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When Everything Feels Like the Horror Movies: The Ghostliness of Queer Youth Futurity

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Opening Credits

To call Raziel Reid's novel *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* "controversial" would be to wildly understate its impact. When Reid's book won the 2014 Governor General's Award for Children's Literature¹—arguably Canada's most prestigious and high-profile literary prize—the Internet combusted. Reid's protagonist Jude, an unapologetically queer 15-year-old who takes drugs, has sex, and describes in detail his graphic and often violent fantasies, was not to the taste of all critics. *National Post* columnist Barbara Kay, for example, published a polemical editorial under the title "Wasted tax dollars on a values-void novel" in which she bemoans Jude's lack of "moral growth." Seemingly inspired by Kay, children's book author Cathy Clark launched a petition calling for the Canadian government to rescind the award given the book's "vulgar content" (Keeler). The petition fanned the flames of controversy; admirers of the novel launched a counter petition to support Reid; the title was selected as part of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's widely publicized *Canada Reads* debates; and Reid's explosively popular book subsequently fueled broader conversations about censorship, the status and norms of children's literature, and the material realities of young queer people (Darbyshire).

As fans of the book pointed out in its defense, *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* (henceforth *WEFLTM*) is based on a real-life event: the murder, in 2008, of Larry Fobes King, a gender nonconforming 15-year-old person of color who was shot twice in the back of his head by a classmate, Brandon McInerney. A few days prior, Larry had asked Brandon to be his valentine (Strangio). In the novel, Jude shares Larry's tragic fate. Some critics argued that Reid, himself only 24-years-old when *WEFLTM* was published, is holding up a mirror for the queer youth who inhabit our own distorted, violent, and horrific world, and therein lies his book's value. Emily M. Keeler, Kay's colleague at the *National Post*, wrote: "It's sickening to me that the moral panic surrounding the book regards teens reading about blow jobs and not its painfully, stylishly wrought portrayal of kids being bullied to death, or growing up with fear because it's not safe for them to be who they are." Keeler concludes that the award, in fact, may help *WEFLTM* "reach a few more Larrys, a few more Judes." Similarly, *Canada Reads* panelist Lainey Lui concludes her

¹ In 2016, shortly after Reid's win, the category was given the more capacious title of "Young People's Literature." Although the website of the Governor General's Literary Awards (see <http://ggbooks.ca/past-winners-and-finalists>) does not explain the rationale for this name change, it is challenging to not interpret this decision in light of the controversies generated by Reid's novel.

passionate defense of the novel by looking directly into the camera and claiming that Reid's book is a powerful message to queer youth that "We see you. We see you. We see you. We see you. We see you."²

At the heart of this debate lie some well-worn questions about genre: what *is* children's literature, or, what should (and shouldn't) children's literature be?³ Truly, it is difficult to imagine that *WEFLTM* would have ignited such a firestorm had it been nominated in the more general "fiction" category. Steve Neale posits that genre is conceptualized vis-à-vis audience expectations (45), and indeed what animates *WEFLTM*'s critics is whether or not the novel adheres to how they imagine children's literature's generic traits. Although many critics have debated the book's particular merits or failures, few explicitly address the anxieties about genre that drive their investments.⁴

Yet, as we argue here, children's literature is not the only genre at stake in *WEFLTM* and the discourse it has generated. In fact, children's and young adult (YA) literature might be less significant to these conversations than other genres Reid deploys to comment on the realities and futures of queer youth. Reid's novel, we suggest, slides through and ultimately refuses to obey conventions associated with children's and YA literature before settling on horror as the most apt genre for describing the lived experiences of queer youth. Although *WEFLTM* initially seems to offer "no future" to queer youth, we resist this reading. Instead, we argue that Reid does present a vision of queer youth futurity, but this future is always horrific, always spectral. We read Jude as an amalgam of Lee Edelman's "*sinthomosexual*" and the slasher film's "final girl": the *sinthomosexual* is an avatar of queer negativity, a naysayer of the futurity represented by the

² Reid himself responded to this controversy in his *Walrus* essay entitled "Smells Like Teen Dispirit," in which he writes that Kay's critique "reinforced why I wrote [*WEFLTM*] in the first place, to educate people and open their eyes to a world and a character they may have not understood before."

³ Although we agree with Perry Nodelman's assertion that children's literature is a "specific genre of fiction whose defining characteristics...seem to cut across other generic categories such as fantasy or realism" and, in this case, horror (81), we follow Marah Gubar in that we avoid offering a refined definition of children's and/or young adult literature. Instead, we deploy a "constellation of criteria" in our examination of *WEFLTM*'s adherence to and defiance of generic convention, permitting the boundaries between and around children's and young adult literature "to remain fuzzy at the edges" (Gubar 213-14).

