

Queer Theory, Science Fiction, and the Dreamed-for Child

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The symbolic landscape of the twentieth century United States is a very strange place. The media useful to the production of these symbols multiplied with startling speed as the century progressed, and the theoretical lenses through which cultural scholars viewed those symbols followed so closely upon one another that figuring out which one was currently in vogue was nearly as difficult as penetrating the prose used to describe it. In this essay, I will bring together three of the most dynamic and influential aspects of twentieth-century US literary culture: science fiction, queer theory, and the image of the child. As queer theory hints that it will, queer science fiction offers an extraordinary new way of dreaming up the symbolic child. As scholarship on the image of the child and its cultural uses demonstrates, queer science fiction struggles – often very effectively – both to enact the potential of homocentric thought and to imagine a symbolic child who can help real adults and real children avoid seeing each other as antonymous.

We will begin with the theory before moving on to the literature. Although queer theory is famously difficult to define, its priority is a battle against heteronormativity. This means that queer theory very often works to reveal heterocentric thought and standards as thought and standards in their own right, rather than the invisible defaults against which everything else is defined. To “queer” a text, therefore, is to highlight or even undo its blithe complaisance in a heteronormative status quo. To queer a culture is not very different: queer cultural scholars point out the quietly heteronormative powers of marriage,¹ sexual shame,² and – as we will study at length below – an insistence on difference. The revelation of such heterocentricity begins the cultural work of undoing an oppressive cultural status quo.

Queer theory’s great promise in the study of the literary child is its antagonism to the rigid boundaries it claims characterise heterocentric culture, implicit lines of difference between (for instance) male and female, masculine and feminine, same and other. For Lee Edelman, the anxiety with which these boundaries are charged is very nicely summed up in the example of the mid-century public bathroom. In his analysis of the cultural furore over Walter Jenkins’ arrest for homosexual activities in a Washington toilet, Edelman locates a public fear over the violation of those increasingly important boundaries:

The American bathroom in 1964 constituted an unacknowledged ideological

battleground in the endless - because endlessly anxious - campaign to shore up "masculinity" by policing the borders at which sexual difference is definitionally produced, the borders at which inside and outside, same and different, self and other are the psychic stakes at risk.³

And one of the leading threats to the continent bourgeois body was homosexuality, which became conflated and endlessly reimagined as a potentially invasive force. In the middle of the century, as imaginary communists peeked out from every corner, homosexuality and foreignness overlapped in the popular imagination, as Edelman has pointed out, saying,

If the reactionary aftermath of World War II saw a massive intensification of political efforts to demonize homosexual behavior (which had, of course, gained new visibility in the armed services during the war), those efforts promoted the popular perception of gay sexuality as an alien presence, an unnatural because un-American practice, resulting from the entanglement with foreign countries - and foreign nationals - during the War.⁴

As with the individual body, so with the domestic family, "safely ensconced in a home that was detached and privately owned".⁵ And as with the family, so with the nation-state, all the more frightening to hetero centre because, as Edelman's comments on a famous 1964 article in *Life* magazine reporting on the secret (to heterosexuals) lives of homosexuals made clear, homosexuals were as hard to identify as Soviet spies:

In conjuring homosexuality as an often invisible yet potentially omnipresent concern, the magazine evokes the Cold War equation of homosexuality with Communist infiltration and subversion of the State - an equation made explicit by the words with which Ernest Havemann's article begins: "Do the homosexuals, like the Communists, intend to bury us?"⁶

In the public imagination of post-War America, homosexuality was as un-American, and as dangerous an outside force, as Communism itself.

As psychology became increasingly powerful in the United States following the Second World War, it too became a site for the production and protection of boundaries. The outcry over psychology's labelling of homosexuality as a disease in seek of a cure is well-known,⁷ but the field's heterocentricity - as defined by an insistence on inviolable boundaries and continent minds - goes beneath such explicit prejudices. Even near the end of the century, self psychologist Arnold Goldberg was defining "the problem of perversion" in exactly these terms. The thesis for his book by that name relies heavily on metaphors of containment and continence: "Normal sexual activity requires a stable and cohesive self and can be achieved only in the context of that structure. Sexuality is thus the act of a strong and stable self, resulting from the vigor of a consolidated self".⁸ Although Goldberg is careful not to nominate perversion "as a foreign intrusion in the person",⁹ his description of perversion and the analyst's ideal approach to getting "a handle on" it is "to circle it slowly to see its changing shapes and forms. Through the method of multiple perspectives, one can start to break down the problem into particular areas, slowly taking it apart without destroying or eliminating it".¹⁰ What Goldberg suggests, therefore, is the careful pinning down of perversion, watching it from far

enough back to be able to see it all no matter what shape it takes, and, in effect, enacting difference *against* it, using “multiple perspectives” to know it.

