Summers had been able to watch *Paris is Burning* or *RuPaul’s Drag Race* before dismissing Randolph’s drag clad embrace as “unconvincing.” After all, the ending makes more sense if Randolph is becoming Joel’s drag mother than if Randolph is becoming his boyfriend. Summers’s interpretation of the novel is diametrically opposed to Bawer’s. Bawer sees the conclusion of the novel as a celebration of innocence as it is being lost; Summers sees a drag queen about to get fucked by a sissy thirteen-year-old.

An explicitly liberationist reading of the novel was not performed until William White Tison Pugh’s 1998 essay “Boundless Hearts in a Nightmare World: Queer Sentimentalism and Southern Gothicism in Truman Capote’s: *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*.” Pugh argues that “the

didactically sentimental themes of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* urge the novel's audience to a better understanding and deeper acceptance of homosexuality through a groundbreaking treatment of adolescent gay identity" (150). Pugh quite convincingly locates the tropes of the novel within sentimentalism, putting Joel in the role of the heroine who has fallen from the middle class but will be rewarded for her fortitude in the face of adversity.

Pugh resists previous readings that posit Randolph as surrogate parent, seducer, predator or destroyer, insisting that these are mis-readings of homosexual desire. Pugh insists that Capote establishes Randolph as the point of identification for readers of the novel. Pugh insists that "Capote's sentimentally didactic goal is explicitly to teach his readers that all human love is beautiful" (164). But Pugh consistently ignores Joel's extreme youth. Having insisted that the "negative reactions" of most critics are based on their assumption of a "predatory and dysfunctional sexual relationship between Randolph and Joel in which the former has molded the latter into a sexual toy and that a romance ensues with complicated inversions of traditional family relationships" (160), he simply discards the adjectives "predatory and dysfunctional" and leaves "sexual" in place to describe their relationship.

Pugh finds gay liberatory potential in the episode in which Randolph thwarts the visit of Joel's Aunt Ellen. Joel looks forward to the visit, in part because Aunt Ellen will take him away from Randolph and back to a more normal life where he will have opportunities not afforded him by Noon City, most notably attending school. Randolph arranges for an extended trip away from the plantation that prevents Joel from seeing his aunt; Joel only discovers that she has come and gone after they return to Skully's Landing. Pugh finds this a positive development, arguing that Randolph's subterfuge "ensures that Joel will be able to experience his rebirth as a gay man in a gay community rather than retreating into a state of perpetual pre-adolescence in a society that

will never understand him” (161). In his eagerness to insist on the virtues of Randolph’s course of action, he has turned Randolph into an entire gay community, one in which Joel can be reborn. Pugh emphasizes equality in Joel and Randolph’s relationship, noting that Joel writes to a friend in a letter that “Out here a person old as us is a grown up person,” and that Randolph is frequently described as looking quite young. Pugh continues, “That two gay men choose to live with each other in a secluded setting should not be read as an indictment of homosexuality” (164). Still, when one of those “two gay men” would really like to get back to the seventh grade, there might be a problem that needs addressing.

Pugh is not coy—he makes it clear that Joel becomes an adult by choosing Randolph, and that were he to return to civilization, he would be a “perpetual pre-adolescent.” Pugh makes the age difference symbolic, but treats the homosexuality as real. The reality of homosexuality (we are not inherently narcissists, sadists, predators) is allowed in, while Joel’s youth is smoothed over as figurative and fungible (as is Randolph’s seniority to him). The fact that Joel spends the entire novel being easily manipulated and behaving childishly seems to be recuperated by the fact that in the last line of the novel, he discards his boyhood. Interestingly, Pugh never points out that both Joel and Randolph reflect Capote’s own image from the late 1940s. In Capote’s early twenties, he was frequently mistaken for a child, being offered milk at a party or mistaken for a tag-a-long kid brother. At one party he was mistaken for the seven-year-old son of the hosts (Clarke, 134). Were Randolph and Joel both aspects of Capote, there would be no age difference to generate anxiety; but Pugh needs the two characters to be real, and therefore creates a problem that he cannot quite fix. Pugh also assesses the book as a site of failed patriarchy, invoking Judith Butler to dissect the various failures, right down to Joel’s inability to embrace his patronym (he is Joel Knox, the Knox coming from his Mother, rather than Joel Sansom). But some of the

phallic symbolism feels perfunctory (Idabel kills the snake Joel is transfixed by) and recycled. In Pugh's eagerness to normalize homosexuality, he straightens out too much of what is a necessarily bent book.

By the new century, there seemed to be much less anxiety over whether one should approve or disapprove of the novel. Gary Richards' graceful 2005 assessment of the novel is focused solely on the question of gender transitivity, and analyzes the ways in which feminine gender performance and tropes of femininity (and conversely, masculinity) are markers for homosexuality. Richards approaches the novel as a historian of sexuality, and elegantly assesses the models of (homo)sexuality it offers. Richards also points out the ways in which Randolph's effeminacy is bound up with whiteness, and that his objects of desire are black and Latino models of virility, working-class muscle in juxtaposition to aristocratic softness. Richards also stresses Randolph's camp sensibility. Very few critics, despite suggesting that Randolph is a figure of readerly identification and empathy, deal with his sheer callousness. If Randolph is to be Capote's sympathetic avatar, how can the reader account for his severe lack of empathy for anyone but Joel (and even at times, Joel)? When Randolph recounts how the maid Zoo's throat was cut by her husband, he complains that she ruined his grandmother's quilt with her blood. Richards recuperates this scene as an example of gender-transitive camp: "Rather than sexistly disregarding female labor and artistry, Randolph overvalues it, begrudging Zoo [the maid] her life because it comes at the expense of his cherished quilt" (36).

Robert Emmet Long's 2008 book *Truman Capote—Enfant Terrible* seems to find the novel, and particularly Randolph, unproblematically sympathetic. Consisting mostly of plot summaries, though the book also includes a number of kind (if saccharine) interpretations. Long writes that "Randolph and Joel are in need of each other, and in time grow closer together...

Randolph will become the father he does not have; in a curious way he will be both father and mother to the boy. Joel, in turn, will bring youth, innocence, and comfort to the spiritually ailing Randolph” (46). Long reads Joel as a stand-in for Capote. “Like Joel, he went to live in a large house in a remote section of rural Alabama. Like Joel, neither his mother nor his father were present to help him grow up. And like Joel, he was a pretty boy considered to be effeminate who came to consciousness of his homosexuality at an early age” (47). Long even tries to find a model for Randolph in Newton Arvin, the older lover that Capote met at Yaddo and referred to as “my Harvard.” But Arvin was, despite epistolary effusion, in fact quite distant. Randolph constructed multiple deceptions to secure Joel as his constant companion; Arvin preferred his privacy to Capote’s company. As I’ve already recounted, Arvin’s frequent rejections of Capote caused him much pain. Also the physical descriptions of Randolph with his moon face and translucent skin are much closer to Capote’s biological father Arch Persons than they are to Newton Arvin.

What is significant about Long’s account is how little anxiety there is to it. By 2008, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* had come to seem like a very normal book.

4. Surveying the Field

The reception of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* essentially delimits the full historical range of this study, and it shows more or less exactly what one would expect to find in terms of attitudes towards homosexuality. In the 1940s, homosexuality is emerging within dominant discourse as a problematic identity. On one hand, homosexuality is just beginning to speak for itself in the mainstream (and 1948 is a critical year for this development; the novel a critical medium); on the other hand, homosexuality is condemned as an ill-bordered moral failing. It is

also a topic that should be kept away from a certain kind of reader. Bookstores and libraries were warned against the backlash that might ensue from stocking *Other Voices, Other Rooms* at the same time that the gatekeepers of those institutions are being urged to read the novel for themselves. The Foucauldian maxim that every moment of visibility is a simultaneous opportunity for oppression and liberation seems perfectly demonstrated. Capote recounted feeling attacked and surprised by the hostility that his book engendered, and yet it became a bestseller. It earned him a living, an international audience, and a reputation.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the homophile movement seemed to have little impact on the critical reception, although the relative silence surrounding the book can also be attributed to the lag between when a book is received by reviewers and when scholars can pick it up as a legitimate object of study. The late sixties and early seventies are also unrepresented—which is unfortunate—the anti-essentialism and radicalism of the Gay Liberation Front and their thinking, particularly with its emphasis on solidarity with women’s lib and black power, might have yielded interesting readings of the novel.

The late seventies, however, sees a nascent gay studies emerging within the academy, though this scholarship could neither ignore nor adequately account for Capote’s first novel. Focused on the idea of homosexuality as distinct from transvestism and other forms of deviance, the scholars of the late seventies and the eighties are mostly embarrassed by *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, with its uncomfortable age gap and isolationist bent. It’s not all that difficult to imagine Randolph rising up at Stonewall, but it is hard to imagine him explaining himself on *Phil Donahue*. Bawer celebrates the novel as making a man out of Joel, but while Joel may leave

boyhood behind, it is not clear that manhood is quite what he enters.¹⁰ By the nineties, queer theory has begun to revive interest in intersections of identity, at which point *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* comes back to the fore. A book which is messy in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation (transboy Idabel suddenly femmes it up to attract the girl who's hitting on Joel?) allows queer scholars to reclaim Joel and Randolph as positive figures, worthy of empathy.

In the 2000s, the insights of critical race theory begin to merge with queer theory (and most other things with the appellation "theory"), as scholars note that sexuality, racial identity, gender, and a host of other concerns are simultaneously constructed both in an individual and across a group. Randolph's sexuality is no longer seen as an isolated feature, but is rather treated as being imbricated with questions of race and class. The queerly constructed household of the novel is no longer reduced to its constitutive elements, but rather mutually constructed in its variances and differences. The most recent critical study that I considered, published in 2008, is not self-consciously concerned with literary theory or academic writing, and simply sees the book as a friendly tale of mentoring and mutual support. The book that Diana Trilling read, full of slippery-slope deviance, has been completely erased. In its place, one finds a homophobic bildungsroman.

This survey of the novel's reception indicates that homosexuality's boundaries seem to form an almost hourglass shape, pinched at the waist of the late eighties and early nineties. In the 1940s, homosexuality was a broad moral failing, with little to properly define it, even though same-sex desire seemed to form its core. As the decades wore on, the homophile and then gay

¹⁰ Bawer is often grouped with Camille Paglia and Andrew Sullivan as the "homocons"—the anti-queers who insisted on the normalization of homosexuality (the purveyors of "homonormativity"), and the divorce of gay rights from economic injustice and trans rights. I find it interesting that Bawer celebrates the manhood of Joel—though in the same review, he is queasy about the morality of *In Cold Blood*.

movements worked to reduce that definition, focusing solely on the attraction between men of the same age. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, homosexuality had made itself clearly and narrowly defined—people of the same gender of the same age who like to have sex and engage in mutually loving, sexual, and supportive relationships. Then queer began to expand that boundary back out, although under a new sign (“queer”), with “gay” as only one component of a much larger set of identities and concerns. Also, the overlap among various identities no longer seemed isolable, but rather mutually constitutive, and the insights of critical race theory, disability theory, and other movements have expanded the definition in new directions. In the 2000s, a new acceptance of homosexuality emerged as not only normal, but with newly and clearly marked boundaries of private and public. This new discursive structure is often referred to as “homonormativity” and explains why sexuality has returned to the private sphere, needing no comment.

Age discordance is strikingly ignored as a theme or concern in any treatment of the novel. While it is generally regarded as a novel about Joel’s boyhood journey to the cusp of manhood, there is something profoundly odd about the *lack* of distress over Joel’s clearly being a minor. Perhaps this is because there is a distinct slippage between the symbolic distinction of being a man and the legal distinction of being an adult. It is precisely between the ages of twelve (the entrance to puberty) and eighteen (the entrance to legal adulthood) that this slippage is visible. In some ways, it is inaccurate to call this dissertation a study of “boys.”¹¹ Most of the characters I will consider are at least on the cusp of puberty, and yet these adolescents occupy a sexual no-

¹¹ Although “boy” is often used by academics and scholars to refer to males in the space between childhood and manhood, common usage generally considers “boy” as synonymous with “male child.” I think many general readers would find it odd to use the word boy to mean “adolescent.”

man's land. They are not legally able to consent to sex, and yet they are undeniably sexual beings.

5. The Radiant Desirability of Joel Knox

While critics have often remarked upon Joel's feminine appearance and manner, none have addressed the sheer kinkiness of the adult response to his body. The dominant narrative of molested boy becoming homosexual man, in addition to including the corruption of the child, also seems to require the complicity of the child, as if his very unmanly desirability attracts the adult sexual predator whose assault marks him as damaged and ejects him from the privileged sphere of heterosexual maturity. Again, Shakespeare's "nature erring from itself," the innate queerness of the child, however irrationally, constituting the condition and circumstance of his perverse turn to queerness. In this section, I explore the nature and narrative of Joel's radiant desirability through both close readings of relevant passages from the novel and considerations of recent theoretical texts on childhood, child sexuality, and the queer child.

Joel's first bodily appearance inspires the desire to spank him. Radclif the truck driver asks Joel why he goes by the last name Knox when his father's name is Samson. Joel responds that his mother renamed him Knox after her divorce. "'Aw, say, son,' said Radcliff, 'you oughtn't have let her done that! Remember, your Pa's your Pa no matter what'" (8). Radcliff continues, after a swig of beer, "'Yessir, if I was your Pa I'd take down your britches and muss you up a bit'" (9). This is a particularly odd moment. First, it suggests how the patriarchal order has already broken down around Joel. His name places him in a matriarchal lineage. Second, it suggests that all males of any age retain agency against women. Radclif suggests that Joel had the power to prevent this renaming against his mother's wishes. Third, Radclif's rebuke suggests

that the proper restoration of patriarchy is through violence. Joel, Radclif thinks, should be taught that his bottom is not a place for pleasure, but a site of punishment—though the phrasing “muss you up a bit” is curiously open to interpretation. It suggests that Joel’s bottom may not be a site of pleasure for himself, but it might be for Radclif. The pleasuring of adults by children is hardly out of line with patriarchy’s rules. But Joel, by being a child not possessed by his father (lacking his patronym), is not protected by the name of the father. His body is anyone’s to discipline or possess, though Radclif obeys the negative conditional: *not* being his father, he does not “muss [him] up a bit.”

Joel seems to have a hard time keeping his pants on in public. While Joel’s pants are lowered in Radclif’s imagination, it is soon revealed that Joel’s pants have often been taken from him. In meeting Idabel, Joel remembers a tomboy from his past in New Orleans, a bully “who used to have a habit of waylaying him, stripping off his pants, and tossing them high in a tree” (33). On one hand, this is a symbol of his failure to live inside the patriarchal order (he quite literally has trouble “wearing the pants”). More importantly, this suggests his already poorly bounded sexuality. Joel seems unable to maintain or understand the borders of desire. Like Capote—who was passed from bed to bed at Joel’s age during a brief stint at boarding school¹²—Joel’s body is subject to a curious set of desires and repulsions. Immediately upon arriving in Noon City, Miss Roberta seems attracted to him, calling him a “cute-looking fella” (23). Joel tries to resist this space of desire by ordering a beer—insisting on being an adult with subjectivity and agency, rather than being the passive child-object of her desires. As James Kincaid has theorized “erotic innocence,” a key component is the ability to project desires onto the blank space of the child (120). Miss Roberta reminds him of his status as a child, and projects

¹² As much as this sounds like a pornographic fantasy of youthful submission, Capote’s recollection of his boarding school sex was not positive.

desire onto him, literally telling him what he wants. “Can’t serve no beer to minors, babylove, even if you a mighty cute-looking fella. Now what you want is a nice NEHI grapepop” (23). This dynamic is repeated throughout the book: when Joel expresses desire, it becomes a sign of his immature lack of self-knowledge. Subsequently, he is told what he wants, and more often than not, Joel alters his desires to fit his elders’ definition of them.

The novel casts Randolph’s desire for Joel’s body in a classical context of pederastic seduction. In the following exchange, Joel asks Zoo to help him understand a curious comment that Randolph has made.

“Zoo,” he said, “did you ever hear of anybody called Alcibiades?”

“Who that you say?”

“Alcibiades. I don’t know. It’s somebody Randolph says I look like.”

Zoo considered. “You musta heard wrong, honey. The name he most likely said is Alicaster. Alicaster Jones is a Paradise Chapel boy what used to sing in the choir. Looks like a white angel, so pretty he got the preacher and all kinda mens and ladies lovin him up. Leastwise, that’s what folks say.”

“I bet I can sing better than him,” said Joel. (160)

Randolph’s casting of Joel as Alcibiades casts himself as Socrates. In this comparison, Randolph seems to recognize the danger of his situation. Socrates was put to death for corrupting the youth of Athens, Alcibiades in particular. It also seems a bit wishful. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Alcibiades is the lustful partner, not Socrates. While Randolph has explicitly placed Joel in the position of pederastic tutelage, Zoo misses the reference while understanding the content. She simply points out another object of pedophilic desire that she does know. And Joel, having discovered this new

boy, immediately feels competitive. While Joel never seems to seek the desire that his body radiates, he is jealous when someone else is the paradigm of that radiation.

The only desire for Joel that seems accompanied by actual contact arrives with Miss Wisteria, the carnival midget. Joel and Miss Wisteria find privacy in a Ferris Wheel car, a kind of privacy in plain view. Alone in the car, Miss Wisteria's hand begins to wander. The following passage, quoted here at length, would seem to describe Joel's first orgasm.

She placed her hand on his thigh, and then, as though she had no control over them whatsoever, her fingers crept up inside his legs: she stared at the hand with shocked intensity but seemed unable to remove it, and Joel, disturbed but knowing now he wanted never to hurt anyone, not Miss Wisteria, nor Idabel, nor the little girl with the corncob doll, wished so much he could say: it doesn't matter, I love you, I love your hand. The world was a frightening place, yes, he knew: unlasting, what could be forever? or only what it seemed? rock corrodes, rivers freeze, fruit rots; stabbed, blood of black and white bleeds alike; trained parrots tell more truth than most, and who is lonelier: the hawk or the worm? every flowering heart shrivels dry and pitted as the herb from which it bloomed, and while the old man grows spinsterish, his wife assumes a mustache; moment to moment, changing, changing, like the cars on the ferris-wheel. Grass and love are always greener; but remember Little Three Eyes? show her love and apples ripen gold, love vanquishes the Snow Queen, its presence finds the name, be it Rumpelstiltskin or merely Joel Knox: that is constant. (195-6)

Joel's introduction to sex is clear enough, though it's a curious phrase: "her fingers crept up inside his legs" as though he were being penetrated by her fingers. Her fingers find the "inside" between his legs, though between his legs should only be his perineum, the bridge of sensitive skin that becomes the vagina on a female fetus. Even here, as Joel's penis is being discovered, Joel is still being feminized, made object, made penetrable. But as her fingers find his sex, everything breaks down into a vortex of ecstatic rupture. The syntax and punctuation lapse out of standard usage. The question marks and colons let half thoughts bridge onto each other into a confusion of identities. Finally a deconstructive set of realizations about identity shatter and reconstruct Joel.

Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" continually arrives at the idea of a self-destructing sexuality ("self" in the sense of "ego" or "personality"), in that the sex explodes the self for its duration. Bersani conceives of sexuality as subverting, exploding, or delaying subjectivity in a way that seems to match perfectly the thoughts of Joel as he loses himself in questions of difference that seem to unify disparate ages, races, genders, species, and modes of being. Bersani sees this seeking of self-destruction as foundation: "this sexually constitutive masochism could even be thought of as an evolutionary conquest in that it allows the infant to survive, indeed to find pleasure in, the painful and characteristically human period during which infants are shattered with stimuli for which they have not yet developed defensive or integrative ego structures" (217). This is precisely the shattering we see Joel experiencing. As he arrives at the end of his climax, he discovers his own name. His self is literalized by sex, and from there he becomes an agent. While the specter of Randolph's sexual designs on Joel may haunt some accounts of the novel, Randolph does not initiate Joel into sex. Rather, this sexual episode with a woman initiates Joel into self-hood. At this moment, he begins to feel obligation toward

Randolph. Joel imagines Randolph's anger at being abandoned and the boy is desperate to return to the man. As oversimplifying as these terms may be, Joel's discovery of a gay self is precipitated by straight initiation. We might, considering Bersani's title, read Miss Wisteria's touch "inside" Joel's legs as anally penetrative, rather than as stroking, but the end result is the same: he is shattered and reformed as himself.

This straight initiation is marked as pedophilic. Miss Wisteria is clear that her desire for Joel is predicated on his being a child. In the story she tells Joel about her childhood, her search for a sexual partner is frustrated by her size. Her account of her tininess is whimsical and unreliable: "I was so little I could sit in my mother's sewing basket... there was a beau of Maudy's [a tall sister] who could balance me in his hand" (194). But she tells Joel that when she was twenty, her mother tried to find her a husband through a matrimonial service. The mail order groom turns out to be seventy-seven-years old, and "much too big, though, and much too ugly" (195). Miss Wisteria laments never having found a fellow midget: "I never have found a sweet little person. There are children; but I cry sometimes to think little boys must grow tall" (195). She seems to be a foil to Randolph. Like Randolph, her sexuality seems unique in this rural world. She has found no partner like herself, and she seeks out boys to act as her partners. But Joel *is* like Randolph. Unlike the predatory Miss Wisteria, Randolph has found a double. Miss Wisteria seeks Joel as a sexual partner; Randolph seeks Joel as a sexual protégé.

In the two approaches that heterosexuality makes towards Joel, both are failures. The first is his insistence on his desire for Idabel, who neither considers herself a girl, nor shows interest in boys. The second approach comes in the form of Miss Wisteria, whose touch marks the presence of actual pedophilia—her potentially insertive fingers reversing the normal lines of penetrability that define heterosexuality. The book offers two female characters with whom Joel

might find “straightness,” but in both cases, the queerness of their desires leads Joel back to his own queer self.

Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child* uses the paradigm of “growing sideways” to contemplate the gay/protogay/queer child. “There are ways of growing that are not growing up,” she writes (11). In large part, what fascinates Stockton is the belatedness of a gay identity in childhood—i.e., that the “gay child” is always a retrospective declaration of the adult. To say “I knew that I was gay when I was x-years-old” is a statement never spoken by the x-year-old child. If “growing up” is completed “when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved,” then “‘growing sideways’ suggests that the width of a person’s experience of ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (11). While Stockton does not consider *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, her idea of growing sideways is a potential fit for the relationship between Joel and Randolph. Randolph does remove Joel from the heteronormative trajectories that might describe “growing up.” And certainly “lateral contact” could serve as a euphemism for the sex between Joel and Randolph that they may or may not have. One might even play with the spatial curiosity of sex on a Ferris Wheel (neither vertical nor lateral). Nevertheless, Randolph and Joel, regardless of how removed they are from heteronormativity, still play out a vertical hierarchy. Randolph is an adult with significant powers (custodial, financial, physical) that allow him to procure, control, and manipulate Joel. As a child, Joel is powerless, and frequently attempts to express an agency that is constantly frustrated. In choosing Randolph, he makes his first “adult” decision in that his desire is finally matched by his capabilities.