⁴ Robert Bittner is one exception: he frames a review of *WEFLTM* with a substantial discussion of the "contentious issues that play out within the field of children's literature awards" and their relationship to "the assumptions held by many people...about what constitutes children's literature" (165).

figural Child, while the final girl is a survivor who often turns the tables on her would-be killer. As we will illustrate, Reid's young queer protagonist is a revenant who disrupts the growth and future-oriented conventions of children's literature while haunting and terrifying readers with strong investments in these conventions. Problematically, however, is how Reid, a White author, draws on the real-life murder of a young person of color as inspiration for his White protagonist. The whitewashing of Larry Fobes King in this context perpetuates some unfortunate, racist trends endemic to horror films: the erasure and disposal of Black characters, and the persistent Whiteness of final girl heroines. Nonetheless, Reid's embrace of a ghostly and ghastly queer futurity—his use, in other words, of horror to describe the vicious consequences of homophobic culture while simultaneously critiquing the genre that categorizes his novel—is what makes *WEFLTM* such a provocative case study.

Scene One: A Failure to Grow

In her formative analysis of adolescent literature, Roberta Seelinger Trites distinguishes between the *bildungsroman* and the *entwicklungsroman*, both of which inform children's and YA literature. The former, she writes, includes “novels in which the protagonist comes of age as an adult” (10) and offers an “optimistic ending that affirms the protagonist's entry into adulthood” (11-12). In the latter, however, “the protagonist has not reached adulthood by the end of the narrative” (10), yet “the character grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem” (14). Trites maintains that “All but the bleakest of YA novels...affirm the adolescent's ability to grow at least a little” (14), and asserts that “adolescent literature is at its heart a romantic literature because so many of us—authors, critics, teachers, teenagers—need to believe in the possibility of adolescent growth” (15). Growth and hope, then, are central to the apparatus of children's and YA literature, and they inform what many readers have come to expect—and even demand—from the genre.

Reid's novel wholly rejects the linear narrative trajectories of the *bildungsroman* and the *entwicklungsroman*. Jude's failure to “grow” is what horrifies critics like Kay, who writes that had she been on the Governor General Awards committee, she would have favored a text “in which the protagonist's struggles to emerge from conflict lead to self-knowledge and the promise

of positive maturation”—in other words, a story that more closely aligns itself with the familiar, romantic conventions that Trites describes. In *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman makes a claim similar to Trites': "The texts assume that children can and do change and that childhood is by definition a time of change, a time in which young human beings undergo the process of becoming the adults they will eventually be" (78). Nodelman continues, "Because childhood is defined by change," children's literature endeavors "to encourage children to change in the proper way" (78).

Jude's failure to demonstrate "change in the proper way"—what Kay describes as his "unapologetically absolute egoism"—denies critics and readers the hopefulness they tend to expect from children's and YA literature. As Nodelman points out, children's literature plots typically follow a pattern that sees the protagonist leaving home at the beginning of the story and returning at the end (80). "Home is identified with constriction, stasis, and safety; leaving it is identified with freedom, process, and danger," he explains; "The return home at the end seems to mean an acceptance of its constrictions in order to gain its benefits" (81). This acceptance of home, according to Nodelman's formula, comes as the result of change or growth on the part of the protagonist. Jude does not utterly reject "home" or "change," however—in fact, the novel suggests on multiple occasions that he is seeking a place to belong. Ultimately, he is deprived of this opportunity by the oppressive, vicious homophobia that claims his life.⁵

Reid makes Jude's desires and their violent denial clear through references to one of the most well-known "home-away-home" works of children's literature, *The Wizard of Oz*. After he is refused the chance to play Glinda in his high school production of the show, Jude steals the good witch's pink ball gown as revenge, using it to fantasize about his dream prom. "Sometimes," Jude narrates, "I wore the dress alone in my room. It matched the walls in my dream, and I slid across the gym floor in graceful sweeps. Everyone turned and stared like they wanted a piece of me" (31). Jude's fantasies, however, are tempered by a haunting sense of impending doom: "But even in my sleep, I felt the timer in my heart. I knew that when the clock

⁵ Other scholars have written on the relationship between queer coming-of-age stories and home/family. See, for example, *A History of Gay Literature*, in which Gregory Woods argues that the coming-out story "is, almost inevitably, almost invariably, an account of the move away from the family" (346). See also Blackburn et al for more on how queer young adult books often "disrupt...normative notions of families and homes" (34).

struck twelve, I'd wake up, and it would all be over" (31). Here, *Oz* fuses with *Cinderella* as Jude finds himself trapped in a fairy tale dream turned nightmare. Luke, Jude's crush (and eventually, his murderer), "was standing in the middle of the gym wearing a tuxedo. He looked like a prince. And as I walked toward him in my gown like a lamb to the slaughter, I was his princess" (31).⁶