Because “diversity” and “difference” have become watchwords since the Civil Rights Movement, it may sound strange for queer theorists to criticise them. But to queer theory, heterocentricity’s commitment to diversity and difference is not all that it claims to be. Instead, its goal is to demarcate, label, and enclose difference in order to colonise, not preserve, it – even if that means using difference to accomplish those ends. As Bersani has put it, “A massively heteroized perception of the universal gives urgency to a narcissistic project that would reduce – radically, with no surplus whatsoever of alterity – the other to the same”.¹¹ Thus psychology still aims at curing homosexuality, or, to put it in Bersani’s terms, at reducing homosexuals to heterosexuals. In effect, this move is pre-emptive in nature, most anxiously in the case of heterocentricity face-to-elusive-face with homosexuality. Bersani spells this out in a comparison of homophobia and racism:

Unlike racism, homophobia is entirely a response to an internal possibility.... Blacks are a dangerous and inferior race[, claim the racists,] and they may destroy us. But not even racists could ever fear that blacks will seduce them into becoming black. Homophobia, on the other hand, is precisely that: to let gays be open about their gayness, to give them equal rights, to allow them to say who they are and what they want, is to risk being recruited.¹²

It is important to keep in mind here that the fantasy of homosexuals on a mission to convert heterosexuals is a projected fantasy: after all, heterosexuals want to convert homosexuals...why wouldn’t homosexuals have similar designs? But what this projection enacts is an omnipresent infiltrator, indeed a series of infiltrators, waiting at the perimeter of the domestic sphere to catch us unless we catch them first.

The terror is that, whereas a homosexual converting to heterosexuality signifies little more than the successful colonisation of difference, the conversion of a heterosexual to homosexuality signifies an undoing of the linchpin of a phallogentric and heterocentric society. Bersani and Edelman have documented just such anxieties in both literature and the consensus imaginary. In his consideration of *The Immoralist*, for example, Bersani points out that André Gide’s homosexual protagonist is freighted with very powerful concerns to a reader in the modern West:

But the way we live already eliminates the weak, and the familiar piety [Marceline] expresses serves to perpetuate their oppression. Nothing could be more different from the strength of Michel’s self-divestiture, from the risks he takes in loving the other as the same, in homo-ness. In that love (for want of a more precise word) he risks his own boundaries, risks knowing where he ends and the other begins. This is lawless pederasty – not because it violates statutes that legislate our sexual behavior, but because it rejects personhood, a status that the law needs in order to discipline us and, it must be added, to protect us.¹³

Edelman raises the stakes further, saying that homosexuality is perceived not only as a threat to legal definitions, but to established notions of history as well:

Homosexuality, therefore, remains subject to figuration as that which threatens the catastrophic undoing of history, national and familial both, by opening an

epistemological gap, a space or void, in maleness itself – a gap in which, in the end, as it were, there is nothing to be seen, and no assurance, therefore, that the visual display of masculinity's phallic ensign can suffice as evidence of the heterosexuality for which "masculinity" has become a trope.¹⁴

For queer theorists such as Edelman, the terror homosexuality strikes into heterocentric hearts is deep and consuming, for homosexuality "is seen as enacting the destabilization of borders, the subversion of masculine identity from within...".¹⁵ And although queers may quibble with the notion that they are enacting such a destabilisation from "within", destabilisation of the status quo is fundamental to the concept of queer theory.

This process of destabilisation begins with, but is not limited to, the name "queer theory" itself. Whereas "queer" has historically been a word connoting disapproval as it denoted difference, queer theorists choose the name because it is their goal to trample on some of the dearest-held assumptions of heterocentric society, to invite disapproval, and therefore they choose a name marked by disapproval. The widely imagined queer agenda of erasing difference, too, is now a mainstay of queer thought as much in reality as it ever was in het fantasy. Thus Bersani aligns "homophobic" with "a system of differences",¹⁶ but what queer theory privileges is an emphasis on sameness, on a world without boundaries and therefore without the erotic and violent payoff inherent in breaking boundaries. The difference is subtle: heterocentricity privileges difference for the sake of conquering it, and when the Other has been consumed, a new Other is created, full of difference and resistances to be overcome. Queerness, on the other hand, emphasises a fundamental sameness that does not so much destroy or conquer barriers as it does ignore them. Thus the Self and Other, for queer theory, are now and always were the same, so there is no Other to be marked, conquered, or reinvented. The reconfiguration is so fundamental that its effects would reach very far indeed. For our purposes, a model of sameness has the potential to defuse the erotics with which the boundaries between, for example, adult/child, wise/innocent, sexual/non-sexual are fraught. With that in mind, we will turn now to see what queer science fiction can tell us about the use and destabilisation of boundaries.