Thus, while “lateral contact” is a tempting paradigm, it ultimately sheds only partial light on Joel’s queer childhood. The narrative insists that Joel leaves boyhood, but not that he enters

adulthood; he might have said farewell to his boy-self, but where is his man-self?¹³ Bond traces the etymology of the phrase “to grow up” back to 1535, and the word “grow” to 725 (the Old English *greouue*), when it was used exclusively for plants (animals were said to *weaxan*, the modern cognate being *wax*). Here, to grow up comes from the idea of reaching full size: “growth is a matter of extension, vigor, and volume as well as verticality” (11). To dwell a bit longer in the realm of etymology, the *education* to which Joel does not return comes from the Latin verb *educare*—“meaning to make straight that which is twisted and malformed” (Badinter, 32). The introduction of the word “education” is St. Augustine’s garden-based metaphor for the instructing of children (32). Like plants, they will only grow vertically (grow straight?) if they are staked and tied and forced into shapes that they would not naturally find (32). His Aunt Ellen and the city of New Orleans will never espalier Joel. But is that what Randolph has done? The absence of adult Joel prevents us from knowing.

Stockton considers James Kincaid’s idea of “erotic innocence” and includes it within her model of growing sideways as necessary for a queer child: “One does not ‘grow up’ from innocence to the adult position of protecting it” (12). Rather this is a myth that is perpetrated in order to justify adult projections onto children while insisting that one be allowed to rehearse titillating scenes of that phantasmic innocence being disrupted. This myth of erotic innocence holds great explanatory power for the novel’s representation of Joel’s childhood, sexual desirability, and queerness. Despite the fact that he inspires a multiplicity of desires, Joel seems entirely unaware of them in any sexual sense. The clearly sexual touch of Miss Wisteria slides him out of his state of innocence and moves him to embrace Randolph fully. In that moment of

¹³ Though there is a queer emphasis on *not-a-man* here, “manhood” as an honorific is almost always perceived as something to be achieved, rather than the simple opposite of childhood. There are many outsides to “manhood”—though the queer male adult is often the *not-a-man* par excellence (Gilmore, 17).

projected adult eroticism, he loses the childish innocence that had made him so appealing, and seems to choose queerness in precisely the way that so frightens the heteronormative narrative of homosexuality as a (morally corrupt) choice.

In his turn away from childhood innocence towards Randolph and an implied adult sexuality, Joel begins to accept dependency as a desirable state, but is torn between a growing sense of agency and regret for the loss of irresponsible youth: “he did not want any more to be responsible, he wanted to put himself in the hands of his friend” (208). As he looks in the mirror he sees the receding child and the emerging adult: “one eye examined for signs of maturity, while the other, gradually of the two the more attentive, gazed inward wishing him to always remain as he was” (209). Joel is still unable to handle certain adult traumas—when Zoo tells him about being gang raped, he refuses to listen, even thinking that Zoo should be punished for telling him. But the critical moment of identity is the one in which he realizes not his own power, but the powerlessness of adults. “I am me,” Joel whooped, again finding himself in his name. “I am Joel, we are the same people” (227).¹⁴ He climbs a branch and looks down on Randolph. “And Joel realized the truth; he saw how helpless Randolph was” (227). Joel takes the lead. His agency is simultaneous with his recognition of self.

James Kincaid seems to provide the most satisfying theoretical framework for understanding Joel’s radiant desirability. Kincaid, echoing Richard Mohr, argues that *we* are the pedophiles we are looking for—that the very readers of lurid accounts of child molesting and the consumers of innocent images of children are in fact both working to keep the child a blank

¹⁴ This moment of coming into identity sounds almost exactly like the lines from Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”: “But I felt: you and I, / you are an *Elizabeth*” (6).

screen for our own projections.¹⁵ Kincaid seems to have diagnosed Joel's desirability perfectly: he is an appealing object in which anyone can see what they want. Moreover, his departure from paradigmatic innocence is precisely what so disturbs many critics. Joel leaves his innocence too early, and he does not transition to adult protector of innocence; rather, he seems ready to participate in his own "corruption." For most of the novel, Joel is manipulated into being with Randolph. At the end, Joel chooses to be with Randolph.

Lee Edelman writes that "the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture... is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end" (19). Capote seems to confirm this incompatibility of queerness and childhood, in that Idabel's tomboy nature makes her an outcast, while the more acceptable "innocence" of Joel entails his endless attempts at getting Idabel to be his girlfriend (his "innocence" refuses to see her "queerness" or his). A proto-heterosexual child can continue to claim innocence and adult protection. If one accepts that a "good parent" encourages the "delay" involved in childhood, postponing harm and pleasure until the "good child" is ready to experience those pleasures and harms, then Randolph is in fact that "good parent."

6. Damned Idabel/Saved Joel

While my main concern is with the gay novelist's resistance to the heteronormative narrative of molested boy becoming homosexual man, I cannot pass over in silence Capote's treatment of Idabel's queer childhood. I would argue that Capote displaces onto Idabel the very weight of cultural scorn that he resists in the narrative of Joel. We might even say that Capote

¹⁵ In evacuating the child of sexuality and desire, the situation of the child seems to replicate the situation of the "good" woman in heteropatriarchy—the blank screen onto which male desires and pleasures play themselves out.

transforms internalized homophobia into externalized misogyny. Historical context may help us understand Capote's narrative construction of a damned Idabel, just as it helps us understand Conrad's racism in *Heart of Darkness*, but of course in neither case can we consider the novelist's choices just or admirable.

While Joel through most of the novel seems remarkably naïve, Idabel is his knowing double, a queer child who refuses to be either a child or a girl. Joel's naïveté makes him extremely appealing to the adults around him. His belief that he can order a beer endears him to Miss Roberts; Zoo finds his efforts at lying transparent but sweet; Randolph manipulates Joel with great pleasure until Joel seems to be in on the game. Idabel's knowledge of the world, by contrast, makes her anathema to everyone except Joel. She and Joel seem to offer up a queer chiasmus of desire. Joel wants her to be the girlfriend that will make him a "normal" boy, while she wants him to be the best friend every boy should have. Joel relentlessly pursues the idea of their being together. When Idabel invites Joel to run away with her, he responds, "We could go to California and pick grapes... Out West you don't have to be but twelve years old to get married" (174). Idabel insists that she doesn't want to get married and says, "you behave like we're brothers, or don't you behave at all" (174). Idabel calls the idea of picking grapes "sissy" and suggests that they join the navy instead (174).

Stockton's striking idea of dogs as the carrier of meaning for queer girls in twentieth-century literature aptly explains the character of Idabel. Stockton notes that fiction writers have "made animals central markers of queer child time." The dog, by its shorter life span, gives the child another method of being and interacting in the world. For Idabel, her dog allows her to enact adult male agency. The dog is a marker of masculinity for Idabel and is rejected by her feminine twin Florabel for its smell. Idabel acts as the dog's protector. When her father tries to

put the dog down (at Florabel's insistence) Idabel reacts violently and decides to run away. "We had us a knock-down drag-out fight, him [Idabel's father] and me and Florabel... I figure I broke her nose and some teeth too" (173). Idabel is jettisoned from her home by way of her dog, though her attempt to assume the adult agency she insists on is thwarted.

In the last passage of the novel, Joel receives a postcard from Idabel, who has been sent away from her home. The postcard reads "Mrs Collie ½ sister an hes the baptis prechur Last Sunday I past the plate at church! papa and F shot henry They put me to life here. why did you Hide? write to IDABEL THOMPkins" (210). Randolph burns the postcard, severing Joel's tie to Idabel. Joel thinks that Idabel is lying and that she was responsible for her own fate. Curiously, in the Miss Wisteria passage, Idabel seeks lesbian sexual initiation, but is instead delayed in her escape, while Joel receives straight sexual initiation and is confirmed in his gay identity. Joel's childhood "delay" delivers him into a gay paradise, while Idabel's refusal of that "delay" ends with her punished in a lesbian's nightmare. Worst of all, they shoot her dog.

There is another way to read Idabel's final appearance in the novel. After the postcard Joel thinks, "Well, frankly, he didn't believe her; she'd put herself to life, and it was with Miss Wisteria, not a baptis prechur" (210). While I can find no reason to consider this account plausible, other critics have. Ihab Hassan reads this as Idabel having achieved her goal of running away with Miss Wisteria. Speaking of how "the search for fulfillment in heterosexual terms fails," he gives Idabel her wish: "Even Idabel, who makes good her escape, winds up with Miss Wisteria as a companion" (11). Hassan considers Idabel's escape with Miss Wisteria, Zoo's rape, and Joel's attachment to Randolph as demonstrations of the failures of heterosexuality (Amy's *marriage blanc* to Ed could be a fourth). What Hassan misses is that queerness might be

a success. He misses that the novel can be read not as a sequence of heterosexual failures, but as an affirmative set of queer accomplishments.

7. Existential Children

The paradigmatic trajectory of molested boy towards homosexual manhood, for all its homophobic flaws, conceals perhaps a queer virtue, in that it acknowledges a role for individual agency in the formation of identity. As I have noted before, that agency is irrationality combined with a sense of essential corruption in the proto-homosexual child that attracts his sexual predator and renders him prey to homosexual “tendencies.” Nevertheless, despite its homophobic pedigree, there is no mean shred of human dignity in the idea of any sexuality, including homosexuality, as at least in part a matter of choice. In this final section on Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, I consider the potential for an existentialist reading of Joel’s narrative and its implications for what might be seen as Capote’s vision of an existentially queer child.

One of Sartre’s main tenets is that there is only what is the case; i.e., existentialism does not deal in hypotheticals. Faced with a choice, an individual is composed of the choices he has made. In the example Sartre gives, a student comes to him with a dilemma—should he join the resistance and fight for France, or should he stay home with his mother for the duration of the war? Certainly, his obligations to his mother and to France are overlapping and mutual, but only one can take precedence in making this choice. It is not a question of whether he is the kind of boy who stays with his mother or the kind of boy who joins the resistance. He will be the boy who stays with his mother or the boy who joins the resistance based on his choice. Each individual has only one life, and the idea that “existence precedes essence” is that one is defined

by what one does. Choices do not reveal the essence of a person; rather choices compose the essence of a person. What has happened makes one who one is—you are what you have done.

So can there be an existential homosexual? According to the logic of the contemporary gay rights movement, no. One doesn't choose to be a homosexual; a gay person recognizes his essence at the moment he acknowledges his desire for other men. Within the model of the contemporary gay rights movement, one experiences an essential desire (which one can deny or acknowledge) *before* leading a gay existence. To a large extent, the success of the gay rights movement in the West has been fully predicated on the lack of choice regarding same-sex desire, and locating the ethical question regarding sexuality as one of truth regarding the acknowledgment of that desire. Does one come out of the closet (tell the truth) or does one stay in the closet (lie)?¹⁶ The relative frequency with which anti-gay politicians are caught in bed with attractive young men seems to underscore the choice between hypocrisy and honesty regarding the essential nature of same-sex desire.

Then what about Joel? In nearly every reading of the book Joel *chooses* homosexuality when he *chooses* Randolph. Joel is portrayed as entirely unaware of what a sissy he is, and while it generates very little difficulty for Joel that he is a sissy (in fact it generates opportunity), he is usually seen as a proto-homosexual, being reborn into—in the words of Pugh—the “gay community” of Randolph. In selecting this book for my study, I did not consider Randolph the molester, but rather Miss Wisteria. It is her hand on (or between) his legs that leads to the crisis of Joel's health. His return to health accompanies a resolution of two crises: one of sexuality and

¹⁶ Matthew Stadler is a significant opponent of the truth-value introduced by the metaphor of the closet, although his nostalgic celebrations of unnamed same-sex sexual activity are less than persuasive. I am neither championing existentialism nor railing against the closet; I am tracing the ways that existentialism is a useful alternative to contemporary understandings of queer growth and existence.

one of autonomy. In 1948, the general cause of distress was that while Joel had not *chosen* to be a homosexual (Trilling is quite clear that sexual orientation is not a choice), he had *chosen* to live as one. Trilling's distress at Joel's narrative seems to actually underwrite the logic of the gay rights movement she found so repulsive in its nascent form.

Joel's approach to Randolph is ultimately unresolvable. Gary Richard's reading of Randolph's desire as cross-racially directed is compelling. It suggests that Randolph's idolizing of Joel is identificatory rather than objectifying and that Joel is to be Randolph's protégé and ultimately his replacement, not his lover or his boyfriend. The novel is not a tale of pedophilic procurement, but rather a story of queer kinship. Randolph is offering Joel an avuncular welcome to what he always was. The novel casts Joel's choice as an exit from childhood, but I think that there is too little evidence to know exactly what Joel enters, even as I keep proffering guesses. The novel concludes in a classic open ending. Joel is entering a new equilibrium, but we have no way of knowing its contents.

Agency, while bound up with adulthood, is not simultaneous to it, and at least for Joel, existentialism is a way of finding an alternative schema for growth—one that resists the clear binary between child and adult. Capote ends the novel just as Joel's adulthood is announced, leaving a void that almost all of his critics have tried to fill in. In continuing the scholarly trend of embracing what has previously been regarded as Capote's failure, I find the blankness of Joel's adulthood to be a significant success. By refusing to represent Joel's adulthood, Capote places value on Joel's boyhood *as* a boyhood rather than as the fertile ground for his adulthood. Despite the novel having been read in light of Joel's adulthood, as projected and guessed by critics, Capote's insistence on adulthood being blank makes us value Joel in his present, not his future.

8. James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*

James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* is ostensibly about the rise and fall of Arthur Montana, the gospel superstar who begins humbly in Harlem and dies of an overdose in a London toilet. Arthur's brother Hall narrates the novel, and frequently displaces his brother Arthur as the central focus. Julia Miller, Hall's sometimes lover and an incest-survivor, also rivals Arthur for centrality. Hall is an advertising executive who leaves the industry to manage his increasingly famous brother's career. The novel is sprawling and frequently repetitive. It covers decades as it traces the ups and downs of the intertwined Montana and Miller families. Most significantly for my purposes, Arthur's boyhood is thoroughly documented, but his adulthood is reported secondhand and inconsistently. Thus, while his molested boyhood is represented as a matter of fact, his homosexual adulthood is almost mythical.

Unlike Joel Knox, Arthur Montana is unambiguously gay. And unlike Joel, Arthur is allotted three unambiguous sexual awakenings. The first awakening he recounts to Hall in an oddly confrontational way. It serves as both a coming-out story and a warning. Arthur tells Hall about how an older man pulled him into a stairwell and paid him for sex when Arthur was only thirteen. In the story, Arthur barely understands what is happening. His body reacts against his will, and Arthur is shocked, confused and shamed by what happens. The man pushes money into his hand and leaves abruptly when voices are heard in the stairwell; Arthur throws away the money after realizing that it is a payment. Robert Reid-Pharr reads this passage by foregrounding Arthur's entry into his own voice. "Arthur's narration of this episode does a great deal more than reveal the fact of his homosexuality... It also announces his aesthetic" (107). Reid-Pharr focuses on the ways in which the spiritual and the physical are bound up in this scene, that "the body and all it implies (desire, disease, impulses beyond conscious control) is indispensable to all efforts at

cultural production, *particularly* those efforts that reach a high level of discursive abstraction” (107-8). Reid-Pharr considers Arthur’s homosexuality as being integral to his voice in the same way that Mahalia Jackson’s was.

For Arthur, this episode is an origin story, not only of his singing but also of his sexuality. The story marks Arthur’s self-presentation as a queer child—a child whose body is simultaneously victimized and awakened. In one sense, he is no longer a child at all. Having discovered his vocation (singing) and his sexuality (gay), he has crossed the threshold to adulthood. In another sense, however, it seems that he remains very much a child, violated sexually and sublimating that sexuality into the voice that will carry him to adulthood, as well as into the Civil Rights movement and fame. But crucially, Arthur rejects the money, and is allowed to reject the sexuality with it—or rather, as children are *supposed to*, he postpones money-for-work and sex-for-pleasure until he comes of age. The complication here is that the work, sex, and money are inextricably bound up with and by the abuse.

While Arthur presents his sexual origins as an adolescent in a stairwell, Hall narrates a second sexual origin for Arthur. On a tour of the south with his quartet, now about eighteen, Arthur finds himself the object of a young woman’s sexual attention. As Arthur comes to realize that he is being flirted with (and alternately hating and appreciating the attention), Hall narrates:

He is aware, though the word is not in him, that he has made a conquest—that chick digs you, man—and that he will be expected to report on it later... And he realizes, also for the first time that he does not want to take Sister Dorothy Green into some dark corner and put his hands up her dress... He has had his hard-ons, and he’s started jerking off—with no object in his mind at all, his mind as blank as a stone... The man who tried to suck him off that far-off day has dropped to the

bottom of a well, deeper than that: that violation, terror, humiliation, is as distant from any idea of love as Kansas from Alaska. Yet a need is growing in him, a tormenting need, with no name, no object. (180-81).

That object will shortly arrive in the form of his friend Crunch. Arthur and Crunch develop a private and moving love. But it's curious that Baldwin presents Hall and Arthur as approaching Arthur's sexuality from different origin points. For Hall, the molestation is an interruption and a suppression—indeed, “the man who tried to suck him off” has to disappear to “to the bottom of a well” in order for Arthur to discover his homosexuality. But for Arthur, the man in the stairwell is the beginning of sexual self-knowledge.

But even before these two origins, there is another. At Arthur's singing debut, Hall expresses concern about how Arthur has done his hair:

I told my brother that the way he wore his hair made him look like a sissy, and that may be the first time I ever really looked at my brother. He cracked up, and started doing imitations of all the most broken-down queens we knew, and he kept saying, just before each imitation, “But I *am* a sissy.” He scared me—I hadn't known he was so sharp, that he saw so much—so much despair, so clearly. But he made me laugh until tears rolled down my face, and I ended up on the floor, both arms wrapped around my belly.

Perhaps then we really began to be friends. (20)

Each time, the narrative moves forward, it shows Arthur and Hall at a new point of discovery about Arthur's sexuality. And as we move back, we see that knowledge has been forgotten or erased each time—each origin obscured in each future encounter. But it seems crucial that Arthur's queer childhood is marked first by knowledge and imitation, then by violation, then by

refusal, and then by embrace. For Arthur and Hall, this narrating of and to each other (and to the reader) suggests that sideways motion that Kathryn Bond Stockton calls queer.

Though for Baldwin, perhaps, everyone is queer. In the first pages of the novel, Hall reveals to his son that he had sex with men in Korea. Before he even begins to tell the story of Arthur, Hall goes back to the most basic point of human origin, to conception. Hall contemplates the endless cycle of birth, death, and defecation:

This rendezvous had been made in the womb, with your mother's shit and piss, before that, with the food your father ate, which gave his sperm its texture and its taste, and long, long before that, and the dread, the mighty, the unavoidable rendezvous continues long, long, long thereafter, forever. I thought, wiping myself, flushing the toilet, watching my dark messengers being whirled under by the tide, turning on the way to wash my hands, and to prepare to shave, watching myself in the mirror, of Arthur's favorite verse from the Bible: *Oh, Lord.... we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.* (16).

I hope my reader will agree that contemplating the taste of one's father's ejaculate is self-evidently queer, a violation of all levels of decorum and boundary. But for Baldwin, these divisions of gay/straight and black/white were never satisfying. Baldwin resisted the labels "gay" and "black," pushing back against them by insisting on the category of "human"—and yet he knew that "black" and "gay" were also the names of communities from which he drew power and authority—and they were communities from which he did not want to be estranged.

In choosing two family units to follow, Baldwin puts pressure on the vertical trajectories of childrearing and the horizontal trajectories of queer affection. Baldwin loves to trace the clearly defined trajectory of child to adult to spouse to parent to grandparent to corpse—but he

always points out that this family tree has queer branches shooting to the sides. Queer horizontality might have its most dire expression in Eve Sedgwick's observation that in the 1990s, a room full of queer people would not presume death in the order from oldest to youngest—but rather sickness and wellness were divorced from temporal expectations.¹⁷ When Hall tells his son about his sexual exploits in defense of his dead younger brother, the straight trajectories of life are overthrown. For Baldwin, the focus is not only on the cycle of life, but also on the messiness of that cycle, and how mapped trajectories of expectation are never to be trusted. Baldwin's refusal of decorum and Hall's insistence on defecation as a constant *memento mori* suggest the queerness of Baldwin's fiction.

Before Leo Bersani contemplated the anus as a grave in the context of AIDS and tried to resist homophobic connotations of anal sexuality and death, Baldwin had embraced the grave and the anus as inextricably linked. Hall makes clear that defecation is a practice for dying, that no expelled waste is ever lost, and that semen, shit, and piss are removed from view at your own risk. For Baldwin, the defensively short memories of white culture that protect it from shame are ultimately lethal—by refusing the knowledge of death, one dies.¹⁸ Hall doesn't insist that the rectum is not a grave; rather, he suggests that we would do well (like Queequeg) to sleep in our coffins. Baldwin doesn't resist homophobia by insisting on the vital dignity of the bottom; rather,

¹⁷ While violence in the forms of bullying, bashing, and suicide remain a constant threat to queer youth, the advent of Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART) has done much to sever the strong associations between homosexuality and illness/death that permeated the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, viable treatments for HIV (at least for people with good health insurance) would seem to be a precondition to the onset of homonormativity. Baldwin's novel was written before AIDS ravaged the gay community, however the juridical and communal violence directed towards both blacks and gays throughout his life make Sedgwick's comments relevant to this text.

¹⁸ This frequent theme of Baldwin's—the need to embrace the body's odors and “funk”, and the violence done to white memory by refusing the “unpleasant”—seems to me a guiding principle of queer theory.

he points out that everyone's bottom shits.¹⁹ And while we never find out exactly what Hall did with men in Korea, we can be sure that he did not despise them for it. For Baldwin, the homosexual and heterosexual differ in terms of the kind of love they want, not the kind of sex.

These contemplations of Arthur's sexual origins may seem to end rather early—Arthur's sexuality is explored in depth around his birth, the age of thirteen and then at eighteen. Once Arthur falls in love with Jimmy (which is hardly an awakening, and much more of a mutual recognition), we never again have any detailed descriptions of Arthur's life—sexual or otherwise. And in this, Arthur's narrative seems to resemble the biographical writing done about Baldwin. After the trajectory of his childhood and his move to France, his story (post-fame) seems to turn into mere scheduling. Both Baldwin and Arthur, having arrived at fame, seem to exit narrative.

9. Money Queers the Child

Kathryn Bond Stockton provides insight into Arthur's commercial-sexual origin story when she writes, “money queers children as much as sex does. It can make them vulnerable and dangerous by turns...” (222). Stockton argues that, in the same way that sexuality is expected to be a pleasure suspended until the end of adolescence, “work-for-pay” is a responsibility to be postponed until the end of adolescence. The vulnerability and danger stem from the fact that “[t]his delay gives them not a shelter from money's effects—they are affected, at every turn, by their financial circumstances—but a shelter, though often incomplete, from knowledge of money—often including the detailed workings of family finance” (222). Arthur rejects the money that he is offered as a reward for sex. Julia, on the other hand, is sexualized precisely

¹⁹ One can find this “everybody poops” theme in multiple places—from Allen Ginsberg to CA Conrad, but only in Baldwin does it seem transcendent to me—to rise to the level of addressing a human universal (one can actually speak without embarrassment of the universal in this context) rather than as a dirty joke.

because she won't earn anymore. When she can't (or won't) provide her father with money from her preaching, he demands that she provide him with sex. Arthur refuses sex for money, though his sexual impulse is sublimated to his singing, which becomes his source of income. Julia is forced to replace money with sex in a rather straightforward way, while Arthur replaces sex with money in a rather roundabout way. Julia quite suddenly becomes the prostitute that Arthur was revolted to have discovered he was taken for. Arthur slowly becomes the religious fixture that Julia suddenly refused to be. And yet, this destroys Arthur, not Julia.