Oz is referenced again later in the novel as Jude turns to the text in vain to escape his reality. In this instance, Jude returns home to find his mother and her boyfriend Ray having one of their routine fights. Summoning Dorothy Gale's famous words, Jude narrates:

There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home. I went down to my room and put on the ruby slippers I'd stolen from the props department. I clicked my heels, hoping they'd work like reverse magic and take me away to Oz, my real home, where everyone is fabulous and freaky and sings catchy songs. They didn't work. (113)

Here, Jude attempts to see himself reflected in *Oz* and its home-away-home narrative, but in a refashioned "reverse" iteration where the "away" portion might provide a "real home," an escape from his unbearable present. We might say, in other words, that Jude is trying to use this work of classic children's literature as a mirror (a way to see and understand himself) or a window (a means of interpreting—and potentially escaping—the world he lives in). But these pedagogical functions of children's literature, understood as fundamental to the genre (see Bishop; Halko and Dahlen), fail him constantly. *The Wizard of Oz* does not deliver the escape it seems to promise, nor does Jude's life align with its narrative structure, so he abandons the text. Shortly before he is murdered, Jude sets fire to Glinda's dress and "watche[s] it burn. Dorothy was an idiot to leave Oz," he narrates; "There's no place like home until you realize you're alone. She had it all. Friends *and* ruby slippers. She went over the rainbow and came back! But you can never go back" (165).

The ambiguity of these latter two sentences is compelling. In the first, "back" refers clearly to Dorothy's "home," Kansas. But the second usage of "back"—"you can never go

⁶ We are indebted to one of our anonymous reviewers for indicating how this passage might also remind readers of Roald Dahl's short story "Lamb to the Slaughter," the tale of a woman who murders her husband using a frozen leg of lamb and then feeds her weapon to the investigating police officers.

back”—is vague. Does it refer to Oz, suggesting that Dorothy lost the chance to go back to Oz when she returned to Kansas? Or does it refer again to Kansas, this time with the implication that Dorothy can “never” actually return to the same home that she left? Either way, alongside Jude’s other references to Oz, this passage serves to further muddy the distinctions between “home” and “away,” positioning Jude in a kind of queer nowhere, an in-between world that sees him dislocated and denied a sense of belonging—one further reinforced by the fact that Jude’s hometown is never named in the novel.⁷ Trites writes that the YA novel is “predicated on demonstrating characters’ ability to grow into an acceptance of their environment” (19). Kay’s critique misses the mark because Jude doesn’t refuse this kind of growth; he is denied it. In other words, Jude’s environment does not accept him, and he can neither escape nor find refuge in it. And following his murder, Jude comes to inhabit nether-space in an even more pronounced way.

Death is another much-discussed convention of YA, one Trites describes as “the ultimate and inviolable authority” in the genre (140). Just as adolescent protagonists must grow into and learn to accept their relationship to home by story’s end, they must also accept “Being-towards-death”; death, Trites writes, serves a generic function that “simultaneously empower[s] readers with knowledge and... repress[es] them by teaching them to accept a curtailment of their power” (140). Kathryn James points out that power, death, and sexuality are often “treated together” in adolescent fiction (4). Heterosexuality is typically enforced, she indicates, through a “literal or symbolic death” that removes “the ‘perverse’ body... from the sexual economy” (17). Insofar as Jude refuses and is refused growth, he also pushes back against the kind of removal James describes. While death typically teaches adolescent protagonists to acknowledge the limits of their power, Jude has his power transformed and even augmented through death. Jude continues to tell his story after his murder; in fact, in the novel’s final chapter, we as readers become aware that Jude’s ghost has been our narrator all along (167).

Here, Jude also defies the conventions of children’s horror stories, which typically “emphasize closure” and are “not open-ended, unless there is an intended sequel” (McCort 11). The “scary picturebook” and “tween horror novel” (e.g. Sesame Street’s *The Monster at the End of This Book* and horror-fiction serials like R.L. Stine’s *Goosebumps*) tend to expose “the true

⁷ It is noteworthy, given our focus on horror, that slasher films similarly unfold in settings that are “simultaneously everywhere and nowhere” (Dika 93).

nature of the monster” and thus dispel its power, Jessica R. McCort argues, while adult horror texts “allow the door to remain ajar at their conclusion, leaving their readers and viewers devoid of full comprehension of the monstrous being and fearful that such nightmares might actually be milling around in their own closets and attics” (11). Indeed, as a spectre, Jude is imbued with the power to haunt and terrorize the living—including scandalized critics like Kay—with his ghostly queerness and a story about the failure to grow. “When I first read Kay’s article,” Reid writes in Canadian newsmagazine *The Walrus*, “I thought it was sensationalistic and fear-mongering. I loved it! I knew that up in heaven, or down in hell where Kay had placed him, Jude was basking in the drama.” While this horror story’s most pervasive monster is murderous homophobia, by the end of the novel, Jude has become something of a monster himself. Jude refuses to be erased per the dictates of narrative convention, and his ghost will return, again and again, to remind us of the quotidian terrors inflicted upon young queer lives, and the routine failure of children’s and YA literature to adequately account for futurities that offer more ghostliness than growth.