For heterosexuals, perhaps the most surprising revelation queer theory and fiction make is just how pervasive this heterocentric emphasis on difference is. Science fiction is an ideal genre for the analysis of this emphasis, for among its most famous furniture is that most outside of others: the alien. In Carolyn Ives Gilman's *Halfway Human* (1998), two long-separated strains of humanity meet again, with the more familiar version of humanity – characterised by heterosexuality, nuclear families, and late capitalism – plays host to one member of the alien humanity. Tedla is from a world where people are born sexless and then stimulated, if they're chosen, into sexual difference. As a "bland," the best translation of the alien name for these neuters, Tedla is a permanent member of the underclass on its own world and a bewildered outsider in any heterocentric society. It tells its host,

You've got to understand how hard it is for me, to live in a gendered world. I have to be so careful. Sexuality is always present, with you. It never leaves your minds. It's as

if you exist in a cloud of pheromones I can't sense, but only guess at. I have to be on my guard all the time, thinking of hidden meanings, body language, and innuendoes. I can never assume I understand you, never take anything at face value. It all has to go through a gender-filter in my brain. I wish I could get rid of it, just be able to relax, be in a completely nonsexual situation, just for a day. I don't suppose I'll ever be able to, for the rest of my life.¹⁷

As the novel reveals Tedla's ongoing struggles to survive in a sexual world, the story being told is of the all-encompassing presence of difference in the heterosexual mind.

Although Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* (1989) is about a society run according to socialist, not capitalist, dictates, its society is just as much one of heterocentricity as is the one imagined by Gilman. The technology that orchestrates and governs the state is the Consensus, a great collective mind composed of the recorded personalities of the vast community. Milena Shibush, however, has never been "read" into the Consensus, because the viruses that would force her into heterosexuality have never been effective, and successful infection (or, rather, heterosexual colonisation) is a prerequisite for representation in the ruling body. However, Milena becomes an unwilling pawn of its designs throughout the novel, realising too late that the Consensus had ulterior motives that overarched not only everything it had ever done but Milena's every action as well. And, not surprisingly, the Consensus' goal is a heterosexual one: as Milena puts it, "The Consensus wants to find a mate. It wants to meet another like itself. It is so sure that somewhere in the spangle of stars there is intelligence. It is so sure that intelligence will take the same form as itself".¹⁸ Although much about this hoped-for alien intelligence is imagined in terms of sameness - "like itself," "same form as itself," - it is only the sameness that allows for an appreciation of difference. What the Consensus wants, after all, is not a partner, but a mate. If Tedla has found that heterocentric emphasis on difference is a planet-wide phenomenon, Milena finds that it is interstellar.

But one of the most encouraging things about this literature, especially from the standpoint of queer theory, is that it not only reveals the underbelly of heterocentricity but also struggles to imagine societies founded on sameness and the absence of boundaries instead of difference. The most pervasive symbol of this struggle is variations the authors make on telepathy, variations that surface with startling regularity even in queer science fiction written decades apart. Sally Miller Gearhart's society in *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1978),¹⁹ for example, is run by and composed of the shared thoughts of Hill Women who can "mindstretch" to one another. At the moment of their separation from male-dominated society, the women discovered a host of mental powers, among them telekinesis and flight, but these powers have very little role in the narrative. On the other hand, the women regularly communicate with one another across both great geographical distances and temporal distances. They are able to share something similar to a very explicit race memory, as we have seen in the methods of historical instruction the community employs, but they are also able to communicate in both thought words and "stretched", wordless emotions. Moreover, they can even communicate with animals, who are almost never seen as adversaries even when they are

competing for similar resources. The society relies upon its women's willingness to open to one another, in effect privileging a willing emphasis on sameness.

Often, the telepathic interpenetration in these novels is tied to children in interesting ways. In Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1992), an anthropologist comes to another world with a lost strain of humanity. On this planet lives a virus that kills all men who ingest it, and nearly all the women who do as well. Nonetheless, a race of women has somehow managed not only to survive, but to propagate for centuries. The secret to their homosexual (not asexual) reproduction is what the women of this planet call "deepsearching", a trance in which two women who have survived the virus's infection enter into one another's spiritual being. During deepsearch, one woman may actually coax another woman's ovum to divide, in effect impregnating her. Marghe and her native lover Thenike engage in deepsearching, and the experience is clearly one rooted in sameness:

It was hot; their skin was hot, and their breath. In and out, in and out. And Marghe gave up everything, gave her breath to Thenike, took Thenike's into her lungs. Then their arms were wrapped around each other, eyes open, staring deep, and Marghe let herself slide down that long deep slope, that slippery slope, sinking in, right in, right down until she *was* Thenike, was Thenike's pulse, Thenike's breath, until she could skip back and forth: her breath, Thenike's breath, back and forth.²⁰

And the virus that makes this process possible, too, is best met not with confrontation, but acceptance. As Thenike describes the best strategy for surviving infection, she responds to Marghe's automatic fear that her body will be somehow unclean after the virus has been introduced:

Unclean? No. Your body is changing, just as it does every time you get sick and another little piece of something else comes to live inside you. If a child gets red fever, then when she is grown and her children get the spots, she will not become ill, because the disease is part of her already, and accepts her. Is this unclean? No. It's life. All life connects (p. 217).