Julia's father rapes her at fourteen, a sexual awakening both singular and brutal. Unlike Arthur's dance of confusion, demurrer, withdrawal, refusal, and acceptance, Julia's rape is known throughout the community and dissected by the characters. Her father accuses her of having orchestrated the rape. "You and the Holy Ghost been after my ass *awhile*; you wanted me, you got me" (172). Hall's narration suggests her partial responsibility: "She knew that something in her had always wanted this, but not this, not this, not this way, she wanted to say, *Please, Please wait*" (172). Even before she realizes that she is going to be raped, she appeals to her youth internally. "She thought, *I'm just fourteen*. She wondered why she thought this. Her father was watching her, and she shivered. *I'm just fourteen. I can't preach anywhere, ever, again*. Why? She did not know why" (169).

Julia is queered through her status as a bread-winning child preacher, and the queer child cannot return to her position as innocent. Like Arthur, Julia's sexual initiation prompts a spatial metaphor: "Every thrust of her father's penis seemed to take away the life that it had given, thrust anguish deeper into her, into a place too deep for the sex of any man to reach, into a place it would take her many years to find, a place deeper than the miracle of the womb, deeper, almost, than the love which is salvation" (172). Arthur has to cast his violator down a well, but

Julia is represented as being the well herself, the depth of her being bearing the (almost) unreachable wound.

Lynn Orilla Scott reads Julia's incest as a way for Baldwin to speak about internalized homophobia. Julia's incest narrative "explore[s] ways in which a discourse of incest obscures other 'tabooed' subjects that are, in fact, more 'unspeakable' than incest.... for Baldwin it is internalized homophobia"²⁰ (84). Scott points out that Baldwin usually uses "like-incest" as a metaphor for the family of man, but that "*Just Above My Head* marks a departure from Baldwin's typical use of the incest motif to suggest themes of kinship and universal brotherhood" (91).

Scott also insists that Baldwin "challenges the taboo against homosexuality and suggests that homosexuality remains a less-tellable tale than father-daughter incest" (94). For Scott, incest and its taboo are legible, but homosexuality is not. "*Just Above My Head* suggests the way in which incest stories maintain a heteronormative ideology and cast homosexuality as other or abnormal" (94). Scott is focused on Julia's displacement of Arthur in terms of narrative proportion, though this seems to an unfair reading: in a novel of nearly 600 pages, there's plenty of room for everyone—part of Baldwin's point is that all stories need to be heard. More interesting is Scott's observation that Arthur enters a spiral of self-destruction while Julia manages to rise out of the muck. But neither Julia's rise nor Arthur's spiral are depicted in any degree of detail. Arthur's self-destruction seems predicated on his devotion to his art. Singing destroys not just Arthur, but the rest of his quintet: Peanut (murdered), Crunch (institutionalized) and Red (addicted). If it were homosexuality that destroyed, then Jimmy wouldn't be able to

²⁰ Scott's reading is a pairing of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*. In the body of my text, I'm not considering her discussion of *The Bluest Eye* as using incest to address internalized racism; however, I feel I would misrepresent her article were I not to make the fuller thread of her argument visible.

survive the novel, and in fact, Jimmy is cast as the model of futurity when his adult self enters the novel. But Jimmy's survival is also predicated on his giving up music. Far from being the queer adult who is eternally rendered a child because of his lack of children, Hall sees him surrounded by children: "somehow, I always see him when he'll be an old man, sitting somewhere with lots of kids around him, telling them the tallest stories they'll ever hear, and with laughter crackling around him like a fire" (45).

And lest we think that Jimmy survives due to his successful postponement of sexuality to adulthood, he had his own journey into sexual degradation as an adolescent.

Jimmy, however, simply loathed his sister and would not speak to his father, spent all his time in the streets, in the movies, in the parks; began to steal, to smoke, to be fondled and jerked off in subway toilets; and sat on a bench in Harlem Hospital every night, waiting for his sister to let him see his mother. (164)

Jimmy is two years younger than Julia (100)—he begins to seek sexual attention at twelve—he embraces sex when he is younger than either Julia or Arthur when they have it forced upon them. Baldwin is less concerned with age than with consent and order. I find Scott more persuasive when she points out that for Baldwin, "Complicity... occurs when one's sense of self requires a scapegoat" (97). Scott gives Jimmy the honor of being Baldwin's mouthpiece when he condemns those for whom "[t]he only way to know that you are safe is to see somebody else in danger" (97).

Most critics see Baldwin's characters as trying to find an authentic self. Emmanuel S. Nelson writes, "Search for self-identity, therefore is one of the central themes of Baldwin's fiction as well as non-fiction" (27). He concludes, "Baldwin suggests that one can achieve a genuine and liberating sense of self only through complete acceptance of one's self, through

loving commitment to another, and through identification with one's community" (31). But is this self an invention or a discovery? Arthur chooses his moment of molestation as his sexual origin—finding a sexuality thrust upon him. Arthur embraces this experience as a way to insist on his identity. Hall insists that Arthur's sexual beginning is later, one that he discovers. What does it mean that Arthur insists on his having been violated, while Hall insists on his volition?

Arthur tells Hall his story of violation in a way that cannot quite be countenanced by the therapy culture's idea of abuse. Arthur is not "breaking the silence" in any way that is suggested by "coming out." He is not looking for affirmation from Hall. Rather, he is offering up his own trauma to Hall and testing whether he will run away. Arthur isn't a "survivor" in any sense that we would expect (pop-)psychologically—he hasn't repressed the memory, recovered the memory, or in any therapeutic way "moved on" from it. Rather, he has lived with it, and he is asking Hall to live with it too. In the same way that Hall eloquently explains the inherent difficulty of being black in America, Arthur is presenting Hall with the difficulty of being gay. The question is not "do you still love me?" The question is "can you handle this?" Arthur is trying to find out if Hall can hear of his life without finding him abject, without needing to purge himself of his brother. To the extent that the psychoanalytic use of "trauma" represents a "shutting down," Arthur wants to be sure that Hall will not be traumatized by the knowledge of his brother's self.²¹ Hall suggests that Arthur must repress the memory to love, but Arthur's revelation of the memory would suggest otherwise.

Julia has her history similarly revised by Hall. When she tells Hall about the incest, she says that she was partially responsible. Multiple times in the novel, Julia expresses no desire for

²¹ My invocation of the "therapy culture" and the attendant ideas is purposefully anachronistic—most of those ideas would seem to start with Judith Herrmann's *Father Daughter Incest*, a book published a year after *Just Above My Head*. These ideas were more fully treated in the introduction.

her father to be punished. When Julia reconnects with Jimmy, Hall says “It must have been strange for Julia to have so much desired to be forgiven by her brother, only to be forced to see that it was not *she*, as far as he was concerned, who stood in need of correction” (353). When Hall and Julia go out for dinner, the question of guilt and responsibility is discussed in detail, and bound up with the meaning of childhood. In this passage, Hall tries to convince Julia that she should stop blaming herself for the incest:

“*You* can’t take on his responsibility. How you going to take *on* a responsibility when there wasn’t no possible way for you to have *understood* it, or even to know what a responsibility was? And you going to try to assume all that now?”

Julia tries to insist that she bears responsibility, as her agency brought about her mother’s death and her seclusion with her father. Julie insists that innocence would be a denial of her agency:

“I understand you. I just don’t want to play the innocent, wronged victim—”

“Well. You *are* the innocent, wronged victim. That’s the truth. Now. Take it from there.” I watched her. “You got the balls?” (358-9)

Hall evacuates her guilt, and tells her that she was too young; that the guilt is all her father’s. Part of the beauty of the novel’s form for Baldwin is that he can embrace contradictions. Julia and Arthur regard their abuse differently from inside their experiences than Hall regards it from the outside.

Baldwin ultimately takes no direct stance, but rather lets the character’s opinions hover in their multiplicity, opacity and contradiction. In a page-long catalog of his sexual activities with Julia, Hall can approvingly and parenthetically insert: “someone said that all love is incest” (390). Certainly, Hall abhors actual incest, and Hall is furious that Julia has been victimized by her

father—and yet symbolically, if all mankind is to be a single family, then incest is the only option. The questions of responsibility, agency and childhood are entangled. These strands are particularly complicated for Julia because we see her both as the monstrous child who brings about calamity and as the regretful adult who has suffered for her childhood behavior.

Unlike Julia, Arthur disappears from the novel before he has reached adulthood. Julia is a mesmerizing character in part because she finds such grace and elegance in her adulthood following her traumatized childhood. Arthur's boyhood, like Joel Knox's, goes unrevised, because his adulthood is not allowed to take its place. Baldwin allows Arthur's boyhood experiences to remain primary—not to submit them to the adult he becomes. While we know of Arthur's success as an internationally famous singer, his adulthood is contradictory and unrepresented. The novel opens with Arthur's death, which ends the tropes of futurity that are attendant to Jimmy, Julia, and Montana and his children. Arthur's boyhood is full of turning points and growth, but it is his boyhood that remains the reader's focus.

10. The Critical Reception of *Just Above My Head*

Because it was a late book—the last novel of Baldwin's career—*Just Above My Head* is almost never considered on its own. This last novel is usually seen as a failed iteration of Baldwin's themes, mostly because the critics preferred *Giovanni's Room* or *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Philip Butcher in *World Literature Today* wrote that the novel was “laced with the gnomic utterances of the self-proclaimed seer. But the pronouncements...fall short of wisdom” (281). In *The Washington Post*, Doris Grumbach assessed the fiction of 1979, finding *Just Above my Head* among “the major disappointments of the year...which repeats in themes and scenes, earlier Baldwin successes” (1). John Leonard captured the general feeling of critics in the

opening sentence of his review in *The New York Times*: “One wants to squeeze James Baldwin’s new novel like a sponge, to wring its neck of excess adjectives, repetitions, digressions, sermonettes, and self-regard.” But he also recognizes its “astonishing heart” (C25). Despite the critical frustration with repetitiveness (both within the novel and across Baldwin’s work), the book was on *The Washington Post*’s best-seller list for thirty-seven weeks (Kenan, 56). Randall Kenan assesses the reception accurately, “The reviews were not overwhelmingly positive, but it was warmly received” (56).

Compared to its prominence in the reviews of *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, homosexuality had ceased to be a pervasive concern by the time of *Just Above My Head*, with one notable exception. In *The Village Voice*, Stanley Crouch stood up for homophobia by giving an account of the sexual abuses under colonialism, slavery, and racism that entirely excluded heterosexual acts.

Homosexuality has not meant just surrendering to a stereotypically threatening identity; it is mired in the smut and terror of the sexual uncle tom [sic] because the very act itself has so often taken place under circumstances absolutely connected to colonialism and other situations where *force* determines consent.” (39, emphasis in original)

Why this definitional field excludes heterosexuality is beyond me. Crouch accuses Baldwin of “trying to prop up that form of sexuality with contrived ideas about greater tenderness and passion, all of which leads to some nearly elitist spirituality, suggesting that sex with no possibility of procreation is somehow more exalted than that which begets” (39).

Crouch’s attack on homosexuality as being *inherently* more coercive than heterosexuality seems even more ridiculous than Diana Trilling’s inability to distinguish Nazis from

homosexuals. He even overplays his hand, insisting that a good use of homosexuality in a novel would be to “reveal that more than a small percentage of pimps are women-hating gays” (39). Crouch’s attack seems the knee-jerk reaction of someone who feels oppressed when someone else isn’t (a constant theme in Baldwin’s work to which Crouch seems deaf). Nevertheless, Crouch is as extreme in his praise as in his blame. He calls one scene “as charged as the best of Pinter or Thelonius Monk” (42). And Crouch seems suspicious of any identity—blackness included—celebrating itself.

But most reviews mention homosexuality off-handedly. When *The Globe and Mail*, in a positive and glowing review, warns that the book “may offend some,” it is referring to Hall’s “heterosexual awakening” and Arthur’s homosexual journey in equal parts. Between 1948 and 1979, homosexuality had ceased to be an oddity and no longer suggested the same space of moral failing that it once had. Only Crouch mentions that the heterosexual narrator is not, strictly speaking, without his own gay-ish past. Whereas Capote’s novel had been the occasion for homophobic hand wringing and anxiety among critics, Baldwin’s novel was mostly reviewed as being more of the same from America’s most prominent black, gay writer.

11. Baldwin and Capote at the Faultlines of Queer Masculinity

Other Voices, Other Rooms and *Just Above My Head* are both coming-of-age stories that suddenly fail to let their protagonists pass into a visible adulthood. In each novel, the author traces a boyhood that takes a turn for the queer, and while both books suggest that they are offering us the man that grew from that boy, that man is notably absent. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* tells us that Joel has abandoned his boyhood, and yet, as my review of the responses to the novel shows, what he enters is entirely unclear (despite the confident projections of

numerous critics). Speculation over what becomes of Joel drives the judgment critics made of the book precisely because Capote leaves blank the space where we would expect to find Joel in his adulthood. *Just Above My Head* tells us what becomes of Arthur—he turns into a toxic drunk who dies in a toilet. But toxic-drunk-Arthur is entirely missing from the text itself. In fact, once Arthur has acquired the critical trappings that would make him an adult—a life partner, a successful career, fame—he is jettisoned from the text. His descent into addiction is nowhere recounted or represented, until his imagined death in a London toilet.

I think that we can find in these texts what Alan Sinfield calls a “faultline,” and it is my contention that in both of these texts, it is the same faultline that prevents the adult version of the protagonist from emerging into a fully represented subjectivity. For Sinfield, the faultline is a place where ideology tries to paper over its inconsistencies. Like the binary ripe for deconstruction, silence and absence mark the places where incoherency would otherwise reveal itself. The faultline lies at the place where ideology tries to insist that its gaps are not gaps at all. Sinfield writes, “the point at which the text falls silent is recognized as the point at which its ideological project is disclosed” (74). Sinfield is here summarizing the work of Dymphna Callaghan, who in her consideration of women in Early Modern tragedies suggests that the “absent, silent or dead” female characters “embody the ‘unconscious’ of the texts” (74). But if we can agree that there is something wrong here—that these missing adult subjectivities mark the place that would reveal the ideological project refusing to name itself so as to appear natural—where do we even begin?

We might start with the question, “Whose ideological project?” Are Baldwin and Capote unwitting agents of heteropatriarchy? Or is it their own liberationist project that has something it would prefer not to be made visible? And why is the adult invisible? The rhetoric of homophobia

denies the existence of gay children (indeed, to the homophobic, children are mere sheep, necessarily needing protection from grown-up, gay wolves), and the rhetoric of gay liberation has focused on consenting adults. If both ideologies accept gay adults as a given, and refuse gay children as problematic or impossible, then why would the (proto)gay child be allowed to emerge in these novels, while the gay adult is as slippery as a greased (to return to the pastoral) pig?

The answer, I suspect, lies in my own hedge, that parenthetical “(proto-)” that I have to use to qualify the child protagonists of the text. Sexual orientation is not something that arrives in full coherence, pithy, clearly bounded, and self-contained like a Manhunt Profile or personal ad. Both Arthur and Joel take long, circuitous routes to sexual identity, full of confusion, isolation, and frustration. The gay children that I have been positing can’t quite exist without their adult, gay selves. Unless Joel and Arthur grow up to be gay, their retroactive identification remains in flux. The problematic gay child is allowed to emerge, it would seem, on the condition that the confirming gay adult never arrive. And if the adult never emerges, the child was never unambiguously gay. The silence that surrounds their adult subjectivities confirms the exact ideological problem that a gay liberationist novel would seem impelled to overcome.

It would be going too far to suggest that either novel is in the service of the heteropatriarchy. It would also be going too far to suggest that there is not a significant difference between the two novels and the time in which they were written. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the earlier novel, keeps Joel’s homosexuality something of an open secret. If refusing to represent the gay adult that emerges from the (proto-)gay child serves as a kind of safety valve to protect Capote himself, it was ultimately successful. He was not arrested, investigated or even vilified for the novel on the grounds of sexual orientation. While he may have narrowed his

readership, it was a tactical narrowing. And one might also consider that Baldwin used a similar strategy in his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, where the structure of the novel prevents his adolescent protagonist John from having to arrive at adulthood.

In *Just Above My Head*, however, it is hard to see the disappearance of Arthur as tactical or defensive. After all, both Jimmy and Arthur are seen as gay children who become gay adults. My insistence on the disappearance of Arthur is much closer to Alan Sinfield's contention about Desdemona in *Othello*, that her character "is a disjointed sequence of subjectivities that women are conventionally supposed to occupy" (53). How is it that Arthur goes from successful musician and satisfied lover to overdosing addict? Could it be that these are simply subjectivities we expect of the black musician? In contrast, Julia's transitions from righteous child preacher to hustling prostitute to well-adjusted earth mother are well traced and carefully limned. It seems easiest to dismiss this oversight as sloppiness. The book is repetitious and sprawling to the point of unraveling. I make no similar paranoid claim that the absence of representation of Julia's time in Africa covers up some similar ideological incoherence.

However, if we return to the question of molestation, again considering Joel and Arthur jointly, something darker seems to emerge that suggests a form of abjection at work within the ideological. The molester in both novels is a briefly appearing character. The boys acquiesce to the molestation without resistance, but hate the act as it occurs and as they remember it. Both Joel and Arthur try to purge themselves of the experience. Arthur hurls the money away in an effort to ward off the experience; Joel conjures a rescuing vision of Randolph before collapsing into a protective delirium. For Joel, the molesting touch cements him to Randolph; Arthur represses the touch until his sexuality can be rediscovered.

What I would like to suggest is that in both cases, the molested boy has nowhere to go, and that in fact, just as the boys try to purge themselves of the abuse, the novels purge themselves of the boys. The ideology of masculinity that structures heteropatriarchy has no place for the molested boy. Just as Sinfield finds a faultline in Desdemona's transition from father's property to husband's (her agency ought not exist), there is a faultline in the transition from molested boy to adult homosexual man. The molested boy is wounded sexually, and cannot discard that wound. If manhood—the prized apotheosis of masculinity—requires the refusal of weakness, dependency, and femininity, as Badinter insists—then these boys cannot refuse. David Gilmore's foundational work on masculinity demonstrates that manhood will never be achieved by all adult males.

The ideology of masculinity, the ideology of heterosexuality, and the ideology of patriarchy are not necessarily a good fit for each other. As Sedgwick wrote in *Between Men*, the homosocial structures of patriarchy do not demand homophobia, and yet homophobia has marked the boundary of manhood within that ideology, the desire that one cannot embrace without becoming subaltern. As Brownmiller wrote in *Against Our Will*, patriarchy does not even need women in order to function. In the space of time that this dissertation explores, the gay rights movement has not challenged these ideologies as much as it has sought assimilation for them. The fight for gays in the military insists that we are masculine. The fight for gay marriage insists both that our identities are easily mapped onto heterosexual templates, and that we are capable of child rearing (if not reproduction). These are the two most visible and successful planks of a much larger and looser coalition of activists, but I want to focus here on the mainstream. I want to dwell on the ideologies that might have the purgative force to eject our molested boys just at the moment they reach gay adulthood.

In all of these ideologies, the most carefully nurtured of transitions must be the transition from boy to man. “Man” marks the prized and pursued identity, the goal. Perhaps this is why gay men insist on being called “gay men”—whereas lesbians have never insisted on “lesbian women” (or felt at home in “gay women.”) We insist on precisely what is precarious, because that is what must be kept in place. These boys are doubly denied a path to manhood, once by their sexuality and once by the invasive touch of a fleeting interloper whose easy access to their genitals marks them as violable. If molestation becomes the method by which they are denied the honorific of “man,” is it any surprise the text cannot bear to represent the “man” they fail to become?

12. Reading the Molested Boy Reparatively

Without retreating from my argument that the discursive regime of homophobia has done a kind of textual violence to Joel Knox and Arthur Montana, I would like to consider another approach to the decision of each author to suspend the representation of these boys’ adulthoods. I began making the argument earlier that the decision to represent only the boyhood is the only way not to give the character’s adulthood precedence. In the case of both Capote’s Randolph and Baldwin’s Julia, we see adulthoods that have been inflected by difficult experiences in youth, and the resulting personality and subjectivity seems fairly fixed. We have a sense of a person who is in flux, and we understand their personalities in light of their previous experiences. For Arthur and Joel, by contrast, their boyhood experiences remain primary. They are not replaced by future versions of themselves, but rather are valued for themselves.

An argument that I will extend in the conclusion is that gay authors have placed a primary value on the adolescence of their characters. In refusing to let the boys grow up, these authors create a space that values the boy for himself without allowing futurity to dominate the

telling. Capote and Baldwin's insistence on the inherent value of the boy proved to be a surprisingly difficult accomplishment. In the reception of these novels, critics alternately bristled at and embraced the two authors' insistence on the value of gay lives. In 1989, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observed with distress in that in the growing literature that pushed for the acceptance of homosexual lives, "the healthy homosexual is one who (a) is already grown up, and (b) acts masculine" (156). Capote and Baldwin refuse both conditions. Sedgwick is looking at psychological literature and finds enormous blanks "in what purports to be a developmental account of proto-gay children" (160). Capote and Baldwin are only able to fill in those blanks by leaving their protagonists' adulthoods unwritten.

Chapter 2: The Limits of Taste

Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* & Dennis Cooper's *Try*

1. The Existential Child

Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* and Dennis Cooper's *Try* both feature protagonists who remain boys throughout narratives that test the limits of the reader's tolerance for counter-normative representations of sex, sexuality, and kinship. In these novels, Delany and Cooper challenge the mythology of an essentially innocent child (and the essential innocence of childhood) with visions of existential children—that is, children who exercise agency and assume responsibility for choices, including choices that call into question their basic humanity.

In *Once You Go Black*, Robert Reid-Pharr resists the effort to view African Americans as “the last innocents” (3) by insisting on an existentialist reading of mid-twentieth-century African American literature. Reid-Pharr wonders why the post-war insistence on “the existentialist maxim... that experience precedes essence” (3) has been abandoned by the current generation of African American scholars. Reid-Pharr usefully distinguishes between the “Black American” and the “Nigger.” For Reid-Pharr, the “Black American” is an existentialist production, the identity that results from self-fashioning or a recognition of the self's agency. The “Nigger” by contrast, is a fantasy of dehumanization—a useless but innocent being:

Niggers cannot clear forests, raise crops, build roads, fight wars, much less found universities or establish traditions of literature, art, and music. Instead, the Black American is produced at precisely that moment at which the attempt to dehumanize the African is met by the equally bold attempt to resist that dehumanization. (3)

In raising the specter of the “nigger,” Reid-Pharr embraces a certain hallmark of existentialism: a certain fascination with the impolite, an embrace of the indecorous, violent, and monstrous.

Jean-Paul Sartre addressed this concern in his lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism”: “...we are reproached for having underlined all that is ignominious in the human situation, for depicting what is mean, sordid or base to the neglect of certain things that... belong to the brighter side of human nature” (345-6). Sartre points out that existentialism has become code for a dismal view of mankind, though Sartre strongly disagrees with this assessment. Sartre insists that the point of the maxim “existence precedes essence” is that “man is responsible for himself” (350); every man has choices, and those choices make up the sum total of the person. Reid-Pharr locates the essence of the Black American as following from the decision to refuse dehumanization. Choice inaugurates humanity; the choices may be awful, but they are always choices.