Scene Two: Enter the Monsters

We’ve entitled this essay “When Everything Feels Like the Horror Movies” to highlight the genre that forms the bedrock of Reid’s novel. After a particularly violent attack, and shortly before his death, Jude makes this generic connection explicit: “I had been cast in a horror movie,” he narrates, “and just come back from the dead” (151). Morbidly and ironically, it is only through his murder that Jude might finally find a home: the death drive. As Žižek writes, “the ‘death drive’ designates the dimension of what horror fiction calls the ‘undead,’ a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death” (294). Jude’s agency as a murdered gay teenager is embedded in this queer nether-space, a liminal world that transcends the horrors of everyday queer adolescence that have haunted him. He becomes the (dis)embodiment of queer negativity as represented by Edelman’s *sinthomosexual*. What haunts readers of *WEFLTM* is this queer undeadness, and the realization that heteronormativity fails to kill what it deems horrific, just as the serial slasher’s villain fails to kill its final girl.

Jude’s narration frequently relies on popular horror icons, allusions, and affect. He channels texts including *The Shining*, *Bloody Mary*, *Poltergeist*, *The Exorcist*, and in one

moment, *It*: “‘It’ was another one of my stage names,” Jude explains, “I always thought they were referring to the Stephen King novel because of my ability to shape-shift into their greatest fear” (24). Jude’s description of himself following an attack is reminiscent of Carrie White, doused in pig’s blood at her high school prom, moments before she takes her revenge: “Everyone stared at me as I walked down the hall. My skin was cocaine white, which made the blood dripping to my feet look even more red” (151).⁸ Earlier, Jude reenacts Buffalo Bill’s gender-queered self-desiring dance from *Silence of the Lambs*: “[I] tuck[ed] my dick between my legs and purs[ed] my sticky lips. I was transparent; I could’ve already been a ghost” (17). A child ejected from the dreamscapes of “home,” Jude moves beyond its borders and feels the lack of embodiment beyond its walls—he embraces negativity because that is the only reality he can perceive.

The most prominent horrific icon in Jude’s story, however, is the dream-demon Freddy Krueger, the ever-rebirthing child-killer from the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984-2010). During Jude’s semi-conscious, semi-fantastical acid trip, he notes: “my skin dissolved until I was just a skull. My mouth opened and I screamed, but no sound came out... I tried to move, but the blood at my feet was so thick, it was like running in a slow-motion dream. I pinched myself but didn’t wake up” (93-94). Jude’s nightmarish visions represent the everyday violence of living a queer life. Multiple traumas take an embodied toll on Jude, his arms and stomach scarred and wounded like Freddy’s victims. And, as he hallucinates the melting of his face, Jude comes to resemble the grotesquely disfigured Krueger himself.⁹

In another instance, Jude and Angela are drunk and bathing. While in the tub, Jude announces his plan to leave for Los Angeles (which is the only named space within the text). Angela empties “the rest of the wine into [the] bathwater, turning it red” and raises a toast to Jude: “here’s to your *dream*” (108, emphasis ours). Jude, in response, laughs: “It looks like we’re soaking in blood.” “Yours,” Angela replies (108). Here, the text again mobilizes iconic images from *Elm Street* to invoke anxieties around queerness and impending horror/terror. Recall the

⁸ See De Palma (1976). For an image of Carrie, see: http://img2.wikia.nocookie.net/_cb20140407131125/carriemovies/images/9/94/Z12678320Q.Sissy_Spacek_w_Carrie_Briana_De_Palmy.jpg

⁹ See Craven (1984). For an image of Freddy, see: http://dbxfanon.wikia.com/wiki/Freddy_Krueger

image of Nancy Thompson from the first *Elm Street* film and the bladed glove of Krueger that snakes between her legs while she bathes;¹⁰ think also of Krueger murdering Glen Lantz in his bed, splashing the room and screen with a fountain of Lantz's blood.¹¹ Horror in Reid's novel is a social-psychological queer allegory, a rupture to heteronormativity. The novel offers a provocative, disturbing invitation to its audiences: read queerness through the lens of horror, where horror becomes a metonym for queer adolescence. Queer bodies are made to suffer and through that suffering we are embodied and empowered. When we are murdered, we are re-membered; when we die, we refuse to be forgotten.¹²