In this refiguring of reproduction, the future of the species on the planet is determined not by its mating of opposites, but by its ability to allow sameness.

The firm line upon which Western society has insisted for centuries between adult and child also becomes porous in queer science fiction. For example, during a trance that her infection helps make possible, Marghe gains perfect recall of her entire life, including her life before birth, a very similar experience to the one that Milena, of Ryman's novel, has when she is infected with the socialisation viruses and read into the Consensus. Milena recalls listening to her mother, a violinist, play music as Milena is still in the womb, and the experience of oneness is exhilarating to both the remembering-Milena and the remembered-Milena: "I've never felt that! thought the adult who remembered. I've never felt music like that since. It was a different state of being: gentle, surging, warm, ultimately intimate. Milena was part of someone else" (p. 149). For Marghe, the connection is also between herself as an adult and herself as a suddenly remembered child:

She had been inside herself in a way she had never thought possible; listening to her body as a whole, a magnificent, healthy whole. And she had done more: reliving memories of her childhood she had forgotten, experiencing again days she had never been wholly aware of. Now she knew how it felt to be a baby just ten days old, and that baby had been as alien to her as any species she had encountered since. There had been more: what felt like days of communication between herself now and herself of many thens (pp. 223-4).

In Katherine V. Forrest's *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (1984),²¹ too, adult and child converse, but in this case the communicators are mother and daughter. This early communication enables the mother and daughter to communicate while the children are still in the womb, and as a result the women can teach their daughters early and quickly. The very beginning of life is marked by co-operation between mother and child, who work together for a smooth, short pregnancy and brief delivery. This harmony between mother and child is a theme of the novels, as in *Ammonite*, where a local myth explains the history of humanity on the planet and their first interactions with the virus:

But in this place where the goddess was not, her spirit still lived, though sleeping, in the hearts of fully half the people, and in this place, her spirit awoke and claimed them in a great sickness. But the goddess is ever-merciful. To those who survived was given a miraculous gift: children. It is said that the spirit of these people lives on in their daughters, and their daughters' daughters, so that all who come after may remember back to what once was, and what may be again (p. 103).

No matter the different names these authors give to their unique versions of the telepathy that negates boundaries, the emphasis of them all is a model of sameness.

This is not to claim that every aspect of every work of queer science fiction emphasises sameness,²² nor even to claim that these works emphasise it to the exclusion of difference. As Bersani himself has pointed out, the argument that queers do not feel the attraction of difference themselves is shaky. Rather, my point has been to show that queer science fiction tends to fulfil a promise of queer theory: an imagined model of sameness.

The potential payoff of this emphasis on sameness for the cultural use of the child symbol is staggering. As James R. Kincaid has pointed out in his two books on the subject, much of the eroticisation of children is very easily explained by the increasing insistence in the West over the last few hundred years that we perceive children and adults as *different*. His marking of difference lines up extremely well with the eros-enabling difference of heterocentricity that queer theory has explained, as we can see in Kincaid's explanation of his project: "Most apparent is the division between adult and child, a dissociation which, I will claim, has been at least for the past two hundred years heavily eroticized: the child is that species which is free of sexual feeling or response; the adult is that species which has crossed over into sexuality".²³ This difference, grounded in sexuality, requires that we think of children only as non-sexual in order that we can define our adult selves against them and thus know our own sexuality. But as Kincaid demonstrates, the marking off of children as the opposite from ourselves does not

prevent the imagination of them as sexual objects, it *energises* that imagination. And since we continue to identify children as those who have less power than adults, indeed since we legalise an unequal distribution of power between the two, the erotic energy enacted by this difference is always one of dominator over dominated. This is the erotic cachet against which the model of sameness in queer science fiction works.