Sartre insists that the popular discomfort with existentialist literature (for example, Camus’ *The Stranger* or Sartre’s own *No Exit*) is not that it portrays “characters that are base, weak, cowardly, and sometimes even frankly evil” (359), but rather that those characters bear the responsibility of their weakness, cowardice, and evil. They are not inevitable traits leading to inevitable actions. Each of those characters could have chosen to behave differently. Sartre notes that readers prefer the various determinisms of nineteenth-century naturalism that allowed flawed characters, and by extension the reader, to avoid responsibility:

For suppose that, like Zola, we showed that the behavior of these characters was caused by their heredity, or by the action of their environments upon them, or by determining factors, psychic or organic. People would be reassured, they would say, “You see that is what we are like, no one can do anything about it.” But the

existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. (359)

For Sartre, this insistence on responsibility is ultimately optimistic. No human being is incapable of change; each man is responsible for his bad behavior. But existentialist literature offers no external comforts from religion, nature, or science. Each man is alone with his actions, and each man is responsible for what he has done. For the existentialist, no one is “innocent” because no one is without choice. Responsibility follows choice, just as essence follows experience.

If we take this existentialist approach seriously, it can be fruitful for examining yet another of these “last innocents” who have not been brought into the purview of responsibility: the molested boy—who, of course, is hardly separable from the Black American.²² Just as Reid-Pharr points out that “the Black American has utilized sex and sexuality as a means by which to ensure the survival of black individuals and communities to a *much* greater extent than he has utilized violence...” (4), the molested boys in the novels I will examine in this chapter use sex and sexuality as ways to ensure their own survival. I am not suggesting a parallel or a supplement to Reid-Pharr, but rather pulling out a special case. Another image might be that we are pulling on different threads in the same fabric.

In thinking of the molested boy as an existential figure who comes into being at the moment he resists his victimization, we have to push back against the current understandings of molestation. Richard Gartner, one of the most prominent psychological experts on molested boys, does a great deal of work to evacuate the consent of teenagers. He explains that many men

²² While I am clearly using Reid-Pharr’s reading of African American Intellectual history to make a “like race” argument (i.e., there are similarities in his analysis of Blacks Americans and my analysis of molested boys), I hope that it will be clear that I am not setting them up as communities without overlap or intersection. I don’t want to suggest that black boys are not molested, and Reid-Pharr’s analysis certainly accounts for sex between adults and minors within the black community and across racial communities as part of his analysis.

retroactively insert consent into their own memories of abuse in an effort to retain their masculinity and avoid feeling like victims. However, Gartner is clear that consent is impossible: "...abusers, especially hebephiles—molesters who are specifically attracted to teenagers—may convince themselves that a boy is a willing sexual partner. Even the boy may believe he consented" (96). But Gartner is not using an existentialist schema. For Gartner, consent consists of fully understanding the implications of an action (96). Gartner sets up children and boys as innocents in way that Reid-Pharr would suggest is tantamount to dehumanizing them. Without the ability to make a choice, there is no human subject. Another way to see this limitation of Gartner's analysis is that Gartner's population consists only of *adult* survivors of sexual abuse. The abused boy can be disposed of because he is already assumed to be absent.

To adopt the existentialist position that all choices entail responsibility is not the same as blaming the boys for what happens to them. We should not confuse a mode of survival with an embraced lifestyle. Still, when we assume that choice and agency exist for the molested boys, easily rendered archetypes of sexual victimhood fall away. Ann Cvetkovich notes how frequently the eroticization of sexual abuse is used as a coping mechanism, and how frequently that eroticization is erased or quarantined. Cvetkovitch notes that in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the protagonist Bone responds to her stepfather's abuse in part by using it as a basis for masturbation fantasies. This response is redacted from the film version. Bone's existential humanity cannot make it to the screen, where she must be "innocent." For a mainstream audience, her essence cannot be structured by the experience of abuse; her essence must be disrupted by the abuse. The more mainstream the representation, the less Bone can respond to the abuse in self-structuring ways. Narratives of innocent children risk dehumanizing the child.

This particular narrative of childhood innocence has a historical and juridical grounding. As traced by Stephen Robertson, the rise of the adolescent as a figure of juridical protection in the late 1800s required an extremely careful recalibrating of the ways in which the public perceived the transition from sexual innocence (childhood) to sexual knowledge (adulthood). As of 1886, the age of consent in America was ten (75), and juries determined the maturity of the attacked much more in terms of physical and emotional presentation than on the simpler metrics of time since birth. In trying to establish sixteen as the new age of consent, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children had to operate carefully to present the jury with an acceptable “victim”—i.e., a sexual innocent. There were clear distinctions between the narratives required by girls and boys in testifying about sexual abuse. Girls (and here I am including adolescents) had to present themselves as knowing nothing about what was happening. They could never refer to the genitals of their attacker by their proper names, nor could they report having offered any resistance. They were required to be completely in the dark about the nature of the attack until penetration caused them a confusing and previously unknown pain. To try to ward off the attack was to have enough sexual knowledge to have already entered the guilt-shadowed space of adulthood, and no longer to be in need of the protection afforded to children.

Boys, on the other hand, were required to fight back—and to have a clear idea of the wrongness of the events at hand. But protecting the sexuality of boys at that late stage of the nineteenth century seemed of minor concern. As Robertson reports:

Despite the clear signs left by anal acts, cases of sodomy received relatively little attention from reformers... Sodomy was discussed only in regard to boys, but even here such acts remained very much in the background. The vices that

reformers saw threatening boys were those of theft and idleness; sex, the primary danger faced by girls, was considered very much a secondary hazard for boys. (61)

The concern of the reformers seemed essentially to focus on the virginity of vaginas. A girl with a violated vagina was a ruined property and would be difficult to marry. Within the popular imaginary, the damage to her was clear and lasting. Boys, however, were hardly subject to the same set of concerns, and anal sexuality amounted to no sexuality at all. Sexual knowledge may have been expected of a boy, but only the aggressor's actions could really be sexual, since they involved the penis and not the anus. The paradox of the dichotomy of child/adult reveals itself strongly here. However, Robertson's research, as helpful as it is in revealing the trends of the 1880s to 1960s, is very much about working-class culture in New York. The anti-masturbation tracts of the same period suggest a rather different standard for boys born to a higher station.

Robertson's history also traces the genealogy of another problem: how adolescents and children came to be considered together regarding sexuality. When I embarked on the project, I had expected that most of the molested boys I would encounter in postwar gay novels would be pre-adolescents, that they would be unequivocally *children*. I have been frustrated by the failure of theoretical approaches to distinguish between adolescents and children or between different ages of children. The lumping of everyone under the age of eighteen into one age group has been frustrating, but has its history in the effort to raise ages of consent. As activists insisted on juridical innocence for older and older adolescents, they were essentially regarded as the same as their younger counterparts. Robertson reports that in the 1950s, one scientist tried to distinguish between "pedophiles"—those attracted to children—and "hebephiles"—those attracted to adolescents (p 211). But this difference in terminology did not catch on, as it rather complicated the simplicity offered by the adult/child-knowledge/innocence distinction, despite the age of

adulthood having moved from ten to sixteen (or eighteen depending on the jurisdiction and the genders of those involved) by the 1920s.

The appeal of the logic of innocence is that it rightly allows for guilt to be attributed to child molesters. However, the danger is that the appealing binaries of guilt/innocence and child/adult ultimately deny the child's humanity. Either the child is erased and seen only as the past of an adult survivor seeking help, or the child is forced to play the role of sexual innocent. Gay male authors have not bought into this binarizing logic of innocence and guilt precisely because their sexuality is always conceived of by the culture as a guilt-inferring choice. Their failure to be men in the hegemonic sense does not simply leave them boys, but rather casts them out of humanity altogether (and here "faggot" may function as a rough corollary to Reid-Pharr's "nigger"), a fact affirmed by prevalent violence against gay men. But just as Reid-Pharr notes that the refusal of dehumanization inaugurates black subjectivity, so we see the inauguration of gay subjectivity in refusing the cultural logics that would obliterate gay subjects. In *Just Above My Head*, Arthur tells his brother Hall about his childhood sexual abuse because he regards it as an origin story. Arthur is formed in the crucible of abuse; his identity follows from the experience of molestation. Arthur rejects the logic of innocence/guilt. He does not tell the story to gain sympathy or to begin recovery. Arthur tells the story because every experience is part of who he is. How Arthur chose to respond to the abuse, both in the moment and the aftermath, are necessary for Hall to fully understand him. His humanity is bound up in having experienced the abuse.

In Reid-Pharr's analysis, innocence circulates as a form of dehumanization and a lack of agency. Innocence always points to a significant lack, sometimes of agency, sometimes of knowledge, sometimes of guilt, and always of humanity. The only innocent, Black subject that

Reid-Pharr can conceive of is the spectral nigger, a figure that seems to have little reality, though much consequence. Molested boys face a similar conundrum. To be an innocent victim may be tantamount to being dehumanized. From the courtrooms in which actual adolescents were coached to perform ignorance to the film version that desexualized fictional Bone's response to her abuse, enforced innocence threatens to make the experiences of molested children disappear.

Existentialism allows the children to remain present and whole, though as Sartre's critics charged, without uplift or escape. In the two novels we will consider in this chapter, the young protagonists are subjected to extremes that I am tempted to describe as unspeakable, unbearable, and inhuman. However, these adjectives are dehumanizing. The fact is that the characters *do* speak what has happened, they *do* endure what happens, and they *are* human (though fictional), as are their abusers. The flipside of existentialism's insistence on choice and agency is that the choices one receives are quite often terrible choices. But for the existential child, a choice that may look monstrous may be the only method of securing survival. For an existential child, the opposite of human is neither innocent nor monster; the opposite of human is corpse.

2. Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg*, or *To Keep from Fainting...*

In Martha Nussbaum's *Hiding From Humanity*, the author asks which emotions can be useful in the context of the law. Every emotion finds its place in her version of jurisprudence with the exception of disgust, because disgust marks a cleansing fantasy, not an engagement with the world. Much like George Orwell's insistence that revenge is the impossible fantasy of being restored to a wholeness that obtained prior to the offending deed, Nussbaum insists that disgust is the fantasy of purging the offending object, action, person, or community from the earth. In both cases, the ineluctable truth is that nothing can ever *unhappen*. There may be the possibility of

redress, but there is never the possibility of restoration. I agree with Nussbaum's thesis: disgust attends the desire to purge at precisely the moment one must engage. To overcome disgust is no easy task. As Kristeva has so carefully concluded, to engage with the abject, one risks self-transformation.

So as we praise disgust, I make this confession: Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* disgusts me. The filth of the main character Hogg is of an extremity that I find difficult to fathom. He does not shower. He does not remove his pants to urinate or defecate. His clothing and body are a geological record of his body's waste, accumulating in igneous layers. The New York subway system, with some frequency, brings me in sight and smell of people with hygiene quite similar to Hogg's. However, I do not interact. I move cars, I cover my nose and mouth, I move as far as I can along the platform, I escape. *Hogg* has brought me close to that which I encounter in real life, but do my best to ignore. I have tried to engage *Hogg* on the terms of this inquiry, though I have not withheld my own experience of revulsion entirely (I'm telling you about it now), since the question of affect maintains a serious role in this inquiry as well.

Hogg's historical place is a bit awkward. Delany finished the novel "days before the Stonewall Riots" (jacket copy), but it was not published until 1995, in a small edition, so that the publisher might not be attacked. The book is incredibly violent, and conceived of by its author as pornography. Delany's novel is unique in my study—the main character is the only child protagonist to explicitly enjoy the sex to which he is subjected (and he is quite definitely subjected to it). And, lest anyone dismiss the novel as not being endowed with literary merit, the book comes, in its most recent edition, with the approval of Norman Mailer. His blurb reads, "There's no question that *Hogg* is a serious book with literary merit."

Hogg takes an existential view of the child, allowing the eleven-year-old protagonist to be shaped to his experiences. Despite narrating the novel, he never tells us his name, nor is he ever called by name.²³ He is known simply as “Cocksucker.” This is an almost amusingly clear example of experience preceding essence. Cocksucker is unrecognizable by any narrative of children or childhood. The novel opens with eleven-year-old Cocksucker giving a blow job to his thirteen-year-old friend, who is in turn pimping and fucking his fifteen-year-old sister (she gets stiffed on her share of the profits). After Cocksucker witnesses Hogg, a professional rapist, engaged in the act of professional rape, Hogg brings Cocksucker with him on his journeys. The first half of the novel focuses on the various rapes that Hogg is paid to commit. His endowment is so large that he causes permanent damage to the women he violates, though Cocksucker easily takes Hogg’s member in all orifices. The second half of the novel focuses on the group of friends who assist Hogg with his rapes. One of the gang, Denny, goes on a killing rampage after his self-performed urethral piercing results in severe infection. Cocksucker assists with the piercing, and later is called upon to suck pus from the resulting wound. Cocksucker is kidnapped and sold by two of Hogg’s friends, but Hogg returns to rescue Cocksucker. Hogg and Cocksucker, in an uncharacteristically loyal moment, help Denny evade police capture and begin a new life.

Writing about her time as a copyeditor for pornographic novels, Katha Pollitt wrote that the central fantasy of those novels was “the delusion that a man can satisfy a woman simply by satisfying himself” (96). It seems to me that this can be expanded, and understood as the central fantasy of all pornography: one need only satisfy oneself in order to satisfy one’s partners. In the

²³ One might usefully note that the most famous unnamed narrator of twentieth century literature is the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. I read *Invisible Man* as insisting that there is no dignified place for a Black man in America, hence the narrator’s departure from American life to his underground light cave. The narrator of *Hogg* is so turned on by any action designed to deprive him of dignity that he suggests a complete opposite response—he *only wants* to live without dignity.

pornographic landscape of *Hogg*, Hogg need only satisfy himself in order to satisfy Cocksucker. Cocksucker eagerly tends to all of Hogg's desires, from eating his feces to taking Hogg's massive member in his eleven-year-old body's every opening. The fantasy, as played out between Hogg and Cocksucker, is also recognizable in more contemporary notions of sadomasochism, as in Pauline Réage's *The Story of O*. What the dominant partner loves to do to a body turns out to be what the submissive partner loves to have done to his or her body. O, like Cocksucker, cannot be tormented because each loves the "torments" to which they are subjected. Crudely put, one cannot rape the willing. Other aspects of Delany's story dispense with any mutuality and recall a purely Sadeian notion of Sadism, as in *120 Days of Sodom*. In Sade's catalog of bodily destruction, it seems unreasonable to even use the word "partner" for the sexual relationships. With the exception of the symbiotic sadomasochism of Hogg and Cocksucker, Delany's sexual subjects are as cruel as they are voracious. Pleasure most often resides in the inflicting of agony and pain. Also, as in Sade, there is no human fluid, orifice, or violation that Delany's characters will not find sexually arousing. One might even think of *Hogg* as a working class *120 Days of Sodom*, the aristocratic mansion supplanted by the poverty-stricken tenement and truck cabins as the site of erotic possibility.

In reading this novel, for the first time in my life, I found a book literally *unspeakable*. In one workshop, when I had to discuss how this book fit into my project, I found myself unable to speak. I was so revolted that I could barely even recount the plot. When the novel began appearing in my proposal for this dissertation, it was surrounded by so many apologies and disclaimers that I wondered how I would ever overcome my own shame and revulsion in order to write about the novel clearly. But when I began trying to construct a reception history of the text, I found that I was more or less alone in my reaction. In part, this is because the book was

carefully kept from readers who might respond in the way that I did. The irony is not lost on me that even as I was making light of reviewers and readers who handled *Other Voices, Other Rooms* with asbestos gloves, I had suddenly become the very reader whose delicate sensibilities were being encroached upon. However, the reviewers who did respond to the book had far stronger stomachs than I did. Either that, or they never lost sight of the novel as being a work of fiction. On the other hand, I, like the viewers of *Last House on the Left*, had to keep repeating, “It’s only a novel.” Still, I could only find two reviews suggesting that the novel’s carefully limited distribution has kept it below a mainstream radar. *The New York Times* has reviewed or interviewed Delany sixty-four times since 1986; *Hogg* has never been mentioned in the *Times*’ pages. Like Sylvester Stallone’s pornographic movie or Mapplethorpe’s nude photograph of Arnold Schwarzenegger, *Hogg* seems an open secret.

In Michael Hemmingson’s 1996 review of the book, published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, he focuses on a passage in which Hogg asserts that his violence and cruelty is more honest and immediate than the cruelty of the bomb droppers, and those who endorse the bomb droppers. Focusing on the novel having been written during the Vietnam War, Hemmingson seems to want to redeem the novel as implicating all of us in the horror of war. He seems to feel that the novel is not pornographic at all, and rather than arousing a select group of readers, the novel will in fact shock all readers of these United States into realizing that the human rights abuses committed in their name are as bad as and worse than what they find in the pages of *Hogg*. Bruce Benderson, to the contrary, finds the book to be a cautionary tale for the left—a tale of what happens when we reject all forms of sexual shame. He writes that Hogg is “the ultimate answer to the liberationist discourse that maintains that our desires are being needlessly constrained by all those silly Puritans... The true Eden...is a blood bath of instincts, a

gaping maw of orality, and a basin of gushing bodily fluids” (20). But what unites both of these reviewers is the belief that *Hogg* is really a book about the limits of being human. Benderson: “*Hogg* is a minimalist testing of a single hypothesis. It wants to know to what limits appetite can suffuse consciousness before that consciousness stops being considered human” (20). Hemmingson: “The reader (as I was myself) may indeed be puzzled and put off mightily by this panoply of sexual and violent excursions and by Delany’s portrayal of this machine calling itself a man, this Hogg” (128). Also: “There is very little evidence that the young narrator *is* a human being” (127).

Both Benderson and Hemmingson are confused by Cocksucker’s convergence of desire and passivity. In truth, he simply does whatever he is asked or told, whenever he is asked or told. In returning to the questions of existentialism, Cocksucker might seem without agency or guilt, but in fact, it is Cocksucker’s humanity that is so distressing. He likes what he is doing, and therein lies the pornographic key to the book. What Cocksucker wants is exactly what is done to him. In what is not one of the more graphic passages of the novel (and is in fact quite representative), Cocksucker contemplates his love of smegma:

The only way I know a guy can raise *that* much dick cheese is from something the super I stayed with showed me a couple of times, back when I was first with Pedro and Maria: he’d only *had* about two-and-a-half inches of cock, even hard. Red had more like nine. But they both were guys with two inches of skin overhang; and sometimes, when he’d beat off, the super would keep the scum inside it, tie his foreskin in a knot, and let the stuff stay in there five or six hours, with a little piss... Inside, it would ferment. After half a day, it was as thick and curdy as you could want. He’d untie the skin and make me suck him off that

way—till he realized I liked it. Then he wouldn't do it for me no more. I think he wanted to eat it himself—'cause I caught him doing that, once, too. (196).

And herein lies the fantasy of the book. Cocksucker does not need to adapt to survive. He need not compromise or negotiate or bargain for his survival. He is already perfectly shaped to his environment. In Althusserian terms, Delany has made a “good subject” for a sexual dystopia. While most of those who encounter Hogg are literally torn open or sent into paroxysms of disgust, Cocksucker enjoys him. In existential terms, what is so distressing to the reviewers is that Cocksucker is so perfectly human, his essence flowing from his experience, his agency engaged only to assist or comply. Like Genet, erotically adapted to the humiliation of incarcerations, Cocksucker is shaped to his world.

In an existential sense, Cocksucker is perfectly adapted to the sexual degradation that he is born to. There is only one condition that ruins his pleasure: the discovery that he enjoys sexual extremity. Once the super discovers that Cocksucker *likes* to eat the thick goo under his foreskin, he keeps it for himself. In a world where the characters live to inflict sexualized suffering, a masochist is out of luck only if he openly expresses his masochism. As long as the characters believe him to be suffering, his pleasure is endless. The inverse is also true. When Hogg expresses affection for Cocksucker, the boy is immediately turned off. Hogg's expressions of affection alternate between the mawkish and the unsanitary. “Like you was my own kid brother” (264). “I'm the shit machine, and you're my personal shit bowl and pee pot, right?” (263). Hogg even goes so far as to ask, “Hey Cocksucker... tell me what you're thinkin'” (268). In the final pages of the novel, as Hogg expresses straightforward affection, Cocksucker begins to work out how he could get back to cruelty. Like Marlene walking out in fury at the end of *The Bitter Tears of Petra Van Kant*, Cocksucker can tolerate anything but kindness. He may seem passive, but his

human agency is always present. His plan to escape affection (as scatological as that affection may be) underscores his agency in submitting to cruelty.

In claiming *Hogg* as an existentialist novel, I am placing it in a long series of works that, at their core, confront meaninglessness and death. Richard Lehan, tracing a genealogy of existentialism in literature, finds absurdity as the through line: “Man attempts to create himself in the face of his absurd limits, an idea which brings all of these writers [Nietzsche, Byron, Dostoyevsky, Melville, Conrad, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Sartre, Camus] together and gives a collective meaning to the term *existentialism*” (xiv). And what does he mean by absurdity?

The absurd occurs when man admits that his reason is limited, that it cannot supply answers to questions that are both metaphysical and personal... A literature of the absurd begins by discarding fixed points of reference—God, history, rational philosophy, even the absolute sense of self... The absurd results when meaning is overwhelmed by the unexpected and the unknown. (xiv)

This is precisely the process that we find at work in *Hogg*. There is no higher power than personal lust and power.

For Delany, however, these representations actually form a check on power. In “Pornography and Censorship,” Delany positions himself against W.H. Auden’s argument that pornography is not serious art. Delany paraphrases Auden as arguing that sexual arousal distracts from aesthetic appreciation (292). In opposition to Auden, Delany insists that all possibilities of the body must be portrayed in order not to facilitate oppressive regimes of power. Delany’s reading of Auden is a bit confused. First Delany places the interview in 1947, when the interchange that he recounts was published in *Life* in the issue of January 30, 1970. The *Life*

article is less of an interview than a profile, though it does quote Auden at length. The discussion is over *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and the passage is worth quoting:

He considers D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover* a "pornographic book."

His definition of pornography? "That's easy, for a man. Any material that gives a male an erection." Although he writes off-color poems for his friend, Auden opposes pornography because "pornography confuses fantasy with reality—reality isn't good enough for you afterwards." (Schott 54)

Delany's argument with Auden is flawed in that Auden is not criticizing pornography as deadening aesthetic response; rather he is saying that one must be aroused by the real because arousal by fantasy leads to dissatisfaction with the world.

In Delany's article, he goes on to mention an article by Harold Norse: "I do not have the article to hand. But memory tells me that the encounter involved a pounce by the older poet; the coupling was brief, desperate...the word that remains with me from the writer is.... 'appalling'" (292). Delany sympathizes with Norse, having suffered a similar "pounce" in his youth. I do have the article at hand. It appeared in the *Advocate* in 1984, and was called "Making it with Auden: In Bad Taste." The article is mainly concerned with penis size. The primary revelation is not that Auden pounced on Norse, but that Auden suffered the tragedy of having a small penis. Norse discusses a heterosexual contemporary who killed himself because he could not live with his tiny penis, and sums up Auden's personality: "He was convinced that nobody could love him because he was unattractive and underendowed" (28). Norse's measure of a man by the size of his penis would seem to prove Auden's point about pornography creating dissatisfaction with reality.