What should truly terrify and disturb about this text, however, are the parallels between Jude and Larry Fobes King, in that the horrific experiences of queer life are captured by what Sara Ahmed calls queer fatalism. This, Ahmed argues, "is how a queer demise is explained and made inevitable...queer fatalism = queer as fatal." Arguing that unhappiness is an injunction for queerness, an expectation that arises "not from not having a loss grieved; but from being grieved because it is assumed you are lost," Ahmed challenges us to "stay unhappy with this world," since "queer [is] how you can build a life from what you refuse not to be." Ahmed's words are powerful, sticky with affect, and invoke a fatalism of their own: they too scrape, scratch, and claw like the bladed glove of Krueger. Her calls hark back to Edelman, who argues that "Rather than rejecting...this ascription of negativity to the queer... [we] do better to consider accepting and even embracing it" (4). Queer fatalism resonates tragically with King's too-short life, yet Jude opens doors for queerness to expand, to inhabit the negative, to weaponize as terror that which we deem fatal, tragic, and traumatic. Jude refuses victimhood and erasure, surviving after death, and embodying the ghostly revenant as he performs his own vanishing act.

We compare *WEFLTM* with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to push further on what horror can and cannot do. The anxieties surrounding the novel and its reception are not bound up strictly within the exhibitions of gay teenage sex, masturbation fantasies, or gratuitous cursing,

¹⁰ See Craven (1984). For this image of Nancy, see:

<http://www.frenchtoastsunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/a-nightmare-on-elm-street-1984-2.png>

¹¹ See Craven (1984). For a clip of Glen's death, see: <https://youtu.be/2-frM2Lf8KE>

¹² We attach the "re" to "member" to signify embodiment, political and personal, as well as a return to a semblance of community, here the circle of LGBTQness.

but rather within the violence and horror that precede, proceed, and intercede in this novel. Jude's death is foreshadowed from page one and heightened through horrific allegory. As in so many other stories about queer lives, both real and fictional—Matthew Shepard, Brandon Teena, Annie Proulx's Jack Twist, of *Brokeback Mountain*—queerness is made legible through suffering, through the horrific.¹³

Scene Three: On Slashers

Although Reid's novel contains many horror references, the slasher genre in particular undergirds this text. Wes Craven's *Elm Street* and its spin-offs rebirthed this subgenre in the mid-eighties when "slasher" became synonymous with being a threat to society. The slasher underwent a golden age through films like Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), and William Lustig's *Maniac* (1980) before coming to an abrupt halt under Ronald Reagan's presidency after facing widespread criticism for its misogyny, violence, gore, and sexuality. Here, as in critiques of *WEFLTM*, the regulation of horror becomes a symptomatic response to a perceived threat to the figural Child at the center of reproductive futurism, a logic that preserves "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (Edelman 2); its Child is "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman 3). It was Krueger who ushered in a new kind of slasher, one in which a Grimm-like fantasy and the supernatural were instilled within the stock character of the murderous antagonist (Roth). Furthermore, as Krueger began to mutate stylistically and thematically through the vision of several directors behind the helm of the *Elm Street* series, he began to implement elements of camp and queerness within the serialized and increasingly popular slasher genre.

Of interest here is the simultaneous popularity of the slasher and the terrorized responses of its consumers and critics. Horror, including children's and YA horror,¹⁴ animates our

¹³ See also Reid's interview with Wendy Mesley on CBC's news program *The National* ("Raziel Reid"). In this interview, Mesley repeatedly asks Reid to narrate his own suffering (homophobic bullying, violence, suicidal ideation) in order to make sense of his experiences as a queer person, his motivation for writing the book, and also to justify and validate the book through appeals to "realism"—i.e. to draw clear correlations between Reid and Jude's experiences.

¹⁴ McCort offers children's and YA horror as an elastic category, one that includes potentially unexpected texts like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Twilight* series (the latter, McCort writes, "is arguably... a blend of romance,

collective sociopolitical fears and desires: as McCort explains, “Our cultures’ monsters tend to represent our obsessions and anxieties, even in what seem to be the most innocuous of texts” (10). Along these lines, the extensive body of scholarship on the queerness of horror includes examinations of how monsters function as avatars of anxieties about queer sexuality.¹⁵ The monster, or here the slasher, are embodiments of these affects much in the same way Jude embodies ours. What horrifies is our attraction to these texts and characters, their winning of awards, their popularity, their disturbing bodies that flail against our sense of moral selfhood. As Eli Roth notes in his docuseries *The History of Horror*, “if [critics] like the movie, they feel as if they are endorsing it for real, that kind of violence. So most often those reviews become a soap box, [like] ‘look I’m a good person’ ...but the truth is we love it, it’s like enjoying fantasy...it’s no different than Grimm’s fairy tales.”¹⁶ Like *WEFLTM*, the slasher— and *Elm Street* in particular—challenges the perceived borders between genres: children’s and YA literature, fairy tale, horror.