Whereas the anti-boundary tendency of queerness has great promise and regularly fulfils that promise, there are elements of the traditional child that remain a threat to the new story queer theory calls for and queer science fiction tries to provide. In particular, the aspects of the traditional child that remain spring from the imagining of the child as at-risk. This is the fictional child that Kincaid has argued is one of the greatest threats to real children, because it insists on a child emptied of personality and agency on its own. This is also the child that Marjorie Heins has pointed out as a threat to the civil rights of all citizens, even children, because their rights are always secondary to those of the child who is non-existent, ideally innocent and always in danger of corruption.²⁴ Finally, this is the child that Edelman has railed against,²⁵ because the potential child threatened with oblivion by non-reproductively inclined adults is the one under whose banner conservatives and homophobes march. The at-risk child is a staple of the popular imagination, and despite the danger that queer theorists and scholars of the image of the child have demonstrated that it poses, the at-risk child is also a fixture of queer science fiction.

At their most innocent, appeals in queer science fiction to protect children are full of pathos, if not explicitly inflected by the political crisis brought on by the cultural conviction of the need to protect children. In *The Child Garden*, Milena frequently finds herself surprised at her desire to protect children and the child-like around her. When she holds Berry, the son of a deceased friend, she realises that "It was Berry she wanted to defend" (p. 342). But she has established this character trait much earlier, not in her dealings with an actual child, but with a woman she comes to think of as a child. Rolfa, the woman with whom Milena falls deeply in love, is a misfit in Milena's society as well as her own genetically-engineered society, and she plays the role with gusto. To most people, this is off-putting, but not to Milena. Instead, she thinks of Rolfa as a child to protect: "And this is a child I am talking to now. Milena understood Rolfa then. Rolfa was still a child. Milena would have to take care of her for a while" (p. 61). Lore, the protagonist of Griffith's novel *Slow River* (1995),²⁶ has very similar feelings about children and their need for protection. While in hiding, Lore discovers a dead kitten, scrawny after a short and brutal life as a stray. The dead kitten becomes a symbol with great consequence later in the book, a tragic figure whose pathos comes from the fact that kittens, as Lore puts it, "should be round" (p. 309). When she reveals to the reader that her siblings were abused, the violated humans take on the tragedy of the scrawny kitten in addition to their own tragedy, for, like the kitten, their innocent childhoods have been cut short.

But queer science fiction's plea for the protection of endangered children is not always so innocent; they frequently use that endangerment as an excuse for limiting the

flow of information to children. Such scenes are often phrased in the generous terms with which they are honestly felt, as when Tedla speaks of Val's daughter Deedee. Although Tedla has recently attempted suicide, its wounded spirit is soothed by the girl, and as it speaks of its own trials, it says of her, "I wish there were some way to protect her...so she would never have to experience ugliness, or malice, or betrayal" (p. 87). The sentiment is sweet but plays into the rationale other adults give for limiting Deedee's access to information, as when her father protests the child accompanying her mother to a clinic. "Well," he says, "don't blame me if she comes home asking what 'venereal disease' means" (p. 7). And even in the imagined societies where the education of children receives great attention, the adults make sure to prevent their children from certain knowledges, especially sexual knowledge. As Megan, the leader of the lesbian utopia featured in Forrest's novel, guides an adult newcomer around their facilities, she shows off a statue charged with erotic energy:

Between two pillars stood a life-size sculpture, ivory-colored, smooth and warm, sensuously carved, of two slender nude women coming together in embrace; they leaned toward each other on tiptoe, one's hands clasping the other's shoulders, one's hands circling the other's waist. Their small lovely breasts were just lightly touching at the nipples; their parted lips were also just lightly touching... (p. 162).

Although Megan asserts that "There is much public art in Cybele that celebrates the love among us," she assures her visitor that art such as this is limited to "these rooms where only the adults assemble" (p. 162). The irony is that it is precisely this kind of logic that conservatives use to argue against maintaining civil rights for non-heterosexuals. The call for protection of children from knowledge of pain (as, for instance, in the form of prejudice against homosexuals), sexuality (as in the sexual orientation that defines homosexuals to a heterocentric world), and venereal disease (as in HIV, which has ravaged the gay community) is an unwitting echo of the same call sounded by those people set on preventing non-heterosexuals from having children, mixing with children, or indeed even existing in a society characterised by a belief in the at-risk child.²⁷ Certainly the desire to protect those we care about is laudable, but the at-risk child imagined in queer science fiction is complicit in a twentieth century phenomenon that pays off in ways that are actually dangerous to children and homosexuals in the real world.