While I tend to think that Delany sets Auden up as a straw man, the arguments Delany makes for pornography are quite serious. The first is that if we don't embrace sexuality, the sex we have "is likely to be infrequent, desperate, brutal, and brief" (293); Auden's pounce on Norse serves as Delany's illustration of what happens when eroticism is rejected. The second is that we must not place limits on the representable, and the sexual is where society often places limits on representation. In the wake of Abu Ghraib, it is hard not to recognize the necessity of Delany's argument that limits on representation assist abuses of power,²⁴ both at the governmental and familial levels. For Delany, pornography is a necessary bulwark *against* oppression. Interestingly, Delany is out of step with arguments that trauma is precisely that which is unspeakable or unrepresentable. For Delany, the best response to trauma is to make everything visible, so that nothing can be unrepresentable. Like Jean-Paul Sartre objecting to those who would view existentialism as the embrace of all things vulgar and cruel, it is precisely the existentialist who can resist vulgarity and cruelty by acknowledging its existence. And this is why one must refuse disgust in response to this text. Disgust would insist that this is dehumanizing, whereas an existential lens of analysis reveals that this is the resistance to dehumanization.

The extremity of *Hogg* is accounted for by Sartre. In responding to Dostoevsky's assertion that everything is permitted if there is no god, Sartre concurs, but with a difference:

Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a

²⁴ One on hand, it seems a positive development that the media handled the photographs from Abu Ghraib without excessive squeamishness over the sexualized nature of the torture; on the other hand, it would be hard to argue that the s/m porn film *Gaytanamo*, which eroticizes indefinite detention, brings us closer to resolving the U.S. Government's torture problem.

given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man *is* freedom. (353)

The sort of extremity found in *Hogg* or *120 Days of Sodom* is accompanied by responsibility. We can expect to see “everything”—but we must also recognize that each act is chosen, and each person bears responsibility.

Sartre and Reid-Pharr are both writing in the wake of significant and massive human rights violations. Naziism and American racism have authorized acts that would make *Hogg* seem positively salutary, and yet like Sartre’s opponents, we often treat them as missteps—historical atrocities that we try to remove from polite representation. Reid-Pharr invokes the word “nigger” as a marker of non-humanity, and notably, it is a frequent epithet within *Hogg*. Delany’s achievements are often noted in the context of his blackness. He is celebrated as “the first African American whose career is science fiction writing” (Rowell 247). The racialization of bodies is highly visible in *Hogg*. Hogg is white, and Cocksucker is described as white for most of the novel. “Nigger” operates as part of a larger taxonomy of ethnic slurring, and characters are constantly referred to by their slurs indicating their ethnic heritage (wop, cracker, dago). At one level, this reduces the characters to their bodies, and gives a visual sense of skin color. At another level, this reduces character to race. In this taxonomy we might return to Reid-Pharr’s original point about the phantasmic figure of the innocent nigger. If Lehan is correct in his definition, that “Existential man is the sum of what he does: his meaning follows from his actions and not some preconceived notion about human nature” (xv), then the taxonomy of ethnicity is the countercurrent. In referring to each other in slurs, there is an assumption of already knowing what personality stems from what ethnicity—as well as a taxonomy of looks and appearances. Personality is reduced to type, desire to bodies. Essence precedes experience.

Hogg on the other hand, is the sum of what he does, as is Cocksucker. If we are to look for the dehumanizing as the essentialist, the racial epithets are the most productive place to look.

In the final pages of the novel, we learn that we have misrecognized Cocksucker. His essence has also been preceded by another bodily experience: blackness. After Hogg has taken his turn towards possessive affection, and Cocksucker has started to plan his escape, Cocksucker reveals that he has been passing. “I wondered how they’d feel when they finally noticed I was a nigger” (266). Cocksucker has to conceal his pleasure in order to continue the sexual extremity, but his pleasure is consistently revealed. Cocksucker similarly conceals his race, suspecting that he will be rejected when it is revealed. Like his pleasure, Cocksucker is sure that his race will inevitably be discovered.

Racial hierarchy pervades *Hogg*. In a long disquisition on his fecal consumption preferences, Hogg makes it clear that he considers Cocksucker white: “I’ll get drunk and eat me some fuckin’ dog turds off the street... Sometimes dogshit’s better. Sometimes nigger shit.... But I wouldn’t never eat no white guy’s shit—it ain’t low enough; unless I was a nigger myself, maybe; or it was maybe yours” (263). In this moment it is worth noticing that Hogg is embracing an ugly, racist, American hierarchy. From top to bottom: Whites, dogs, blacks. Their feces are in the same order, though Hogg is trying to get as low on the totem pole as he can. However, he would make an exception. He undervalues Cocksucker’s solid waste because he misrecognizes it as white, whereas he might consume it more often were he to recognize it as black. Nevertheless, Cocksucker seems unsure that he will be welcome when his race is revealed.

As Reid-Pharr points out, existentialism is a way out of essentializing notions of race, and the passing novel is deeply bound up with essentialist notions of race. Typically, in a passing narrative, the white-looking heroine is rewarded for embracing a black identity or punished for

rejecting a black identity. But while racism is a socially structured struggle to insist on one group's superiority, this novel portrays characters in search of the low and degraded. Like Ruby Turpin in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," Hogg maintains a clearly ordered, racialized, and quintessentially American hierarchy of humanity. While Turpin is simply reassuring herself of her place within that order so as to secure a sense of selfhood, Hogg is contemplating whose shit to eat. But Hogg's sense of self is predicated on the shit he eats, so perhaps Hogg's contemplation of fecal matter is not even a single remove from Flannery O'Connor's risible racist.

It should be no surprise that pornography brings us close to the terrifying—that sexual fantasy can make pleasurable what is most feared. It should also be no surprise that fantasy and reality intrude upon each other in awkward ways. Is it possible to read *Hogg* as a parody of American structures of race *and* as pornography for coprophiliacs? One of the intersections of critical race theory and queer theory has been the idea that sexuality and racial identity are simultaneous and inextricable. My understanding of Reid-Pharr's notion of existential race is that existentialism has the power to act as a deconstructive solvent, slipping the easy binaries of black/white, child/adult, gay/straight, and cruel/kind. In Delany's dystopian utopia, that big American marker of difference collapses on itself. Cocksucker's "blackness" is real, but without meaning or consequence. He marks it as the truth of himself, yet only two pages from the end of the novel. It is neither an afterthought nor a revelation.

The pornographic may be well suited to the deconstructive, precisely because pornography welcomes narrative collapse. Pornography moves all plots towards sexual congress, though *Hogg* is not the sort of novel that closes each chapter with the simplicity of orgasms and spent bodies. The novel portrays couplings that violate endless boundaries, the most significant

being the boundary between the sexuality of children and adults. One of the contentions of this dissertation is that there lies a faultline between queer boyhood and queer manhood. However, Cocksucker is not a child in any contemporary sense of the word. While family units populate the novel, Cocksucker has neither parents, nor a sense of orphanhood. He is no misguided Pip Pirrip or Oliver Twist. He does not postpone sex or work, he is capable of orgasm, and his thoughts do not seem childish or immature.

Existentialism does its own work to eliminate the line between child and adult. If the existential subject refuses innocence as the foundation of selfhood, then existentialism refuses the two predominant images of the Western Child. The existentialist child can neither be the Calvinist child in need of correction nor the Romantic child who loses nature's purity as he matures. The adage of "spare the rod, spoil the child" would make no sense in the case of Cocksucker; the rod would simply bring him to orgasm. Similarly, the "nature" that Hogg and Cocksucker embrace would be as foreign to Wordsworth as James Joyce's scatological love letters. Rather, the experiences of Cocksucker form him into an almost carbon copy of Hogg. Like a medieval baby Jesus, his proportions seem curiously adult for a child. To be an existential child may mean not to be a child at all. Certainly, there is no "missing subjectivity" here in the way that I argued for in the previous chapter—and adult Cocksucker would differ only in stature. Yet the faultline remains. Where the bildungsroman promises to take you past the line of demarcation between child and adult, the existential novel erases that line. There are only experiences and the selves shaped by those experiences.

Childhood is necessarily suspect in an existentialist paradigm. However, Cocksucker *must* be a child in order to question the conventional understanding of childhood that this novel attacks. Delany's own writing about *Hogg* does not suggest that he took the novel terribly

seriously. It was a work of pornography designed to make money, but because of its extremity, went unpublished. However, it began to circulate in Xeroxed copies—Delany does not know the source of the leak, though it was presumably someone working at a publisher considering the novel. Published in 1995, critics approached it (if they approached it) as a meditation on the boundaries of humanity. From both perspectives, Cocksucker’s child-body plays a crucial role. In one case, the taboo on childhood sexuality arouses. In the other, the taboo suggests a limit on humanity. In both cases, it is the tension between the expectations of a child and the behavior of Cocksucker that compels the reader.

So, what investment might a gay man have in seeing a child as a sexual, existential being, rather than as an innocent in need of protection? Is this a pedophilic fantasy (well, duh), or a larger challenge to homophobic discourse? As Edelman puts it, we have been living in a discursive regime where gay children *simply cannot exist*. There can be no gay children, because to embrace a sexual identity is to be an adult. Stockton insists that the delaying of sexual activity for pleasure is definitive of childhood. Delany answers both of these limitations on queer children by making Cocksucker an unambiguous child who embraces gay sex for pleasure. Placing him before pubescence, there is no wiggle room regarding Cocksucker’s youth. He is the embodiment of desire that cannot be accounted for in the discursive regime of homophobia that dominated the latter part of the twentieth-century West. Whatever prurient purposes the novel may serve, the very existence of Cocksucker is a challenge to homophobia. Perhaps the brilliance of the novel lies in the fact that the prurience cannot be separated from the challenge. The inseparability of prurience and liberation might even stand as a definition for that ill-bounded word “queer.”

2. Dennis Cooper's *Try*, or You Only Get Bad Choices

While Delany's novel celebrates fecal matter with gustatory zeal, fecal odors are a source of frequent disgust in Dennis Cooper's *Try*. Ziggy, the sixteen-year-old protagonist, is often the source of these odors. Ziggy is as ill suited to his environs as Cocksucker is perfectly formed to his. Ziggy is "son" of his separated, adoptive parents Brice (who rapes Ziggy) and Roger (who has consensual sex with Ziggy). Ziggy alternates between complete submission, intense curiosity, and unexpected explosion. Whereas Cocksucker enjoys the sex that is forced upon him, Ziggy mostly copes through drug use. It is hard to imagine the book as pornography. The sex in the book is coercive and uncomfortable, and usually followed by frustration and depression. Satisfaction seems almost alien to the sexual pursuits that drive the novel.

Ziggy is a source of radiant desire, and like Joel Knox, Ziggy is confused by the terms of his desirability. Ziggy's appeal to the adults in the novel is based on his age. As an eight-year-old, his father Brice began to rape him; as a prepubescent, he began appearing in his Uncle Ken's porn films; and as an adolescent, he entered his father Roger's zone of desire. Within the calculus of desire that shapes *Try*, Ziggy's anus is a central locus.

Like Cocksucker, Ziggy's humanity is distressing, though Ziggy evokes sympathy in a way that Cocksucker does not. Ziggy has adapted to the unavoidable sexual aggression of the men around him, and he makes no effort to escape or avoid the sexual attentions that he receives. In a letter that sets the novel's events in motion, Roger writes to Ziggy,

...you're probably wondering what my exact tastes entail. Ahem.... To me teenaged boys of the sort I have indicated are an example of human beings at their most fiercely alive, most...evolved, let me say.... As for what I like to do with them, rimming's the technical term for it. "Eating ass" is a lowlier synonym.... I

love to spend quality time with a beautiful boy's ass, massaging, mapping, recording its factual data, putting my tongue in the hole (this is a common gay sex act), fingerfucking it (ditto), and so forth. Don't think for a moment that this brand of sex has any relationship at all to the "sex" Brice imposes on you. It's far more like worship, if anything. (18-19, italics in original).

After reading this letter, Ziggy masturbates (unsuccessfully) by fingering himself and tries unsuccessfully to look at his own anus. The part of him that seems to draw him the most attention is entirely unavailable to himself.

Ziggy seems conditioned to accepting the abuse, but tantrums punctuate his tolerance. After reading the letter, he freaks out, beating his mattress, hurling his possessions around the room, tearing posters off the wall, and toppling his dresser before jumping through the piece of furniture's back. The noise attracts Brice, who pulls him out of the dresser by his hair, smashes him against the wall, and kicks him seven times. Ziggy puts one hand over his balls to protect them, the other hand "trying to cover his blunt little ass crack" (21). Brice responds, "I've *seen* your can *before*" (21), and kicks his defensively deployed hand. Ziggy's attempt at physical defense is read by Brice as a form of seduction, shame, or modesty, none of which he feels Ziggy is entitled to. Another question of interpretation occurs as Brice leaves: "Then Brice snorts and says, 'Well, you're the one who has to live in it,' which Ziggy initially thinks means his body. But Brice probably meant, like, what's left of his bedroom" (21). Again, Ziggy's body is an object of confusion and frustration—even though it is constantly drawing sexual attention toward him.

From Chaucer to Kristeva, Western culture has understood fecal matter as the sine qua non of abjection—the thing that must be quarantined through humor, shame, disgust, or some

combination of the three. And while gay culture has managed to celebrate the bottom as productive of pleasure as well as of feces, the crisis of AIDS has intruded the larger straight culture's anxiety about the rectum back onto gay self-representations. The rectum acts as a kind of grave, a space of erasure, oblivion and abjection. Cooper takes this fear past all containable representations. When Uncle Ken penetrates Robin, a thirteen-year-old head-banger: "The kid's butthole gulped down Ken's cock, wiping both of them out" (25). Roger explains that the anus is less specific than either the cock or the face. The anus is the end of the human. In other of Cooper's novels, the exploded or destroyed anus plays a more pivotal role. But in *Try*, the anus, while being a site of oblivion, is also a site of intense attraction and revulsion.

Existentialism does not imply good choices, and Ziggy's survival is contingent on choosing between bad options. In preparing for sex with Roger, Ziggy approaches his drug dealer Annie. He explains, "I need to get through a sex scene I might not, like, know how to be part of exactly" (54) and asks for her advice. Annie asks if he plans on having an orgasm, to which Ziggy responds, "I... guess not" (55). She offers him heroin. In order to resist the pain of the obliteration that his inability to refuse sex entails, he chooses another form of obliteration.

Ziggy's survival is highlighted by the death of Robin, a thirteen-year-old boy that Uncle Ken has recruited for a porn film. Robin's fatal overdose is unintended, but his body is immediately put to use. Uncle Ken masturbates over the corpse before calling a client who pays more for dead boys than live ones. Before the overdose, Ziggy tries to interview Robin for his 'zine about sexual abuse. The scene is curious in that Ziggy seems hyperaware of his suffering from the abuse, and yet he has no interest in protecting Robin from it. Ken is a frequent source of affection for Ziggy, and while one might initially assume that the affection comes at too high a

cost, the reverse is true. Having no choice about the abuse, he takes the affection because it is so rare, regardless of its source.

Robin's death reminds us that Ziggy's struggle is to retain his humanity by staying alive. As is often the case in Cooper's novels, the human body continually dissolves into mechanistic or textile-like surfaces. Roger describes another teenaged lover's body as "perfectly formed, as unpored as tinted cellophane, at least from a few feet away..." (49). After Robin's death, the boy is described as being "like a kid in a 'dead body' Halloween costume, but worse, more realistic, not endearing at all" (178). For Cooper's characters, skin is always a kind of wrapping that is violently breached. At times skin is a glorified surface, but characters often see it as kind of gift-wrapping that betrays, because the viscera underneath skin is so repulsive. The metaphorical desire for depth (to know someone deeply) becomes a literal evisceration. In *Try*, there's no mutilation of the body, even though the focus on sphincters pushes in the direction of the body's objectification.

Roger's desire for Ziggy is an attempt at dehumanizing him. Roger makes it clear that his desire for bottoms is predicated on a desire to not confront the humanity of those with whom he interacts:

I would hazard a guess that this little fixation involves an avoidance of more resolute body parts, namely the face and genitalia, both of which, while fascinating, present too much personality, thereby reinforcing my failure to penetrate the givens of people I crave. For, of the body's main features, an ass is the most vague in meaning and structurally flexible. What *is* an ass if not the world's best designed, most inviting blank space, on the one hand, and, on the other, a grungy peephole into humans' ordinariness, to put it mildly. (100)

But ultimately, Ziggy's body, with its strong odors, manages to prevent Roger's attempt at anonymity and pleasure. Upon opening Ziggy's cheeks, "a strong smell of cloistered shit filled the immediate area...my son's interior foulness asked of its scholars an almost inhuman diligence" (112).

Ziggy's sphincter acts as a kind of metonym for Ziggy himself. Toward the end of the novel, Ziggy asks Roger about his rectum, the "'cavern' supposedly hidden away in his buttocks. Had I discovered it yet? he wondered" (171). Roger assures him that he has. "What's it for?" Ziggy asks. Roger explains:

"Your fecal material collects there," I said, and dug two, perhaps three fingers into his ass, deep enough that I could bend their very tips and explore the rectum's slippery walls. "And when there's enough shit," I continued, "it weighs on the tube, and ... time for your toilet." (171)

Ziggy asks Roger, "What's in there right now?" (171), and Roger responds, "Mucus...and some mysterious seaweedy objects. It's quite hot in here. You must have a slight temperature, but then I'm no G.P. of course" (172).

In this moment, Ziggy is trying to figure out the rules of his desirability, and yet, the crucial answer always eludes him. When he tries to figure out how his bottom became sexualized, he is given a lesson on defecation. This seems paradigmatic of Ziggy's situation. His life is a sequence of bad options. The more direct answer to the question "what's in Ziggy's rectum?" would be "his father Roger's fingers."

Ziggy's options do not involve departure or safety. Roger promises to take Ziggy away from Brice's violence. Instead, Brice and Roger have sex with Ziggy together (for much of which Ziggy is unconscious). They discuss the smells that emanate from his bottom, trying to

decide whether to be turned on or disgusted. Brice takes partial responsibility: “I probably ruined his bowels.... I’ve been fucking him since he was eight.” Though ultimately, the three of them settle on Ziggy’s stench as who he is. Roger says of his smell, “It’s nastier, but more specific. Less...censored. I mean it’s *who* our boy *is*” (187). Ziggy understands himself as product of his experience, and Ziggy’s journey is ultimately an existential one. Even his status as their adopted child (despite Roger’s long absence, and their most unparental interests in the child) is allowed to stand. He is their boy, not by fact of birth, but by fact of experience.

Ziggy also takes as a given that his essence flows from his experience. He just can’t find his essence, no matter how much he sorts his experience. In explaining how he shares Brice’s opinion of himself as manipulative, Ziggy says, “the School therapist... She told me I’m so fucked up now by my psycho upbringing, and, uh, the molestations and stuff, that my whole personality’s, like, about using other people. ‘Cos I never thought anyone would, uh, love me if I was just, like, myself?” (187). Ziggy, Brice and Roger all seem to concur with Roger’s assessment of Ziggy: “You’re a disaster... It’s fascinating” (187).

There is no suggestion of uplift or redemption. There is no higher power that might save Ziggy, not even Social Services. Like Cocksucker, Ziggy is in a world where his sexual availability is both constant and non-negotiable. Despite nearly everyone being aware of Brice’s molestation (including the school counselor, who simply explains Ziggy’s problems back to him), Ziggy is still firmly his. Unlike Cocksucker, Ziggy’s adaptations come with traumatic side-effects; rather, Ziggy’s adaptation to trauma leaves him a frayed nerve. He cannot concentrate, he has violent tantrums, and he takes drugs in the face of any negative feeling or experience. Ziggy’s ‘zine is named “I Apologize,” which reflects his recognition that his life is precarious. His apologies for being molested are not literally expressions of apology, but rather a survival

technique. Faced with torture, an apology is a better strategy than an attack. Ziggy's choices keep him alive, but they frustrate his search for a way to be comfortable, loved, and whole.

The reception of *Try* was quite warm. Catherine Texier's review of the novel for *The New York Times* celebrated Cooper's move away from disembowelment and towards an examination of human connection:

This may be a shock, if not a disappointment, to Mr. Cooper's fans, but there is in this novel almost as much discussion about love and the meaning of love as there is the usual dissection, real and figurative, of body parts and organs. There is a stunning parallel between the obsession of penetrating a body to possess it, to unlock its mystery, and the flickers of humanity that spark, oh so feebly, between the characters. (par. 9)

In fact, by 1994, Cooper seemed to be the mainstream media's favorite cult figure. When the *Sunday Times* of London seemed distressed by the novel, the reviewer wrote, "*Try* is a baffling book: *The Guardian* called it 'totally awesome', and other people swear Cooper is a genius. Best take their word for it" (par. 4). In the *Los Angeles Times*, Michael Cunningham declared the novel a significant achievement for Cooper because it suggested the possibility of love, and declared that "After reading *Try* you might feel, at least for a while, that almost every other contemporary American novel is a little forced and melodramatic, full of wishful thinking rather than hard human facts" (par. 2). Most critical assessments of Cooper—and there have been two anthologies dedicated to articles assessing his work in the last ten years—focus on *Try* as a part of the George Miles cycle, and give more weight to the more graphic of the novels—notably *Frisk* with its graphic disembowelments, and *Closer* with its shocking anal mutilation.

I chose to consider *Try* because Ziggy is the only character across Dennis Cooper's novels who strikes me as truly *molested*—both in the sense that he is subject to unwanted sex, but also the sense that he is directly disturbed by his precocious sexual knowledge. While most of Cooper's adolescent characters suffer abuse at the hands of both their peers and adults, they typically seek out the situations they encounter. For most of Cooper's adolescents, sex and violence (in isolation or combination) are escapes from various forms of frustration, alienation, sorrow, or grief. But for Ziggy, sex and violence form the contours of the only life he has known. He seeks to escape *from* sex, not *to* sex.

3. Ziggy and the Transfer of Affect

Another approach to Ziggy, and one that might initially seem opposed to the existential approach I have taken so far, would be Teresa Brennan's theorization of emotion in her book *The Transfer of Affect*. In Brennan's theorization of affect, she considers the ways in which we can see the transfer of feelings between individuals. Contrary to the idea that we are each isolated beings, Brennan insists that the communal shapes the individual experience.

Brennan begins by exposing what she calls the "foundational fantasy" (12). In the foundational fantasy, the mother becomes the origin of affect, rather than the repository—hence the child can blame all negative affect on the mother as having come from her. "The moment of the foundational fantasy is the moment when one says either 'I am good and powerful. The other is base and abject' or 'I am miserable and abject. The other is good and powerful (so good that sometimes they will punish me for my abjection)'" (13). And this phantasmic binary need not be limited to the family romance. "There is no reason why one person's repression could not be another man or woman's burden, just as the aggression of the one can be the anxiety of the other"

(12). Brennan terms these carriers of others' projected negative affect, "feminine beings" (15). "These are mostly likely to be women, but the disposition of the negative affects varies, especially when racism is a factor... The question should be: To whom is the affect directed?" (15). Ziggy seems to be the "feminine being" (15) that Brennan describes as the carrier of negative affects. Brennan's point is larger than simply that some people are winners and some people are losers in the foundational fantasy. She is at pains to point out that it is a shared or collective fantasy. The "self-contained Western identity" (12) is a fiction that depends on the group accepting the fantasy as a group. Put crudely, the myth of the rugged individual only takes hold if everyone invests in the truth of the myth. Ziggy accepts the position of miserable abjection in order to carry the negative affect of his fathers. In the bottom covering scene, it is clear how much Brice's anger and aggression are Ziggy's anxiety and passivity. Ziggy is shaped to their needs. Brennan usefully points out that the seven deadly sins (pride, sloth, avarice, etc.) are not acts, but affects. In this light, it seems that Ziggy is not apologizing for deeds, but emotions.