Interestingly, recent analyses of *Elm Street* focus on the not-so-subtle queerness of Jack Sholder’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (1985), whose femme-boy protagonist, Jesse Walsh, proclaims: “Fred Krueger is inside me, and he wants to take me again!”¹⁷ Although *Elm Street 2* is a pronounced gay allegory, the franchise has always opened its bladed arms to queerness. Heather Langenkamp, star of the original Craven film, notes that “my very first fans were young gay men, and they told me that they were using [my character] Nancy as they faced their folks or their parents or their families in revealing their true selves” (Roth). As the franchise proceeds into spin-offs, Krueger is positioned as the star of the films,

action/adventure, and fantasy infused with horrific elements” (5)). McCort’s collection explores children’s and YA horror with a scope outside the purview of this paper. We are grateful to one of our anonymous reviewers, however, for indicating that interested readers might look to Malinda Lo, Meredith Russo, and Adam Silvera for three instances of other authors writing at the intersections of YA, horror, and trauma.

¹⁵ See Babuscio, Benschhoff, and Elliott-Smith.

¹⁶ See, too, McCort’s assertion that when it comes to horror, “the reader or viewer must be emotionally invested in the situation at hand, must experience a physical response to the text that is rooted in fear, disgust, and repulsion, must reject the terrifying thing while also fearing that he or she might become its next victim, and, perhaps most important, must feel *excited* by the horrifying experience that he or she has willingly engaged in as the reader or viewer of the text” (10).

¹⁷ See Chimienti and Jensen.

moving from sadistic slasher to campy queer icon. Krueger visits gay bars in the second installment and, in the sixth, flies around like Oz's Wicked Witch of the West threatening a new wave of doomed teens. Krueger, like Jude, persists.

Describing his death, Jude narrates: "I had no doubt where the tunnel led, but it wasn't like I was going through it; rather I was a part of it, and the light would be revealed as a part of me" (167). Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who comes to the realization that he is the embodiment of hell, Jude reaches a similar, if inverse conclusion: he survives the horrific to become the hero(ine) of horror. Like Jesse Walsh, Jude becomes a Krueger of his own, one who continually haunts his killer, Luke, but also enacts revenge more broadly on literary communities and critics through his reminder of queer history and trauma. As Douglas E. Winter notes in his reading of Stephen King, "horror fiction is...an intrinsically subversive art...that the lifting of the mask may reveal the face of the bogeyman is our existential dilemma: the eternal tension between doubt and relief that will haunt us to our grave" (32). Jude indeed reveals this face; that is, he exhibits the structures of heteronormativity and homophobia that render horrific queer experience.

Closing Credits: The Final Girl and the *Sinthomosexual*

The slasher introduced a popular horror character trope: what Carol J. Clover would come to famously call the "final girl." The slasher's final girl is the film's survivor, typically the character with whom the audience is invited to identify most strongly, a figure who embodies innocence, virginity, agency, and who is thrust across the threshold between childhood and adulthood through her endurance and resistance. Some final girls not only survive their initial stalking but also transform from hunted into hunter: *Halloween's* Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), *Scream's* Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), and *Elm Street's* Thompson. As writer/director Rob Zombie notes, slasher franchises offer moments when, like Krueger, "the killer [becomes] the star" (Roth); and, through these various final girls, we also see stars who become killers. Indeed, Jude is a final girl-turned-ghost—and a ghost who seeks revenge. Yet Jude is perhaps most productively read in light of both the final girl and Edelman's *sinthomosexual*. Our fusion of the final girl with the male figure of the *sinthomosexual* speaks to

how both *WEFLTM* and the slasher film are interested in gender and its confusion—in both productive and oppressive contexts. Jude, gay male-identified (Reid 55) but often gender nonconforming, is misread by Kay as “trans” and hailed as “Judy” by his bullies; his death points to how antiqueer violence in *WEFLTM* is doubly-weighted with both queer- and transphobia.¹⁸ In dialogue with Clover, Chris McGee points out that “low-budget slasher films examine and play with gender in more subtle ways than one might expect, and are downright preoccupied with the *fluidity* of gender” (183).¹⁹ Instead of an “overly masculinized female lead,” *WEFLTM* delivers a feminized male lead; the “sexually confused male killer” endures, however, as does a version of the moment when the final girl “picks up the killer’s weapon and fights back” (McGee 183). This fight resembles the work of Edelman’s *sinthomosexual*.