The most popular of threats to childhood innocence also makes its way onto the stage in queer science fiction. The paedophile, the twentieth century's ultimate bogeyman, provides a very loudly protested threat to children in these texts that could very easily have come from any het text, and *Halfway Human* and *Slow River* provide the best examples. Alair Galele is the xenologist who brought Tedla out of the legalised slavery of its home world, Gammadis, to Galele's home, Capella 2. At the time, Tedla was little more than a child,²⁸ and the life from which Galele rescues it has been marked by repeated sexual abuse at the hands of the gendered overclass. Although it becomes quickly clear that Galele is also attracted to Tedla, he never propositions the young neuter. By working to obtain better rights for neuters, Galele puts his reputation at risk,

and by secreting Tedla off planet, he effectively ends his career forever. By the time of his death, Galele has sacrificed his reputation, career, degree, friends, family, public standing, wealth and personal health for Tedla and the mission on which they met. But when Galele is revealed as a paedophile, both Tedla and Val - the Capellan xenologist who cares for Tedla after it attempts suicide - renounce him, Tedla even refusing to speak on his behalf when Galele goes to court. When he dies in prison, Tedla is given a letter from Galele (after having refused other communications) that it nearly throws away, it is still so disappointed in this man that it has repeatedly said it loved - and with whom Tedla has made it clear it would have been willing to have sexual relations because it loved him so dearly. But whatever good work Galele might once have done is eclipsed by his attraction to children. Tedla's explanation of its revulsion for Galele is worth quoting at length:

My entire world shattered around me that day [when Tedla found out Galele was not only a pedophile, but an incurable one]. The person I had known best, the person I had loved and admired with all my heart, had completely hidden his true nature from me. I hadn't known him at all. Everything I had trusted was a complete deception.

I was still angry, but now at him. How well I remember that shabby gray room where they laid it all out before me. I paced up and down between the window and the wall, my mind whirling with outrage and confusion. In that state, they tried again to get me to admit that I also had been his plaything. When I still denied it, they showed me pictures of the children they had picked up in their sweep, children in makeup and grotesquely suggestive costumes, sexualized before their time. There was one, a little girl with curly blond hair and dark eyes, that could have been a picture of myself at that age (pp. 455-6).

This passage is rife with the twentieth century's party line description of the paedophile and his victims. First of all, the paedophile's lust for children becomes the defining characteristic of what was previously a complex human being. Everything decent about him, everything about him that Tedla is sure it "had loved and admired with all my heart," is suddenly labelled "a complete deception." Moreover, the children themselves are the victims of an unforgivable crime: being "sexualized before their time." I would never argue that forcing children to have sex - indeed that forcing anyone to have sex - is anything less than reprehensible, but I would emphasise that this one crime, of ruining a childhood innocence that has never been proven in the first place, not only sends an otherwise good man to prison, it trumps everything else he ever did in his life, even to the person who knew and loved him best.

Slow River portrays a very similar paedophile and an identical process of demonisation by the act of paedophilia. Although Lore has always loved her father Oster and cherished their relationship, her realisation that he has been abusing her siblings since they were all very young completely changes her attitude toward him. The impetuosity of her change is made all the more dramatic by how it changes again the very moment that she discovers her *mother* was the one abusing the children, and her father was completely ignorant of the abuse. She relates the emotional moment in which the

change takes place within her to the reader:

My mother, the monster. Which meant Oster wasn't a monster after all. This time I had to bend forward, head nearly to my knees, before I could get air into my lungs.

My mother, the monster. And Oster - he could be my father again. The one I thought I'd lost (p. 288).

Indeed, the word "monster" becomes a mantra in the book, mirroring the frequency with which it is used in other twentieth century invocations of the paedophile. But with the removal of the label from him, her father becomes again a human being, one capable of mistakes but once more loveable. Lore wants to blame him for failing to detect the paedophilia and protect his children from it, but even this sin is forgivable:

He should have known. But he wasn't a monster. And I missed him. I wanted to have him back. I'd spent the last three years believing him to be something he was not, and I wanted to touch him, maybe have him ruffle my hair, anything, just to make contact again with the father I had thought I had known (p. 290).

The relationship between Lore and her father is very similar to Tedla's relationship with Galele, whose last name Tedla takes when it comes to Capella 2. When Lore mistakenly believes that her father is the criminal, all her deep love and affection for him - based on experiences in which he never gave her any reason to believe he was a child molester, experiences Lore has no trouble forgetting because the narrative of paedophile is so easy to believe and eclipses all other narratives - are invalidated. Even after her father's absolution, Lore is still angry at him for failing to detect her mother's paedophilia, which fits perfectly with the novel's theme: we must ask who is hurt by and who is to blame for every action. If Oster can be tagged with guilt for failing to spot his wife's criminal paedophilia, then by extension all the novel's readers should be on the alert for adults who are secretly abusing their children. Whether or not such private policing is a good idea, what it rests on is the assumption that all children are perpetually at risk, even in the sanctity of their own homes.