Seen through Brennan's lens of analysis, Ziggy is more or less a sponge of negative affect. He absorbs every negative, dehumanizing, objectifying or hypersexualizing interpretation of himself, and periodically, they explode from him—literally, as in his furniture-destroying outbursts or his bursting into tears during the little consensual sex he has; or figuratively, as described in the constant stench of his body. Ziggy's sexual attraction is undisputed throughout the novel, but it is neither a source of pride nor power. His beauty draws sexual predators to him. Even the cross-dressing, fellow sixteen-year-old who wants Ziggy to fuck him has covered his walls with posters of Edward Furlong in *Terminator II*, suggesting that even Ziggy's same-aged partner is a budding pedophile, and by implication, predatory.

As Brennan describes the problematic transmissions of affect, sight is generally preferred in description because “Smell” is no “respector of persons” (10). Ziggy’s father is disgusted by the smell in part because it involves a dissolution of their personal boundaries—the tongue is distinct as it enters his sphincter—and in what must be the most widely quoted scene in the book, Ziggy refuses his father’s sexualized love, saying that he if he loved him, he wouldn’t rim him when he was crying.

Brennan’s idea of the transfer of affect complements existentialism’s premise that essence comes through experience. Nevertheless, it also pushes back against the isolated individual being alone with responsibility. Brennan offers a theory of how Ziggy’s essence assumes the structure that it does. Still, it seems that both theories bring us to the same conclusion: a lifetime of abuse has made Ziggy suffer.

V. Where Does the Child Go?

In looking at these two novels, it is clear that their authors reject the idea that the child is necessarily an innocent. Cooper and Delany offer children who are incompatible with contemporary conceptions of childhood. Indeed, these children would make as little sense in pre-Romantic notions of childhood (an evil state requiring religious indoctrination and heavy correction) as they would in post-Romantic notions of childhood (an innocent state of natural truthfulness and wonder). These children are not adults. They lack financial independence, and are subject to the adults around them in order to be fed, clothed and sheltered. Their bodies, as unnaturally elastic as they often seem, are immature: slender and hairless. Both children make choices about their sexuality, but those choices are not the preferred choices for independent people. They cannot refuse sexual advances. Their choices consist of how to respond to that

which they must accept. Their choices have to do with adaptation and survival. And yet, it is their adaptation that makes them compelling to both their authors. It is their ability to refuse innocence and discover agency that drives the novels. These are dangerous representations. Delany's novel had a small print run in the hopes that Black Ice Press would not face a loss of funding or prosecution. Cooper has received death threats for his novels, an irony considering that his novels have also prompted requests from people who would like to be killed. Within the scope of this study, it is my contention that the existential agency that I have traced through these works is precisely what makes them dangerous. That in rejecting the "innocence" of childhood, Cooper and Delany have not represented less than human characters; they have in fact thoroughly humanized them.

I insisted on using affect theory as well as existentialism to read Cooper because it seems to me that it offers a kind of sympathetic reading of *Ziggy*. *Cocksucker* needs no sympathy because he is perfectly adapted to his situation—he is a pornographic fantasy of sexual voracity and ability. But *Ziggy* is deeply traumatized, and deserves to be read as such—as someone suffering from the consequences of the choices that have allowed his survival. *Hogg* is an important representation of a child, but it *is* pornography. It can be read from a space of arousal, and anyone outside that space of arousal will ultimately be disgusted or revulsed. On the other hand, *Try* demands to be read from a place of sympathy. The literature on abused boys, while not exactly matching Cooper, does often show case studies of boys molested by a large constellation of abusers. Studies of abuse often depict families and collectives in which nearly all adult males are attracted to and make sexual use of the boys in their proximity. I don't want to argue that *Try* is a novel of social conscience, demanding better treatment and understanding of abused boys. *Try* demands a reading practice that sees children and adolescents as people endowed with

agency, choice, and sexual desire. It demands a complicated and direct interaction with Ziggy's humanity.

More importantly, *Try* refuses to let the reader look away from Ziggy. His suffering is not the precursor to adult recovery, nor does it pretend to act as a representative or exemplary case. Cooper's refusal of futurity demands attention for Ziggy's life and experiences as valuable in the moment. Ultimately, both *Hogg* and *Try* refuse to reduce their protagonists to figures of innocence or monstrosity. As shocking or disgusting or humiliating as their adventures are, Ziggy and Cocksucker retain their agency, and by extension, they become complicit in the distressing action that drives both novels. The novels refuse to sentimentalize or condemn either boy. Both boys are surviving in a world that is not of their own making; this is the condition of all mankind, not just children. By embracing an existential notion of humanity, both *Hogg* and *Try* insist on the humanity of their protagonists. In other words, they refuse the notion of "child."

Chapter 3: Persistent Boys and Persistent Boyhoods

Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin* & Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance*

1. 1993/2012

In Peter Schjeldahl's review of the 2012 Whitney Biennial for *The New Yorker*, he compares the 2012 Biennial to the "political-identity-mongering edition of 1993, which, come to think of it, really may have been the worst ever" (72). In contrast to 1993's "succès de scandale," 2012 earns the moniker "enchanting" (72). In considering a component of the 2012 show that explicitly addresses child abuse, he writes, "Not long ago, such material would have signaled righteous social criticism. Here it channels a spirit of audacious curiosity, neither parading nor protesting psychic wounds, but coaxing poetry from them" (72). One way to think about this might be to say that the 1993 biennial was self-consciously *liberationist*, fighting a battle for recognition and affirmation. The 2012 biennial is self-consciously *liberated*, uninterested in demanding that the worth or pain of certain people be validated, but rather believing that the viewer will share the artist's perspective that the validity of the subject's worth and pain are to be taken for granted.

The comparison that Schjeldahl makes between visual art in 1993 and 2012 maps onto literature as well. Scott Heim's 1994 novel *Mysterious Skin* is almost surprisingly earnest in its "parading" and "protesting" of "psychic wounds." Michael Lowenthal's 2002 novel *Avoidance* could easily be described as displaying a "spirit of audacious curiosity," not a stance usually taken by those portraying the wounds left by child abuse. *Mysterious Skin* is a case study in the after-effects of abuse. Interestingly, the novel equates adulthood with recovery. The central character of *Avoidance* is preoccupied by the fact that he seems to be the only member of his

peer group *not* to have been molested by the man who dominated his childhood. *Mysterious Skin* and *Avoidance* both contain queer identity and the acts and aftermaths of molestation, but to use Peter Schjeldahl's words, Heim's novel is one of "righteous social criticism" while Lowenthal's novel can embrace the darkly absurd poetry that comes from trauma. Heim's novel was widely regarded as shocking, but it also has a slightly didactic quality: in case you were unsure of what child molestation does, look closely at these lives. Lowenthal assumes that you already got the memo: child molestation is wrong and bad and has continuing negative effects on the lives it touches. To be crude: Heim's figure is Lowenthal's ground.

We began this study in 1948, the year in which homosexuality first voiced itself as an identity, and first began to insist on the rights of homosexuals as a protected class—homosexuality was an identity with remarkably fuzzy boundaries, but there was a new status demanded for it. We end this study with the onset of what Lisa Duggan has influentially called "homonormativity." Duggan's definition offers a homosexuality that looks a lot like heterosexuality, or at least, a gay identity that heteropatriarchy need not contest to maintain its structures. Though the earliest instance of Duggan's term that I can find dates to 2000, when she mentions the term in a footnote to her introduction to an issue of *New Literary History*, the term would seem to originate with Susan Stryker as a way to point out the exclusion of genderqueer and trans people from an increasingly conservative gay rights movement (best represented by the views of Andrew Sullivan).²⁵

I am using the date of 2003 to mark the mainstreaming of homonormative identity: a recognizable homosexual who is entitled to the same rights and protections for love as any

²⁵ I write this with my tongue in my cheek, but in fact Andrew Sullivan has been incredibly effective. In *Virtually Normal*, he called for establishing the only goals of the gay rights movement as gay marriage and the service of gays in the military. In 1995, these seemed like a fool's errand, but in 2012, his vision has come to (or is coming to) pass.

straight couple. Crucial to homonormativity, though this will be my addendum to the discursive regime, is that the boundaries of private/public and child/adult are the same for the homonormative subject as the heteronormative subject. I've chosen 2003 because it maps so neatly on to the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Lawrence v. Texas*—a decision in which two men who were neither lovers nor in love were arrested for the crime of sodomy (which they seemed not to have been committing at the time of arrest). The Supreme Court affirmed their right to love and be lovers. This tipping point occurred at the highest level of government. While the gay rights movement of the 1990s seemed mostly engaged in a losing battle to enter marriage, repeal sodomy laws, generate support for people with AIDS, and win the right to serve openly in the military, the gay rights movement of the early twenty-first century finds itself in a world with a growing access to marriage, the legal possibility of serving openly in the military, a generation of men over fifty (including men living with HIV and AIDS), and is now branching out to questions about where to stand on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and forging alliances with the NAACP to end the New York policy of “Stop and Frisk.”

Duggan's main objective in using the term “homonormativity” is more fully expounded in her 2003 book *The Twilight of Equality*?²⁶ Duggan argues that a robust minority rights movement must be imbricated in the larger fabric of social justice movements. To focus narrowly on the right of an oppressed group to simply spend their money or participate in the politics of empire is to abandon the very structures of liberation that made opposition possible in the first place. Duggan's term has been extremely productive, and I take this long digression to point out that while homonormativity signals a significant set of queer triumphs, I am not

²⁶ In *The New York Times*, Helen Sword attacked the term “heteronormativity” as a zombie noun indicative of bad academic writing. One shudders to think what she makes of “homonormativity.”

unaware that it is linked to ideologies that do nefarious work in the world.²⁷ I will focus on homonormativity as a recognizable identity within U.S. culture, not a political structure that furthers the hegemonic goals of imperial Western avarice.

In Chapter One, I traced the reception of Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* to look at one particular mapping of the identity of homosexuality, and how that identity went from a gelatinous moral failing to a clearly bounded set of sexual desires with social ramifications. But as we come to the end of this period, we find that we are still, oddly enough, where we started with respect to the transition of molested boy to adult man. Despite the respectively liberationist and liberated stances of Heim's and Lowenthal's novels, the molested boy will still not cross to a visible adulthood. In *Mysterious Skin*, we return to the broken bildungsroman of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. The arc of the novel follows two molested boys on their journeys to adulthood, which involves one of the boys seeking to have his memories restored by the other boy. But at the point when both boys have returned to the abuse in order to free themselves from its hold (and by extension become new, adult people), the novel abruptly ends.

Uniquely in this study, *Avoidance* places the molested boy on the periphery. The narrator and protagonist is Jeremy, a man in his early twenties. He alternates between life as a graduate student (studying the Amish) and a camp counselor. Jeremy is dedicated to Camp Ironwood, where he was a founding camper, and he is traumatized by the fact that he was *not* molested as a boy by the camp's founder, Ruff. Jeremy was in close proximity while Ruff's pedophilic attentions were directed towards his best friend Charlie. Jeremy listened from outside the shelter. Charlie is promoted to Camp Director when Ruff retires, leaving Jeremy in the number two slot.

²⁷ Most notably, Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* expands the idea of "homonormativity" into "homonationalism" to make a global argument about the conservative and imperialist uses of gay liberation.

Jeremy plans to molest troubled camper Max, until he realizes that Charlie has *already* molested Max. Simultaneous to his discovery that he is too late to be Max's first, he realizes that child molesting is wrong, even as he retains his pedophilic desires. Jeremy comes close to adopting Max, until Jeremy confesses his desire to Max, and the boy disappears from the frame of the novel. Charlie is informed of his impending arrest and disappears into the woods to live off the grid, presumably a fugitive for the rest of his days. In Max's disappearance, we see confirmation of Lowenthal's commitment to resisting futurity; however, Charlie's adult presence and Jeremy's unrealized pedophilic desire both suggest that a significant shift has taken place.

2. 1994: Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin*

Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin* was remarkably well received. The *San Francisco Chronicle* included it as an editor's recommendation, saying, "Exquisitely stylized writing makes this coming-of-age story about two boys and their childhood secret both heartbreaking and indelible" (11). Christopher Lehmann-Haupt began his *New York Times* review by quoting Oscar Wilde before offering the reader a lengthy plot summary, and concluding with high praise, declaring that Heim had managed to "elevate his [Brian's] experience from the clinical to the poetic." In an odd echo of Diana Trilling's musing on the actual process by which one becomes a homosexual, Lehmann-Haupt forgives Heim's "mechanical quality" in dealing with repressed memory, suggesting that "perhaps the difficulty lies in how little is generally known about how repressed childhood memories return, or if they even do as commonly as is currently supposed" (21).

Mysterious Skin tells the story of two boys, Brian Lucky and Neil McCormick, living in the wake of molestation at the hands of the same man. The story is told by multiple narrators,

with Brian and Neil as the main characters, but additional friends and relatives joining in the first person accounting. Brian and Neil meet through little league at the age of eight. Sexually precocious, Neil is already aware of his desire for men, masturbating to his mother's *Playgirl* collection. When he first sees Coach Heider, "Desire sledgehammered my body, a sensation I still wasn't sure I had a name for" (22). Neil is raised by a beautiful, permissive, and highly sexual single mother. Brian's mother, by contrast, is a prison guard who spends much of her time on target practice. Although Brian's family includes his father at the start of the novel, his nuclear family is fairly pleased to see him depart. Although shy and submissive, Brian is otherwise normatively masculine gendered, and is never perceived or represented as a gay child.

The experience of abuse unites Brian and Neil, and their different responses give the novel the feel of a case study. Brian and Neil undergo the same traumatic molestation, but Neil remembers and Brian does not—or rather, the narrative arc of the book concerns Brian's search to reconstruct the memory he has repressed. Neil looks a lot like an existential child in terms of his fierce independence and refusal of convention—though his defiantly open homosexuality and hustling will seem conventional to readers of gay novels and viewers of gay films. His desire for adult men precedes his sexual activity with them, and he is excited by his abuser before he is repulsed. Neil masturbates to the image of Coach Heider before the man begins his sexual activities with the boy. Neil procures Brian for Coach Heider, and the traumatic event ensues: eight-year-old Brian fists Coach. A few years later, Coach Heider finds Brian in the woods following a bad Halloween, and molests him a second time. Both times, Brian represses the memory completely, leading him to question why he experiences missing time.

There is something wonderfully queer and distressingly normative about *Mysterious Skin*. On the queer hand, *Mysterious Skin* completely reverses the terms of sexual penetration that

structure heteropatriarchy. Brian is not penetrated by Coach. Rather, Brian's arm is put to phallic sexual service. Brian's trauma is that he was manipulated into letting his arm enter Coach.²⁸ His entire body is libidinized to the point where his entry into Coach could conjure every fear ever projected onto a vagina. Neil is fellated by Coach, but there is no sign that Coach wants to be fellated himself. Coach is consumptive, rather than penetrative. Neil fellates Brian in imitation of Coach, but is never able to recreate Coach's complete oral envelopment of his partner's shaft and scrotum: "...I tried to do it to you....my mouth was nothing like his. I was just a boy" (288). Disturbingly, this is a sex act that is *only* possible between an adult-sized person and a child-sized boy.

Unlike the existential boys of *Hogg* and *Try*, Neil and Brian are boys interrupted, their boyhood essence suspended and waiting for recovery. The novel embraces narratives of recovery, particularly the idea of recovered memory. The book opens onto Brian's search for missing time, and while Brian hopes that aliens might be his secret, it turns out that, as it usually has in the twentieth century, sex is *the* secret. Once he does the work of recovering his memory and reliving the experience, Brian can be reborn as himself—though one must ask who he has been all this time, if not himself. The interrupted Brian is put back on track. In an almost perfect parallel with *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, the emergent personality is postponed until after the end of the book. We are sure, in the final sentences, that the new subjectivity has arrived. We are also sure that we will never get to see it.

²⁸ Language here enforces the subject-object relation of penetrator to penetrated. While Coach is clearly the active agent, there is no way to construct the verb "to fist" such that Coach is the subject and Brian the object. To say that "Brian fisted the Coach" gives Brian an agency that he did not have; to say that "Coach molested Brian" is to mystify the terms of the abuse. "Coach was fisted by Brian" also fails.

Neil would seem an existential child, but he too seeks out recovery from what he had previously embraced. Neil's photographic memory of sex with Coach Heider contrasts with Brian's almost total repression. For most of the novel, Neil embraces the degradation that Coach has offered him, sliding into prostitution. Neil tries to give up hustling, but cannot until he is brutally raped and beaten by a john. This purgative violence prepares Neil to join Brian in facing their past. In contrast to Neil's hypersexuality, Brian seems stunningly asexual. Brian seems to have a suspended sexuality. Locked away with this memory of the abuse are all of the desires and interests that would have developed had he not been molested. He represses (and goes in search of) not simply his memory, but the entire nexus of sexuality that went with it. But Brian's sexual void is almost heroic compared to Neil's sexual swamp. Neil takes all comers, but his sexual availability is accompanied by cruelty and hardness. The hope for Brian's redemption is thrown into highlight by the hopelessness of Neil's abandon. Neil values Brian's recovery immensely.

3. The Meaning of Manhood

Psychologist Richard Gartner has written extensively about the sexual abuse of boys. He focuses on problems that arise when the experience of sexually abused girls is used as a template for understanding the sexual abuse of boys. He began writing about sexual abuse in an anthology he edited entitled *Memories of Sexual Betrayal*. This 1997 anthology sought a middle ground in the polarized battle between the recovered memory movement and its deniers. The most extreme versions of the recovered memory movement insisted that if you ever thought you might be molested you were, and that thinking someone had not molested you was a sure sign that they had. Renée Fredrickson gives credence to the existence of nationwide rings of satanic, baby-

murdering pedophiles who disguise themselves as aliens and celebrities in order to discredit the memories of the molested children. Others wanted to use the excesses of the movement to insist that child molesting and incest were as rare and unlikely as they had once been thought to be. Gartner's anthology is lucid and admirable in its insistence on documentation and argument, rather than conspiracy and bluster.

Gartner points out the distinction between "dissociation" and "repression" as responses to trauma:

The terms *repression* and *dissociation* are both used to describe the process by which events in a person's history are unavailable to the individual's memory. They are not interchangeable terms, and it is important to differentiate them with clarity. *Repression*, a process first described by Freud (1900), refers to an active mastering of conflictual material by pushing it out of awareness. *Dissociation*, a process discussed by Janet (1898), Fairbairn (1954), Sullivan (1956), and Bromberg (1991, 1993, 1994), among others, refers by contrast to a passive severing of connections between one set of mental contents and another, often before they enter awareness, so that they dwell side by side without reference to one another. (17)

It is tempting to see Brian as repressing the experience, while Neil dissociates, but in a truly Freudian sense, the repressed can never return to consciousness. Brian dissociates, and because the events were stored, he is able to dredge them back to consciousness with Neil's help. Neil, on the other hand, neither dissociates nor represses the experience.

In Eric Tribunella's study of maturation in the American novel, *Melancholia and Maturation*, he points out these hallmarks of adulthood: sobriety, responsibility, knowingness (or

a lack of innocence), experience, law-abiding-ness, hard-working-ness, and heteronormative gender. This matrix would suggest that Neil and Brian are (almost) jointly an adult:

	Neil	Brian
Sober		X
Responsible		X
Knowing	X	
Experienced	X	
Law Abiding		X
Hard Working		X
Heteronormatively Gendered		?

And while Neil is helping Brian achieve the two qualities he actually has, but has dissociated, there is almost no anxiety over the gender that Brian will take on. Or, the question might be, does anxiety of a *not* heteronormatively gendered Brian push the book to close before it emerges? Unlike Joel, where speculation of his post-book identity has long driven critics to their various positions, Brian is allowed to demur. In an odd way, the novel is simultaneously respectful of his opacity, leaving him open to a new way of being, while avoiding what would be a crisis of emergent sexuality.

As long as manhood is heterosexual, queer authors will necessarily be suspicious of it. However, while *Mysterious Skin* was seen as an exemplar of the recovered memory movement, it completely resists the typical narrative of the young adult bildungsroman. Tribunella argues that loss and trauma are necessary conditions for the passage from boy to man in these novels.

Tribunella adopts Freud's basic structure of the ego as put forth in "Mourning and Melancholia" though mapping Freud's process of ego formation onto maturation—young adult fiction embraces the idea that loss is the key to maturation. In opposition to this typical narrative, Neil and Brian undergo the trauma and loss while unequivocally children. Their route to adulthood is healing and recovery.

In the logic of the American bildungsroman, Tribunella identifies a pattern of "boys being encouraged to form intimate same-sex friendships before one of the boys is lost or nearly lost through illness or death. The outcome of the boys' school story is usually the successful manhood of the protagonist, who leaves behind school and the friend he associates with childhood" (1). *Mysterious Skin* reverses this pattern: Brian, the nearly lost boy, has to find his way back to Neil in order to restore the possibility of adulthood. Rather than rejecting an intimate same-sex friend, Brian has to seek one out. Neil is Brian's only path to adulthood, even if that adulthood may turn out to be—via its queer potentiality—a gay manhood.

The novel's sympathies lie with Brian. Having lost his memory of the events, he seems almost defenseless. He suffers at the hands of his father, Coach Heider, and school bullies. Neil on the other hand is often flamboyantly cruel. His cruelty is represented as being directly related to his abuse at the hands of Coach Heider. At one point, Neil convinces a developmentally disabled student known as Zepherelli to hold the stick of a bottle rocket in his mouth as he sets it off. Wendy narrates the section and describes the damage to Zepherelli: "His mouth was bleeding. Little red splinters stuck through Zepherelli's lips... Bubbles of blood dotted the lips" (70-71). Once they see the damage, Neil's first priority is preventing the boy from telling on them.

“When I was little,” Neil said, “a man used to do this to me.” ...He pulled the front of Zepherelli’s pants down...

“Sometimes, I wanted to tell everyone what was going on. Then he’d do this to me again, and I knew how badly he really wanted it. He did it to some other kids, but I knew they didn’t matter as much to him, I was the only one whose photo he kept in his wallet...”

...

Neil buried his head in the kid’s crotch. The dick disappeared in Neil’s mouth. (71-72)

This passage takes place when Neil and Wendy are about twelve years old, leaving the abuse about four years in the past. Brian and Neil present polar opposites that will ultimately converge. The abuse leaves Brian defenseless, while it forms a shell of hyper-defensive cruelty around Neil. However, that defensiveness also leads Neil to being brutally raped, and both Brian and Neil must come together in mutual support. Neil can never reassure himself that Coach Heider truly loved him because Neil yearned for exclusivity, and yet having been denied monogamy (as distressing as that concept might be in the context of child abuse), Neil becomes voracious in his own sexual appetites—a strategy that only works until Neil reaches the cusp of adulthood.