“*Sinthomosexual*” is a neologism that fuses homosexual with *sinthome*, which Lacan borrows from “an old way of writing what was written later as ‘symptom’” (qtd in Edelman 35). The *sinthome* “functions as the necessary condition for the subject’s engagement with [social] reality,” yet it simultaneously “refuses the Symbolic logic that determines the exchange of signifiers” (Edelman 35). It follows, then, that the *sinthomosexual* both structures and punctures the fantasy of reproductive futurism—a heterosexist fantasy that positions an imaginary Child at the center of political discourse, shores up heterosexuality as the normative way of being, and in so doing, violently disavows and marginalizes queer lives and relations. Homosexuality, Edelman argues, “figures the availability of an unthinkable *jouissance* that would put an end to fantasy—and, with it, to futurity” (39). In other words, nonreproductive queer pleasure shatters the heteronormative logic of reproductive futurism as represented by the Child. The *sinthomosexual*, then—as embodied, for Edelman, by figures like Scrooge—refuses “to contribute to the communal realization of futurity, the fantasy structure...supporting reality itself. [Scrooge] realizes, that is, the *jouissance* that derealizes sociality and thereby threatens, in Žižek’s words, ‘the total destruction of the symbolic universe’” (45). The *sinthomosexual* is a perpetual nay-sayer, akin to the “bah humbug” of Scrooge, one who embodies and animates

¹⁸ Gratitude to one of our anonymous reviewers for making this point and suggesting that readers see Shraya (2018) for a discussion of the horrific intersections of misogyny, homo- and transphobia.

¹⁹ In Clover’s words, slasher films are “texts in which the categories of masculine and feminine, traditionally embodied in male and female, are collapsed into one and the same character” (61).

negativity by adamantly forgoing the reproduction and futurity represented by the figure of the Child.

While Edelman describes the *sinthomosexual* as a queer adult, we argue that Jude is a *sinthomosexual* child. When is a child a *sinthomo*? Do children like Jude or his real-life inspiration, Larry Fobes King, get to be “children” in the sense of the privileged fantasy Child of reproductive futurism, a Child who, as José Esteban Muñoz points out, is imagined as White, middle-to-upper-class, and destined to be straight (95)? If, as Edelman notes, *sinthomosexual* is a catachresis, then perhaps within the vein of this metaphor we can read queer childhood as the Child’s catachresis, its inaccuracy. Conventional children’s and YA literature attempts to conjure a future for the symbolic Child by burying the remains of those children who have no access to “growth”—that is, queer children. Futurism’s “final signifier,” which promises to “make meaning whole at last” (Edelman 37), is severed through the brutal unveiling of the Real by Jude, insofar as he becomes the destroyer of that sign—he becomes the final girl of the final signifier. Jude is *sinthomosexual* in his pulling back of the Child’s velvet curtain. Jude reveals—indeed, embodies—the skeletal remains of the queer child buried and laid to (un)rest: he becomes the purveyor of the veil, the horrific gaze from the abyss beyond.

Queer childhood, then, is the symptom that emerges through the reception of *WEFLTM*. If we read children’s and YA literature as an ordering of childhood into a “straight” trajectory of growth and development in tandem with the linearity of a heteronormative social order, Jude as *sinthomosexual* betrays that linearity—or curves it sideways, perhaps in the sense that Kathryn Bond Stockton outlines in *The Queer Child*: Jude literalizes (and lateralizes) the ghostly gay child (15). If, as Edelman argues, “fantasy names the only place where desiring subjects can live,” then Jude’s spectrality locates itself in a return, not to home as such, but to a space of continual haunting (34). This “sheltering office of fantasy,” Edelman continues to observe, is “in concert with desire, [it] absorbs us into scenic space until we seem to become it, until we seem so fully at one with the *setting* of our fantasy, the *frame* wherein we get to see what is where we are not” (34). Take this queer nether-space we have been discussing, Reid’s haunting algorithm of queerness gone ghostly. If the fantasy of heteronormative childhood development and its cyclical return home is removed from its rhythms, then the fantasy is shattered. To straighten itself, the

fantasy positions the other, here queer childhood, as specter. Jude, enmeshed with the setting of this fantasy—that is, untethered by the real/ity of queer childhood/adolescence—mirrors to us that which we dare not gaze upon. Jude shows us what we are not, what we lack, or perhaps how we ourselves are the projection of the Child: we are our own brood who dispossess those children we deem unassimilable to the fantasy of our imagined Child/ren.