It is important to pause here and state plainly just what is wrong with continually retelling cautionary stories about the paedophile. I am not arguing against protecting children or even recognising whatever real dangers, with real criminals and real victims, there are in the age-old story of the paedophile. Rather, I argue that the way we talk about the paedophile, particularly as the ultimate trope of the at-risk child narrative, is not only not helping, it might be hurting. Virginia L. Blum has demonstrated how, in case after case, concerns with ideal children - the imaginary child who becomes a model for real children, a model to which they had better aspire if they know what's good for them - and the threats they face are not sites for helping real children. In fact, the point of her study is that such an emphasis on ideal children actually hurts *real* children, who can never live up to the ideal and therefore can never avoid inspiring resentment in their parents.²⁹ And Kincaid has made a similar point about the paedophile in particular. Whereas instinct and the discourse on paedophilia itself would have us believe that the endless stories about the paedophile are our surest defence against his (or perhaps her) machinations, Kincaid claims that paedophile talk "is monster-talk, first of all, talk that

is busy rejecting the pedophile that it is, at the same time, creating".³⁰ For Kincaid the redundancy of the stories, the strict formula to which they adhere, makes the real problem of child abuse too simple to address directly, makes it so easy a tale to tell that it precludes action that might make a difference on anything other than an individual scale:

We tend to turn the whole theater of pedophilia into a melodrama of monsters and innocents, and we do so for many reasons, all of them bad. Doing so assures us that there are no complex issues and none that threaten. It allows us to overlook both contradictions and cruelties in our logic, in our family structure, and in our social system at large. It allows us unlimited and gratuitous *talk* on the subject.³¹

As Kincaid demonstrates, that gratuitous aspect of the talk is one of the narrative's most important, and dangerous, fixtures:

In the case of child molesting and its culturally approved narratives, we have stories that allow us a hard-core righteous prurience; it's a scapegoating exercise we have come to depend on. Through these stories of what monsters are doing to children, we find ourselves forced (permitted) to speak of just what it is they are doing; we take a good, long look at what they are doing. We denounce it all loudly but never have done with it, and are back denouncing it the next day, not ignoring the details. We reject this monstrous activity with such automatic indignation that the indignation comes to seem almost like pleasure.³²

Therefore, I am criticising texts that borrow the formula of paedophile-bashing not because I like paedophiles, but because the formula itself invites precisely the kind of abuse that it is claiming to prevent.

But even if scholars of the child image are wrong at a societal level about the ineffectiveness of stories about the paedophile, they certainly seem to be right when it comes to queer science fiction. In this fiction, talking about how much we despise paedophiles or how very much children need our protection isn't proof against fantasies of children; more often, it's an invitation to them, a chance to pass around the dirty pictures so the audience, like Tedla being told of Galele's crime, can take a dilatory moment to check them out ourselves. Tedla itself is a telling example. Although Tedla and Val both despise Galele for his attraction to children, both also linger over fantasies that smack of paedophilia. Tedla's adventures across the planets is marked by a seemingly endless series of sexual encounters, some of them consensual, but most forced either through legal power or economic need. Certainly Tedla must be old enough by the end of the book to qualify as an adult, but the novel does not treat it as one. Before it comes to *Capella 2*, Tedla is just past the age of puberty, but it is continually referred to as a child. The first person Tedla falls in love with, Squire Tellegen, does so in a moment of tenderness that Tedla relates to Val:

"My dear, dear partner," he whispered. He used the word that meant "love-partner," the word older humans use for the youths of their infatuation. It made me giddy to hear it (p. 264).

Galele responds with similar tenderness when Tedla thanks him for being "so kind to me." "My dear child," Galele replies, "My dear, dear child" (p. 386). And finally, Val

labels it a child, even in the present-tense of the frame narrative:

She looked down on the alien's face. This way, in sleep, it looked very peaceful, and very young. On an impulse, she bent over and kissed the damp forehead, as she would [her young daughter] Deedee's. There was no reaction.

"Poor kid," she said. "Poor lost kid." (p. 73).

The novel's emphasis on Tedla's status as a child no matter its age becomes important when the novel lingers over Tedla's sexual experiences. Two such scenes come when Tedla itself relates its sexual history to Val. In the first, Tedla is recounting its days on Capella 2 as a prostitute:

Tedla's eyes rose to her face, slightly surprised, slightly knowing. "Yes," it said. "I was very good. I could be anything the client wanted - male, female, adult, child, anything. I changed genders every night. No one could tell what I really was; they were all mystified and attracted, but Shandurry charged a fortune for them to find out. Humans find sexual ambiguity very stimulating" (p. 443).

This last statement is perhaps an odd statement in a book that takes such a vocal stance against paedophilia, considering that Val, a passionate critic has already recognised her inclination to "associate the lack of obvious sexual characteristics with adolescence" (p. 11). Another of Tedla's stories is from its days on its home planet, when it is being punished by its masters for what amounts to getting too uppity:

They did other things I won't make you hear. At the end of six hours they started pretending they were going to let me go. Once they actually gave me my clothes back, but before I could leave, Jockety came in the room with an apparatus for giving electrical shocks. They all laughed and stripped me naked again. Jockety taped wires to my body, then set out to see if he could induce a convulsion while he was sodomizing me.