Neil and Brian both have the fundamentals of their personalities firmly in place prior to the abuse—again reminding us that they are essential, not existential children. Neil is often seen as repeating the abuse in his sexual contacts with men—but before he ever meets Coach Heider, Neil is an eight-year-old size queen, impressed when he sees that his mom is giving a blow job to a man with a bigger cock than the ones Neil had seen in his mother’s *Playgirl*. Neil’s mother doesn’t know that Neil is watching, but giving a blow job on a backyard swing is also not hiding

the act. And while Brian's obsession with UFOs is seen as a response to Coach Heider's abuse, he does see a UFO within the first pages of the book. Within the world of the novel, a UFO is not a desperate attempt to cover over the abuse, but rather a fairly reasonable explanation for his missing time and physical ailments.

The gender roles of the characters do not line up with anything like the discursive regime of heteronormativity. Brian's mother is a prison guard who spends a great deal of time in target practice. Coach Heider is a paragon of masculinity, invoking young Neil's immediate archetype of manhood, and yet he is a child molester with an exclusive interest in young boys. Neil is initially quite manly as a boy—the star player on his team. But as he ages, he becomes the sportscaster for the local adult baseball games, which acts as covers for his sexual contact with the team members. Despite his manly role as announcer, where he is accepted among the community of men, he is treated as an outcast in school because of his open embrace of his homosexual desires. Brian on the other hand is not coded as gay or sissy, but merely as a wimp. His primary protector is his older sister Deb. Brian is not exactly impotent, but he is unable to respond sexually to another person until he can recover from the sexual wound inflicted by Coach Heider.

Brian's feminine characteristics include hysterical fainting, and while his narcoleptic episodes are clearly figured as the result of repressing the memory of Heider's abuse, they also act as a self-defense mechanism against Brian's distant and cruel father. When his father pushes Brian to help him kill a turtle in a display of hunter-gatherer manliness, Brian's strength falters *before* his narcolepsy kicks in. Brian's foot is supposed to be keeping the turtle immobilized while his father decapitates it; Brian's father keeps demanding that Brian "step down harder" (12). The scene is gruesome. "The turtle was still snapping, its head nearly severed. My father

sawed farther into its flesh. I couldn't stand. My body weakened and my foot lifted from the shell" (12). The freed turtle attacks Brian's father, and the relationship of eater and eaten is briefly reversed: "Its jaw closed over the meat of my father's hand, its sharp edge razoring his skin" (12). After the turtle is killed, the violence turns to Brian. "My father lifted his arm. I knew he was going to hit me. Before I felt his hand, I passed out, crumpling like a dropped puppet" (12). Brian's hysterical response to the Coach's abuse actually enables him to avoid his father's violence. While Brian and Neil both fail at being masculine, they fail in complementary ways. Brian is unable to defend himself or inflict pain. Neil is remarkably able to defend and sustain himself, but his style is both cruel and bitchy. Neil also supports himself in the highly unmanly profession of prostitute.

Heim has struck an uneasy bargain with futurity. The adult versions of Brian and Neil will never arrive, and yet he pushes the narrative inexorably toward that arrival. In order for Brian to become an adult, he needs to recover the event of his childhood. In order for Neil to become an adult, he must reject his childhood understanding of the abuse. When Neil is hustling in New York, he turns down a three-way because "the three-way possibility reminded me of Brian.... this boy I'd shared with Coach, had managed to infect me somehow, to ruin my once beautiful memories" (240). Neil's effort to reassure himself of Coach's love has never been entirely stable, but it was a significant marker of his childhood self. His childhood interpretations begin to unravel in full force with Brian's return.

Neil's ability to reinterpret his childhood is contingent upon the brutal rape he undergoes in New York that ultimately displaces his love of Coach Heider. Neil accepts a proposition from a man who looks "fortyish, straight, slightly criminal" (241). The man takes Neil to Brighton Beach, where he forces him to get high on coke and rapes him before bludgeoning him with a

shampoo bottle. The rapist barrages Neil with a misogynist litany: “I’m going to give the slut what he needs” (244); “You’ll do what I tell you. That’s what a slut does” (244); “I know you want it” (245); “Gonna show you what that hole was made for” (246). Neil watches his own blood swirling down the drain, and after he passes out, he wakes up on the front lawn of the apartment building. Like Coach, the rapist narrates Neil’s experience of sex. Coach reassured Neil that he liked the sexual activity, while the rapist insists that Neil is intended for and in need of the sexual activity. Neil’s refusal of the rapist’s narrative unhinges Coach’s narrative.

Neil’s assault confronts him with an unwelcome identity: the child he has begun to outgrow. For the first time, Neil wants to purge himself of the sexuality that was imposed on him, and return to something that might be called innocence or purity. On his journey back to Kansas following the rape, he feels “like the person my mom had been when she’d barely survived her worst drinking days. ‘Mom,’ I said aloud. I almost put ‘I want my’ in front of it” (248). Just before the rape, Neil tries to avoid thinking of himself as a predator; the guilt of bringing Brian to Coach consumes him. After the rape, Neil has returned to innocence through victimhood, and by extension his childhood state. The childish is returned only to be fully and finally abandoned.

Brian has always known that recovering his childhood experience will allow him to discard his childhood. Brian recovers the events that he has been dissociating, and Neil fully surrenders his love for Coach. Together, Brian and Neil return to the house where the abuse took place. Brian narrates the section of the novel that includes the discovery of the house and entering it. Neil narrates the final chapter. As Brian actually returns to himself, it is not his voice that we hear, but rather Neil’s. At the end of Brian’s section, his own voice predicts what will come:

“It’s time,” I said. “Speak.” The forbidden moment had come; Neil would have to tell his story. Before he even opened his wounded mouth I knew what he would say. I knew it as conclusively as I knew my family, my self, and as he spoke it seemed as though his story had already ended, I was already tucked away in some warm and secure place, I was already remembering his words. (282)

Like the end of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the conclusion arrives before we are aware of it.

Brian’s voice leaves the novel even as it forecasts a future self we will not see.

The climax of the novel promises to be the simultaneous emergence of adulthood, memory, and recovery. Brian and Neil revisit the things that happened to them separately: Neil’s closeness to Coach Heider and Brian’s experience with Coach Heider in the woods. Brian is of one mind about the abuse, but Neil is divided—he recognizes Brian as a pure victim while his own experience is more complicated. Neil tells Brian what he has repressed. Neil describes the seduction: “...he took off my clothes.... I oohed and aahed to give the impression that what he was doing to me was the greatest thing I’d ever known.’ In a way, I thought it was. Or it had been, at one time, now only part of a memory” (287). Neil tells Brian about the sexual acts—how Coach kissed Brian, how Coach fellated Neil, and finally how they had both fisted Coach Heider. Brian begins to remember. When Neil omits mention of a nosebleed, Brian demands that Neil include it.

In a certain way, Heim has depicted Neil as an existential child who is replaced by a retroactive romantic child. As a child, Neil embraced sexual activity, but in moving to adulthood he revises that embrace. Brian’s movement to adulthood requires not revision but revelation. Neil continues to remind Brian of the abuse, revealing that Brian had fisted Coach, and that this was the moment when the dissociation occurred: “...when your arm pulled out of him you fell.

Weird. You fell face first into my knee, and when we twisted you up onto the couch your nose was shooting this geyser of blood” (290). Brian begins to punch himself in the face to reproduce the nosebleed, and after three blows, Neil pulls Brian’s hand away and cradles him in his arms. The blood becomes central to the narrative. “It was Brian’s blood, and for some reason, I knew it was pure. No other man I’d held in my arms—now, not even I—had blood this pure” (290). Brian tells Neil to continue, and Neil reveals that he took the five-dollar bill that Coach had given Brian and that Brian had let drop in his catatonic state. Neil gives Brian the five dollars he says he’d owed him “all these years” (291). Brian tears up the bill into tiny pieces and scatters them in the air. Finally, Brian relaxes into Neil’s embrace, declaring, “It’s over” (291).

The transition to adulthood is violent for both boys. Neil’s rape and Bryan’s self-inflicted blows are ways of preparing to jettison their boyhood selves. The narrative suggests that any gay man in a heteronormative world must regard manhood with suspicion. Heim confirms Tribunella’s paradigm that adulthood follows trauma: in the reenactment scene, the boys experience violence on a greater scale than they did at the hands of Coach Heider. But Heim allows the boys to disidentify with their childhood selves while withholding the emergence of their adult selves. Heim has stretched the space of boyhood significantly, allowing the sheltering space to contain the boys through the end of the novel.

The novel ends in a space of danger. Brian and Neil have broken into the house where Coach had abused them, but he no longer resides there; the family that currently lives in the house comes home to discover Brian and Neil in their living room as bloody, embracing intruders. The room becomes bright, and “It was a light that shone over our faces, our wounds and scars. It was a light so brilliant and white it could have been beamed from heaven, and Brian and I could have been angels, basking in it. But it wasn’t, and we weren’t” (292). Again, who it

is that Brian and Neil become is obscured. We see their angelic possibility, but know it isn't real. We know they have overcome, but what that looks like as they enter adulthood is hidden from view, continuing into the whitespace at the end of every novel.

Like Capote, Heim ends his novel with the protagonist(s) having achieved adulthood, but without that adulthood being revealed or portrayed. Heim engages multiple tropes of a futurity, but remains suspicious of those tropes. Much of the popularity of the novel has stemmed from the audience's concern for the boys, and in withholding the resolution of their crisis, Heim has attracted a huge audience of women as well as gay men (Camper). I argued that Cooper refuses adulthood for Ziggy in order to value the experience of his boyhood, but Heim has already engaged the cultures of therapy and recovery that Cooper refuses. Heim spares himself the burden of representing an adulthood inflected by abuse, even as he traces the path toward adulthood.

4. 2002: Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance*

Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance* has an almost farcical relationship to child molesting. Because the book was written under the discursive regime of homonormativity, there is less concern with having to isolate pedophiles from homosexuals, though pedophilic desire seems remarkably pervasive among the adults in the novel. The narrator, Jeremy Stull, is the assistant director at a summer camp. He observes boys constantly, and like Coach Heider, it is his job to make sure that they develop skills and mature. However, *Avoidance* has the reverse trajectory of *Mysterious Skin*, and follows Jeremy's disastrous realization that he has pedophilic desires—which may or may not make him a pedophile. Jeremy is initially indifferent to Max, the camper who, at fourteen, is the oldest of the molested boys in this study. Jeremy's desire for Max

awakens over the course of the novel, as Jeremy returns to his own childhood brush with pedophilia, and ultimately emerges both unmolested and unmolesting, but now cut off from the camp that had given his life meaning. Max is molested, though not by Jeremy, and subsequently disappears from the novel because of Jeremy's desire—bringing much pain to Jeremy.

There has been no scholarly treatment of *Avoidance* that I can find. The book is only ten years old, and it is not unusual for a decade to pass before works of literature become objects of study. *Avoidance* essentially pits a “good pedophile” (a pedophile who recognizes his own desires and does not act on them) against a “bad pedophile” (a pedophile who preys on children). This figure of the “good pedophile” has been increasingly prevalent in the last decade or so. A fair amount of attention was paid to the film *The Woodsman* (2004) for its rehabilitation of the pedophile (as played by Kevin Bacon) through the protagonist's recognition of other pedophiles and his steps to prevent abuse. Even a recent essay in *Gawker* compiled research suggesting that pedophilia is biological, and praising programs in Europe that allow pedophiles to contact hotlines that help them refrain from acting on sexual impulses. I suspect that *Avoidance* will come to be seen as a sort of early point in the genealogy of the “good pedophile” story. The novel was published just as homonormativity was gaining a wide footing, and in that clear separation of gay space from boy-loving space, Lowenthal's narrator marks a fairly new development.

Jeremy is highly focused on the transition from boy to man, and as a twenty-five-year-old grad student, his own manhood seems slightly suspended. When, as a camp counselor, Jeremy watches the boys being helped to their cabins by their parents, he observes, “The adults remained in charge for the first yards. But as paths steepened, complicating footholds, the boy nimbly asserted his domain. Like a creature released from captivity, he thrilled to his new habitat” (9).

Jeremy is proud of the campers who, like him, return as counselors. “Simon had been a runt ten-year-old in my maiden summer as a counselor, and now at nineteen, in his own counseling debut, displayed the jumpy zeal of a Seeing Eye dog in training” (10). Jeremy is as fascinated by boys being glorious in their boyhood as he is in their transition to being men.

Like most of the other boys in this study, Max is a source of radiant desire, with little mastery of his appeal. Max is flirtatious with Jeremy almost from their first meeting. Max breaks his wrist and has to be brought from the camp to a hospital. However, having wet his pants mildly, he requires a new pair of underwear and suggests that he take Jeremy’s. Jeremy objects that they’ll be too big, and Max “unleash[ed] the other half of his smile. ‘No prob,’ he said. ‘I wear everything big’” (18). Jeremy observes that Max wears size eleven or twelve shoes (17), and while they are modest—using the door as a screen for the actual underwear switch—sex hovers between them from the start, at least in Jeremy’s mind. Jeremy does not accompany Max to the hospital, though he does comment on Max’s lingering power over him: “There he was: piss and sneaker-sweat—unadulterated boyness—encrusted beneath my fingernails” (19).²⁹

Max seems simultaneously a boy and a knowing sexual subject. The other campers are sexual, but their sexuality isn’t “knowing.” They are inexperienced and boyishly brash. But Max announces his gay best friend early on, and has no embarrassment about it. When driving to the hospital, Max insists that Jeremy join him in making the popping noise when the song “Lollipop” comes on the radio. Jeremy demurs, but “Max forced my finger into my shock-widened mouth” (77). This is precisely the reverse of the scene in which Coach Heider inserts his finger into Neil’s mouth. Max is aggressive, but Jeremy misrecognizes his aggression as sexually inviting.

²⁹ If “piss and sneaker-sweat” exhibit the appeal of “unadulterated boyness,” I may have been too harsh on *Hogg*.

Max has markedly more agency than any of the boys in the other novels we have considered. Joel Knox is seen as a patriarchal failure for having surrendered his father's name, but "Max" has taken his name from his father, a suicide whose body was found by Max. Unlike Ziggy, Max can advocate for himself, and will ultimately call on Jeremy to defend him from his molester. Jeremy mistakes this agency for adulthood, and sees him as simultaneously seductive and innocent. "I marveled at his ability, despite the maturity life had forced on him, to be such an unmitigated *kid*" (75, emphasis in the original). It is Max's experience that first merges the distinctly sexual with the caretaking for Jeremy. After Max narrates how he discovered his father's corpse, Jeremy holds Max as he cries. Then the sexual intrudes:

I clutched him tighter, this ragged bruise of a boy, and without wanting to, wanting desperately not to, I imagined kissing his trembly lips.

Then I imagined more than a kiss.

Immediately I tried to erase the thought, but my groin churned with an obscene thrill of blood. I stiffened, unable to pull away. (89)

Jeremy returns to his own childhood in his desire for Max: "'Max,' I said, the way I'd always wanted my father to baby me" (90). Jeremy's erection is bound up not only in his desire for Max, but also in his own desire to have received attention as a boy. Jeremy offers a kind of reverse futurity, displacing Max with his own childhood self.

5. Pederastic Tutelage/Producing Pedophiles

While *Avoidance* exemplifies the new discursive regime of homonormativity, it also seems to bear out many of Foucault's observations in the *History of Sexuality*. Foucault contrasts the discursive regime of the confessional to the pederastic model of ancient Greece:

In Greece, truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another; sex served as a medium for initiations into learning. For us it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret. (61)

Foucault's idea of an ancient Greek initiation into learning through pederastic sex may be more Platonic mythologizing than historical reality, but when Ruff, the founder of the camp, sexually abuses Charlie, the abuse constitutes a kind of pederastic initiation in the criminal sense, with Charlie learning to be a child molester through his own experience of abuse (a cruel twist on the Aeschylean *pathei mathos*, "knowledge through suffering"). Jeremy is cut off from that knowledge, and when he witnesses this transmission again in the case of Max, it becomes abusive, and Jeremy insists on confession. Of course, Max initiates the confession. Jeremy and Max agree on the importance of expressing the individual secret. Still, for Jeremy, his own secret is his own desire, not the actions he has taken. As Jeremy puts it, "Scarless me: always almost, never quite" (101). It is his self-policing of desire that forms the core of the novel.

Confession is crucial in the West, because it suggests misrecognition. At the heart of contemporary gay culture is the confession of homosexuality: "coming out of the closet." The confession is a way of correcting a misperception or revealing an unseen truth. *Avoidance* hinges on Jeremy's misrecognitions. The turning point in the novel is the moment when Jeremy is about to confess his desire for Max, and believes that the desire is mutual. Jeremy and Max are alone in a canoe, and Max asks if he can tell Jeremy a secret:

I knew what he planned to say. He was beating me to the punch of confession: his attraction to boys, to men, to *me*.

"There's something..." he began and then drifted off.

My hand somehow landed on his knee. “It’s okay. Take your time. I know it’s hard.”

My palm rode his kneecap as it jittered manically, each bounce of the bone shifting his jeans. At the baggy crotch his still unzipped fly winked at me; it took everything I had not to look. Was he wearing my underwear, the pair he’d kept?

My fingers snuck an inch closer, two. If I reached inside I could obviate awkward words. I could spare both of us embarrassment.

....

“It was Charlie,” Max said. “He messed with me.” (119)

Jeremy, upon hearing Max’s confession, suddenly realizes that Max is not a mutual or appropriate sexual partner. In Max’s confession is Jeremy’s realization that Max is not “knowing” in the ways he has supposed; in fact, sexual contact is inherently abusive. Max is distressed and wants the abuse kept secret. Jeremy reports Charlie to Child Protective Services, and sets in motion an investigation. Jeremy tells Charlie about Max’s confession, and Charlie becomes a fugitive, living in the woods. Jeremy takes on an eloquence that Humbert Humbert would find purple: “Rain-ruined paths could be patched or replaced; what happened to a ruined boy?” (123).

I ultimately find this novel to be quite funny—in large part because it reverses so many tropes that have come to be accepted regarding sexual abuse and sexual abusers. Jeremy is unrecognizable in the portraits of most pedophiles, in which pedophilia is a totalizing trait to which all other aspects of a personality can be traced. Jeremy has not structured a life in which he has access to the objects of his desire; he is shocked by the desire that emerges within him for one of the boys in his care. Similarly, Jeremy is traumatized by the fact that he is neither molested nor molesting. Both as a child and as an adult, he misses out on the sex he wants most,

and yet he also knows that what he wants is harmful. His sorrow at his lack of fulfilled desire is in equal measure to his moral sense of himself as having done nothing wrong.

6. Collapsing Futurity

In every other book that I have considered, the molested boy has held the center of gravity. In *Avoidance*, Max is peripheral to Jeremy, and when he disappears, it is simply because he has left the narrative. Max is not on a trajectory toward adulthood. Unlike the other novels, which have resisted futurity by refusing to supplant the boy with the man, *Avoidance* offers a clear portrait of Charlie, a molested boy who grew up.

Lowenthal portrays Jeremy and Charlie as both children and adults. Unlike the other authors in this study, Lowenthal does not need to be protective of their boyhoods. With the onset of homonormativity, the homophobic power of futurity is lessened and there is less concern that gay men and pedophiles will be lumped together. Jeremy and Charlie are a matched set—born a month apart, and devoted to Camp Ironwood above all else. They had their first years as campers together, and they begin the novel as the number one and number two of the camp. Camp founder Ruff has recently retired, and Jeremy is distraught at being passed over as his successor in favor of Charlie. When Charlie and Jeremy were boys, just pubescent, Ruff took them on a special camping trip that ended with Charlie and Ruff having sex inside a lean-to, while Jeremy listened outside. Jeremy was and remains jealous. “All evening, I’d fantasized about Charlie. Now I realized how much I also longed for Ruff” (129). Jeremy masturbates as he listens to the pair, and their congress ends with Ruff sealing Charlie’s ejaculate in a Ziploc bag. Ruff keeps it as a souvenir.

Like Brian and Neil in *Mysterious Skin*, Jeremy and Charlie serve as mirror images and foils. They have the same desire for Ruff and the same desire for Max, though only Charlie is allowed to indulge those desires; he is rewarded in the first case and punished in the latter. The novel ends with Charlie having disappeared into the woods to live as a fugitive, and it is tempting to shoehorn him into the same category as Max. To declare Charlie a boy who never reached adulthood would make him fit my paradigm. However, Charlie is a boy and a man.

Charlie is precisely the specter who has haunted each of these texts: the molested boy who grows up to molest. Lowenthal does not exactly present molestation as a pedagogy of pedophilia; Jeremy's lack of contact with Ruff reassures that pedophilic desire is innate, rather than learned. However, in both Charlie and Jeremy, Lowenthal finds a relationship between man and boy that is not predicated on abandoning the boyhood self. In many theorizations of manhood, the boy must restructure his relationship to his past in order to abandon a fundamental self-conception of his childhood. Charlie and Jeremy do not restructure themselves. Their boyhoods at Ironwood turn into adulthoods at Ironwood. There is a seamless transition between their lives as campers, camp counselors and camp directors. Charlie's sexual activity with Max is a precise re-enactment of Charlie's sexual activity with Ruff.

This is consonant with current understandings of child molesters. In psychologist Carla van Dam's 2001 book *Identifying Child Molesters*, one of the hallmarks of a pedophile is the treatment of children as peers, rather than as children. "For many of the molesters interviewed, this tendency to interact with children as peers reflected their own arrested development. They were themselves still operating at the emotional level of a child" (152). Jeremy has the same trajectory as Charlie, but is able to recognize himself as an adult.

In homonormativity, gay men have access to unequivocal manhood. *Avoidance* marks a moment at which the (proto-)gay boy does not have to be discarded in order for a man to emerge. The space that Capote, Baldwin, Cooper, Delany, and Heim so carefully protected for boys can at last be carried forward into adulthood. What I have called a collapsed futurity means that the boy-self is no longer discarded in favor of the man-self. What is disturbing about *Avoidance*'s new template is that this harmony comes at the expense of actual boys. The two adults who have not transformed their boyhood selves are both pedophiles. Max is ultimately denied the care he could have received from Jeremy because of Jeremy's pedophilic desire. The maturation process that Tribunella traced, in which trauma and loss lead to the inauguration of adulthood, cannot be abandoned without consequence. The continued embrace of boyhood into manhood, at least as Lowenthal presents it, is ultimately bad for boys.

Conclusion: Radiant Abjection and Disappearing Boys

In offering the “elevator pitch” version of this dissertation, I say that I have shown that homophobic and homophilic discourse have conspired to prevent the emergence of molested boys into adult subjectivity in the postwar gay novel. I stand behind this assertion, but do these six novels truly count as proof? And for what reasons have these discourses conspired? Certainly, novels are full of child characters who do not become adults, and this is not cause for further examination; novels are full of characters who have been molested, which is also not cause for a particular anxiety. So why am I so focused on this set of texts, and how can I really insist that a subjectivity is “missing”—suggesting a lack, rather than an absence?³⁰ Can a subject ever truly be missing from a novel except in scare quotes? In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault insists that a silence is also a statement, but in Foucault’s failure to define the statement, does he not also fail to define a silence? What is the difference between “missing” and “not within the scope of this project”?

My argument is ultimately that homophobic discourse rejects, abjects, and despises the molested boy because he reverses the terms on which heteropatriarchy has long structured itself: penetration = dominance, receptivity = submission. Homosexuals offer a double rebuff to this structure. First, homophilic discourse valorizes the penetrated status, and locates reception as an act of pleasure, rather than as an act of submission or defeat.³¹ Second, the “power-bottom” receives with a force that is hard to consider submissive, and the bottom is often figured as the

³⁰ I take this distinction between a “lack” and an “absence” from Dominick LaCapra and his work on trauma theory.