We move towards a conclusion with some lingering questions raised by *WEFLTM*. Given that reproductive futurism invokes a White, middle/upper-class, able-bodied, future-straight-adult Child, we ask: who gets to be a final girl; who gets to endure and turn the tables on the antagonist? Just as queer characters are often violently expunged from a variety of popular narratives, characters of color make ready prey in horror films. Robin R. Means Coleman dedicates an entire chapter of *Horror Noire* to the deaths of Black characters in horror films of the 1980s, entitled “We Always Die First—Invisibility, Racial Red-Lining, and Self-Sacrifice” (145).²⁰ For all of *WEFLTM*’s compelling disruptions to the heterofuturist social order, we cannot overlook that Reid based his queer White final girl/ghost-survivor on the real life and death of a person of color. The White queer specter persists, yet the racialized boy is not given this same opportunity: King exists as a doubly-ghosted figure relegated to the shadows of Jude’s story. As Coleman points out, with few exceptions (notably 1970s horror films featuring Black women), “Final Girls tend to be White. When their fight with the monster is over, their lives return to stasis. Ripley sleeps peacefully after she ejects the alien. Laurie Strode’s quiet, suburban life can return to normal” (131). The final girl’s Whiteness is one deeply problematic and enduring horror convention that *WEFLTM* fails to challenge in any meaningful way. Insofar as Jude’s ghost infects the machine of children’s and YA literature, it also reinscribes Whiteness onto the final girl and whitewashes the real-life murder at the origin of this story.

The Whiteness of the final girl recalls the Whiteness of children’s and YA literature in general, the Whiteness of Edelman’s Child, and indeed the Whiteness that is ascribed to innocence itself (see Bernstein). If children’s and YA literature are ostensibly romantic genres and Jude/Larry are haunting figures interpellated by their queerness and/or race, we ask: in what

²⁰ Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) is a direct challenge to the white supremacist ideology behind the fact that horror films often make hasty victims of their characters of color.

way is the “romance” of *WEFLTM* necropolitical or, perhaps, necromantic?²¹ Necropolitics emerge from Foucault’s biopolitics (or *droit de glaive*), which names those whom the sovereign has the right to kill to preserve the social order. Jude, here, embodies Krueger once again, naming himself as both biopolitical and necropolitical, as wielding the “right of the sword” (or perhaps “right of the bladed glove”) by churning queer life and death into a world wrought by negativity—his place to belong. He is morbidly empowered by repression even as he is curtailed by it. If we call Jude a final girl-cum-monster, we might also think about the Latin roots of “monster”: *monstrum* (“portent, prodigy”) and the verb *moneo*, meaning “a reminder, a warning.” We want Jude to remind us of Larry, whose death is at the source of this horror story. Larry’s is the face behind Jude’s white mask.

We would add that the contours of horror are being transformed through the creative excellence of contemporary BIPOC screenwriters, directors, and performers. We might look to films like Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019) to find the typical dynamics of horror reversed through the film’s demand: for us/U.S. to inspect and interrogate, via Peele’s mutated stock figure of the doppelganger, the ways in which we enact violence upon childhood, nations, race, Indigeneity, and/or queerness. What horrifies us as viewers of *Us* is two-fold: one, the witnessing of the performance of Black execution; and two, the notion that we (us), as spectators, are doppelgangers complicit too. Similarly, Jude and Larry demonstrate to us the ways in which we abet the horrific realities of LGBTQ2S, non-binary, and gender nonconforming youth within and beyond their literatures. This is one of *WEFLTM*’s many terrors. When children’s and YA literature critics and readers require that the genre performs in certain ways to be “worthy”—to offer, that is, futurities premised on linear growth into “moral” adulthood and the violent, often lethal, expunging of sexual and genderqueerness and their attendant pleasures—these critics and readers do nothing but sustain harmful fantasies of reproductive futurism by nourishing its treasured, singular Child. *WEFLTM* enacts such anti-queer violence but refuses to let its final girl die. Queerness in *WEFLTM* is the poltergeist of childhood, its ghostly futurity, a shining shank or bladed glove that carves timelines into wavelengths, distorts the frame of fantasy, and asks us

²¹ See Mbembe and Puar for more on necropolitics. See also Chickasaw scholar Byrd, who coins the term “zombie imperialism” to mean the “current manifestation of a liberal democratic colonialism... where death belongs more to racialized and gendered [and, we’d add, queered] multitudes” and “killing becomes precisely targeted” (228).

to encounter the nightmare of a mortally wounded child metamorphosing into a ghostly being-towards-death. Jude is our queer final girl-turned-*sinthomosexual*-slasher who demands that we confront the futurist fantasies and violent disavowals that structure our engagements with children's and YA literature.

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