It didn't work. He tried again and again, and at least got whatever satisfaction can be got from raping a child in excruciating pain (p. 148).

In both these stories, the paedophilia being decried is also being carefully re-imagined, dwelled upon, relived and experienced by the speaker, hearer, and reader. A final example from this novel comes very late in the book. Val, now finally told that Galele was a paedophile, reflects first on how foolish she was to read him as anything other than a monster, then puts herself in his position and imagines the lust herself:

Val thought of Alair Galele. She felt a little betrayed herself, ashamed that she had actually begun to like the man. She blamed her own acumen that she had seen nothing of the predator in his writings. Weakness, bad judgment, helpless impulsivity. Not malice.

The brain alteration treatments for pedophilia were severe and rarely failed, the conditioning was so strong. She looked at Tedla and thought of living year in and year out within touching distance of the thing you wanted most, the thing you yearned for more than life. Was it enough to break down even the strongest conditioning? She looked away, not wanting to Tedla to know what she was thinking (p. 459).

And indeed it is not entirely clear what Val *was* thinking. As she stares in imaginary lust at Tedla, is Galele's remembered anti-paedophilia treatment the only conditioning in

danger of breaking?

If insistent condemnation of paedophilia were any proof against child abuse, the tendency in queer science fiction to rail against it could well be justified. However, as these selections show, an emphasis on the at-risk nature of children does nothing to discourage fantasies of child abuse.

But having sounded that warning against queer science fiction's penchant to invoke the at-risk child, I want to place my warning in perspective. Queer science fiction has tremendous potential for cultural work in general, and it has already demonstrated that it can imagine a healthier, more capable human being, indeed network of human beings who can relate to each other without the power-heavy and erotically charged emphasis on difference that colours heterocentric culture. Perhaps what we see today in queer science fiction should be considered a snapshot of a genre and community involved in an ongoing struggle. The model of sameness proposed by queer theory promises a radically new way of writing the fictional child. What remains to be seen is how fully queer science fiction fulfils its potential.

Notes

1. See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).
2. See Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
3. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 159.
4. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 158.
5. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 157.
6. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 154.
7. And Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay", in Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 69-81, expresses continuing concern over new efforts to cloak psychology's bias against homosexuality.
8. Arnold Goldberg, *The Problem of Perversion: The View from Self Psychology* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 42.
9. Goldberg, *Problem of Perversion*, p. 9.
10. Goldberg, *Problem of Perversion*, p. 178.
11. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 146.
12. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 27.
13. Bersani, *Homos*, p. 128-9.
14. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 169.
15. Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 168.
16. Bersani, *Homos*, p. 42.
17. Carolyn Ives Gilman, *Halfway Human* (New York: Avon, 1998), p. 15.
18. Geoff Ryman, *The Child Garden, or a Low Comedy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), p. 291.
19. Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women*, with illustrations by Elizabeth Ross (Watertown, Ma: Persephone Press, 1978); edn used (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1984).
20. Nicola Griffith, *Ammonite* (New York: Del Rey, 1992), p. 231.
21. Katherine V. Forrest, *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (Tallahassee, Fl.: Naiad, 1984).
22. For example, though Ryman's Milena is not attracted to the "opposite" sex, she does find erotic pleasure in difference. A more subtle difference pervades many of the lesbian utopias, too, a

romanticisation of the feminine as opposed to the masculine, perhaps borrowed from second-wave feminism.

23. James R. Kincaid, *Child-loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.
 24. Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency", Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).
 25. In his "The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive", *Narrative* 6 (1998), pp. 18-30.
 26. Nicola Griffith, *Slow River* (New York: Del Rey, 1995).
 27. See for example the very recent case of Tommy R. Schroeder, a homosexual teacher who was denied protection against discrimination at his place of work because the court found that "there is no simple way of explaining to young students why it is wrong to mock homosexuals without discussing the underlying lifestyle or sexual behavior associated with such a designation." In other words, children must be protected from knowledge of certain kinds of sexual behaviour even if doing so means that adults are discriminated against because of that protection. (*Schroeder v. Hamilton School District et al.* US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. *Lexis Nexis* (2002).)
 28. Indeed, Tedla is *never* a convincing adult. It is repeatedly referred to as a child, and when she first sees it, Val recognises that its "lack of obvious sexual characteristics" makes even the adult Tedla look like an adolescent (p. 11).
 29. Virginia L. Blum, *Hide and Seek: The Child between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1995).
 30. Kincaid, *Child loving*, p. 7.
 31. Kincaid, *Child loving*, p. 27.
 32. James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 7.
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