³¹ Within BDSM discourses reception is still marked strongly as submission, even to the point of slavery, but it is a valorized position, and one prized as a validation of the self, rather than a defeat or loss.

more powerful partner. Homosexuals pose an obvious threat to the patriarchal order.³² In *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, Suzanne Pharr diagnosed this as the plinth on which homophobia rests.

Homophobic discourse, which one might find currently embodied on the websites of the secular NARTH (the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality) and the religious FRC (the Family Research Council), binds gay men and molested boys in two ways. The first is in the belief that molested boys become gay men, and the second is the belief that gay adults are prone to molesting boys. Consider NARTH's position statement on pedophilia:

Early sexual experiences with an older, same-sex person are commonly reported by our homosexual clients. And some studies do suggest that such experiences may be more common among homosexuals than heterosexuals; in proportion to their numbers, that is, homosexuals may be more likely to sexually abuse a same-sex minor.³³ (“NARTH Position Statements,” par 11)

It is no mistake to say that in this discursive regime, gay man=molested boy. The slippage in NARTH's short paragraph is shocking. The paragraph opens by suggesting that homosexual adults seeking to change their sexual orientation report high levels of molestation as children, while suggesting a causal link between molestation by an adult of the same sex and becoming a gay adult, before using these reports and the link as evidence that homosexuals may be more likely to molest children. NARTH's mission statement calls itself a “scientific organization that

³² As Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, patriarchy *does not need* homophobia as a central structure; however, in post-Classical Western patriarchy, homophobia is a constitutive element (to the point of reading homophobia *back* into Greek and Roman texts). Part of the onset of “homonormativity” is the ability of gay activists to restructure patriarchy in ways that homosexuality is not a threat to patriarchy, which is in turn distressing to queer theorists who find homonormativity a noxious state precisely because it does not position itself as an enemy of the patriarchy.

³³ This structure of contact is purposefully ungendered.

offers hope to those who struggle with unwanted homosexuality” (par. 1), and vociferously denies being homophobic or anti-gay, while insisting that homosexuality is an abnormal condition that can be changed, and that same sex households are less than ideal for raising children. The website is filled with slightly absurd disavowals and qualifications. Statements like “Tolerance must also be extended to those people who take the principled, scientifically supportable view that homosexuality works against our human nature” (par. 20) ignores the fact that this is not a principled or scientifically supportable view. No one should confuse plurality with consenting to be bullied.

The Family Research Council (FRC), tracked as a Hate Group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, “Family Research Council”), focuses not on converting homosexuals, but on demonizing them. Unlike NARTH’s secular insistence on “junk science” (again, as defined by the SPLC), FRC is religious in nature, “Advancing Faith, Family, and Freedom” (FRC “homepage”). The FRC’s “Information Analysis” uses boldface and bullet points to insist on the fact that homosexuals are essentially crypto-pedophiles:

- **Pedophiles are invariably males:** Almost all sex crimes against children are committed by men.
- **Significant numbers of victims are males:** Up to one-third of all sex crimes against children are committed against boys (as opposed to girls).
- **The 10 percent fallacy:** Studies indicate that, contrary to the inaccurate but widely accepted claims of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, homosexuals comprise between 1 to 3 percent of the population.

- **Homosexuals are overrepresented in child sex offenses:** Individuals from the 1 to 3 percent of the population that is sexually attracted to the same sex are committing up to one-third of the sex crimes against children.
- **Some homosexual activists defend the historic connection between homosexuality and pedophilia:** Such activists consider the defense of "boy-lovers" to be a legitimate gay rights issue.
- **Pedophile themes abound in homosexual literary culture:** Gay fiction as well as serious academic treatises promote "intergenerational intimacy."
- **MALE HOMOSEXUALS COMMIT A DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF CHILD SEX ABUSE CASES** (par. 4-10)

Of their seven claims about homosexuals, six consist of accusing homosexuals of being or supporting pedophiles. In the discursive regime of homophobia, the precondition of a homosexual adulthood is a sexual wound in childhood; there are no gay children, nor are there proto-gay children or even gay adults. Homophobia insists that all gay adults are just unhealed heterosexuals—and of course, in this discourse, being a victim does not preclude being a predator. It may even be the precondition of predation.

Homophilic discourse, and surely these novels are all in the category of homophilic discourse, has long had to push back against these two oft-repeated claims from homophobic discourse: (1) that homosexuality is always the result of childhood sexual abuse and (2) that homosexuals are themselves perpetrators of child molestation, whether through “recruitment,” rape, or simple visibility. So how can homophilic discourse offer up a molested boy, while resisting the totalizing logic of molested boy=gay man? Certainly, it would be cruel to jettison wounded children from gayness entirely, and yet, to represent these molested boys as gay adults

would affirm the logic of homophobia. To simply refuse to represent *any* adulthood avoids the problem. To a very large extent, I think that these molested boys are refused their (gay) adulthoods because to let them grow up would confirm *both* of the claims that structure homophobia's conflation of gay men and pedophiles. Many of the boys in this study remain ambiguous in their sexuality—an ambiguity that feels the natural(ized) province of the adolescent and the pre-adolescent. Unlike the bildungsroman, which traces the character from childhood so we might see the formation of an adult, these novels allow their young protagonists simply to stop before they reach adulthood.

Perhaps with homonormativity freeing queer authors from the resistance of homophobia, we will see less anxiety over the adulthood these boys could discover. But how could one put the lie to homophobia's insistence that gay man=molested boy and molested boy=gay man, if the boys were first molested and then represented as gay adults? Perhaps we ought not be surprised that a primary strategy that has been in place for 60 years is simply not to represent the adult when the molested boy comes first.

But while this hypothesis is compelling, it does not feel complete. I think there is also a question of abjection. Children have long been a symbol of purity and futurity. Even before the Romantic child appeared on the scene, Shakespeare was urging his loved boy to make a child as copy for the future; it's hard to distinguish Shakespeare's conception of a child from his conception of that child's parent, so closely is the futurity of the parent embodied in the child. Shakespeare's imaginary would seem to contain his own threat/retrenchment to patriarchy.

Certainly, for centuries, child molesting and homosexuality have both been despised under the rubric of non-procreative sex, but both child molesting and homosexuality pose problems of futurity. If a central cultural fantasy of the child is the reproduction of the parent in

the child, then the alteration of that child, or damaging of the child, will fundamentally alter the reproduction of the parent—and depending on the closeness of identification, the parent himself. Adult identity can be as threatened by the impure injection of the child molester's predation as the child's is. This fear of the alteration of identity is the very foundation of Julia Kristeva's articulation of abjection. In the logic of "gay panic," the homosexual's very presence (or discovery through revelation or flirtation) is cause for such a crisis of identity that the "victim" must kill the revealed queer in order to restore his own sense of self. Both the pedophile and the homosexual can play out as the abject to normative identity within a homophobic and heteronormative discursive regime; the pedophile disrupts the child, while the homosexual fails to produce a child. In both cases, the threat to futurity and reproduction is beyond the "ick factor" of non-procreative sex.

In Kristevan abjection, abjection is recognized by the impulse to purge. The reason for the purgative impulse is the fear of the abjected object's transformative power. You may drink that raw sewage, but it will transform you into a sick and wretched person; your body conspires to keep the sewage at bay. Certainly, very few people would embrace the transformation that cholera brings about on the body. But as abjection is abstracted further and further from the literally sickening, the question of what causes the purgative impulse becomes less clearly answerable. What transformation is feared? What would happen to the supporter of Israel who allowed himself to listen to the suffering of the Palestinians? What happens to the gay man who listens carefully to the ex-gay? In refusing that which is "Not me... abject and abjection are my safeguards" (Kristeva 2). The homosexual is the abject of heteropatriarchy *until* the onset of homonormativity. The pedophile is the abject of the homonormative gay man.

Kristeva opens her book by using the example of a skin on the surface of the milk because “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.” But far from the sewage that clearly threatens bodily integrity and health, the skin is “harmless, thin as a sheet of paper, pitiful as a nail pairing—I experience a gagging sensation.... ‘I’ want none of that element.... ‘I’ expel it” (3). Kristeva questions the integrity of the self that experiences abjection, because abjection threatens to restructure the self and to reconstitute its boundaries. But “abjection” refers to a process in the self, as well as the object that instigates that process. In threatening the boundary of the self, the self is always-already altered by the threat. “But since food is not the ‘other’ for ‘me’... I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (3). For Kristeva, the parents who offer the milk with a skin are the “other.” There is a triangulation, and in defining herself against the parents (they do not mind the skin; I do mind the skin), the abjection creates an erasure and a refusal of the self. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). Over and over, the pedophile threatens identity, system, and order. The child’s identity is altered by sexual contact; the systems of education are overthrown, and the chronology that governs our notions of maturation is smashed.

We have seen these disruptions and contaminations in every novel. In James Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head*, the man who molests Arthur remains a looming shadow—and even the gay order that Crunch and Arthur construct is overthrown by Julia, seeking a way out of the incestuous chaos her life has become. Arthur falls victim to two pedophiles: the man who molests him and Julia’s father. In Samuel R. Delany’s *Hogg*, Cocksucker never attends school, and has no family or social structure beyond the street, highway, and truck stop. In Dennis Cooper’s *Try*, Ziggy does nothing to protect Robin from ending up a desecrated corpse in a

shallow grave. In fact, Ziggy's very ability to make it through a school day seems a remarkable feat of will. In Michael Lowenthal's *Avoidance*, Max could find order with Jeremy, but for Jeremy's confession of his pedophilic desire. In Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin*, the only direction in Brian's and Neil's lives is toward a return to the moment at which they were disrupted by entering Coach Heider's orifices. Identity, system, and order are among the first and longest lasting casualties of those affixing their sexual attentions on children. Only Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is moved toward order by a pedophilic presence. Because Joel's molester is a woman outside his circle of friends and family, she forces him to choose a particular order and identity. He is shattered by Miss Wysteria, and he remakes himself, if not exactly in Randolph's image, at least into a denizen of Randolph's world. Only Joel's abjection has a hero in the wings to restore the boundaries of his subjectivity.

The molested boy suffers the fate of abjection, although prior to the molestation, he is not abject. Abjection, by its very nature, is radiant. The subject's very knowledge of the abject's existence constitutes its attack on the subject. Pedophilia has tried to speak for itself, and I will soon attend to that history, but for now I will say that advocacy for pedophilia has not succeeded. "Pedonormativity" may be—at least according to Kincaid and Mohr—the systemic structure we live within, but only under the guise of other entertainment. "Relational Pornography," the term used in criminology to describe the eroticizing of something that is not overtly sexual (Holmes & Holmes 117), is certainly all around us. *Mysterious Skin* is at pains to point out that a child's sexual desire is not an occasion for adult action.³⁴ The child molester is perhaps the most abject

³⁴ Disturbingly, the rape scene from *Mysterious Skin* is included in J.H. Blair's anthology *The Hot Spot: The Best Erotic Writing in Modern Fiction*. The scene ends with a john bludgeoning Neil in the face with a shampoo bottle. If the rape scene is considered arousing by some, I can only surmise that the molestation scenes would have fans of an erotic nature as well. "Relational pornography" is everywhere.

of identities in contemporary society—not the other against whom one might respectably identify one’s own behavior; but the monster, who cannot be understood and is beyond empathy.

What has interested me most, and what drove me to undertake this study, is the way that abjection cruelly radiates out toward the molested child. In part, the child’s adult futurity is absorbed into that space of radiant abjection. As LaCapra describes the process of contact with trauma, there is numbness and objectification, but empathy can counteract the negative results of distance (39). While my first hypothesis suggested that the authors simply occlude or ignore adulthood in order to avoid a homophobic logic, the second hypothesis is less salutary. The radiant abjection of the molester tars the boys it touches, and it turns out that the soiled purity and distressing futurity of the boys turns into a punishment that isolates these boys to the point of disappearance. In the second hypothesis, the boys are not respectfully left alone, but rather actually jettisoned, tossed into the void because they become too clearly attached to what they have endured. In considering that void, I had hoped that I might bring empathy to the spaces that were the most upsetting. There is not simply an absence of the narrative’s continuation; rather, there is a *lack* where their adult subjectivities should appear. In looking at the narrative arc of *Mysterious Skin* we see that something is missing. And this absence continues through many other novels I have not considered in the study—most notably Jim Grimsley’s *Dream Boy* (1995), in which the main character may or may not be dead, and the protagonist is literally split into pieces that cannot be rejoined.

Consider, for a moment, George Hamilton on the *View* in 2008. During the show, he revealed that he had an affair with his twenty-eight-year-old stepmother when he was a twelve-year-old. Hamilton is bragging, but the hosts insist that he was molested, rightly pointing out that his stepmother had committed a crime. The women of the *View* demand that Hamilton recognize

himself in the guise of a victim, but Hamilton insists that his identity contains no such visage. The narrative is clear in its facts, but disputed in its meaning. Hamilton insists that his stepmother was a conquest, the first woman he bedded. The women insist that his stepmother was a child molester and that she victimized Hamilton. The syntax shows how clearly we conceive sexuality in terms of subject and object. Sexuality is clearly a verb, and it is not *stative*, but *transitive*. The real question is whether Hamilton was the agent or the recipient of the action.

But this would never have been a question had Hamilton been seduced by a stepfather, rather than a stepmother. Think of Humbert Humbert's frustration that Lolita has turned out to be precisely who he tried to make her into. But Hamilton insists that his adult subjectivity *emerges* at the point of first sexual contact. This is an origin story: he has become an adult; he has become a desiring subject. But for the boys in this study—even including Cocksucker and Neil—their sexuality is an object sexuality.³⁵ Is there any better way to understand their position than with the colloquial, "They got fucked?" Sexuality is never divorced from power, and these kids are unable to be shown in their adult iterations because they have been sucked into the vortex at the heart of a monstrous identity. At the heart of the sex-power nexus are the questions posed to futurity by the mutually receptive possibilities of gay sexuality. Is being a bottom the same as being a victim or receptacle? Is the rectum a grave? What can Joel grow up to be? To what identity can he aspire? Randolph's? A femme queen voguing like a butch queen? Androgyny realness? Does he become Newton Arvin hiding in a phone booth during a raid on a gay club? Truman Capote drunkenly alienating everyone who ever loved him?

³⁵ This may pose the biggest distinction between gay and lesbian accounts. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison details the extensive ways in which pre-adolescent Bone adopts a sado-masochistic fantasy life in order to re-appropriate the shame of her stepfather's sexual and physical abuse. Bone, in fact, works hard to become a sexual agent, rather than just the object of her stepfather's lust.

In Chapter One, I quoted Lee Edelman saying that “the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture... is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end” (19). Queerness is an end to futurity in that the actively queer child is no longer a future adult, but a full (and guilty) person. The act of molesting, in addition to any psychological harm, also inflicts a symbolic expulsion from innocence, from childhood, and from a cultural notion of futurity. Similar to Stockton Bond’s theorization of childhood as a series of postponements, Edelman shows that futurity is not simply a symbolic bat with which to beat adult homosexuals; there is grave danger for any younger-than-adult person who is expelled from that futurity.

Another problem might be one that Ken Corbett brings to the fore in his 2009 book *Boyhoods*. A gay child-psychologist, Corbett often feels like the sympathetic voice that Sedgwick called for in “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay.” In his chapter on boys diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder, he is careful about how he discusses the general category of “trans.” In perhaps one of the most sympathetic readings of queer futurity I have ever read, Corbett writes:

...we have no “archive of feelings,”³⁶ and without such an archive it is hard to bring the horizon of these boys’ adulthoods into sight.... This matter of a trans future provokes considerable anxiety; trans fantasies, trans states, trans acts, trans bodies are consistently met with fear, and with prognostications laced with fear. We have yet to find a way to speak of trans states... outside a discourse marked by a split between phobia and advocacy.... the vast majority of these children move on to lives that cannot be measured by the norms that mark how we

³⁶ Corbett credits this notion to Ann Cvetkovich’s book of the same name—I have considered that book elsewhere in this dissertation, and will treat the term as being self-explanatory here.

typically understand maturity and well being: genders that match a masculine/feminine binary, heterosexuality, marriage, child rearing, and typical bourgeois citizenship. (124-5)

In speaking of the post-homonormative transgendered child, Corbett's words seem equally applicable to the pre-homonormative queer child. The irony is that one would look precisely to fiction to build that "archive" of feelings—and for the gay boy, growing to gay adulthood, a realm of such work exists. But for the molested boy in the gay novel, it seems that our authors had to first lay groundwork before they could build. That the boy cannot emerge into an adult makes sense in the light of the multiple modes of evaluation that are in circulation. Homophobic and homophilic discourses conspire to keep the molested boy's adult subjectivity out of view. Both respect and fear are in operation as these subjectivities are occulted from sight.

The "problem" of the molested boy is also much like the one Susan Sontag traces in *Illness as Metaphor*. Where do we draw the dividing line between the problem and its host? For Sontag, the question is whether we can ever truly keep the lines clear between the cancer and the person with the cancer. For this study, the question is whether we can ever truly keep the lines clear between the molester and the molested. In a courtroom, most certainly. In fiction? In the social imaginary? Most certainly not. Within the boundaries of "ideology" these mash-ups of problem and solution are constant. The police drama loves to stress that those who police are intimately tied to those who need policing. The work of language ties our victims to their victimizers, work as we might to extricate the two.

It is also the case that our knowledge of molested boys is somewhat lacking. Boys and girls' sexuality has been very differently constructed. As Rind notes, we have adopted the (father-daughter) incest model for boys. In Michel Dorais's *Don't Tell*, he lists six coping

strategies engaged by boys who have survived sexual abuse: 1) accepting the role of victim, 2) identifying with the molester and molesting to find the molester's pleasure, 3) punitively molesting in order to inflict the molested's pain on others, 4) rescuing other boys from molestation, 5) eroticizing the abuse through S/M, and 6) working to appear completely normal. This encompasses almost everything—the abuse will be eroticized or not; the boy will identify with the molester or not; the boy will abuse other boys or not; the boy will protect other boys or not. Dorais focuses on the link between being abused by a man and being perceived as homosexual. Dorais points out that the taboo on homosexuality prevents the boys from telling, and writes, “Perhaps sociologist Christophe Gentaz is correct when he writes that homophobia acts like a psychological condom on their manhood” (124). One wonders how it is that a metaphor demonizing the safe sex practices that have now led to the survival of at least two generations of gay men (myself included) offers the greatest insight into the experience of molested boys. Can we look forward to a day when homonormativity can remove the “psychological condom” and molested boys can embrace their manhood through psychologically barebacking with their manhoods?

Happiness/The Hidden Track

I end by considering one more text featuring molested boys: Todd Solondz's 1998 film *Happiness*. In this movie, the most sympathetic character is a psychologist and child molester named Bill Maplewood. While all of the characters are monstrous, Maplewood alone seems aware of his own monstrosity. Maplewood's pedophilia is revealed when he masturbates in the backseat of his car to an issue of *Tigerbeat*. The initial object of his affection is his son's proto-gay friend Johnny Grasso. Like Brian and Joel, he is willowy and unathletic, the sort of sissy

described by Eve Sedgwick—in fact, to be honest, he reminds me (both morphologically and behaviorally) of myself at the same age. Evan Silverberg, the actor playing Johnny Grasso, was 14 at the time of the filming, although he appears much younger. Bill drugs Johnny with a tuna fish sandwich and rapes the boy while he is unconscious.

When the boy discovers blood in his feces, he tells his mother, and he is immediately taken to the hospital. The adults know that he has been drugged and raped, but the boy is entirely unaware of what all the fuss is about, taking his “illness” as something to be reported and left to adults to handle.

When Mr. Grasso comes to see Johnny in the hospital, what infuriates the father is *only partially* that the boy has been molested. He is far more upset that his son *doesn't seem to mind*. While the adults ask Johnny to describe the details of the past evening, he realizes that they are looking for the moment at which he was harmed. He says, “No one hurt me.” Mr. Grasso bursts out, “What do you mean, ‘No’? You’ve been fucking raped!” at which point the son realizes a double trauma: both the trauma of being raped (of which he had been unaware), and the trauma of his father’s disgust at his very unawareness, which also functions as a sign for his impending homosexuality and his father’s awareness of it. Mr. Grasso, alpha jock patriarch, literally sends his son into the black hole of the queer object. Mr. Grasso reveals the knowledge that Johnny Grasso lacks—that he is a sissy and that he has been raped.

This would seem a return to lax attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s—Johnny Grasso is psychically untouched by the abuse; but the boy is also entirely unaware of it, and insistent that he has not been hurt or damaged. However, Solondz is clear that the boy’s body is severely impacted. Bill Maplewood’s second victim is never on screen, but is clearly raped while conscious. The care that Maplewood takes to prevent Johnny Grasso from suffering seems

heavily weighted toward self-preservation. When Solondz returned to the characters of *Happiness* (embodied by different actors) eleven years later in the film *Life During Wartime*, Johnny Grasso did not return. According to imdb.com, this was Evan Silverberg's only role, ever.

David Gilmore's foundational text of masculinity studies insists that manhood is accomplished through successfully passing some kind of test, and that in order for manhood to exist, there must be adult males who *are not men*. Elizabeth Badinter's formulation of manhood similarly requires that there be adult males who *are not men*. Kilmartin and Lynch define manhood as being thought masculine by other men, again reminding us that some adult males remain outside of manhood. Gilroy's formulation, like Kilmartin and Lynch's, is structural and posits that each culture will have its own test for manhood, while Badinter's formulation is specifically Western. But in each case, it seems clear that all the protagonists of these novels are both failing and being failed—those who should protect and guide them are initiating them into sexuality too early and in destructive ways; those whom they should refuse, they embrace. The fear and fantasy that hovers around each novel is the fear and fantasy of introjection, that each boy will make himself into the molester.

In a certain way, it seems only honest to leave these boys alone—to place them on the precipice of an adult identity without the burden of representing the consequences of molestation to queer boys who grow up. In one sense, there is nothing crueler than the ledge these children fall from, the open chasm that yawns precisely where they would enter adulthood. But in another sense, not portraying their adulthood saves them from exemplifying a particular identity. These novels were all received before efforts like Dan Savage's "It Gets Better"—and if we are honest—we often know that it does not get better. One of the oddest failures of the "It Gets Better Campaign" is how many young men have killed themselves *after* making an "It Gets

Better” video. I often found myself wishing that Truman Capote could stay his biography at the moment of his beauty and disappear like a River Phoenix or James Dean, and not live out a corpulent decline rivaled only by Marlon Brando and Orson Welles.

We are living—as all people do—through an odd set of contradictions. The gay rights movement has had major successes, though they are mostly successes that affirm a neo-conservative agenda, securing us a place in the military-industrial complex, a place in the procreative nuclear family, and removing us from the purview of the criminal justice system and the mental health system. In her analysis of the Women’s Rights Movement (essentially coterminous with second wave feminism), Gail Collins comes to the depressing conclusion that while women gained access to the rights and positions of men, the struggle did not transform the systems to which they gained access. They joined the systems of capitalism, exploitation and government; they did not transform them. Similarly, the term “homonormativity” has come to name the ways in which (openly) gay men and women have unprecedented access to the institutions that once oppressed, excluded, and incarcerated them, and yet this has not fundamentally altered those institutions for those who remain oppressed, excluded, and incarcerated.

Ken Corbett writes of his “efforts to hold open a therapeutic space wherein we might see these boys more fully” (125). I hope that this dissertation has contributed to opening that space.

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